ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

THE *BERTA* ECONOMY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF PRODUCTION IN THE WESTERN ETHIOPIA BORDERLANDS

BY

TARIKU FEYISSA

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Menge Woreda Updated Kebeles-January, 2001
(Benishangul-Gumuz Region)

Benishangul-Gumuz

ALL BORDERS ARE UNOFFICIAL AND APPROXIMATE
ADAPTED FROM NUPI, 1999

List of Indigenous Terms

Glossary of the Main Non-English Terms Used in The Text

abandu - dried straw used in *Berta* traditional divinatory practices

acharief /aseqelle - Rainy season

acheda - Harvesting

adama/Atuma - Threshing

agur - *Berta* title for king or ruler;

alahila - Village

algawan - Maize

alhadya (Fatha) - The first stage of wedding

alirs - The second stage of wedding

alrhaula - The third stage of wedding

al-rutana (Ar) - stands for local dialect; term used by Arabic speakers to refer to any indigenous language "the upper region", used in the text as synonym for Bela Shangul; opposite to al-Safil, the lower region, used in the region to indicate the Sudanese plains north of Bela Shangul

alu-bubuts , - harvest season

amoso/ amozo - Dry Season

aplayu - Weeding

apurjpun - /a-pun-pun/, dancing and drum beating; the last stage in the Ero ceremony.

asadak - Bride wealth

ban, - boomerang-shaped throwing stick among the *Berta*

batsa - *Berta* local beer;

bibi - high-burning wood used in *Berta* traditional divinatory practices

chefícheta (chira)	- Re-clearing of fields
ero	- Harvesting Ceremony
feda	- Hunting Ceremony
fir-buda	- lit. "Water-cleaning", the first stage in the Ero ceremony
jabal	- pl. jibal, hill, mountain; hence jabalawin, mountain people
jeble Sud'	- Block mountain
jedingo	- Household
jellabia	- a loose shirt-like cotton garment, common dress of the male population;
kaffa	- Agriculture
kurama	- festival, or celebration to entertain a guest, offerings to God.
makk pl. Mukūk,	- Fung title for king ruler.
mudaqa /mu-daqa/,	- lit. "Fire-throwing", the burning of dry grass during the Feda ceremony.
neri /néri/,	- traditional *Berta* diviner and medicine man
rega	- sowing/ planting
sorame/Selemique	- Sorghum
tari	- a special kind of ebony wood used by the neri to predict the future.
watawit	- descendants of Sudanese Arab merchants who intermarried with *Berta* women;

ACRONYMS

A.A	Addis Ababa
A.A.U	Addis Ababa University
B.G.R.S.	Benishangul- Gumuz National Regional State
EPRDF	Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front.
IDR	Institute of Development Research
IES	Institute of Ethiopian Studies
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture
MPED	Ministry of Planning and Economic Development
P.A	Peasant Association
TG	Transitional Government

PREFACE

This study is based on field research carried out among the *Berta* of Western Ethiopia. The study attempts to make an ethnographic description of the *Berta* economy and the corresponding issues related to the organization and division of labour in the various cycles of their economic life and ritual activities. The thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter presents the conceptual framework for understanding shifting cultivation and statement of the problem. It also states the objectives of the study, methods of data collection and fieldwork situation, and describes the reason for the selection of the research site.

The second chapter deals with the research area and the *Berta* people. It also describes the physical environment. The myths of origin and the tradition that have survived through out different generations and the subsequent external invasions are also discussed in this chapter. In the third chapter an attempt is made to describe the household as a basic production unit through which labour is allocated and organized. It also shows how households efficiently allocate their labour resources and the performances of various economic activities.

In the fourth chapter an attempt is made to describe the land tenure system in *Berta,* the impact of secular changes in the system on the lives of the people in general and the production process in particular. It also describes the nature and characteristics of shifting cultivation and the annual agricultural cycle and seasonal activities such as finding of new fields, sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing. It also describes the major crop production and livestock production. It describes the process of production by focusing on the types of crops grown, and the circumstances (cultural, social, economic) under which they are produced.

The fifth chapter attempts to describe the important role of non-agricultural income earning activities in increasing economic and food security. The last chapter provides some concluding remarks.

ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the *Berta* economy, focusing on their social organization of production and their relative significance in the organization and division of labour in the various cycles of their economic life and ritual activities. In spite of the large and varied literature produced on Ethiopian societies, *Berta* remains one of the least studied ethnic groups of Western Ethiopia. The economic and socio-cultural development of this society is relatively simple. In spite of these facts, researchers and development workers have paid little attention to the people of this peripheral area.

A major objective of this thesis is therefore to provide an ethnographic description of one of the least studied, explored and minority group in Western Ethiopia, so as to make a small addition to the growing anthropological literature on Ethiopian borderlands. The finding of this thesis is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods of data gathering, though much of the material is based on the intensive micro studies of the *Berta* people with participant observation technique.

The result of the fieldwork indicates that the dominant source of employment for 95 percent of rural households is agriculture, crop and livestock farming. The food security of most households depends on cropping activities. The other source of income is non-agricultural activities particularly for poorer households. This includes agricultural wage labour, petty trading, hunting- gathering etc. The majority of

farmer's households depend on such non-farm activities during farming seasons and slack periods. There are a number of other subsidiary activities that farm households undertake either all the year round or seasonally with the aim of supplementing their income from primary sources (crop and livestock farming).

The findings of this study suggest that there is no marked difference in the sources of household farm labour either in terms of income group or agro-ecological zone. Over 95 per cent of the households from all income groups depend on their own family labour for their seasonal farming as well as off- farm activities.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The *Berta* are one of the various group in Ethiopia inhabiting the *Benishangul- Gumuz* National Regional State (BGNRS). *Assosa,* the capital of the Region is located 687kms west of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. The *Berta* depend predominantly on shifting cultivation / *Swidden* cultivation for their livelihood, with hunting, gathering, fishing and petty trade as supplementary economic activities. This introductory chapter presents conceptual framework, selection of research site, statement of the problem, objective of the study, research methods, Significance of the study and limitations of the study.

1.1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING SHIFTING CULTIVATION

A general anthropological understanding of economy was dominated by two contrasting views for many years in the past. The first view was the neoclassical. The neoclassical (in anthropological terminology 'formalist') studies began in the 1960's. The second approach to the economy was a culture-bounded view called substantives. This approach is often associated with names like Karl *Polanyi,* George Dalton, Marshall Sahlins etc. Substantives are a variety of functionalist theory that dominated social anthropology from the 1930's to the 1950's. These schools are presently active in economic anthropology, and below I will review each of their contributions to a theory of production in non-capitalist economics. I will only pay particular attention to the relative emphasis of these different schools to give psychological versus institutional factors. According to substantives, different institutional complexes make economic systems fundamentally incomparable so that it is institutions that must receive the greatest stress in analysis. Neoclassical writers, on the other hand, maintain

that institutions are not so different that all economics cannot be analyzed with the postulate that persons act so as to maximize their individual gains

Following debates in theoretical anthropology that occurred in the 1970's, other third group forwarded alternative approach that seeks to provide a middle ground to the above debate. A remarkable representation of this approach in the Ethiopian case is *Donham* (1979). In this book, *Donham* proposes that the *Male* economy should be understood in the context of local cultural meanings and the wider political economy that combines to shape it over the past several years.

The economic base of many societies that combines hunting/ gathering with shifting cultivation like the *Berta* can be better understood in the light of the third approach noted above. With respect to changing settlements, Moran (1982), Stauder (1971) and other emphasize that the abundance of lands and the absence of population pressures on vital resources as well as low returns in economic activities of previous areas made shifting cultivation possible. Frequent mobility is made possible by domestic organization, arrangements of huts, neighboring relations, free access to natural resources and availability of land all of which are related to shifting cultivation. So Moran's perspectives on human activities to a variety of ecosystems, Stander's and some of Olive's views on shifting economy and people's movement are employed in analyzing *Berta's* activities. Briefly, in line with the analytical view made above, external and internal and/or actor (emic) and observer (etic) perspectives are combined to analyze the economic and socio-cultural activities of the *Berta* community.

Shifting cultivation, also known as Swidden cultivation or 'slash and burn", is an agricultural system in which farm fields are cultivated for some years before living them fallow. Clearing the forest and burning it after it has had a little time to dry and prepare the farmland. Burning may bring some changes in the physical properties of the soils, and kill pests and insects and eliminates seeds of weeds, which is beneficial in any effort to cultivate crop. Moran argues that burning doesn't cause negative effect on soil organic matter since temperatures during burning of the forest are not high to destroy it though its amount depends on the success of the burn, humidity of the environment and density of vegetation (Moran,1982: 267-268).

Shifting cultivation is also advantageous in that it protects the soil from leaching and erosion, reduces expenditures for fertilizers and pesticides and creates new forest that provides a higher net yield. African studies indicate that maximum biomass is attained within eight years after a field is abandoned. Using this studies Moran argued in favor of the system's merits but recognizing that any demographic increase would threat the system's by reducing a volume of agricultural land and shortening the fallow period (Ibid; 272-223*)*. Stauder (1971) argues that abundance of lands and the absence of population pressures on vital natural resources are necessary for shifting cultivation.

The other argument raised by scholars, is the role of a labour in understanding local level social organization of production. It has been argued by scholars like Goody, that in Africa the major constraint among shifting cultivators who use the hoe is labour. Hoe culture, is a typical feature of the shifting cultivation system. So shifting agriculture/ cultivation requires more labour, while among the settled plough cultivators it is land (Goody, 1971a). Since Ethiopia is a country where the plough existed before it entered other African countries (Goody, 1971b) this fact seems to hold true to a certain extent. Private ownership of land

before 1975 land reform, especially in the south, institutional control of land by peasant associations (Dejene, 1988) and disentitlement of land through redistribution after the reform (Mesfin, 1991) militate in favors of Goody's argument.

Studies conducted in west Wollega by Stahl (1977) and highland Gamo Gofa by Olmstead (1973) found capitals in the form of farm oxen and land respectively to be the major constraints on organization of production in agriculture (Stahl, 1977, 32-34); (Olmostead, 1973: 232-233). There are also cases as in Bolosso (Wolayta), where both farm oxen and land are found to be critical constraints (Dessalegn, 1992 a:5).

So from the above statement one can conclude that, the role of labour in understanding local level social organization of farmers received scant attention. Even though the role of labour in the domestic economy was explored by some scholars like Donham on *Male* (1978); and Stauder on Majanger (1971), very little attention has been given to it by the studies conducted among shifting cultivators. Studies conducted in South Ethiopia seem to hint that neither land nor capital in the form of oxen is the major constraint on agriculture, it is rather the importance of human labour in quality and quantity seem to outweigh the role of other factors of production.

Among the Berta shifting cultivators or hoe cultivators, the diversity of their activities, the need to protect crops, the rapid growth of weeds, which is a very hard agricultural task and labourious work of the year, and the hoe culture impose competing demands on the labour of the households. Households access to labour, therefore need to be scrutinized to understand the local level social organization of production.

1.2. Selection of research site

The study sites called *Kudiyu* and *Belmaghua* are found in *Menge* woreda. *Berta* is a name by which the dialects as a whole, and the people speaking them, are known in the Woreda. Within the *Berta* are found *Khomshia, Shirgole and Bambashi (Fadashi).* These People display minor cultural and linguistic variations. During my stay in *Benishangul*, I visited the whole woreda of *Menge* (22PAs). Based on the information I gathered and my own observation in the field, I chose *Kudiyu*, as my main research site. *Kudiyu* is chosen for some practical reasons. It houses the largest established group of the *Berta* people. The earliest *Berta* people were first settled around this Woreda, and the present day *Menge* Woreda is the site, which indirectly gives the name to the whole region. Above all, most of the historical sites and cultural heritages of the *Berta* people including the *stelea* of *Belbanbashi, the stelea of Benishangul* etc are found in this part of the region. It is the center of *Berta* society and culture (see plate, 2).

1.3. Statement of the Problem

In Ethiopia one finds over seventy different ethnic groups (*Abbink*, 1991:11). Among these ethnic groups the *Berta* are one of the ethnic groups found in Western Ethiopia. Inspite of the large and varied literature on Ethiopian ethnic groups, the *Berta* of BGNRS remains one of the least studied groups, although some attempts have been made by scholars like *Cerulli* (1956); *Tucker* and Bryon (1966); L. M. Bender (1976); *Atieb A. Dafallah, A. Truilzi* and L.M. Bender (1976). Some of these studies were primarily linguistics by nature, so many things of *Berta* past and present still remains uncovered, and the existing data are incomplete and inadequate. One of the major objectives of this thesis is therefore to provide an ethnographic description of one of the least known and least explored groups of Western Ethiopia.

The second motivation to study the *Berta* ethnography is that the socio-cultural and economic development of this study people remained relatively simple. Despite all this facts researchers have paid little attention to the people of this peripheral area. Thus, their social organization of production becomes the central theme of this research. A focused problem of investigation was formulated in the basis of field realities. The essential components of *Berta's* economy, and the corresponding factors of social organization of production and issues related to labour are some of the points considered in this study.

More specifically, *Berta* system of shifting cultivation as it operates through a yearly cycle of agricultural activities, the social units and settlement pattern involved in shifting cultivation and other economic activities are issues of the research

1.4. Objective of the Study

1.4.1. General Objective

The main objective of the research is to collect ethnographic data on some aspects of Berta economy and the corresponding factors of social organization of production and issues related to labour.

1.4.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. describe the system of shifting agriculture, as it operates through yearly cycle of agricultural activities, the social units and settlement pattern involved in shifting cultivation and other economic activities.

ii. explore the production practices and the division and organization of labour in the production units.

1.5. Research Methods

This ethnographic account is based on three periods of fieldwork. The first fieldwork was carried out from mid June to the beginning of September 2000. The second fieldwork was from December 2000 to January 2001. The third fieldwork was from November to December 2001. The field study was carried out for a total of five months in a village called *Kudiyu* among the *Menge-Berta* of Western Ethiopia.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, associated with different techniques is used to generate data. Much of the material in this thesis is based on the intensive study of the *Berta* people with a participant observation technique. Anthropologists in intensive micro – studies, ordinarily use these techniques. So systematic observations of day- to- day activities of their social organization of production in relation to organization of labour in the various cycles of economic and ritual aspects were systematically observed and recorded throughout the fieldwork.

The major activities carried out in the first round of the fieldwork aimed at achieving three things. The first aim was to achieve an official research permission letter. I received the official letter from the concerned body without much difficulty. Then, I made preliminary discussions with *woreda* council's offices, *Kebele* executive committee members, elders and other concerned bodies about the aim of the research. Helpful guide was identified at this stage. Since I was doing my fieldwork among people with whom I was not familiar the situation necessitated me to employ an interpreter who is a native *Berta*. Hence, I employed Ato Awade Mohammed who served me not only as an interpreter but also as an informant throughout my stay in the field. He has research experience and rich in ethnographic information. The last aim of the first round fieldwork was to achieve a census type of survey

and to conduct participant observations. This was to gain an overall picture of the *Berta* people. Information on the total number of households in *Berta – Menge,* total population by sex, age, religion, income and martial status of residents in each household, the size of land owned by each individual is obtained through the survey. In the second and third rounds of the filed work I employed both the combinations of participant observations and in-depth interview. In depth interviews, both structured and unstructured were held with selected peasants, knowledgeable elders, sheiks (Moslem religious leaders), PA leaders and other influential persons. These interviews enabled me to reconstruct the recent history and provide data on *Berta* economy. Observation of the daily routine social and economic life of the people as well as listening to different types of social gatherings, elders meetings, and political and ritual performances were conducted. The study also employed the methods of historical inquiry with specific techniques of archival and documents analysis.

Field-work Situation

My first fieldwork trip from A.A to *Assosa* (BGRS) was on June 15, 2000. *Assosa*, the capital town is 687kms far from A.A. in the west direction. It is a 3 day's journey to reach *Assosa* by bus. A bus leaves A.A. regularly to *Assosa* - BGRS, passing first through the different zones of *Oromia* regional state of Ethiopia. The first bus stops at *Nekemte* town. *Nekemte* town is an administrative and cultural center for the region. The road from A.A. to BGRS is all weather-road for about half its length and becomes a rough road from then on. It cuts through the patchwork of arable plots and grazing land of the plateau covered by various cereal crops such as maize and sorghum. The way to *Assosa* passes through Bamboo, bush forests and coffee forests. The roads and strips are lined up with mango trees, which grow well in *Benashangul Gumuz* area, which alsol provide windbreaks. They also serve as sources of food and income for the settlers.

Settlements in the *Berta* region consist of several homesteads. They usually comprise a circular or square yard enclosed by a milet-stalk fences about two meters high. The people live in villages made up of groups of huts. My observation of the *Menge-Berta* within their localities started on the *Assosa-Komsha-Menge* road on June 22,2000. Bamboo trees, bush forests and various types of crops, especially maize and Sorghum are spread over the field. It was my first time to visit *Menge*. I began to live there and continued the fieldwork until December 30, 2001.

In *Menge* I met the family of Mohamed *Yesuf* who kindly offered me a corner of their single room. This enabled me to learn many things about *Menge* life which otherwise would have escaped my notice. Participant observation is the technique I used for the fieldwork most of the time. Since my knowledge of the *Berta* language was not beyond the elementary level, most of the data were acquired using Amharic through the assistance of young bilingual *Berta*.

I began the actual fieldwork in *Kudiyu* on June 27, 2000, which is an hour's walk on the left hand side of *Menge* town. *Kudiyu* is the most inaccessible village. It has roots and rivers that are difficult to cross. As soon as my self and my informant reached *Kudiyu* village all the villagers came out of their houses and provided us with stools made of bamboo. After we sat for a while all of them, from children to elders, greeted us by saying, "How are you!" Soon coffee was prepared and hand-water moved around by children. Women brought cups and put them on ground in front of every body. Roasted sorghum in a gourd was moved so that everybody could take a handful and the rest was put in front of my translator and me. Then, a boy of about ten years old poured coffee in everybody's cup they continued to do so until it was finished.

The same process of greeting and hosting was followed in every village. Actually the *Berta* as mentioned perviously have one particular tradition in common-gathering under a roof and eating together. The gathering is not restricted to a family/ household. People in an area get together and eat. For instance, residents of a village build a *kalwa (tukul)* in common for this purpose. Every household in a village brings to the *kalwa* the food it prepared at home. If a guest happens to arrive at the village to visit a relative, he is not treated at his host's residence. It is all the village who treat him in the common *kalwa* as their common guest. This shows the community's respect for a guest (outsiders). During the coffee ceremony my informant and myself introduced ourselves to the people we met there. This was how the ground was laid for cooperation of the community and smooth rplation for the smooth operation of the fieldwork.

Apart from the general conversation and interview with the villagers during the five months of my stay in *Menge*, the actual fieldwork took a little over five months in the three rounds of the field research. Based on such fertile ground it was easy to visit several homes and interact with the people freely. *Berta* hospitality and reverences for strangers is frequently manifested in the several over night invitations accorded to the researcher. Most informants are quite popular to many people for their art of narration. Shamble *Amis Bala, Ibrahim Yesuf, Hassan Abdunahman, Atayu* Mohamed and *Yayia Kalifa* are quite popular in this regard to mention some among others. Most informants speak Oromo and Amharic languages in addition to their native *Berta* and Arabic language. *Abdulahi mohammed Ali, Ibrahim Yesuf* etc. all speak the *Berta* native language, and are also well conversant in Ormo, Amharic, Arabic and English languages.

Informants and language assistants were all natives. Besides they are all mature and dependable. The only one who is relatively young is 24 years old. This young language

assistant never parted with me throughout the fieldwork period. He is well conversant in the three languages *Berta*, Oromo and Amharic. He is an expert in Oxfam (GB) project in *Menge*.

They all helped not only in making translations but also as a bridge in communicating with various people. They took me around from one village to another. Their company helped me a quick and open discussions and to have free movement with natives. This discussion usually ended in ethnographic recording.

1.6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The *Berta* of *Benishangul Gumuz* have so far been ignored and neglected not only by governments and development agencies but also by anthropological researchers. Since the existing data is incomplete and inadequate our knowledge of the society is still far from adequate. This is because detailed accounts of the various aspects of *Berta* ethnography have not been recorded and presented yet. This research is therefore hoped to make modest contribution to a much-neglected area of *Benishangul -Gumuz* ethnography particularly to their social organization of production. The result of the research is also hoped to be of interest to students of social anthropology dealing with the social organization of production, labour and labour production process. This may thus help as a reference material for other researchers interested in this particular topic. Although the research is primarily an academic endeavor, the issues have serious practical implications as well, and the results should be of interest to those who are mainly preoccupied with public policy and development agencies whether they are in government, ethnic or civil society.

1.7. Limitation of the Study

The study is limited both in scope and time in that the data collection has not covered the whole area inhabited by the *Berta*. The Study was carried out only for a little over five months without covering the whole process of non-agriculture and other economic and soico-cultural activities, which need at least a year to cover its full cycle.

Among others, shortage of time and lack of money and difficulty of transportation and communication facilities are some of the constraints that limited the study only to the stated village. Above all, traveling through very steep and difficult *Assosa-Menga* road, 56kms from the Addis Ababa main road, put life at risk. It is full of ups and downs.

Absence of earlier documentation is another limiting issue. The research area is the most inaccessible village. Beside this, there are roots and rivers that were difficult to cross. *Menge-Berta* (the research site) is one of the weredas of *Assosa* zone. As mentioned earlier, *Assosa* is about 687kms from A.A. to the West direction. Due to the financial and time constraints not all aspects of economic organization are dealt within this study. The study focused on the exploration of the social organization of production, particularly production of major agricultural crops and organization and division of labour. Other productive enterprises such as livestock production, gold panning and craft activities are not studied in detail.

CHAPTER TWO: GENERAL BACKGROUND OF THE AREA AND THE PEOPLE

2.1 The People and the Area

The *Berta* ethnic group is one of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the *Benishangul - Gumuz* National Regional State (BGNRS). They occupy the major portion of the region, an area covering north and north-west including central and western frontiers bordering the Sudan. The BGNRS, embraces five nationalities. They are *Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo*. Together with these also live some nationalities from other states. The region is bounded by Amhara in the North, Amara and Oromo in the South; Gambela in the southwest; and Sudan in the west. According to the 1994 population and housing census of the country, the regional population size reported in October 15, 1994 was 560,080. The actual population size and the projected population by sex and census year of the region is summarized and presented in appendix two. *Benishanguel- Gumuz* state covers an estimated area of 50,381 square kms. It is divided into three zones, seventeen woredeas, two special woredas (Pawe and Togo) and 633 *Kebeles* (see, map 1)

The region is situated on a low-lying plateau, some 5,000 feet above the sea level. It has undulating character and is dotted with several small hills. It has a few peaks not exceeding 8,000 feet in height. It covers extensive lowland areas which are terminated on the west by steep escarpment, and slope away gradually to the northeast to the level of the Sudan. The country is intersected by numerous streams and water courses. Of them, *Tumat* and *Dabus* rivers drain to the *Abbay* or the Blue Nile river, while *Shreqole* river ends up in a swamp in the Sudan. The relief of the Region is generally low.

2.2. Climate

The annual temperature ranges from 20-25 degrees centigrade. The mean monthly maximum temperature ranges from 24°c in July to 31°c in February. The mean monthly minimum temperature ranges from 13.6°c in December to 17°c in March. The coldest months are July, August and December while the warmest are January, February, May and April. There is no frost in the area as confirmed by the local people.

2.3. Rainfall

The distribution of rainfall is similar throughout the months of the year with most of the rainfall being received from June to September. There is heavy rainfall in July and August, while the dry season extends from November to March. Small rains come during April and the first week of May. Surface water is inadequate throughout the regions, especially in the semi-arid areas like Kurmuk bordering the Sudan. Some of the major rivers like the Tumat or the Shryole, dry out during the hot season and the surrounding inhabitant have to dig holes in the sand in order to procure a little water (Hailu W. Emmanuel, 1963; Tesfaye Alamayu, 1963; Bekele Geleta, 1968).

2.4. Vegetation

The vegetation is of Savanna Woodland type, increasing in density along the river courses and towards the south. The grass grows to a height of several feet. But is burnt off in the dry season to make movement and cultivation possible. According to the Region's Agriculture Bureau, about 60% of the region is covered with various plants and woods. Trees such as incense, eucalyptus, oak, rubber trees, and ebony are abundant in the area. There is a large reserve of incense trees in the woredas of Tongo, Sherkole, and Sirba. In Kurmuk woreda

(district) 30% of the wood is incense trees. Furthermore, the region is known for its high reserve of marble, gold, limestone, mica, copper, zinc and tantalum.

2.5. Transportation and Communication

Land and air transportation make movement possible within Asossa. They also make possible connections with other parts of Ethiopia. Land transportation is possible only during the dry season because an all weather road is not yet constructed. As there is not much business in the area, one can only find trucks to reach Asossa- Benishangul Region. In addition to land transportation the region is also served by air. Like most other parts of the country, the Region is very poorly served by modern infrastructure. The type, size as well as distribution of all components of infrastructure i.e, transport and communication networks, power and water supply systems, education, health and financial institutions- fall short of the requirements for sustainable development. Though road transport is dominant, there is a shortage of all weather roads. Like the poorly developed transportation system, the telecommunication link, in most of the zonal administrations and districts, is at low level of development.

According to recent information of the Ethiopian Telecommunication Authority of the *Asossa* branch, *Asossa* zonal administration, *Bambesi* and *Menge*, have telephone stations, and the capital of the region *Asossa* has microwave station. Likewise, the post office distribution in the zone is limited to only one zonal administration. According to the information obtained from the Ethiopian Postal Services, there is only one zonal administration that is getting postal services partially or fully. All other districts are without postal services.

Most *Beni-Shangul's* people are desperately poor and taxes are set at a very low level. The region has no modern industries, commercial farms (few investors have recently started in some district). The region has one government commercial bank- two petrol stations and only a handful of Non- Governmental Organizion (NGOs). Most of these basic services are stationed in *Asossa*-the capital city of the region.

Though there are plenty of Streams/ Rivers and large grazing areas for cattle, the *Assosa* zone, and particularly the *Menge Wereda* is one of the regions that suffer from different animal diseases. Trypanosomiasis, anthrax, black leg and pests are common animal diseases in the area. Since animal health service is very poor, cattle are dying helplessly. Few goats, donkeys and sheep can survive the animal diseases in the region. There are no veterinary services, and therefore the introduction of cattle into the production work cannot be anticipated until the diseases are put under control.

2.6. Brief history of *Berta* People

Ethiopia is a home of a number of nationalities with diverse history, socioeconomic development, fascinating and unique culture of their own. Unfortunately the majority of these nationalities are barely known to each other and even much less to the outsiders. The *Berta* are one of the more than seventy different nationalities in the country. However, it is one among those minorities neglected and least known. This nationality inhabits the region that is south of the Blue Nile on both sides of the present day Ethio- Sudanese borderlands.

Berta is the name by which the dialects as a whole and the people speaking them are known in the region. Later it came to be known as *Benishangul*. The term *Belashangul-Berta* is used here for present day *Menge, Asosa, Khomosha, Bambshi/Fadasi/, sherqole, ya'a and Hoppa*.

The *Berta* are the largest established group of the region (Atibe.a. Dafalha,1964). Their kindred are still living in old *Fung* province of the Sudan, *Fazugll* and *Keili.* All Berta still think of them selves as belonging to one nation and they all speak the same language. In fact, the *Berta*, , have been dominated through out the ages by alien groups (*Fung, Sudanese, Arabs, Mehadist, and the Ethiopians*), which have attempted to impose their own political, cultural and religion institutions. The *Berta* have resisted foreign intrusion by sticking to their own culture, using their own language and performing traditional ceremonies which symbolize their adherence to *Berta* cosmology and self-identify. The myths of origin and the traditions that have survived through different ages and subsequent innovations are part of this cosmology. The following reconstruction presents the core account of the traditions.

The history of when and how the *Berta* occupied their present habitat is difficult to determine exactly. However, literature based on traditions indicates that centuries ago the *Berta* and their ancestors came from *Gerrii,* a mountainous region in Southern *Sinnar*. Wendy James argues that it was during the 16th century that these people migrated to the present region from mountainous region called Gerrii in the Sudan (W. James. 1979). On the other hand, A. Truiulzi (1981) and others are of the opinion that the *Berta* had certainly settled in the region by the early 17th century (Truiulzi, 1981). The original inhabitants alluded are most likely the Mao and the *Komo*. Whatever the case, the *Berta* must have settled in the new region by the early 17century. The name *'Berta'* first appeared in Ethiopian sources as a tributary of the *Fung* kingdom of *Sinnar*, a claim apparently contested by the neighboring rival state of Ethiopia. Since an expedition sent by Emperor Susenyos in 1617 raided the boarder district the *Berta* inhabited (Esteves Pereira (1892 – 1900) as quoted in Triulzi, A.1981: 250), it was assumed that the *Berta* were part of Ethiopia

The *Berta* of *Bela-Shangul* say that, their first king, *Agur(Agurie)*, was told by the *nari* to abandon *Gerri* and move to high places in the east. Accordingly, they moved eastwards and settled around the *Tumat* valley. Here, there were rocks around which the first *Shangur* (traditional divinatory practices) *ceremony* in the east was observed. This rock became the symbol of unity for the migrant *Berta* and it is here, according to traditions, that the *Berta aguri* (Berta king or rular) were buried. The present day village of *Bela-Shangul* (Rock of the *Shangul*) claims the same spot as an ancestral site, and it is this site, which indirectly gives the name to the whole region (*Atibe, A. Dafalla*, 1964). *Berta* who has now taken shape used to be called "*Jeblawi*", "*Watawit*" and the like at different historical epochs.

According to the evidence from the elderly people, this contemporary name is a derivative of *Berthu Aluries* son, who was noted *Agur-* meaning a king who led his people out of the land of *Sinnar*. Under the command of this first leader, the *Berta* tribe permanently settled around the *Tumat* river. Then on the second stage they moved to a different site called '*Jeble Sud*'- meaning Black Mountain around the present day *Assosa* town. This permanent settlement at '*Jeble Sud*' is a stretch of land found between *Menge* and *Shirkolle* woreda. This settlement is said to be once occupied by both the '*Mao*' and '*Komo*' tribes. However, no written evidence could be obtained and the elderly people also could not provide tangible information as to exactly when the *Berta* people occupied the region. Thus the people of *Berta* enormously and permanently settled in *Menge* areas of the *Assosa* zone, *Begi* woreda and in the areas as far as the Sudan region. Their migration must have been a gradual process. According to elders, all *Berta* claim that they all have descends from one father *'Berthu'* and one mother *'Endeli'*. According to legend, the *Berta* originated from these people, multiplied and eventually scattered through out the region. The fact of their coming from the Sudan to Ethiopia could be stated based on their search for more space or land for settlement. This could perhaps be

due to population increase in their original place or in search of arable land for cultivation. Disputes and disagreements that might have been created among the people might also have caused the migration.

The *Berta* has cultural similarities with Mao and *Komo* and hold several speech dialects to be shared among their people. It is true that various clans such as: '*Fa-dull*', '*Fa-beghir*', '*Fa-teinzre*', '*Fa-dashi*', and others have emerged. The word '*Fa*' is used as prefix in their language to indicate to which clan they belong. For instance, '*Fa*-dull' means member of 'dull family' or it may depict people or persons belonging to the famous personality of 'dull'. By the same token, the prefix "*Fa*" is added to any proper name such as; rivers, mountains etc... to denote oneself. The second group of settlers in the region of *Benishangul* was probably the so-called *Fung*. According to *Atieb*, the *Fung* abandoned their home probably in the 16th century. By the first half of the 18th century, the *Fung* seem to have established themselves as the political rulers of the region.

Towards the close of the 19th century, the territories which had once been under the *Fung Mukuk*, appear to have been divided into three independent Sheikdoms each ruled by descendents of the Arab settlers. These are the so-called *Watawit* with whom *Benishangul* come to be identified, although, the majority of the inhabitants are still *Berta* by racial origins. *Fung*, is an immigrant race that gradually gain cultural and political domination over the less well-organized people and made them subject to its rule.

The *Watawit* families were the descendents of Sudanese Arabs who came to *Benishangul* starting from the 1st quarter of the nineteenth century as traders and preachers of the Islamic

religion. As time went on they were able to establish their ascendancy over the local people by integrating themselves into the *Berta* ruling families (A. Triulzi, 1981).

Events in the Sudan had once affected the region of *Bela-Shangul* simultaneously with the rise of the *Mahadi* in 1881 in which, a great grand son of Fadli Wad Mussa, by the name Abd-al- *Rahman*, succeeded in becoming the un-disputed master of the whole region of Bela-Shangul (including *Khomosh* and *Aqoldi*). In the years following 1889, he successfully resisted *Mehadist's* attempt of conquest. But, it was not to be expected that *Abd-al-Rahman's* independence would long be respected by *Abdallahi (Kalifa)* whose sovereignty over the region was a little more than a legal fiction and also by Menilik who coveted the valuable gold region. Finally, rivalry over the gold region of *Bela-Shangul* between the *Kalifa* and *Menilik* culminated in *Ras Mekonnen's* expedition of 1898, which ended the period of independence of the *Bela-Shangul Sheikdoms (Atieb, A. Dafalla*, 1964).

During Ras Mekonnen's invation of *Bela-Shangul* (1898), about 200 people were settled in *Methahara* area in the Awash Valley region, after being captured while they were fighting against Ras Mekonnen's army. It is said that they were many in number when they were scattered to different areas. Their descendents were returned to *Bela-Shangul* in 1993 having retained their *Berta* language and culture.

2.7. Population composition

There are diverse ethnic groups in *Benishangul-Gumuz* National State. The largest are the Moslem *Berta*, and the second largest are the *Gumuz*, who together with the *moslem Berta* constitute almost half of the population. In addition, the region has smaller indigenous communities such as *Shinasha, Mao* and *Kamo*, as well as highlander populations of *Amhara, Oromo*, and the *Tigrez*.

People from Wello and from northern and central part of Ethiopia were settled in the region after the great famines of 1973/74 and 1983/84. Their movements took place mainly in 1978/79 and 1984/85. The Oromo people have settled in *Dibate, Wombera* and some other *Woredas* for along time, but some have moved to the area in more recent years. Nowadays, the largest ethnic groups in the region are the *Berta*. There are many other ethnic groups represented in the region. These are mentioned in the 1994 Population and Housing Census Report (appendix one).

2.8. Religion

There are obvious differences among the ethnic groups with respect to religious affiliation. More than 90% of the *Agew/Awingi, Shinasha and Tigray* are Orthodox Christian followers. Among the Amhara and Oromo, more than 50% are Orthodox Christians. Considerable proportions of protestants (greater than 20%) are found among the *Hadiya* and *Kembata*. *Berta, Fadashi, Komo* and Mao are almost exclusively (more than 95%) are Muslims. Islam has also substantial proportions of followers among the *Amhara, Oromo* and *Gumuz*. About 54.2% of the *Gumuz* follow traditional religion.

Table 1: Religions in *Benishangul-Gumuz* according to ethnic affiliating. Differences from 100% are due to people who have not stated their religious affiliation.

Ethnic group	*Religion*					
	Orthodox	*Protestant*	*Catholic*	*Muslim*	*Traditional*	*Others*
Agew/Awingi	99.2	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.0
Amhara	55.8	0.6	0.0	43.5	0.0	0.0
Gumuz	14.7	8.0	0.7	16.2	54.2	5.9
Hadiya	17.2	50.2	28.0	4.5	0.0	0.1

Source: Population and Housing Census, 1994

The different ethnic groups are not evenly distributed in religious affiliation. *Berta* and *Amhara* are the main ethnic groups in *Assosa*. *Gumuz*, *Amhara* and *Shinasha* dominate, the *Metekel Zone* but the *Gumuz* have predominantly settle in the *Kamashi Zone*. The thesis also describes about the traditional beliefs and rituals. This people like other ethnic groups have their own distinguishing features that they produced in the process of their struggle for survival. In *Berta* there are many traditional elements that survived as parts of *Berta* cultural practices. These traditional beliefs are all related to the people's daily practices.

The *Berta* follows, Islam and traditional belief. Although the number of the traditional believers is decreasing in favor of modern religions, especially Islam, there are many traditional elements that survived as a part of Berta's cultural practies. There are many traditional beliefs found in different parts of the area and they are all related with people's daily activities. The belief is that every activity of the community has to be blessed in the name of local gods or deities; otherwise hunting, cultivation, marriage and the like won't be successful. Beliefs are also used to control theft, lying; adultery, homicide acts and the first three are especially counted as shameful acts and condemned by the community. Elders and spiritual leaders play the role of settling disputes, forming families through mamiage, holding funeral and other feasts and leading the traditional worshipping.

This traditional beliefs and spiritual culture, were, centered on the *Shangur*. It is a traditional divinatory practice among the *Berta*, and its main actor is the *neri* diviner. The *Shangur* is said to have been performed or consulted before any major event hunting, harvesting, gold panning, a long journey for trade, moving from one area to

another. *Neri* is the performer of *Shangr*. The *neri* was, and still is, an integral part of traditional *Berta* society. The *Berta* seems to have lost whatever social organization they formally possessed.

They have an annual ritual ceremony, which they called *Feda* "hunting ceremony" that has got high influence in the life of *Berta* particularly, during the past years. The other important ritual ceremony is *Ero* "harvest ceremony". It is thanks giving ceremony for the year, which has just passed, one of purification, and it serves the purpose of predicting what the coming year would give. Today they all are performed irregularly and have lost their spiritual economic and political function in society.

2.9. The *Berta* Language

In Ethiopia most Berta speakers are found in *Benishangul* National Regional State in the corner of the Sudan border. They are also found scattered to the South among the *Maos* and *Oromo* speakers. A group of about 1,000 (*Gebeto*) are found in the *Diddessa* valley, between Nesgemet and *Gimbi*, some are found across the Sudan border and are known there as "*Fazogli*". The total number of *Berta* in Ethiopia may be as high as 50,000 (estimate of *Atieb* A. *Daffalah* based on census figures) making *Berta* one of the four leading Ethiopian *Nilo* Saharan groups. The self-name of the language is *ndu-dbrou* ("mouth of Breta") or *ndu-Oaya* ("mouth of home"). Dialect differentiation in *Berta* is not very significant.

The three main Ethiopian varieties are;

a) Undu (The 'pure *Berta*" of the *Unduorea* north of *Asossa*)

b) Mayu (the *Arbicized Berta* of the *Asossa* area), and

c) Fadashi (the dialect of the *Bambeshi* area). The *Gebeto* are mostly *Fadashi*. (The Sun, July 10,1997:9).

The most widely spoken language is "*Aruthan*" *Aruthan* is the language of "*Aljebalawi*," which means the first settlers of the *Berta* people. This dialect is widely spoken by people belonging to different clan and tribes of the *Berta*. The other widely spoken language is Arabic and it is a highly valued language. Almost all Berta speak Arabic as I observed. My informant, Ato *Ibrahin Yesuf*, also confirmed my observation.

CHAPTER THREE: THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF LABOUR

3.1 Berta Household Organization

Household Organization seems to be the appropriate place to begin a study of production in Berta. Households are economic institutions through which labour is allocated and organized as a basic unit of the production and the reproduction process. Household as a unit of analysis is defined as household members should live together, should eat together, share the same cooking arrangements, share a collective budget and should acknowledge the authority of a single head. This chapter also attempts to describe the division of labour and the various forms of indigenous work parties. It also shows the issues related to work assignments at family and community levels. This helps to understand the ways in which different households exchange labour and the different functions of voluntary work associations.

The chapter shows how the household efficiently allocates its labour resources to the performance of various economic activities. The critical and unique contribution of male, female and child labour to household economic survival is discussed in detail. Anthropologists seem to conceive a household as a residential, productive and consumptive unit (Bender, 1967; Gregory and Altman, 1989). This conception stresses the function of a household rather than the relations between its members. Viewed as such, a household may consist of kin or affinity, or otherwise. According to informants, an ideal Berta household consists of a husband (head), wife, the spouses, children, and a mother or father of one of the spouses. In the case of a polygamous husband, he is a member and the head of independent households he forms with each wife.

3.2 Marriage and the constitution of New HouseHold

Marriage was the fundamental social relationship on which Berta households were instituted. With out wife, a young man could not found his own household. He had to remain a member of his father's house under the formal authority of the latter. Marriage was the first step in the processes through which young men began to control their own labour that wives and children become an independent household.

In Berta, they exercise two kinds of marriages. One is through the consent of the couple, and the second is arranged through the families of the son and the daughter. However, the former one is not as such fully accepted. It needs the approval of the two families or at least it must be backed by either of the two. Otherwise, it will only remain a dream for the would be bride and bridegroom.

The Berta People practices preferential marriage (between brothers and sisters children). By tradition boys of about eighteen years old and girls around sixteen begin their married life. My informants told me that marriage below the age of sixteen is not common. At present marriageable age is tending to increase, and some couples marry after twenty years of age.

The only marriage prohibitions among the Berta are those stipulated by the Koran. According to their understanding of the *Korunic* prescription, a man must not marry his own mother, mother-in-law, lineal grand mother (Father's Mother, Mother's Mother), lineal grand daughters and daughters of his brothers and sisters (Brother's Daughter, Sister's Daughter), his direct paternal and maternal aunts (Father's Sister, Mother's Sister) or any woman who has been nursed by the same woman as he has. The *Berta* do not extend their prohibition on marriage to collaterals designated by the same kinship term as the prohibited women. The

Berta prefer marriages between brother's children, i.e. parallel cousin marriage, which is the marriage of a man to the daughter of his father's brother, or to a kinswoman referred to a man by the same term as the genealogical father's brother's daughter (FBD). Islam has enjoined preference for FBD marriage. The marriage of the prophet's cousin Ali to the prophet daughter Fatima often follows the spread of Islam to Africa (Bates and Rassan 1983: 199; and Lewis 1966: 52). Although all first cousins are genealogically equidistant, they are not considered equally close by the Berta and they are graded in the following way in terms of their kinship distance from Ego: FBS, FBD, FZS, FZD, MBS, MBD, MIS, MZD. So the Berta people's first choice for marriage is between brother's children (FBD).

This type of preferential marriage is important not only for the elementary families but also for the solidarity, and strengthening of the whole *Berta* society. The important advantage of such type of preferential marriage is important (between brother's children). It even includes sister's children; one of the spouses is of the same lineage. When they live together one will not harm the other, even if there is an injury, the injured will not revenge the other. If the spouses are from different lineage and if disputes arise between them, then each support their sides, and so the disagreement continues. When children of two brothers marry, the father, mother, grand father, grand mother and other close kin of the other, and both spouses will be equally willing to support any of their closest kin in old age.

The other type of preferential marriage is between *FZD*. Here also the spouses are from the same lineage and ethnic groups. Other preferential marriage is with *MBO* or *MZD* even if the spouses are of different lineage because marriages among close kin are usually more stable. Many of my informants, including elders, confirm the above statements.

The Berta practice polygamous and endogamous marriages. Authority is mainly maintained through father, which is a feature of patrilineal and patrilocal family. Thus, marriage is conducted between Patrilineal clans and a girl should leave for her husband's residence, that is, viri-local or patrilocal residence. Preparations for weddings go on at the some time and ceremonies are conducted in villages of both families on the same day. These marriages take place mainly during the dry season, lest they should affect the cultivation time. The whole procedure and the events involved could be vivid from the following narration.

The elder of *Berta*, Ato Abdurahman, told me about their marriage ceremony. He said, in *Berta*, there is only one type of marriage that is marriage preferences. He also said that unlike their neighboes such as *Uduk* and *Gumuz* the *Berta* do not have any experience of exchange marriages until the present day, because this type of marriage will bring disunity. According to Ato *Abdulrhuman*, if a man sees an attractive girl, he may request his parents to ask for her hand in marriage. If the parents approve, the boy's father accompanied by another elderly approaches the girl's parents and asks if his son could marry their daughter. More often than not the father chooses a girl for his son without necessarily informing his son.

A young man who considers himself to be of a marriageable age (20 and above) and who feels that he has enough wealth, and family support looks for a marriageable young girl who has reached puberty (16 and above). Upon the identification of the appropriate girl, the suitor undertakes an over- all inquiry about her personal character and her parents' background. The girl's suitability is judged in terms of her behavior in most of the cases (aggressive, cool, greedy, generous, kind), her ability in agricultural work, household management, beauty, age and the like. The suitor searches for a spouse from the same lineage and from the same status-groupings. In *Berta* it is not common to see a poor boy trying to choose a mate from a rich

family. This is mainly because the groom may find it difficult to afford the bride- wealth, which the rich family might demand in accordance with " rich marriage standards". After having sorted out these matters, the young man repeatedly asks the girl's parents.

The boy's father takes coffee berries, tobacco, tea and sugar as gifts when he goes to the girl's house. They tell the boy's father about their decision when he visits them. If they do not agree, he takes back the gifts and goes home. If they agree the representative pays to the bride's family the first part of the bride wealth known as *Asidak*. This ceremony represents the first stage of wedding called *fatha*. During this time they prepare food and drink and the spouses continue to live with their original families. The size of the bride- wealth (partly refundable on divorce) ranges from 100 to 1500 Birr. From 4 to 5 kgms of sugar and coffee, 5 to 10 *kesha* sorghum (one *kesha* is equal to 10 kgms) depending on the economic position of the parties involved and the number of the bride's close relatives.

In rural areas there has been little change in these customs. Though greater attitudes is nowadays allowed in their observance, the most important change has been the substitution of money payments for most of the gifts which were in kind in former days.

A marriage in many, perhaps most, African societies involves a whole series of presentations (payments, gifts, or services), and while the most important of these are from the husband and his kin to the wife's kin, there are frequently, one might say usually, some in the other direction. Presentation in the Oxford Dictionary is defined as ' the act of paying, in money or service, what is due by law or custom'. The presentations with which we are concerned here are all those gifts and payments of goods or services, which are required by custom in the processes of establishing a valid marriage.

The second stage is known by the local name *Alirs*. This is the marriage, which is usually held four- five months after the *fatha*. The marriage as a rule takes place after the harvest because there is enough corn and money to pay for the ceremonial feasts.

An elder told me that before the *Alirs* (the second stage of wedding), a shelter for the young couple is built in the households of the bride's parents but they build a small hut before the rainy season. After the *Alirs* the husband visits his wife regularly. If his wife is from his own village he passes only the night with her, but he is living and working in the daytime in his parents homestead. If his wife lives in another place (village), he may stay there for one or two months. During his stay in the homestead of his wife, he will work with her at the household of his wife's parents.

During his visits, as his wife does not have her own separate field, the husband works with her and with other members of her household to cultivate the fields, which belong to her households. He is bound by the rules of social conduct to help with agricultural work in his wife's household, particularly with weeding which is considered the most labourious and most important work of the whole year. During the second stage of the wedding, *Alirs*, the young wife does not cook for her husband when he visits her. The young wife only brings the meals to her husband in the shelter where he dwells during his visits, but takes her own meals with the other women of her household. The men of the family, the wife's father and brothers also have their meals together, while her husband has his shelter alone or with neighbors or friends in the village. The rules of social conduct prohibit him from eating in his father-in-law's presence, particularly in the first year of marriage, unless he is officially invited to do so. Only some times, when his father in-law is not at home, does he eat with his brother-in-law. As a rule, it is at least a year after the *Alirs* that a wife's father asks him to eat with him and with

the other men in his household. Even then most husbands continue to eat in their shelter, joining their father-in-law only at the feasts accompanying circumcision and other rituals where many men participate in common meals.

After *Alirs*, the husband is forced to buy clothes, shoes, soap and perfumes. As a rule most husbands bring these things to their wives. It is always shameful to a husband who is mindful of the rules of social conduct to cloth his wife by her father even though she still lives in her parents' household. In most of the cases the husband do not provide food for his wife and children. A wife is still entirely a member of her natal home until *alrahula*: she shares in all the work of the household, and her husband assists her during his visits and at most, the husband may bring sugar.

The couple becomes an independent household only after the third stage of the wedding, *Alrahula*, when the spouses establish their own household and begin to be economically independent of their parents' households. At the *Alrahula* a bride receives from her mother the '*idda*': foodstuffs, particularly sorghum and household utensiles. In the year of the *Alrahula* the husband begins to cultivate his own, usually small field in the village where they live. After the *Alrahula*, however, every family becomes an independent economic unit even though he may live for the time being in the homestead of his wife's parents. After *Alrahula* the young family cultivates his own fields and has his own livestock and the wife now cooks for her husband and children, even if they continue to live on the homestead of the parents of either spouse. *Alrahula* is only a temporary arrangement and every family eventually sets up its own homestead.

During Alrahula (which is the third stage of the wedding) the bride leaves for new household accompanied by girls and women from her village. Then mother's man who was her *wakil* during the *fatha*, her sisters and her mother's sister, but not by her mother. Her *wakil* gathers together a number of elders. If the bride is moving to her spouse's village these are elders from his village to witness what the bride brings with her as *idda*. The whole treasurer is listed, the *wakil* sometimes even having a written list, since at a divorce these things remain with the wife. The people who have accompanied the bride stay for two or three days at the invitation of the husband's parents. During this time dancing, food and millet beer are provided. The birds' escort, the bridegroom's kin, all the neighbors, people from his village, and from the neighboring villages attend this ceremony (plate 13 &14).

Case: Ato Hassen Abdurhuman is from Kudiyu. He is married and has two children. He told me about marriage in Berta as follows: Marriage in Berta is generally accomplished by people's consent. Bertas' are Muslim, marriage is performed based on the Sharia law. At present, exogamous marriage has no opposition from the society. However, it is not fully acceptable. It is not forbidden if the women perform the marriage according to Sharia law. I have observed some Berta who married Oromo and Amhara. They told me that they have not faced any problem because of this regarding bride wealth. Ato Hassen conversely told me that it is also accustomed in their people. He said, that when he married, he purchased different items for the wedding, such as perfume, cloth and gave birr 1500.00 for preparing food, beverage etc.

Divorce

In *Berta*, divorce is uncommon. Divorce may be initiated by the man or by the woman on grounds that would appear sufficient to at least one of the spouses. A man may divorce his wife as a rule of social conduct for reason such as infidelity, laziness, abuse of his relatives, or continual quarrelling. A woman does so if her husband is persistently cruel, not hard working, disrespectful, etc. Women often marry another husband before the matter is brought to the elders court where marriage terminates. At the instigation of the wife, the husband claims the return of the bride wealth excluding materials, blanket and other gifts he gave to his' wife and her families including her siblings. Basically, both the woman and the new husband (if she married another) are held responsible for the refund of the bride's wealth.

During divorce they share their wealth equally. During this time the woman moves to her natal area. They share all their domestic animals: sheep, goats, chicken, etc and agricultural product such as sorghum, maize, etc. If it is in the field the elders give the estimated value or she can share in the field as the land actually becomes the property of the husband. As a rule no sharing and selling of land is practiced in the society. Land is exclusively the property of the community. The divorced woman is not allowed to live in a place where her former husbands live, she must go to her natal places. After she returns home she has the right to marry another person. She can't claim any children from her former husband. The children stay at the husband's family's house but they have the right to visit their mother with permission.

3.3. Household Organization of Labour

In the traditional societies, work was allocated mainly according to age and sex groups in the community. Also the relations between relatives were determined to a high extent by age and

sex in life of a nuclear family unit. Some of these features exist, but age as a determinant factor for distribution of work responsibilities within the adult group seems to have a declining importance.

The sexual division of labour, however, still seems to be an important variable for the explanation of the division of labour in the rural community, and for the complex economic household structures. Men are responsible for the kind of work in agriculture involving physical strength in short peak periods. They are clearing the land in the shifting cultivation, building houses, taking care of livestock and hunting. Through hunting and animal production men are responsible for most of the protein supply for the family. Men are also responsible for training their sons in their work tasks. Certain age groups, usually the younger men, are responsible for the defence of the local community or homestead as warriors, and for cattle raiding within some of the tribal communities. The elder men in the community take the political decisions. Men's work in agriculture is usually limited to the peak seasons, mainly the hard work of clearing land. Women and children mostly do the remaining work. Women are thus the cultivators, once the new land is cleared and dug. They do the planting, weeding and harvesting, and they have the main responsibility for supporting the family with food from their plots. Women are also responsible for fetching water firewood, cooking, washing, and taking care of the house and the children. Planting or growing vegetables in the backyard, grinding grain using a stone-mill, washing children and their clothes are exclusively the work of the women.

The survey carried out in *Kudiyu and Belmgha* villages however, shows that the actual *Berta* households may differ in their size as well as the relations, blood or otherwise, between the members. To begin with, a newly established household may consists of only the spouses; or the spouses and their only child. Where the wife/ husband married for a second time, and has

a child from the previous marriage, there could be a member of the household who is a child of only one of the spouses. Another is a household consisting of a mother head, and her children. However, one of the children of such a household should be a male and grown up, able to plough the fields. A household may also consists of other persons who are related to the spouses officially or by blood and dependants.

Among the Berta, most of the activities in the preparation of food and drink and rearing of children are strictly the work of the wife. Activities in agricultural field and livestock production, and decisions about activities in the agricultural fields and the disposition of the household's property are that of the husband. The work of kitchen is exclusively the activity of a woman. The wife cannot sell a sheep or a goat without the consent of her husband. To do otherwise, may lead to divorce. Only men construct-houses and hives, hang and bring down hives, engage in distant trade, take heavy items to the market by loading on pack animals; and clearing, sowing and planting the fields. On the other hand cleaning homesteads, planting or growing vegetables in the backyard, grinding grain using a stone-mill washing are women's activities. Making "*borde*" (non-fermented "local beer") and *alasalia* (fermented "local beer") for men to drink, and taking items to market is women's work. Children help their parents with the activities assigned to their sexes, but guard fields and fetch water irrespective of their sexes. Male elders who have retired from the agricultural fields perform very few activities, such as house keeping, and encouraging attendants on *Anafir* and *Amaha*.

Nevertheless, the division of labour in terms of sex should not be over emphasized since most of the activities in the field are performed by both sexes. Eventhough women's participation in clearing and sowing fields is low compared to the male population, their contribution in clearing ploughed land from weeds, guarding fields close to homesteads, weeding, harvesting,

threshing, and transporting is probably greater than that of the men. In terms of the agricultural practices of the Berta, clearing, weeding, harvesting and threshing are among the most- difficult activities performed in the field.

In some years when crops fail, it is the women's duty to support their families by preparing food from the offshoots of bamboo. To get the offshoots of bamboo they may have to walk far miles as it is not easily available in some seasons. In addition women who live near and around settled villages such as *Asosa* and *Menge* town carry logs and bamboo for fire to sell them in the villages for a small amount of money with which they buy salt, tea, coffee, sugar and pepper. Gold panning is also their monopoly. It is obvious from this analysis that women shoulder heavier responsibility than men to maintain the households. The following figure confirms the above statements.

Workload of household members

Table- 2 Percentage distribution of workload on household members

Person	Fetching water	Cooking food	Collecting fire wood	Agricultural work	Taking goods to market	Washing cloths
Husband	-	2.30	1.60	4.90	59.50	2.90
Wife	94.50	95.60	93.50	77.90	29.60	90.40
Other family members	5.50	2.10	3.10	17.20	10.9	6.70
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Compiled from field data

As could be seen from the table the percentage distribution of workload on household members has uneven distribution, where the mother and/or wife contributes much of the work load of the household, and the share of men and/or husband is extremely insignificant.

Dessalegn (1985) has also confirmed the above statement by saying that Ethiopian women's participation in forms of farm labour, other than the ones they are customarily prohibited from engaging in, more than matches that of their husbands (Dassalegn, 1985:50). Hana Kebede

(1990) also states that women's work in the agricultural sector has been erroneously documented as marginal because in rural Ethiopia women engage in a variety of economic activities, such as cultivation, house construction, food storage and marketing (Hana Kebede, 1990:58).

3.4. Intra-Household relations and Labour Supply

Division of labour in *Berta* households restricts domestic activities to women, and ploughing fields to men. Thus, the presence of both sexes is indispensable to the establishment and maintenance of a household unit. A married couple initially establishes each household in Kudiyu village. According to informants, the strength of the conjugal bond depends, upon the commitment of the husband and the wife to their responsibilities as spouses. A husband divorces his wife if she is not fulfilling her responsibilities in the field and at home. Wife could also leave her husband's house if he fails to plough the field. Hence, one can say the union of the sexes in marriage constitutes a social relation of production. Marriage to a young *Berta* man is a step to appropriate the labour of his wife as well as his own. Marriage in *Berta* society has three stages. During the first (*fatha*) the spouses continue, to live with her family. During his visits (one or two months) in the homestead of his wife, as his wife does not have her own separate field, the husband works with her and with other members of her household to cultivate the fields which belong to her household. He is bound by the rules of social conduct to help with agricultural work particularly with weeding which is considered the most labourious and most important work of the whole year.

As already mentioned, the couple becomes an independent household only after the third stage of the wedding, *Alrakala*, when the spouses establish their own household and begin to be economically independent of their parents' household. The married couples stay in their

parents' household on average for 2 years before *Alrahula*. Then they begin to cultivate their own usually small field in the village in which they live.

A newly established household expands with the birth of children. A child in *Berta* society is an asset. They do not have any knowledge of family planning. Children have both economic and social values. On average children of seven and eight- and some times even children of six years, can guard fields close to homesteads; and also participate in weeding. Giving birth to children is crucial for the household's future labour supply and continuity of their survival as a unit. Therefore it is believed that to have many children is advantageous. According to my informant, the *Berta* is in favour of having many children. Children's participation in production practices is the primary reason. Other reasons for favouring many children include security in old age, continuity of descendents, respect and fame.

3.5. Inter household organization of labour.

In most agricultural societies the household is the unit of production, where the active members constitute the household's labour force. By and large such a labour force is not sufficient to produce the required goods. Thus, most societies have the tradition of supplementing household labour with outside help, by forming arrangements of labour exchange (Barker 1989:57). This is often called labour organization or work parties (Danham 1978, Barker 1989).

As Danham's (1978) work on *Maale*, *Knutsson's* on Western *Wellega* (1965) and that of Tully's year on the *Ari* of Southern Ethiopia indicates a household obtains extra working hands from members of other households in their community through communal work arrangements. Likewise Berta household gives and obtains labour through formal cooperative

work arrangements. Many studies conducted in Africa and Ethiopia show that households participate in cooperative work arrangements because first, there is a demand for high labour loads during farm activities. Barker (1989) states that in most peasant farming systems the demand for additional labour is high during planting and harvesting seasons. Secondly, the feeling that more can be worked in-group than when one works alone. Thirdly, the existence of tasks exceeds the strength of a single person. Fourthly, the prestige obtained through conspicuous giving by those who prepare feasts (Erasmus, 1967; Herbkovits, 1952; Donham, 1978). The need to guard crops from both domestic and wild animals may also give rise to small-scale cooperation between households cultivating fields.

In most peasant communities there are two structural types of cooperative work arrangements: reciprocal (exchange) and festive work arrangements (Erasmus, 1967: 445; Donham, 1978: 204 - 205). Erasmus defines reciprocal work groups as composed of a group of households that work in rotation on each other's fields. In this group, membership is unambiguously defined and each group is clearly bounded. In festive work arrangements, the sponsoring households brew beer or prepare food and ask neighbours to come and help on the appointed day (Lange, 1978; Cheater, 1989; Marwick, 1966). Since each work party is recruited on each occasion, people who work in festive work parties of any particular household may change over time (Donham, Ibid). The Berta people, like other Ethiopian societies have different cultural ways and means to tackle their social and economic problems for their survival. These traditional cooperatives are described as follows.

3.5.1. Reciprocal work parties: *Amaha*

Amaha is the smallest type of indigenous voluntary work parties composed of a group of individuals or families or neighbors who work for each other in rotation. Informants indicate

that *amaha* is the first and the oldest form of labour associations in *Berta* community. It is a small work party ranging from four to ten persons and as a rule members of the group are persons living close to each other.

In *Berta* work was allocated mainly according to age and sex. Adult men's *amaha* were distinct from women's *amaha* and occasionally boys and girls labour (fifteen to about eighteen years old) combined to form young people's *amaha*. Men's *amaha* were organized for all tasks in the agricultural cycle: clearing, cultivation, weeding, and harvesting. Women's *amaha* formed only for weeding and harvesting, while young people's *amaha* mostly weeded. Weeding requires the greatest demand for labour and calls the full work force. Being small groups, *amaha* do not have leaders who organize and directe and coordinate the group's activities. Scheduling workdays and making sure everyone's arrival on time were relatively easy matters for four or five peoples to accomplish among themselves. With out the differentiated structure of roles, *amaha* work groups were relatively short lived usually they were organized for one agricultural task, and after that task had been accomplished, the group dissolves.

The most obvious features of *amaha* organization within the area was that not single network ties covered the entire local system. Quite distinct boundaries were evident among the *amaha* work groups. First of all, people tended to work with neighbors from the same settlement *Kudiyu* people worked mostly with other *Kudiyu, Belemgha* people with *Belemgha*.

> *A case in kudiyu household illustrates an example of how amaha were Organized and employed during the agricultural cycle. Abdurhamaj's household belonged to three different amaha. The household head and his wife are not member of the amaha but three of their five children over the age of fifteen participate in the workgroup. At the beginning of the year,*

Abdurhaman's household cleared new fields with other kind of work parties Anafir and were not involved in amaha, by the time of cultivation and sowing. However, one of his sons, about twenty, joined three other young men from household nearby in amaha that worked three times on each member's field. After a month the weeding season arrived, and this amaha continued to work, weeding each member's field twice before the group dissolved. Since the weeding season was a time to peak labour demand, Abdarhaman's daughter, about eighteen years old, joined another amaha with two young married women, and the group worked twice on each of their fields. A younger son, about fifteen, joined yet another weeding amaha and his group, composed of six other young boys and girls, worked about four times on each of their fields. Finally, at the end of the agricultural cycle, Abdrhaman's daughter joined a harvested amaha with four other young women, and the worked once on each of their fields.

3.5.2. Festive work parties: *Anafir*

Indigenous people conceptualize Anafir as a cooperative work group, consisting of 10 to 25 persons to perform agricultural activities or construction works,. At the time of the work, the host invites the group with food and drink in turn for the assistance received. If the size of the *anafir* is large, women from neighborhood households take part in the preparation. So they support them by providing food and drink. As a rule, usually, a person begs *anafir* at least ten to fifteen days before the date on which he wants the *anafir* to be undertaken. The number of persons depends upon the nature and the amount of work to be performed. The people to be asked could be kin, affines, friends, neighbors and villagers, and those for whom he has worked in the past.

Anafir attendants are expected to come with the instruments appropriate for the work to be performed on the date of the work to be performed. They may go directly to the house of the host or to the place where the work for which they are begged is performed, depending upon the type of the work. Where the *Anafir* is for house constriction, attendants are expected to bring bundles of grass or roof thatching and bamboo to the place of the host where the materials are available.

In *anafirs* for other types of activities, such as fence constraction, the host could employ the labour of the attendants for other related activities if the major task for which the *anafir* was begged is completed earlier than expected.

The quality and quantity of food served at a *anafir* vary from *anafir* for house thatching and to the ones begged for other types of activities. A host of *anafir* for house construction in most of the cases should see to it that all the attendants pass the night at his place, and are served food and beer to their satisfaction. At least mutton and chicken are served to attendants of such types of *anafirs*. In practice, however, the quality could be superior or inferior, in both cases, depending upon the economy of the sponsor.

Berta world out look (ideology) hold that *anifr* is a turn, you work for some one and he works for you in turn. In practice, however, not everyone reciprocates for the labour he obtains, or is reciprocated for the labour he gives. Elders and those who give feast and/or do feast, mostly the rich, may not reciprocate with labour for the *anafir* labour they obtained from others. Elders receive un reciprocally *anafir* labour because of their help and kindness in the past, when they were physically strong, or good advice and favors in mediation of cases currently.

In contrast to the households of the above service- giving categories of people, households able to serve special food to attendants may obtain *anafir* labour but may not be expected to reciprocate. Such households serve meat with injera and drink on *anafir,* for most of the activities preparation of the field and sowing are not arduous and can usually be accomplished by a domestic group regardless of its composition. Even people who live alone are able to sow their own fields. The only exceptions occur when their efficiency is hampered by illness or injury. Then the necessary labour is recruited on the basis of kinship or neighborly relations with the village.

> *Case: Atayu Abdurhman, age 43 lives in Kudiyu village, is a widow who lives alone in her own household and performs all agricultural work herself. Just on the sowing period, she got sick with malaria and unfortunately could not sow her fields. So her affines whose field borders Oseman directly on hers, and yaya who is her nearest neighbour sowed it for her.*

Where the *anafir* is organized for agricultural activities such as: preparation of fields, cleaning, sowing, weeding and thrashing a large working team composed of most able-bodied inhabitants of a village is formed.

A much more difficult task is weeding, which many household cannot do themselves. In order to weed successfully and in time, larger working groups.(*anafir)* are formed. Anyone who organizes *anafir* must supply its participants with sufficient millet beer or tea for as long as the work is performed, and when it is finished he should entertain them with meat.

Weeding by *anafir* takes place at a time when everyone in the village is much occupied with the same economic activities. Whoever helps weed the field of his neighbour cannot at the same time weed his own field. Most men participate in *anfairs* while women continue to weed their own fields or perform other agricultural work.

The domestic group mostly does harvesting. *Anafirs* and paid labour are not used. Harvesting is considered women's work; if a household lacks sufficient women to do it, it tries informally to enlist the co-operation of female neighbors who have finished their own harvesting or who can be released from it because there are more than enough women in their household. The final agricultural activity is threshing done by a large working team composed of most able-bodied inhabitants of the village. Threshing is an economic activity with a considerable recreational aspect. The consumption of a large amount of beer is an inevitable concomitant.

> *Case The case of Abdurhaman is described below: One day able males respond to the call of Abdurhaman and helped him in thresing the forest to prepare a new plot of land for cultivation. On the evening of that day porridge, and beer were provided to the participants. Other community members in the compound shared the feast. A big fire was lit in the halwa (Abdurheman's guest house) around which all sat in a circle and ate, drank and played until mid-night was approaching.*

The difference between *amaha* and *anafir* is, that while the former consists of as many as thirty people and requires the provision of food, beer or honey wine, the latter is small in regard to its labour and does not require beer or honey wine, except food, coffee or tea. In addition to this, *amaha* is limited to age-mates and sometimes kin, and the like. *Amaha* seems reciprocal rather than festive since it does not involve the preparation of beer or honey wine.

In the views of the anthropological literature regarding work groups or parties arrangements discussed above, one may tend to categories *anafir* and *amaha* as festive and reciprocal work group respectively. It is true that each *anafir* party may be recruited a new by hosts who serve special food and beer or honey wine, while members of the *amaha* group remain the same to the end. However, in addition of variability and stability in membership, the distinction between reciprocal and festive work groups concerns the degree of obligation to reciprocal labour as well as the quality and quantity of the food and/or drink served.

There are other cultural cooperation's, each of which has different purposes. *Sanduq and Mujada* are forms of traditional associations.

Mujada: is a cultural cooperation, which is used for any kind of material and labour or money contribution as well as offering advice. It also includes rehabilitating the poor and the disabled by providing money and material assistance. Furthermore, it also includes sharing the sorrow during death, and supporting each other financially during marriage.

Sanduq: is an economic institution established among female to save and contribute money for the purpose of fulfilling household materials. Both systems of labour mobilization have their own respective acting leaders who are supposed to arrange the working days for each member to control the beginning and ending times of work and absence of members. Every participant is expected to come with tools on time. Absence without reason ends up in dismissal from the membership or it leads to financial punishment.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SOCIAL ORG3ANIZATION OF PRODUCTION

4.1. Agricultural Production System

It is very difficult to discuss agriculture without discussing about land and land use practices. Land whether it is inherited, allotted, purchased or seized is the most basic resource of agriculture. In traditional economy, land is a source of food, pasture, grazing and forest products.

In this section, attempt will be made to describe the land tenure system of the *Berta*, the impact of secular changes on the lives of people in general and the production process in particular, and people's opinion regarding land holding practices.

Land, labour, and other inputs such as animals, tools, seeds, fertilizers constitute the major production resources of most agricultural societies (Dalton, 1967: 66; Barker, 1989: 54). The area covered by *Benishangul- Gumuz* Regional State was brought under Emperor Minilik II rule towards the end of the nineteenth century, notably between 1875 and 1898. The process of incorporation was more or less completed by 1900 (Donham, 1986: 3). It is difficult to generalize about the land tenure systems of the said region before Menilik's occupation for the lack of sufficient data and the diversity of cultural groups living there. According to my informants, in *Berta*, lands were owned by the community as a whole. In those days people had the right only to use the land occupied in their lifetime. Upon the death of an occupant, his heir (the eldest son) had to request the chief to allow him to inherit his father's property and to use the land. Informants noted that since there was no scarcity of land, individuals were free to cultivate unoccupied land by consulting village leaders. Land ownership questions were not crucial issues.

4.1.1. Land use practices

In the entire *Berta*, inhabited lands clans own all land, both cultivated and uncultivated. In most of the weredas, people are free to farm uncultivated land. Inside his own territory a clan member can farm as much land as he is able to cultivate. Size of farm depends on the farmer's initiative and the size of his family. The size of the farmland is usually from one to six plot ('*timad*')and sometimes larger.

A local unit called "Oud", which is equivalent to 'one timad', measures the size of farmland. The size of the farms of the household ranges from one to four *timad*. The land size of about 40.9% of the households is four and above *timads*, about 30% owning two *timads*, 15.2% one *timad*, while 13.6% own three *timads*. The exception perhaps is 0.3% where the households own half a *timad*. Access to land is justified by almost 94.0%, where only 6.0% reported having no access. Nevertheless, it has been reported that no effort is being made to enhance production. This issue has been justified where households have no means of improving their agricultural productivity due to the low capacity of acquiring farm implements and inputs. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage distribution of household by size of farm land that a household owns.

MengeWereda	1/2 Timad	One	Two	Three	above three	Total
Total	0.30	15.20	30.00	13.60	40.90	100

Source: field data

Land is not sold under any circumstances, either inside or outside the clan. Nor are the tenants permitted to work under someone else. Land is not inherited since any one can use an uncultivated field. A boy begins to farm on his own at about sixteen to twenty years of age. If unmarried, he will divide his work between his own fields and those of his father. When a boy

has collective work on his field (which is usually just next to his father's), his mother will prepare beer from *corn* or *sorghum* collected from the father's fields. A boy, as a rule of social conduct buys clothes for his father, mother, and siblings from the cash earned by selling his *corn* or *sorghum*. After marriage, a man must farm his own field together with his wife and provide his own beer. He will no longer work on his father's fields.

The length of time in which an area can be cultivated depends completely on the soil. When the crop yield begins to decrease a new field is started. Productive soil remains usable for four to six years: two years is the norm for ordinary soil. When the field starts to get old, the farmer notes that the yield is decreasing. He then starts to look for a new piece of land.. Moving is an individual decision, but villages usually move together to a new cultivable soil. A family never farms alone since all depend on their neighbors. The first step in starting a new farm is to cut-down a big tree in the middle of the field, and leave it in the field. This is mostly done between September and January.

After the first big tree fall, a work party may be formed to clear the grass. This is done while it is still green, in September /October. The tool used is a slightly bent stick. Grass, which is two to three meters tall, is cut at ground level, completely felled, and sometimes trampled. The Grass is cut and trodden upon to prevent the seeds from spreading and to allow the grass to dry out. Some fresh grass is taken for thatching the farmhouse, grain store, and the other buildings on the farm. This grass is cut with small scythe known as mac'edic (Amharic Mac'ed).

Cutting the grass also makes falling of the trees easier. Cooperative parties in which only men take part often do this. Trees are cut with axes at about one meter above the ground. The wood is used for building materials and firewood.

In January/ February the grass is burned off. First the grass around the house is carefully burned off so that the house will be safe from the general burning- off which follows. Men generally do this work and a lot of uncultivated bush land gets burned with the cropland. The reason for burning is to make working in the fields easier (although it is recognized that ash is good fertilizer). The burning also chases out wild animals and makes a group hunt possible.

After clearing grass and trees, the people build the farm hut Women may help carry grass for the roof of the house. A work party generally is not called for because the farmsteads are very simple, although passers by generally stop to help for a while. Separate houses for boys and farm animals are also built. In the village, work group are common. People start to move out to the farmstead in late April and stay there until the sorghum is harvested. In the second year some of the family can move back to settlement, but some one has to stay permanently to guard the fields.

4.1.2. Agriculture- Nature and Characteristics

In *Berta* farming has been simply a way, for many the only way, of survival and not for marketing (a business enterprise). Ideally, the farmer is supposed to produce everything that he requires for himself and his family. With the help of his family he produces almost everything he requires to satisfy his minimum needs. Basically, he produces for his own consumption and not for market. Simple necessities such as salt, species, coffee, sugar, and soap are obtained by barter in the local market. Whatever cash the farmer gets goes primary to pay his tax and what little is left is spent on a few cheap manufactured articles.

The *Berta* economy is characterized by shifting cultivation. It was long ago since shifting cultivation took over hunting-gathering and became a dominant economic activity of the community under study. But it began to manifest some changes currently. Though still insignificant, land tenure system is changing since clans have been transformed into peasant associations (PAs) and went against pervious delineations of their clan territory. Today land acquisition, at least falls theoretically under the responsibility of PAs and *wereda* councils. Practically, rural people follow their traditional system of using land for cultivation and housing.

The type of farm implements and the nature of their cultivating practices do not vary among the people. The economy of the people is based almost exclusively on agriculture. The main types of crops produced include variety of sorghum, maize and sesame. The basic agricultural tools are digging stick, small hoe, and machetes for clearing under bush, short looped sickle, and single bladed axe.

Though the *Berta* economy is based on shifting cultivation, a general surplus production is not aimed at currently. According to my field observation and data, most of the people suffer from food shortages during the rainy season. Cultivated cereal crop do not go beyond what is needed for the consumption needs of the inhabitants. They compensate for their food shortage by eating bamboo shoots and other roots and leaves. This has been confirmed by 86.8% of the people, while 8.8% claimed as having not been affected at all. During the worst period of food shortage, households tend to apply different survival coping mechanisms. The base line survey of Oxfam-GB indicates that 25.5% of them sell their labour, 27.3% collect wild fruits and vegetables, 22.9% engage in gold panning, 7.3% sell animals and fixed assets, while a small proportion (about 7.0%) depend on assistance. About 92% of the households experiencing reported food shortage. These are indicated in the table given below. The major

reason given for the occurrences of household food shortages are: crops diseases/pest, excessive rainfall and low production.

Table 4 Percentage distribution of status of food availability at household level

PA	Rainy season	dry season	both	non-occurrence	Total
22 PAs	86.00	2.30	2.10	8.80	100

Source: *Menge* Wereda base line survey Oxfam-GB 2000.

Table 5. Percentage distributions of survival mechanism methods of the households during food shortages.

PA	Sell labour	Collect wild fruits and vegetables	Engage in gold panning	Sell animals	Borrow money	assistance	Total
22 PAs	25.5	27.3	22.9	7.3	5.2	11.80	100

Source: *Menge* Wereda base line survey Oxfam-GB 2000.

As indicated below (Table 6), the economy is based on agriculture, which provides the source of livelihood for about 95.6% of its inhabitants. The remaining 4.4% are engaged in non-agricultural activities such as teaching, civil servant, petty trade, gold panning etc.

Table 6. Percentage distribution of household's livelihood (income)

PA	Agriculture	Teaching	civil servants	others	Total
Menge Wereda	95.6	0.30	2.10	2.00	100

Source: *Menge* Wereda base line survey Oxfam-GB 2000.

As can be seen from Table 7 below, the majorities of the households i.e, about 42.6% said that they are depending on traditional gold panning, 7% on petty trade; 6% on daily labour and the rest(nearly 7%) depend on small domestic service activities, while 37.4% said that they have no other source of income.

Table 7. Percentage distribution of Secondary source of income

PA	Gold panning	petty trade	daily labourer	others	no source	Total
Menge Wereda	42.6	7%	6	7	37.4	100

Source: *Menge* Wereda base line survey Oxfam-GB 2000.

The wild bush and woodland is a vital resource for the *Berta* domestic economy. Many wild foods are collected to supplement the diet in time of food shortages, especially in the rainy season. Wild honey is also collected and fishing is important in the later rainy season when the rivers are beginning to subside. Hunting was more significant traditionally than it is today. It is very likely that hunting and gathering played a vital part in *Berta* life formerly. The woodland is also the source of many medicines (from roots and bark) and of building materials for a wide variety of domestic objects.

4.1.3. Shifting Cultivation as a Subsistence Economy

The *Berta* way of life is characterized by shifting cultivation. They also spend time fishing hunting and gathering, gold panning and raise domestic animals. The hoe cultivation of sorghum, maize, millet and sesame occupies most of their time. These are the most widely cultivated crops. They complement these steple foods in their meals with relishes such as sesame seeds and a dozen varieties of beans and pulses. They also use wild greens, mushrooms and meat when available. Besides this, also grow small amount of spices, herbs and peppers mainly to flavors food. Sweet potatoes and groundnuts are also grown. The general features of this type of agriculture, as it occurs worldwide, have been described by Conklin (1957a, 1961); Warthers (1960), Pelzer (1963), and others as quoted in Stauder (1971:26). In this section I will describe the particular features of the *Berta* system of shifting cultivation, as it operates over a yearly cycle of agricultural activities, and labour related to this agricultural production system.

Shifting cultivation is a farming strategy in which fields are cropped for fewer years than they are allowed to remain fallow. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for *Berta*. They move frequently in search of virgin land in response to the decline in fertility of soil. The duration of *Berta* shifting system is based on the fertility of land and its yield and intensification of weeds. A plot of farmland can be used for four to eight years depending on yielding capacity of the soil. If the soil is good it remains usable for long time. In most cases four years is the norm, the farmer will then starts to look for a new piece of land. Farms are small patches of plot, often located around the homestead and riverbank. As motioned above, when soil losses its fertility, farms are shifted to new grounds but still not far away from home. This is because of predatory animals such as apes, monkeys, baboons, wild pig and weevils, that would otherwise destroy crops. Hence, farms are sought to be moved for the *Berta*, in most of the cases shifts his dwellings too. The other reason for frequent shift of farmlands is usually due to termites that eat mud walls and fences. There is no problem in leaving one's old hut and building a new one because land as well as bamboo tree is available in abundance. Annually different crops such as finger millet and noug may be sown on the same farmlands turn by turn (noug in the first year and sorghum next). Thus, crop rotation may be applied on the same field until the farm shifts to another plot depending on the yield of the harvest and condition of weeds and also termites.

Shifting cultivation within *Kudiyu* and *Belngnha* villages made possible by favorable conditions such as availability of land, the absence of population pressure on vital natural resources and free access to them, and the existence of domestic organization to mobilize labour for clearing the forest, constricting huts and to carryout cultivation. Since kin groups depend on one another, they usually leave an old plot for a new one altogether. However, some with usable land may stay behind. There are certain criteria to select a new farm field.

Natural vegetation is an important sign of land's suitability for farming. They look very closely at the forest and bushes. In general, grass-covered land is considered to be bad for farming while the presence of tall trees and bushes are considered to be good since they indicate that the land was left fallow for long period, say from 15 to 20 years. A selection of a new farm field is followed by land preparation and clearing the farmland for crop cultivation. The unsuitable, steep and rocky area is not selected for cultivation. Farmers are forced to shift to new grounds, but still not far away from home because of predatory animals.

In short, the *Berta* economy is best characterized as shifting cultivation. They use slashing and burning to clear their field. Hoe culture is a typical feature of the shifting cultivation system consisting of local hand tools, locally made sickle, and small knife as major tools.

4.1.4. Yearly agricultural production cycle

The *Berta* ascribes a prime importance to agriculture, which is the basis of survival. The basic unit of agricultural production is the household. Members of the working groups get involved in different aspects of agricultural production. Members of a household engage in a complex set of seasonal agricultural tasks. They fulfill most of their tasks in the capacity of independent production unit having a well stated division of labour predominantly based on age and sex. The cycle of agricultural production consists of preparation of the field, sowing, weeding, harvesting and thrashing. Each of this consecutive seasonal agricultural tasks in turn contain a set of inter – related tasks.

4.1.4.1. Finding of a new field

Annually each *Berta* domestic group normally makes a new field: it brings into cultivation an area of forested land, by 'clearing' off the forest. A man selects the site for his new field according to a number of criteria, some ecological and some social.

Of the ecological criteria, some restrict site selection by excluding certain kinds of land as agriculturally unsuitable for new farm fields. Excluded is land which is too rocky, or impossibly steep, or land without forest vegetation. *Berta* prefer sites covered by well-developed forest growth rather than those where the trees are small and under growth sparse. *Berta* pay little attention to soil itself, but vegetation serves them as an index of the fertility of a site. They estimate that the lusher the forest vegetation of an areas the more years it can be kept under cultivation, and the larger it yields. On the other hand *Berta* prefer to avoid clearing patches of forest which include too many huge hard-wood trees which would require too great an amount of labour to cut down.

All the various ecological factors I have mentioned combine with other, purely social factors, to guide the decisions. *Berta* makes decision on where to clean new fields and live. Wherever, *Berta* chooses to make their new farm field, the way they make it is the same. When the *Berta* farmer observes that the yield is decreasing and the field starts to get old on a given piece of land, he starts to look for a new field. The first steep in starting a new farm is to cut down a big tree in the middle of the field. This is done throughout September to January. The man will also tell people about his new field, and no one can farm there without his permission or at the risk of being legally accused. A man tries to farm as much good land as he can; occasionally, he will share some land with his brothers. The preparation of the new field for cultivation involves a very labourious process. First the land has to be cleared of the natural vegetation cover by cutting the longer trees with axes and by burning the bush and the grass. Men perform the physically demanding work, women and children the lighter work. Thus, the men burn the forests, dig out bushes and also cut trees with axes and clear the land to be used for cropping. Women and children mostly remove the wild grass.

4.1.4.2. Re-clearing of Fields

Another activity is the re-clearing of previously cultivated fields. For most households this is the first act in the annual process of cultivation. Old straw and stubble left from the previous harvest are dug out with a hoe and raked with a wooden rake into heaps which are soon burned on the field. The clearing of fields facilitates later weeding, but often it does not get done. If the rain come unexpectedly early, the field is sown without being cleared because sowing is performed immediately after the first rains. The clearing of a field usually begins towards the end of June, about one month before the rains are expected, and coincides with another important activity, panning of gold from the river. The number of hands available in typical households for clearing the fields is therefore limited. This work is usually left completely to old people and small children, between the age of seven to eight participate fully in agricultural work. In many households there is nobody available to clear the fields. The use of a neighbor's help or of hired labour, quite common for weeding, rarely occurs at clearing. The clearing of fields is the only agricultural activity with which other economic activities clash. The successful management of all other activities is accomplished by a suitable division of labour, by mobilization of labour from outside the domestic group, and by careful organization. Although clearing is important since it later simplifies weeding, it is not as essential as sowing, weeding and harvesting. Unlike clearing, if any of these latter operations were neglected, the result of all agricultural work might be jeopardized, thereby threatening the physical existence of the household. If a field is not weeded, the crop is destroyed because fast-growing grass chokes the grain. If fields is not cleared before sowing, weeding is impeded, but the crop is not endangered. Therefore, mobilization of labour assures that all fields will be weeded, although some may not have been cleared.

4.1.4.3. Ploughing

The shifting cultivators do not practice ploughing land. They use minimum or zero tillage to cover the seeds using the small homemade hoe. These shifting cultivators do not traditionally practice the use of oxen for ploughing. Therefore, there is no cultivation (ploughing) of the land before sowing or planting their seeds. Moreover, the practice of deep ploughing does not exist in this system.

4.1.4.4. Sowing/ Planting (Pala)

In most parts of *Berta* sowing is exclusively the work of men including sometimes boys of seven to ten years. This is relatively easy work. Sorgum, maize and millet are sown first and then seasame on special part of the filed. After these crops have been sown, others are planted in small beds in gardens near the dwelling. All work in and around the house (gardens) is usually a women's domain. Sowing does not present a great organizational problem. Even people who live alone are able to sow thir own fields. The only exception occurs when illness or injury hampers their efficiency. Then the necessary labour is recruited on the basis of relatives and neighbourly relations withen the villages. The first rains signal the time to plant after the burning. Planting may extend from March to May. Except for certain areas reserved for root crops, the entire field area is planted with maize and sorghum. Near a woman's cooking hut, pumpkins are planted among the maize.

Immediately after planting, the fields must be guarded against monkeys and birds unearthing the seeds. After it has germinated and emerged from the ground, the maize needs no watching for a month or so. Then the young stalks became vulnerable to baboons and monkeys who like to chew them for sugar. As the maize slowly develops ears, these too became targets for

animal pests. During the last two months before harvesting, boys must guard fields against the major pests, monkeys, baboons and various birds constantly.

In most of the cases, all fields lose some of the crop to pests; and this is expected. But if the fields were constantly left unguarded, the whole crop will be lost. The *Berta* protect their fields from wild animals and pests by different traditional methods. They usually take traditional measures depending on the type of the wild animals and pests and the situation. To protect their fields, *Berta* cannot build fences, which would be useless against monkeys, baboons and birds. Traps are used to some extent, but are insufficient. So they took measures such as sprayings perfumes, in some other areas farmers make doll- like structures, which look like human beings. They hung them inside the farms inorder to frighten wild animals.

The *Berta* relies primarily on human presence in their fields to frighten off pests. They live among their farm fields, but if their previous habitations are not strategically enough located to guard their new fields, either, they move to fit the new situation or new special shelters that are built for watching the farm fields other than guarding. Maize requires little attention between planting and harvesting. Their agriculture is extensive, and they would rather devote their labour to making more and bigger fields rather than to improving the fields of smaller and fewer fields.

Occasionally *Berta* do not succeed in burning their fields properly. If the fields do not burn at all, because of early, unexpected heavy rains, they can be planted but with great loss of yields through un-checked weeds. If this occurs over a whole region, there is a threat of famine. But even when natural conditions are normal, many fields are not burned off completely, either because they had been failed at the wrong time or in the wrong way, or because the wind changed or the dried matter was not sufficiently uniformly distributed, etc. In these case *Berta*

often try to re-burn parts of the fields as they are, although they will rarely trouble tupile and burn all unburned materials. They will go ahead and plant what is not burned together with what was. In any case, it is advantageous to *Berta* not to burn their new fields completely, at least not to reduce to asks all the medium- sized tree trunks and branches. This size of tree is needed for domestic fires. *Berta* are not concerned to cut and pile branches to burn them efficiently, or to fell large trees earlier so they may dry out. Even after a good burn, a field is left with many large trunks and branches in completely burned.

4.1.4.5. Weeding (*Alamer*)

A much more significant organizational problem is presented by weeding. This begins about a month after sowing and lasts for about forty days. This does not mean, however, that fields are weeded for a full forty days. In principle, they are not weeded on Friday, the Muslim holy day (though Friday is not a day of rest for the *Berta*). The fact that the millet and sorghum fields are not weeded on Friday shows the significance of weeding, which nobody is willing to endanger by going against God's will. During the period of weeding, Friday is used for other agricultural work: the additional sowing of failed corn and the weeding of beds of okra and other cultivated plants. Activities other than agricultural work are most often performed on Friday. In former times millet fields were not weeded on Mondays either. However, Monday is not of such importance and fields may be weeded without danger if it is in the morning, before departing for work and before sacrificial food is prepared for the children. Recently a belief has spread from *Menge* that fields must not be weeded on Wednesday, the danger of doing so being exemplified by accounts of terrible things that have followed.

Thus nowadays fields are usually weeded on Monday, sacrificial food first being prepared for the children; and no weeding is done on Wednesday. Other economic activities such as gathering wild vegetables are being performed instead. Wednesday is also the day for

neighborly assistance with weeding, as in this case no danger threatens. The weeders leave between eight and ten o'clock in the morning. In the afternoon they rest for two to four hours and return from the fields before sunset at about six o'clock. The size of the harvest depends less on the size of the plot than on how much of it is successfully weeded; but it is impossible to influence the size of the harvest by extending the weeding period as any weeding carried out later than about two and half months after sowing is useless. By that time the grass is so high and the grain competing with it so stunted that it could not ripen even if the grass were removed. Weeding is thus strictly scheduled. Its completion is facilitated by the fact that it clashes only slightly with other activities. It is done at the height of the rainy season when there are plenty of pools with surface water near each village. From these water can be drawn easily and quickly either in the morning before the workers leave for the fields or in the evening. Care of the cattle is also organized so as not to require the labour of household members who must be free to weed. During the weeding season livestock is kept in the village. After morning milking the cattle are put out to pasture where no one guards them. At sunset they return by themselves and are milked again. Milking and the occasional search for strays is the only care given to the cattle during the time of weeding.

Each household thus has its entire labour force at its disposal for the weeding of fields. Both men and women weed fields. Children above the age of seven or eight also participate, with the exception of one child of that age who stays at home, guards the house and, if a girl, see to the domestic tasks, especially the brewing of beer. If a household is unable to release one person from weeding it can rely on the help of its neighbors in the village and leave its house empty. In principle, the working group, which weeds the fields, comprises all the members of a household. The composition of these groups presents no great problem in households with a relatively large labour force. In such a household it is also easy for some members to stop

weeding their own fields some weeks before the end of the season and to work on somebody else's fields for cash. Fatherless orphans and other men who must pay their own bride wealth themselves mostly do this.

If a household comprises one member only, he weeds his fields himself if physically able and especially if he is not financially dependent solely on a high production of millet. This is usually the case with divorcees, young widowers, etc. They weed their fields in the same manner as households with more members, but do so alone. However, one-member households usually consist of older people with limited working ability, which have to cultivate for cash as well as for their own subsistence. Some households with two or more members have only a limited work capacity due to old age, illness, accident or pregnancy. The households must compensate for their limited income from cattle breeding or by producing more corn, mobilize working groups to weed their fields on the basis of ties of neighborliness or kinship outside their own immediate family. These will be discussed below.

As already stated above, it is a much more difficult task, which many households cannot do without any assistance. In order to weed successfully and in time, large working groups called *anafir* are formed on the basis of institutionalized neighborly assistance. Any one who organizes *anafir* must supply its participants with sufficient millet beer, tea or coffee for as long as the work is performed, and when it is finished he should entertain them with food. The organizer can invite a large group of peoples, or specifically invites only some of them, his uses neighbors and friends in the village and his nearer kin.

Although a working party of neighbors is organized differently and under different circumstances from a working party of the closest kin, preference is given to adding those households, which need it for their subsistence rather than for the procuring of surplus. This attitude is also revealed in exceptional cases when the men of the village decide to weed the field at neighbor who cannot afford *anafir* in the usual manner and who has no close kin in the village to assist him. A head of household whose members are unable to complete their weeding and a married man who has set up his own field prior to his *ruhula* and cannot weed it himself, may arrange *anafir*. In many cases a household cannot weed its fields by itself, if unable for family reasons to arrange *anafir or* to hire a labour force. This applies to household heads who are too old to work efficiently and who do not have young workers in their households. Such are usually old married couples, widowers, and widows and elderly divorcees living alone. If they cannot afford labour or a working group of neighbors their fields do not remain un weeded. Their children or grand children in the same village will weed for them.

Young married men who have their own fields, but not yet their own household, cannot leave the weeding of the fields of their parents' household to its other members. They are still members of this household and dependent on it for their living; and it is their first duty to weed them alongside the household's other members. When the household comprises a relatively large labour force all the members first spend some time weeding the household land and them for a proportionate period they weed the bridegroom's field. If a household does not have an adequate labour force to weed both its own plots and those of a married son, the latter must first participate in weeding the household plots. To weed his own field he then has to mobilize a working group or to use hired labour.

The decisive principle for the recruitment or working groups for weeding fields is neighbors hood ties within the village. Ties of kinship may modify this local factor in several ways, as when two or more *anafairs* taking place in the village at the same time. Women usually participate only inforems organized by their kin. Kinship ties operate especially strongly when a household cannot affoed to arrange *anafir*. The working groups then formed of the household head's children or grandchildren living in the same village. The obligation to weed the fields of another houshold is determined by residence in the same village and is usually balanced by the reciprocal right to entertainment, which need not be fulfilled if the parents or grand parents concerned cannot provide it. Help with weeding is then a one - sided kinship duty

Harvesting, threshing, winnowing and Storage

Once the major work of preparing the land, planting and sowing is done, and weeding completed, farmers in most cases sit and wait while the crop is growing. When the plants grow to maturity, another busy season of harvesting, threshing and winnowing arrives.

4.1.4.6 Harvesting (Teseqa)

Harvesting begins about four months after sowings and usually last two months. It may even begin before the end of the rainy season. At the same time several other economic activities are being carried out. This affects the composition of the working groups involved in harvesting, which again are determined mainly by membership in the same household. Harvesting is considered women's work. So the women of a household comprise the basic harvesting groups. It is uncommon, for instance, for a mother and daughter living in different households to spend secured days gathering crops together, first in the mother's filed and then the daughter's. Similarly a working group may be formed of a women, her daughter in--law and possibly other kins women who live in a different household. They work together for

some time in the fields of each. As in other agricultural activities, kinship relations are the basic for recruitment into harvesting groups for households lacking an adequate labour force. Neighborhood groups and hired labour do not apply because harvesting lasts so long that the female members of a household or their closes female kin almost always manage to complete it successfully.

Divorced men or widowers who are the sole inhabitants of their households and who do not have any close female kin in the village where they live must do their own harvesting. A man occupying a household with his elderly mother, if she has no female kin in the village also harvests crops. If a household lacks sufficient number of women to do it, it tries informally to enlist the co-operation of female neighbors who have finished their own harvesting or who can released from it because there are more than enough women in their households.

4.1.4.7. Threshing (*zuma*)

The final agricultural activity is threshing, done by a large working team composed of most able- bodied inhabitants of a village. Threshing is done on an earthen threshing floor located in each field, using a simple flail, a piece of wood split lengthwise to which a bow- shaped branch is attached as a handle. Threshing begins only after the crop has been brought in from all the fields of the village, and lasts about one month or perhaps a little longer. The simple process of driving animals over the sheaves does threshing. The animals whose necks are tied together and whose mouths are muffled, are kept plodding in a circle over the unthreshed grain while the farmer continuously arranges the unthreshed grain with a wooden fork. All the men of the village thresh in the field of one household and the women winnow the grain as it is threshed. Women of the household whose grain is being threshed prepare large supplies of sorghum beer, which is consumed during the work. Occasionally tea and coffee

are also offered to the members of the work team. When the grain of one household has been threshed the team moves on to thresh the grain of the other household in turn.

Threshing is an economic activity with a considerable recreational aspect. The consumption of a large amount of beer is an inevitable concomitant and the sound of flails falling on the threshing floor sets the rhythm for songs, which men and women sing as they work. There is continuous dancing from morning until evening. The men take turns in leaving off threshing and women by turn stop winnowing to join the group of dancers. Thus, threshing time is a long pay festival for each village. The work component is of course of prime importance for the members of the households whose crop is being threshed. For the majority, however, especially for young boys and girls, the recreation is more important.

4.1.4.8. Winnowing

It is done with the help of a wooden spade by throwing the threshed grain into air. The grain being heavier is thus sorted out from the chaff which the wind carries slightly further away. Winnowing is removing the chaff from the grain. Winnowing is done entirely by hand using wooden forks and shovels. Sieves and bowls carry out the final stages.

4.1.4.9. Storage

The grain is then collected and stored either in pit outside the house or in containers. These containers, which sometimes are placed outside with their conical, thatched covers, look like small huts from a distance. The size and the number of the containers or pits depends on the wealth of the individual farmer.

Table 8. Agricultural Calendar

No	crop type	Land preparation			Planting (sowing)	Weeding		Harvesting
		1st	2nd	3rd		1st level	2nd level	
1	Sorghum	As the rain begins	1st week of May	July 15	May	Sep.	Aug. 15	Dec.
2	Maize	"	"	"	1st week of May	June 15	Agu.15	1st week of Oct.
3	Millet	"	June 15-30	"	July 15-Aug.30	1st week of Agu.	1st week of Sep.	Feb-15 and Jan-15
4	Haricot Bean	"	July	"	Agu.	Sep.	Aug-15	Nov.
5	Noug	"	July	"	July	"	"	Nov. 15

Source: Compiled from field data

4.2. Major Crops

The process of production can be described or analyzed by focusing on the types of crops grown, the circumstances (cultural, social, and economic) under which they are produced; division and organization of labour; and the different techniques and tools used. As already been mentioned, in *Berta*, crops grown include: cereal crops such as sorghum, and maize; root crops, such as potatoes, sweet potatoes, and groundnuts. In addition, certain other plants/ crops such as oil seeds, e.g. noug, sesame (selit); sunflower (suf) are also grown in the area. For the purpose of this thesis subsistence crops will be briefly discussed. Cereals (sorghum and maize) and root crops are produced basically for local consumption, though farmers sell or exchange a portion of their produce on the local market. The following discussion focuses on their functions, particularly their contribution to subsistence and the relative importance given to each crop.

4.2.1. Cereal Crops- Sorghum, Maize and Millet

Sorghum, maize and millet are warm weather crops. The average annual temperature that these crops require to grow ranges from 18°c to 25°c, and the rainfall from 1000 mm to 2000mm. They form staple food corps for almost high proportion of the rural population. These food grains have certain qualities that make them attractive to the peasants. They are drought- resistant and therefore do well in *Berta* area where the rainfall is not only small but also unreliable.

4.2.1.1. Sorghum (*sil'misici*)

There are different types of sorghum. The most common are *Esehu, Silmisici, Sorome, Zelfuda (white), Zelgafa, Zeli* etc. The *Berta* grow more than 15 different types of sorghum. Sorghum is planted during the season of *asefala* where there is heavy rain. They categorize the varieties of sorghum in to two. One is called Bobe (alcashe). This type of sorghum is red, white and red-white in colour. It is used mostly for porridge. *Berta*'s staple food- porridge and injera are made form this type of sorghum. Most of the indigenous drink such as borde- (fermented and non fermented tela) is prepared from sorghum. Weevil easily attacks this type of sorghum. Because of this, the *Berta* do not use it for commercial purpose. They primary use it for consumption. Its productivity per-hectar is high.

The second variety of sorghum is known by the local name *adehun/ sorome*. This type of sorghum is also used for consumption. A portion of it is used for commercial purposes as well. It is not easily attacked by weevil. It can stay for 3 to 4 years without being eaten by weevil but its productivity per-hectar is very small.

The practice of sorghum growing starts by field clearing-collecting and burning in February and March. Broadcasting does sowing over the uncultivated field. Then ploughing is done in order to cover the seeds with soil, minimum tillage only. This is commonly done in April.

Interplant cultivation is done first using a hoe, followed by a hand weeding in (June). If the weed infestation is high a third weeding using slashes might be necessary. Harvesting is done in January by cutting the sorghum heads only which is transported and piled up around homes until it is threshed. The crop residue is used for livestock feed and stalk is sometimes collected for fencing and fuel. Threshing of sorghum heads is one by oxen on a well-prepared threshing ground. This is usually done in February.

4.2.1.2. Maize(*Amadz*)

The practice of maize growing starts by field clearing (collecting and burning) in February and March. Polishing (both first and second) is done in April, and sowing from end of April to early May depending on the onset and amount of rainfall which is sufficient enough to moisten the planting zone of the soil. The interplant cultivation using hoe is done in late May, followed by 2-3 times weeding in July and August. The fresh cob is then ready for consumption around early September. Harvesting is usually done from end of October to December. Beating the cob in sacks commonly does threshing of maize. If the amount is big, the maize cob is threshed on a prepared threshing ground by beating with stick.

4.2.1.3. Finger Millet

Land preparation for finger millet is done about three times from May-June. *Sowing* is done from the end of June to late July. *Weeding* is done twice in August and September. The shifting cultivators harvest only the heads since they thresh their crop commonly by beating stick. *Harvesting* of finger millet is done from the end of November to early January. The harvest is then left on the ground for 1-2 weeks until the head is well dried. The main reason for harvesting and drying on the field is to avoid breaking of stalks and loss of yield due to wastage if it is allowed to fully dries before harvesting. Once the harvest is dry it will be collected, tied and piled up right on the field, on a raised bed like structures to prevent the

possible termite attack. Then threshing ground is prepared, around the crop field and threshing is done, so that only the grain is transported to residential areas by donkeys. The crop residues and crop aftermaths are fed to livestock right on the field. There is no food shortage in the crop area. The residue is therefore not transported to residential areas.

4.2.2. Oil Seeds

The *Borna* people produce a very great variety of oil seeds. The important ones are: Noug, Sesame, Soybean and groundnuts.

4.2.2.1. Noug (*Nazzra*)

Land preparation starts around June/July. Sowing is done from end of July to August followed by weeding in September. October is the usual flowering time of Noug and harvesting is done in November. Threshing is done by beating the harvest with stick or threshing ground around November and December. There are warms, which bring serious problem for the growing of Noug. On average they produce four quintals per hectar. It is cultivated in small area when compared with cereal crops.

4.2.2.2. Sesame

It is usually mixed with sorghum sharing all the cultural practices of the sorghum crop. However, the sesame crop is harvested in September a little earlier than sorghum. The harvested sesame crop will be tied up and kept upright until the capsules are opened. Then threshing is done by slightly beating the heads on either a piece of mat or a well prepared threshing ground, depending on the quantity of production. On average they produce four quintals per hectar. It is cultivated in small area.

4.2.2.3. Soybean

Land preparation starts in May. After sowing the seeds, like sorghum it is followed by interplant cultivation using hand hoe in July. Weeding is in August and harvesting is done in

October by pulling and uprooting the whole plant. Threshing is done by hand beating of the harvest on the threshing ground without using tools.

Generally one can conclude that the farming method practiced by the *Berta* is of a traditional system. This might explain why the agricultural yield in the *Berta* land as a whole is very low. The major causes and effects for decreasing of production might also be the lack of extension service as much as required, shortage of different inputs, the lack of infrastructure, the problem of using oxen for ploughing due to the existence of animal disease in the study area. The above brief description of crop production indicates that the population in the study area lives just at the subsistence level.

4.2.3. The Socio _ Cultural importance of crops

The process of production can be described and analyzed in terms of a set of cultural meanings associated with it. In *Berta* there are rituals associated with economic activities (e.g. harvest rituals-Ezo); belief systems; and certain unfavorable circumstances (e.g. epidemic disease, drought, locust invasion, unusual season, etc.).Likewise, there are different types of ceremonies related to birth, marriage, and circumstances that involve the use of sorghum and maize. The involvement of sorghum in many cultural and ritual practices indicates the existence of a special relationship between the people and the crop. They cannot perform ritual and/or ceremonial acts such as prayers, blessing, and cursing without using sorghum together with other " ritual items" mentioned above. Ritual ceremonies and reconciliation procedures involve the use of sorghum. Individual households arrange special types of karama for the children of the village during the weeding season. This is held before the weeding begins on a Monday or Friday. The sacrificial food is usually salted sorghum boiled in water. Boys and girls eat this karama together.

As in many other societies, there is a gift- giving tradition in *Berta*. Sorghum is one of the typical items that characterize gifts-giving practices in *Berta*. Female guests (daughters, sisters,) are entertained by giving the favored variety of sorghum particularly during the harvesting season. It is a common practice for married women to come back to their natal home expecting this kind of gift. Like sorghum, maize is also given as a gift to relatives and the poor. Moreover, a good harvest of maize gives relief to a person who is obliged to host big members of guests coming to participate in ceremonies associated with death or marriage.

Sorghum plays an important role in the economic life of the *Berta* people. Its primary use is for consumption, but some portion of it is also used for commercial purposes as well. Most of the indigenous drink such as borde- (fermented and non- fermented *tella)* is prepared from sorghum. Both fermented and non- fermented *tella* is brewed for domestic use such as rituals, feasts and work parties in agricultural activities. Their staple food-porridge and *injera*-are also made from sorghum. Nowadays sorghum can also be bought or sold, but in a very small quantity. The *Berta* do not produce all the material goods that they need. They therefore need money to cover the whole range of expenses incurred within and outside the framework of their own economic system (eg, payments of bride wealth and to secure their immediate material existence). They also buy many products, which form the basis of their daily food e.g. onions, salt, sugar, and tea. Besides foodstuffs, they also buy clothes and ornaments. Cash thus plays an important role in the lives of the *Berta*. It should, however, be noted that the price of sorghum is fluctuating following the amount of the annual production.. Yet the *Berta* have no special crops cultivated exclusively for cash as far as my observation and the information collected from my informants is concerned.

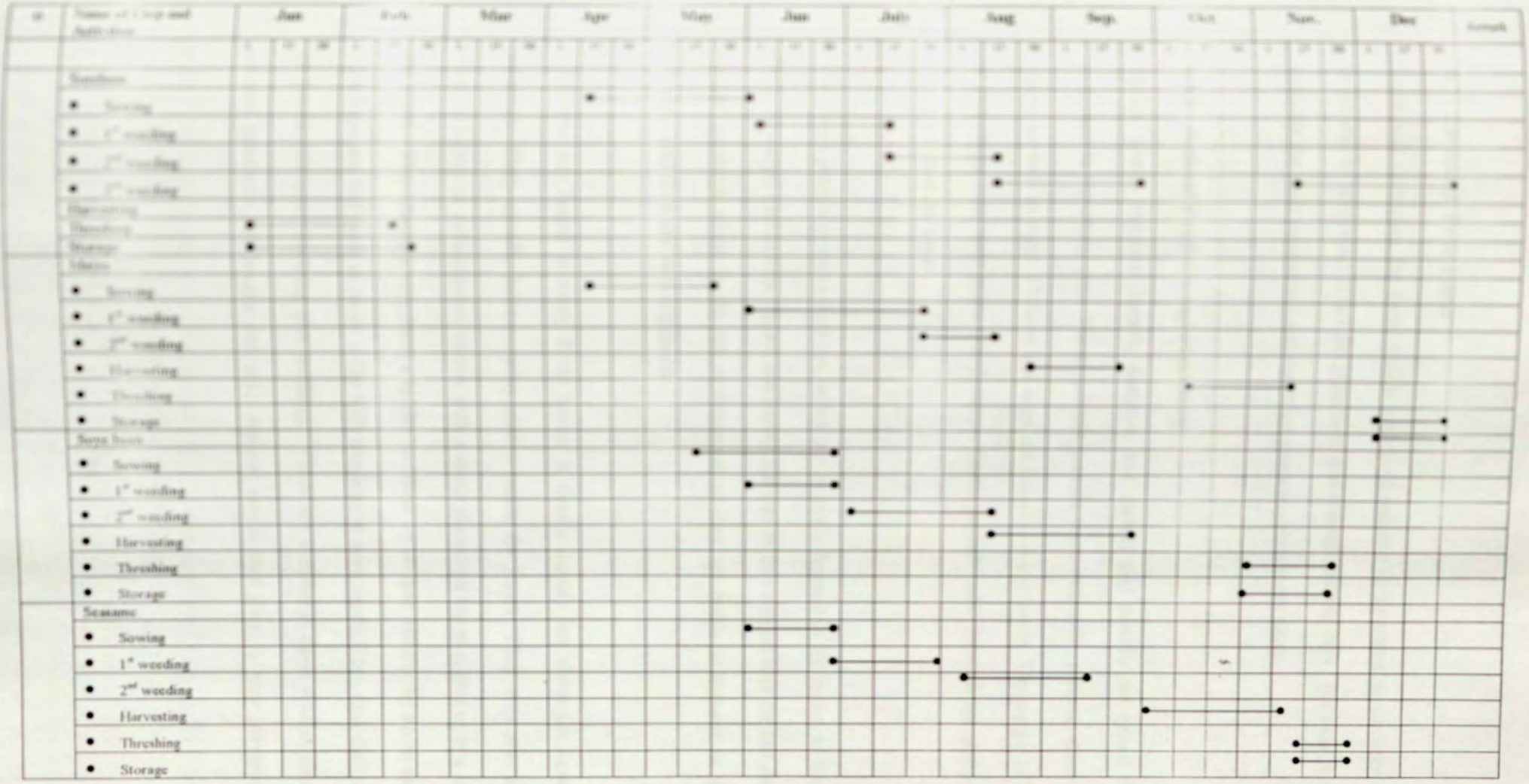
4.2.4. Problems about crops

Many wild and domestic animals destroy locally produced crops. Some of the wild animals and the crops, destroyed by them, are specified as follows. Monkeys mostly destroy maize, sorghum and millet; *apes* destroy maize and sorghum; wild pigs also destroy maize and sorghum and porcupines destroy crops. These animals not only eat a lot, but also damage much more than the amount they eat. Monkeys, apes and baboons are usually troublesome in this area because they travel in large packs.

Insects can also be very harmful to all crops. Termites, locusts, caterpillars and warms are also troublesome because they cause damage to the crop both in the field and in storage bins (*gotara*). The people have no protection against insects. No pesticides. There are ritual specialists called *nari* for the control of flood, drought, locusts, wild animals. Farmers at different parts of the study area have developed different experience to protect their crops. For instance, they spray perfume, local beer or its residue. Another protecting system is that boys and girls guard the fields from morning to late afternoon.

They build a fire outside the fields and chase particularly baboons and monkeys by beating sticks on fallen trees, shouting, and whistling. Older boys may even build huts in the fields and stay during the night to drive away wild animals. Men try to kill baboons, pigs and other wild animals that destroy and damage crops with gun and spears. They also use various traps against these wild animals. So it is advantageous to farm together because people can cooperate in guarding the fields.

Table 9. **MENGE WOREDA AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION CYCLE**



Source: Menge Woreda Agriculture Office. Sep. 2001

4.3. Livestock Production

Generally speaking, the *Berta* land is said to be suitable for livestock production. Its climatic condition is favourable. It has got plain land and enough grazing area. The land is specifically suitable for goat production and therefore goats populate these parts.

4.3.1. Animal Products and Marketing

Sheep, goats, equines (horses, donkeys, and mules) and poultry are raised for various purposes in the study area. These animals provide them with milk, manure, skins and hides, honey as well as eggs. Chikens and dogs are found in every house. The people of all corners of the study area own goats and donkeys. Goats provide milk for children and periodically they are killed for meat.

The *Berta* people possess donkeys, which are in much demand in the region as they are used both for cargo and saddle. Mules and horses are rare as they cannot bear the hot climate. The 'arma' donkeys adapt to the hot environment so they are much in demand in the *Kudiyu* village, and they are very expensive.

Chickens are found in every *Berta* house. A family usually has about ten hens and two roosters. They usually have roosting places inside the house. They may also keep them outside either in subterranean shelter with a stone placed on top at nights or in a house built on stilts. The chicken may have a ladder to climb up or they simply fly up to their house. Chickens are fed once or twice a day with sorghum or corn seeds. They find their own water in pools left after cooking and washing. There are traditional open market places where animal products are bought and sold. Animal power also plays a very important role in

transporting people and goods to and from market places in the *Kudiyu* village. Donkeys are particularly useful for these purpose (plate 9).

Generally speaking livestock production in the *Kudiyu* village is totally traditional. This happens to be true because little attention is paid to the region not only in the agricultural sector, but also in other sectors. Therefore, no modern livestock production is practiced in the area, and thus the potential of the region in livestock production is not yet fully utilized. The potential of the region is confirmed from many angles. For example, the area has huge natural resources such as good pastureland, good climate and weather conditions (rainfall, temperature, altitude), water resources and others.

The production system, as has been mentioned above, is traditional. Animals are not well fed but are driven to natural pasture and rangelands, which are the main sources of pasture in the surrounding. Grazing, though not severe, runs difficult during the dry season. This difficulty is solved by making from agricultural residues in some areas, but this feeding cover very little proportion of animals' fodder as compared to pasture and range field grazing. The feeding management that entails cutting and carrying fodder is not experienced widely. This ensures that the problem of over-stoking doesn't prevail in the area. Water availability for drinking varies from place to place in the *Kudiyu* village throughout the year but it is said to be adequate and animals do not go very far to drinking water. The water sources are rivers and streams.

4.3.2. Animal diseases

As it is true for the country as a whole, animal diseases are widely spread in the *Kudiyu* village. The location of the *Kudiyu* village i.e., the fact that it is in the western lowland of the country, and the hot humid climatic character, has created conducive conditions for various

bacteria and virus to survive and cause animal disease in the area. The important and recognized endemic and epidemic diseases in the region are listed below in order of their frequency of occurrence in the area. *Trypanosomiasis*, internal parasites, exo-*perasites*, contagious *caprine pleuropneumonia pasteurolosis, anaplasomosis, Babesiosis*, anthrax, black leg, *pneumonia, lumpyskin* diseases and others.

The absence of full veterinary services, for various reasons in the past, did not make intentional husbandry possible. In this regard Trypanosomiasis, which is intensively spread and cause substantial losses can be mentioned. Therefore, the introduction of cattle into the production work cannot be anticipated until the diseases are put under control.

CHAPTER FIVE: NON-AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

This chapter is devoted to explain the relative importance of non-agricultural income. These income earning activates play an important role in increasing economic and food self-sufficiency. This has been noted by many researchers such as Fleurent 1989, Vaughan 1987, Shipton 1990 as quoted in Yared, 1999: 111). Non-agricultural economic activity in *Berta* consists of the production and sale of liquor, local beer and wood, charcoal. They also sell their labour, as well as engaging in hunting gathering, petty trade, craft activities and gold panning. Although non-agricultural income is very limited, it enables many peasant households, to meet critical cash and grain deficiencies. This type of income often complements rather than replacing income from grain and animals sales for many peasant households. Non-agricultural income can be an important source of cash for the purchase of necessary items from the market such as salt, pepper, coffee and cloths. In general this study explains as how hunting gathering and non-agricultural activities make substantial contributions to food-supply.

5.1 Agricultural wage Labour

Agricultural wage labour is one of the critical sources of income and food for most of the farmers. This people sell their labour in order to generate income for the purchase of food and other materials needed for their survival. Agricultural wage labour primarily involves weeding, harvesting and ploughing for other peasant households. The labour market is a means by which labour- short and food-secure people acquire labour from poor, food-insecure households that are deficient in land but have surplus labour. The latter get highly valued additions to their income. Certain female or elderly- headed households, which are short of labour, are also compelled to hire labour. A more permanent type of wage labour is arranged when a relatively well-off but chronically labour- short couple hire a man on a long-term

basis. Hired persons are more or less servants who participate in all the tasks of the household. Elderly people and some single women are likely to hire such a person. The hired person is often a destitute who does not have the land and animals necessary to form an independent household. The payment is in the form of providing room and board, clothing and some quintal of grain a year. These arrangements can be important means for a minority of destitute that come from fragmented households. The employers benefit as well, in that they acquire labour necessary to the continued viability of the household.

Divorced women and widows often are short of labour, but it is the latter group, which hires substantially more labour. This is because widows are more likely to maintain greater land resources than divorcees, who have had to leave much of their former households land to their ex-husbands. Divorcees usually engage in labour exchanges in order to acquire labour. Generally, female-headed households hire more labour in the harvest season, when they still have the grain and cash supplies needed to pay wages.

Most of them hire out some of their members in the pre-harvest season. This is primarily due to the limited scale on which most households, and the limited degree of rural differentiation that exists carry out agricultural production; the labour needs of the households are often adequately met by its own labour force. Despite the generally limited role of wage- labour in the economy of *Berta*, it is very important to a small number of poor households. Quite a few poor and female-headed households survive the last few pre-harvest months earnings from daily wage labour. The income earned is likely to be spent for the purchase of food and other materials needed for their survival is an illustrative.

> *Mohammed heads a family of five and has sustained a major short fall in production. As way of meeting their food requirements, he and his two boys*

involved in ploughing the field of one elderly Shekas. In most of the cases the shekas have some surplus grain that is prerequisite for hiring extra- household labour. So they receive some grain and cash for their services. The income derived allowed them to buy condiments and cloths. So such income earning allowed them to reduce grain sales, avoid animal sales and gave them access to market grain and commodities.

Daily wage labour is also another critical sources of income and food for most of the peasants. These people sell their labour in order to generate income for the purchase of food and other materials needed for their survival. The following case is an illustrative.

Yaya Kalifa heads a family of four and has sustained a major shortage in production. His household stopped selling grain and reduces food consumption. There is one road construction company by the name Semal road construction. Semal is building road from Komosha (one of the Woredas of Asosa zone) through Menge up to the border of Sudan. Yaya is now working in this company as a daily labourer. He earns 15 Birr per day. The wage he earns allows him to buy condiments, cloths and grain. He said that his family members are now happy.

Secondly, many of the households are more likely to use non-agricultural income for purchasing food. This non-agricultural income is considered merely as a supplementary income in more secure households. They are more likely to use this income to buy commodities such as cloths, sugar, coffee, grain espécially maize and sorghum, spice etc, For example

Mohammad Yesuf's family is self-sufficient. In addition to the satisfactory grain production of maize and sorghum plus sesame and Noug, they also possess mango trees, groundnuts that they are able to sell every year. Yesuf's wife and his daughter also are engaged intensively in beer (fermented and non fermented beer) sells. Mohammad runs a small business. They use income from such sales to purchase cloths and different commodities from the market but they don't buy maize or sorghum.

Households are also more likely to engage intensively in non-agricultural income earning in years of crop failure because it is necessary for survival amongst the poor.

Mohammad heads a family of five and has sustained a major short fall in production. As a way of meeting their food requirements, they collect firewood and bamboo from the forest and sell it to nearby town. Such income earnings allow them to reduce grain sales, avoid animal sales and give them access to market grain and commodities, such as sugar, coffee, species etc.

In spite of their limited role in the total economy, non-agricultural economic activities play a significant role as source of income that enables households to cope with the seasonal food shortages. These activities are important for poorer households, who are more likely to use the money to buy food.

5.2. Hunting-gathering economy as a subsistence strategy

Today, the *Bareta* subsists primarily from the products of domestic crops supplemented by livestock products, but hunting and gathering are still important activities and make substantial contributions to the food supply. Most men go on hunts at least several times

during the year and many do so much more frequently. In a similar way, every one from elderers of both sexes through young children gathers the various bush fruits and vegetables whenever they are available. Different methods of hunting are used in *Berta* include net and spears, bows and arrows, and traps of several kinds. Net hunting is usually carried out during the rains, or shortly there after, when the game animals are most abundant. The *Berta* also depends on hunting of aquatic animals from *Dabbus* River and its tributaries to same extent. Peasants living around big rivers have long experience of fishing for consumption and for sale. Main sources of fish production are the *Dabbus, shirqole, Tumat* and *Menge* rivers. Fishing implements consist of nets, spears and baskets and also roots and fruits to weaken the fish.

Hunting-gathering economy is one of *Berta's* subsistence strategies designed to supplement shifting cultivation. Since crop cultivation done is insufficient to cover the subsistence needs of the society, people resort to hunting of small animals, and especially to the gathering of wild foodstuffs not only during the rainy reason but also during the dry months. Hunting and gathering were probably more important in the past than in the present. It had both economic and social values that contribute to its subsistence for a long period of time.

5.2.1. Hunting

Hunting is one of *Berta's* subsistence strategies to supplement their shifting cultivation. There is an annual ceremony known as *Feda* "hunting ceremony" that has got high influence in the life of *Berta* particularly, during the past years. For the hunting day they prepare drink and food. The drink is known as *hatso*. They gather special roots called *hatso*, which are used to make a strong beer believed to give strength and courage to hunters. According to informants, the roots are collected in advance by men and then dried and ground by women. They are then

mixed with water and made ready for the *feda*. Together with *hatso*, which is apparently reserved for the *feda* hunters, a more popular drink called *batsa* is prepared in great quantity for the celebration. All the villagers participate in this preparation, which is usually supervised by the elders.

The *feda* as it has already been mentioned above chooses coordinator from among the people perform an annual ceremony. The choosing ceremony is held first by elders and youngsters. Then they make circles and sit on the ground. Then they burn *Tse Tsengn* by the *Berta* specialists. The direction to which the smoke goes shows the coordinator of the hunting group. So this man is chosen as a coordinator. After this the next step is to decide the hunting day. To decide the hunting day they put seven woods on the ground with different size to indicate the day of the week. This lottery ceremony is called *gugu* in *Fadeshi* and it has different names in different regions.

During the hunting day they all gather in front of the coordinator's house having spear, *bonga*, hunnering, trap and other necessary materials for hunting. According to my informants, the hunting ritual *Feda* is the same with the neighbors *Komo* and *Mao*. The first step in *Feda* is to search for the forest where they can get big games. The expected forest is burned from three directions, the remaining one side is left for the hunters to wait ready to catch and kill the animals, which are running, to escape from fire. After the end of the ceremony they carry all the meat and share among themselves. They eat and drink, sing and dance. Finally by choosing one coordinator for the next *Feda*, they close the ceremony. The *Feda* ceremony also includes the cutting of males' face and the circumcision of young men and female children. On the other hand youngsters of the area roam around for two weeks and collect food and drinks from their neighbors for *feda* celebration. The collection of such materials shows the cultural integration and solidarity of the people to make the festival unforgettable.

5.2.2. Gathering- edible wild plants

Available foods from uncultivated plants must also be considered in a discussion of production potential. Though they cannot match the over all yields of domesticated crops, many of them have nutritional qualities that merit consideration. Several of the small herbs provide the main source of green vegetables for their diet. Similarly, a good share of the fruit intake is derived from bush sources. In addition, it is necessary to inquire into seasonal rhythms in the availability of the various bush foods. This becomes an especially pertinent consideration for the period just prior to the harvest, when the crops reaped the previous year. Bush foods are of much value during occasions of sever drought.

The level of food crop production in these communities is subsistence, while they have the custom of consuming and living on root crops, and plants such as bamboo shoots etc. to cope with seasonal household food deficits. I obtain a great deal of information from informants and exegesis about different edible wild plants and herbs. In the study area one can find a variety of wild edible plants species mostly trees, shrubs and largely herb types of which their fruits are commonly used by the *Berta* people. The edible plant part could be the fruit, the bud, the inner part of the bark, the root, the younger tender leaves and/or stem. These edible wild plants can be taken as an alternative potential food source in times of failed harvest.

Wild plants which yield edible fruits, seeds, stems or roots in *Berta* land comprise more than fifty different species. But the importance of collecting should not be judged from this, because these plants are not found within the same villages, and most are eaten only occasionally as a kind of relish or when agricultural food such as sorghum, maize and millet are lacking.

The system of food gathering is spontaneous. Everyone participates, though actually women and children do the greatest share. Much of it might be called random collecting. Since it is performed while in the pursuit of other activities such as picking up firewood. Materials for building and medicines are gathered, as they are needed. Normally women gather and cook wild (or domestic) greens and mushrooms. It is the responsibility of the women of the domestic group to gather and cook greens and mushrooms and to distribute the dish to all the members of this group to eat. On the other hand, women never hunt or trap or skin game, and they rarely fish. But it is the responsibility of a man, when he obtains some game or fish, and after having perhaps eaten certain portions of it, to bring the remainder home to present to the women (or woman) of his domestic group. The women then cook it and distribute it to all the members of the group to eat, including to the man who provided it. Most of the edible roots are frequently collected merely by hand. However, a digging stick provided with an iron point is also used to dig up certain wild edible plants and similar root plants. Most of the edible roots are chopped and roasted or boiled. Most of the edible fruits are sweet and eaten raw after picking. Some fruits are eaten without any preparation. The following is a case in point.

Case: Aba Abdulki Mubrek, Age 67, is living in Kudiyu village. He is married and has ten children from his two wives. According to Aba Abdullah mubrekthere are a variety of wild edible plants in Berta. The edible plant part could be the fruit, the bud, the inner part of the bark, the root, the younger tender leaves and/or the stem. These edible wild plants can be taken as an alternative potential food source in times of failed harvest. Most are eaten occasionally as a kind of relish or when agricultural food such as sorghum and maize is lacking. For instance, Kontsolo-bamnboo, the edible part is the bud, sweet and the ripping time is between April to June It is chopped and boiled.

5.2.3. Utilization of Plants and Shrubs

The *Berta* land is endowed with a variety of trees and shrubs. Traditionally they are used for house construction, as source of fuel energy, for making different furniture and utensils, for fencing and making different farm implements and as source of medicine. From the view of different farmers, the larger proportion of the rural fuel-wood source is thought to come from collecting dead wood and branches.

It is observed that farmers in the near by towns consider charcoal and fuel-woods as "cash crops" where these are means to generate income. The uses of trees for house construction and firewood consumption seems to raise each year as the number of households and the need to build new shelters increases in addition to the maintenance of the existing ones. Grasses which are tall enough for thatching can be obtained locally from the natural grass lands, so it is possible to harvest such grasses for thatching year after year.

Many broad leafed herbs, which are rare but important source of traditional medicine are found, collected, cultivated and multiplied in the gardens of some specialist traditional medicine people whom they call *neri*. This is a case in point.

Case: *Aba Mabrak, age 54, is living in Kudiyu village. He is married and has twelve children from his three wives. He told me that the people of Menge wereda use different kinds of herbal medicines. The area is endowed with a variety of broad-leafed herbs. Traditionally they are the source of medicine. These medicines are prepared from the leaves, roots and other parts of the plants. This medicine is prepared by specialists known as neri. The medicine is prepared for different purposes, such as snake bite, spirit possession, different kinds of wound, blood clotting, for various kinds of stomach*

problems and other kinds of diseases. For instance, they prepare medicine from a root called "shekad fiely" orsnake bite. They cut the root into pieces and pour drop of water into it and tie it around the part of the body bitten by the snake. Another root used to cure a stomach problem is "Abugilag" People with such stomach problem chew and swallow the root. "Megil" is a leaf that is used to heal a wound. It is also used to stop bleeding when a person wounded and bleed they use these leaf to stop the bleeding.

Now a days, hunting is generally reduced and confined to small games in remote areas. It is not practiced as openly as before, whereas gathering and using forest resources continued to form part of *Berta's* diet. Thus, hunting, gathering and fishing are among important subsistence strategies of these people.

5.3. Trade and Market

In addition to farming, livestock raising and occasional hunting, the people are engaged in petty trade and crafts. Native traders are mostly engaged in bartering and buying and selling grain. It is not uncommon to see them sitting in the market place before noon up to the evening to sell about two or three birr worth of grain. In few but fortunate markets, especially in *Asosa, Mengo* town, different kinds of fruits such as oranges, lemon, banana, and mango are found. The roads and strips are lined up with mango trees, which grow well in the area. Mango trees provide windbreaks. They are also sources of fruits for the people and are sold at cheap price. During my stay in *Mengo* town I have observed that all the local markets get manufactured goods such as textile products, soap, needles, matches etc. from Ethiopia. A few years ago they used to get most of the manufactured goods from the Sudan. Smuggling goods from the Sudan and coffee out of Ethiopia used to be common phenomena but now it is becoming uncommon. As far as my observation is concerned market is held once in a week,

like in most rural local markets in other parts of Ethiopia. This has been a practice for a long time. Mostly the Oromo, Komo, Mao and Amhara attend these local markets. The Oromo usually sell coffee and tobacco, while other ethnic groups sell cloth, mirror, soap, razorblades, matche, thread. Native *Berta* mostly sells clay pots and albrik. There are small houses scattered in the local market, which provide *borde* (non fermented *tella*), and tea. There are also bread houses of different varieties, including porridge. In fact it is not common in most part of the country to sell porridge in the local market. Meat, both cooked and uncooked, and a variety of root crops such as okra, groundnuts, and potatoes are sold in the market. The people sit wherever they can in the market and their products are displayed on leaves, cloths and plastic sheets stretched on the ground.

5.4. Gold Panning

Gold panning is the other economic activity of the people. My informants told me that the *Kudiye* village is very famous for its gold. Gold is found in *Dabus* plain, *Shorkole* and *Tumat* valley (I have observed the *Tumat* valley and the gold panning activities during my stay in *Mengo*). Gold has been exploited in *Berta* for a long time by hand panning. The local people are still using such simple method of panning for gold. Mining is conducted on a very limited scale but in widely scattered area. Mining by local people is generally done by excavation of small round pits along stream banks and gravel bars. Sand and gravel containing the richest concentration of gold are done in a wood curved, bateau a solid bow type of implement used for panning the gold. Mining is most active during the rainy season when water is available for washing sand and gravels. Women spend hours panning heaps of gravel for an insignificant amount of gold. During the dry season, when the rivers and streams dry out and the shortage of water gets critical, alluvial gold mining could be unrewarding. Panning is

profitable only during the rainy season and is therefore, not done during the dry season. It is a labourious and time-consuming job.

Berta people mine gold from rivers/ streams in traditional way using several crude tools, namely:

1) *Ashone* _ made of metal used for digging.
2) *Ashad* _ A basket made of bamboo. It is used for drawing dug up soil out of a hole.
3) *Toriya*_ A tool made up of metal mainly used for digging a hole in the stony area or compact and through rocky region.
4) *Mushahir*_ A wooden bowl made from a monolithic piece of wood. It is used for washing, screening and processing gold out of the dug soil.
5) *Ag Aagu*_ It is a large gourd used as a vessel for fetching water that is needed for washing or cleaning the soil dug up for gold.
6) *Abudi*_A vessel used for collecting and keeping the gold. It is made from a minor gourd opned in two halves.
7) *Alwir*_ It is made from rope or al_ selba (local name for rope and thin bamboo). This traditional tool is used for drawing or dragging soil out of very deep depression or holes (Plate 10).

5.5. Craft Activities

The people are engaged in craft as a secondary or minor pursuit. Few artisans both men and women produce different types of pottery all of which is locally consumed. Moreover, the *Berta* are famous for making *al-birik* (a kind of jug used to cool water-) and special *daggen (al- nakin)*. These are few of notable *Berta* traditional crafts. The people under study / produce simple implements and instruments depending on their needs and necessities. The people

produce agricultural, hunting gathering implements, house utensils and musical instruments. The following are some of the instrument of production, which are responsible for their survival. They are *Shangur, tsenge, arpet, pelle, caqu, atahiyu* etc. They have dining utensils made of gourds and horns. The people also make many musical instruments such as *turenbet, nankara, waza, agola, ambude* etc. The above traditional craft products show the extent to which the *Berta* use their indigenous knowledge and skills in their struggle to survive. (Plate 20)

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary

This thesis has attempted to provide an ethnographic account of the *Berta* people, who share adjacent lowlands along the Ethiopian border with the Sudan and their indigenous peoples of the *Nilo* Saharan. It is difficult, and perhaps arbitrary, to try to "summarize and conclude" a work of this kind. The ethnography I have tried to outline in this thesis is an intricate process, only parts of which I have been able to trace and analyze in detail. Although this thesis presents a good deal of new ethnographic material, it is not intended to be a comprehensive thesis on *Berta* society and culture. Many aspects of *Belashangual-Berta* past and present still remain uncovered and there are a number of unexplored research areas, which need further study. So this thesis must be considered as a preliminary and prelude to the ethnography of the people. It seems appropriate, however to try to summarize some of the main themes of this ethnography.

In fact, the *Berta*, have been dominated throughout the ages by alien groups (*Fung, Sudanese, Arabs, Mahadist*) as well as by the Ethiopians, who have at various times in history attempted and eventually managed to impose their political, cultural and religious institutions on them.

Starting from ancient times, the *Berta* people had been living in Central Sudan. They said that they came from a mountainous region in Southern *Sinnar*, which they call *Gerii*. The *Berta* of *Beneshangul* says that their first king, *Agur*, was told by the *neri* to abandon *Gerri* and move east wards and settle around the *Tumat* river. Then on, they moved to different areas. The second group of settlers in the region of *Beneshangul* was probably the so-called *Fung*. According to *Ahmed*, the *Fung* abandoned their home in the 16th century. By the first half of the 18th century, the *Fung* seem to have established themselves as political rulers of the region.

Towards the close of the 19th century, the territories, which had once been under the *Fung Mahak*, appear to have been divided into three independent *sheikdoms* each ruled by descendents of the *Arab* settlers called *Watawit*. One of the rulers of the sheikdoms was *Sheik Hojole (Khojali) al-Hasan*. He was from the *Rikabiyaa* family who was given the over rule of the whole *Berta* region by the Ethiopians after they annexed the region in 1898.

So, in the past the *Berta* seems to have a patrilineal clan system with a traditional ruler (*agur*) who was a descendent of the first settler in the area. The *agur* was also a ritual leader (*neri*), much followed by the *Berta* people. He who was at the same time the diviner and medicine man of the *Berta*. As a wave of conquerers, slave raiders and colonizers of *Aksmities* and Egyptian penetrated the region; all imposed their own structure of domination and opposition. Today the *Agur* system has been wiped out with the rise of *shakdoms* and with the establishment of Ethiopian rule over the region. Most *Berta* sticks to their traditional religion and customs and the role of the *neri* or traditional diviner is still important in their life.

This section describes the houshold as an economic institution through which labour is allocated and organized as the basic input of the production process. In the traditional societies work was allocated mainly according to age and sex groups in the community. The sexual division of labour, however, still seems to be an important variable for the explanation of the division of labour in *Berta* community, and for the complex economic household structure. Vertually every *Berta* belongs to a domestic group, because a pooling of labour and skills is necessary if one is to obtain a normal livelihood. The necessity for collaboration in subsistence activities is essentially a function of the sexual division of labour as conceived and practiced by *Berta*. Males and females must depend on each other, for each sex is trained in certain skills where the other sex is not. In addition, many tasks not requiring special skills

are nevertheless conventionally assigned to one sex or the other as its particular responsibility. Thus, in the actual sense, there is no clear-cut demarcation. Conventional division of labour based on sex and age is observed in *Berta* communities. There are duties to be carried out dominantly by men and women or both. The household's economic survival is based on the critical and unique contributions of male, female, and child labour.

In spite of the normative ideal of self-reliance, however, households are compelled to rely on each other in the form of assistance and cooperation for a variety of economic purposes. The *Berta* community members cooperate in various spheres of life. The most visible forms of cooperative are the work parties called *Anafir* and *Amaha* which are used for the communal performance of re-clearing of new fields, weeding, harvesting, house building etc.

Furthermore various organizations such as *'edir'* and the *'equb'* are organized on a community basis. The *edir* is an association that collects regular contributions from its members for the purpose of covering funeral expenses. Members also provide labour and food to accommodate guests during the mourning period. If a formal organization is not present, people just make cash or food contributions to the affected households.

Regarding marriage the *Berta* exercises two kinds of marriages. One is through the consent of the couple and the second is arranged through the families of the son and the daughter. However, the former one is not as such fully accepted. It needs the approval of the two families or at least it must be backed by either of the two, otherwise, it will only remain a dream for the would-be bride and bridegroom. Today in most of the cases the spouses establish their own household and begin to be economically independent of their parents' household. The newly married couple commonly forms a separate residential, economic and

consumption unit in order to start a largely independent life. The newly married couple is ideally an independent economic unit primarily reliant on its own land, labour and animal resources to manage agricultural production, income earning expenditure, market transactions and food consumption.

Today the *Burta* people share a similar subsistence way of life based on hoe cultivation of *Sorghum, maize and Sesame*. The type of farm implements and the nature of their agricultural practices do not vary among the *Burta*. Their economy is exclusively based on agriculture, which accounts for 95.6% of its population. This sector is made up of entirely traditional small-scale peasant farming-an activity that consists of crop cultivation and animal husbandry, which are carried out with traditional implements and methods. The major categories of crops grown in the area are cereals. *Sorghum* and *maize* are the popular cereal crops of this region occupying dominant share of the area cultivated as well as out put of the sector (93% of the households covered under the study produce these crops). These cereal crops play a central role in the economic as will as the social and cultural life of the people. Of all the cereals, *sorghum* plays the most important part in ritual and ceremonial activities. Furthermore, it is a staple food of the region. The involvement of these cereals in many cultural and ritual practices indicates the existence of a special relationship between the people and the crop. Ritual and/or ceremonial acts such as prayers, blessing and cursing cannot be performed without using sorghum together with other ritual items.

4.2 Conclusion

The *Burta* of my research area is relatively less developed, disparately poor and occupied peripheral territory. Education, medical care and other indicators of development remained poor. Lack of all weather road, shortage of skilled manpower, unimproved agricultural system

and scattered pattern of settlements have negatively affected trade, food supply and the provision of public and social services.

The area is potentially rich with a variety of natural resources. It has great agricultural potential and suitable climate for the production of tropical crops and adequate water supply with plain land for agricultural mechanization. It also has a promising wildlife, unexploited forest resources, gold deposit and other mineral resources that could bring about economic development. However, economic development, largely depend on how efficient the resource are utilized. Since the area has been one of the neglected and forgotten parts of the country, the natural resources are not efficiently utilized. What they earn is hardly enough for the bare necessities of life. Thus, the inhabitants of the area heavily depend for livelihood on the vagaries of nature.

Today, the *Berta* subsists, primarily from domestic crops, supplemented by livestock products, hunting and gathering. Hunting and gathering are still important activities and make substantial contributions to the food supply. Most men go on hunts at least several times during the year and many do so much more frequently. In a similar way, everyone from children of both sexes through young children gather the various bush fruits and vegetables whenever they are available. Hunting and gathering were probably more important in the past than in the present. It had both economic and social values that contribute to its subsistence for a long period of time.

Nevertheless when hunting lost its prominence with depletion of the wildlife and government's ban on its activity, the community moved its option to cultivation. Shifting cultivation had probably existed side by side with hunting/ gathering economy but, sometime later, the latter were reduced to secondary position and continued to supplement the former.

With the decrease in the returns of hunting, the community tilted more to the application of shifting and fallow systems. Here also it is within the possibility of existing simple technology, abundant land and low population density that the *Berta* farmers adapted to slash-and-burn system.

The shifting economy is almost confined to hand to mouth level. Lack of draught animals, unimproved agricultural system and implements, short period of cultivation and long period of fallow, dictation of cropping calendar by rain, and the like are among the reasons that have limited the scale of production. The people are hoe cultivators and shift farm field every five years or so. Human labour and simple agricultural tools can help to cultivate only small plots of land. Shifting to a new field requires much more time and energy. To make thing more problematic diseases and pests take part of crops from the day of its sowing until it is processed for food.

The existing technology has not allowed adaptation to sedentary life of the highland people. Various techniques were employed to maintain shifting cultivation. Slash-and -burn, an agriculture which is widely practiced today in tropical forests (Marshall Sahlins, 1972:42). It is a technique for opening up and bringing under cultivation a patch of forestland. The standing growth is first cleared by axe or machete and, after a period of drying out, the accumulated debris is burned off, thus the inelegant name, slash-and-burn. A cleared plot is cultivated for three to five years, rarely more and then abandoned for years, usually with a view toward restoration of fertility through reversion to forest. The area may then be opened again for another cycle of cultivation and fallow.

It is in line with views of Moran and *Sander* that shifting agriculture was adapted within the existing simple technology, the abundance of lands and the absence of population pressures

on vital resources. Various techniques were employed to maintain shifting cultivation. In response to a decrease in soil fertility, reduced farm yields and increase of the distance between farm and homesteads, the *Berta* used to dismantle their old villages or homesteads in favor of new ones. Moving of homesteads or plots remained the alternative solution since there is no any mechanism of controlling weeds or increasing soil fertility. In order to ease the burden of shifting, domestic group is organized and people of the village move together. Domestic organizations and moving together helps to mobilize labour for all variables of cultivation and common protection of crops.

The most commonly used fertility maintenance practices of the area are crop rotation, fallowing and to some extent manuring. Rotation of cereals such as *finger millet* and *sorghum* with *Niug* and pulse crops is the common practices. Shifting cultivator's practices fallowing. It refers to the bush fallow or the use of periodic vegetative fallow to restore the level of organic matter in order to improve soil structure and siphon nutrients from the sub-soil via the vegetation and leaf fall on the surface of the soil. This ethnic group uses the slashed and burnt new land for growing crops for about 3 years and leaves it to regenerate by itself for 4-8 years of bush fallow so that the fertility is restored.

Another technique of facilitating the system is the use of fire in land preparation. They cut the grass and remove it to another area while it is still green and burn it before it sheds its seeds lest they spread on the farmlands. Burning the forest allows new pasture to rejuvenate and increases its biomass; improves soil fertility and thereby yield; eases work in the field or hunting wildlife; eradicates mosquito, poisonous or harmful animals, pests and insects and chases wild animals thereby protecting crops and domestic animals. It is also argued that, by shifting system, the nutrients accumulated in the forest biomass are made available to crops

on the periodic basis. Digging by simple hoe and leaving some trees in the farm field may lessen erosion and maintain ecological balance.

Here, we have to raise one important question: for how long shifting cultivation support the population? Is population pressure /demographic increase would not be a threat to the system? In view of the government, burning, indiscriminate hunting and clearing forests, digging the earth for gold panning, etc cause damage on the ecosystem. State's effective forbidding of hunting has contributed to the recovery of wild life, which is however, becoming menace to crops and domestic animals. It is also pushing shifting agricultural system to sedentary life through a program of 'package' or 'extension intervention'. Policy makers and planners argue that shifting-cultivation may not hold community's livelihood in the face of rapid population increase and not convenient for growing perennial crops unlike sedentary farming activities which allows extension program that include plough-based farming, and establishment of public services. Currently the existing opportunities for settlement and cultivation are not exhausted, and access to land is not a primary problem in the area, but for how long it would last is the question to be answered. The present situation of the area in the face of demographic pressure is high due to natural increase of indigenous population and flow of other ethnic groups, particularly Oromo and Amhara into the area. Population increase reduces agricultural land and shortens fallow period. It is with view of forecasting demographic increase, which may pose problem in the future that government favors sedentary life than mobile one. So it needs State, NGO's and others intervention to mobilize the community and the region resources for sustainable development and this should not be given time.

The other point, which needs great attention, is the livestock production. Generally speaking, the *Berta* land is said to be suitable for livestock production. Its climatic condition is

favorable. It has got plain land and enough grazing area Sheep, goat, equines (horses, donkeys and mules) and poultry are raised for various purposes, but their production is limited by some ecological factors. So the absence of full veterinary services, for various reasons in the past, did not make effective livestock production possible. In this regard trypanosomiasis, anthrax and blackleg, who are intensively spread and causes substantial losses, can be mentioned. Therefore, the introduction of cattle into the production work cannot be anticipated until the diseases are put under control. So the government should give great attention for livestock production to control the widely spread diseases by expanding veterinary services, and orienting the people about value of animals by products.

In the community particularly goats and cattle are the most important source of drought power, diet and cash in time of need, and are seen as store of wealth. Above all goats, sheep and cattle are needed as source of manure to maintain the fertility of the soil. This is a mechanism of keeping the goats and cattle in an out-door barn within farm plots so that dung is dispersed on the farm plots. It also involves rotating the site of the enclosure from one plot to another. Because of such practices, the availability of enough land for fallow and the fertile nature of the soil, modern fertilizer did not penetrate there farming activities as such. Animal products, like milk and milk products and butter are also source of income especially for women who used it to cover miscellaneous expenses.

The study also tends to single out that agricultural income earning in *Berta* is in general limited, but is important in meeting the grain and cash deficit that households often sustain. Intensity of income earning varies with inter year and inter-household variability in grain availability. Difference in the availability of resources such as inputs and labour between households also lead to varying to engage in income earning of this sort. Alternatively, some

of the poorest households are sometimes compelled to divert labour from agriculture to non-agricultural activities in attempts to meet current food needs.

The findings also show how labour flows between households in various ways. A household could form strong labour parities by obtaining some more working arms through *anafir* and *amaha* arrangements. A household could also obtain the assistance of neighbors and close relations in times of peak labour and difficulties. *Amaha* and *anafir* work parties are the major institutions through which they promote mutual assistance in the community.

Based on a closer demonstration of the local level production equation and the corresponding social organizations of farmers since shifting cultivation started, this study tends to single out labour issues, rather than land or capital, as the crucial factor determining the success of *Berta* farmers.

In general human labour and simple tools are the primary means of working the land, and horticulturists do not produce consistently large surpluses for others consumption. Their subsistence economics made both the group and the individual household largely self-sufficient and independent.

Since contemporary, *Berta* societies generally occupy marginal territories and do not use major technological aids; they have developed a variety of techniques to exploit their environment. The most common technique is slash-and-burn (or swidden) agriculture. Trees and undergrowth are cut and burned to form a layer of fertilizing ash, several varieties of plants are cultivated for several years, then the area is left to lie fallow and new land is cleared. The success of swidden agriculture, and *Berta* farming in general, depends on intimate knowledge of the environment.

Thus, it is through flexible choices and continuous efforts that the *Berta* survived as a society in the face of hot climate, low land diseases, harmful wild animals, non-existence of public services, Sudden bush-fires and distraction of crops by weevils, pests and wild animals.To minimize (if possible to avoid) the existing problems and to bring a sustainable development an intervention of state, NGO, religious organizations etc. above all the participation of the community to the proposed measured is very crucial. The people to whom change is being proposed should be involved in such processes as need assessment, exploration of alternative solutions, mobilization of resources and implementation and evaluation of methods and outcomes. The people must be asked not only to state their problems but also to set and prioritize their goals, and to choose alternative solutions for each goal. Instead of thinking of completely new ways of dealing with problems, it is advisable to start by strengthening local mechanisms and institutional devices by which people traditionally respond to their problems. In short, the whole idea is that if people are involved in development activities, there is a greater chance that there will be popular community participation in mobilizing resources and implementing development plan.

In short, the result of the field work single out that the *Berta* society may be described as virtually homogeneous in character. They all share the same, materially simple culture. They gained their livelihood in the same manner, they possess more or less the same skills and same kind of property. Their homes, their way of dressing is similar and their conservations, their ideas and views of the world tend also to be similar. In terms of their economy: It is characterized by shifting cultivation. Shifting of fields is more frequent; clearing by means of fire (which is the most common techniques of slash- and -burn). They have short period of cultivation and long period of fallow, use of human labour which is the crucial factor of determing the success of farmers, and finally use of hoe as tools of planting, are main features of the *Berta* cultivation system.

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Appendex I

Major ethnic groups in Benishangul- Gumuz (CSA) 1966).

No	Ethnic groups	Number of people	Percentage
1	*Berta (Jebelawi)*	112,883	26,7
2	Gumuz	107,495	23.4
3	Amhara	102,061	22.2
4	Oromo	58,845	12.8
5	Shinasha	32,105	7.0
6	Agew	17,545	3.8
7	Tigray	3,918	0.9
8	Kembata	2,894	0.6
9	Mao	2732	0.6
10	Hadiya	2,185	0.5
11	Komo	1,109	0.2
12	Other	7,012	1.5
Total		**457,890**	**100**

Source : population and Housing Census, 1996

Appendix II

Population projections based on the 1994 census

Wereda	*Area (km^2)*	*Population number (Census 1994)*	*Projected Population July, 1,2000 (CSA 1999, low variant)*	*Projected Population July, 1,2000 (CSA 1999, medium variant)*	*Projected population July, 1,2000 (CSA 1999, high variant)*	*Population Census 2000 (Polio campaign)*
Metekel Zone	**25,993**	**165,663**	**192,259**	**193,064**	**194,134**	**203,714**
Dangur	8,590	30,741	35,826	35,826	36,024	39,414
Guba	3,942	7,962	9,240	9,279	9,330	13,659
Wembera	7,201	41,686	48,378	48,581	48,850	39,230
Mandura	1,036	22,593	26,220	26,330	26,476	36,904
Dibate	2,277	41,686	48,378	48,446	48,714	51,030
Bulen	2,947	21,111	24,500	24,603	24,739	23,477
Pawe S.W.	***569***	***35,858***	***41,615***	***41,789***	***42,021***	***38,636***
Assosa Zone	***12,604***	***194,084***	***225,243***	***226,186***	***227,439***	***233,066***
Menge	1,519	28,970	33,621	33,762	33,949	3,107
Kurmuk	1,434	10,614	12,318	12,370	12,438	17,165
Assosa	2,696	73,954	85,827	86,186	86,664	86,855
Komesha		9,762	11,329	11,377	11,439	11,446
Sherkole	3,216	13,989	16,235	16,303	16,393	14,797
Bambesi	2,221	34,475	40,000	40,177	40,400	39,167
Oda Godere	1,518	22,320	25,903	26,012	26,156	27,329
Tongo S.W.	*2,245*	*14,877*	*16,330*	*16,398*	*16,489*	*23,566*
Kamashi Zone	*8,970*	*58,783*	*58,936*	*58,183*	*58,511*	*67,318*
Yaso	2,859	7,771	9,009	9,056	9,107	16,311
Sirba Abay	1,314	9,221	10,710	10,746	10,806	12,293
Kamashi	1,998	8,335	9,673	9,716	9,767	10,702
Agalo Miti	1,540	16,190	16,468	16,537	16,629	17,980
Bulin Jegumfoy	1,653	11,266	13,075	13,129	13,202	12,040
Total	*50,582*	*448,459*	*534,882*	*536,679*	*538,994*	*566,080*

Source: Population and Housing Census, 1994

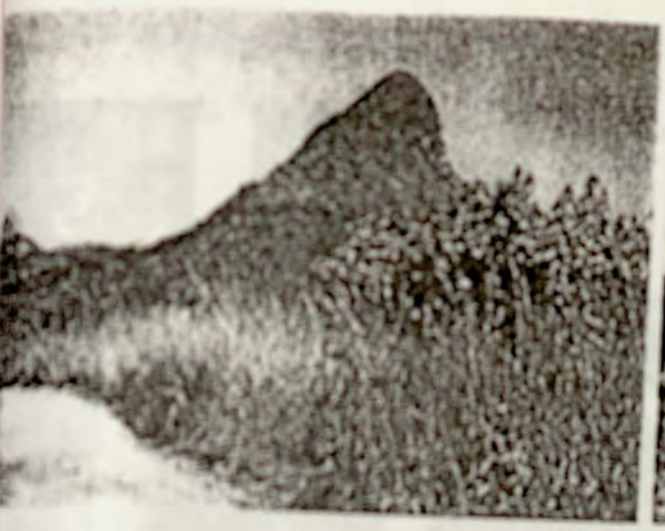

Plate 1: Mountain - Menge

Plate 2: Berta Hut

Plate 3: Berta Women

Plate 4: Berta Children

Plate 5: An Interview with an elder Ato Abdulahi Mohammed

Plate 6: Ato Abdurahman/around his homestead

Plate 7: Berta on Donkey

Plate 8: Sorghum

Plate 9: Berta Retarning form the Market

Plate 10: Gold Panning

Plate 11: Berta Music

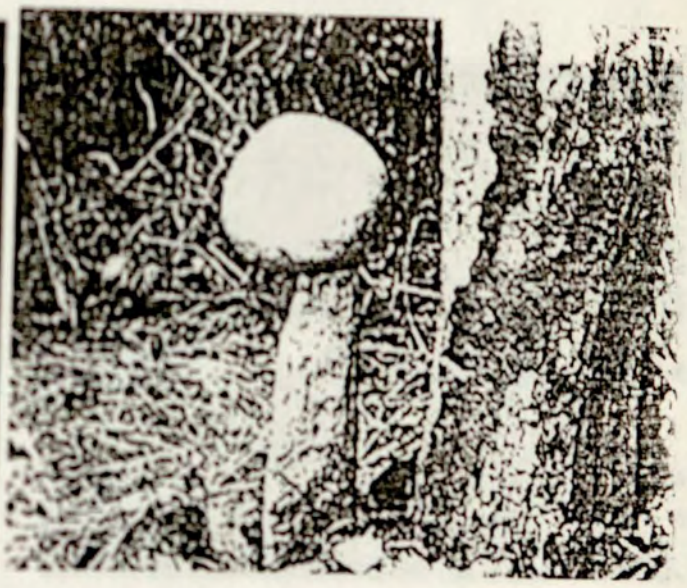

Plate 12: The Stelea of Bela -Shangul

Plate 13: Berta Wedding

Plate 14: Berta Dancing on a Wedding Ceremony

Plate 15: Berta Cemetry

Plate 16: Berta Pottery (Market Place)

Plate 17: Berta Pottery

Plate 18: Berta Women Dancing

ate 19: Traditional Tool for Gold Panning

Plate 20: Berta Musical Instruments

This thesis is my original work, has not been presented for a degree in any other university and that all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

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