Bleak prospects: young men, sexuality and HIV/AIDS in an Ethiopian town

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Dessie and Ethiopia: Romanticism and poverty

On 15 October 2001, I woke up before 5 a.m. and proceed to Addis Ababa bus station by taxi. Fortunately, there were plenty of buses heading for Dessie and I was offered plenty of options. It had been a long time since I had travelled by public transport. When I boarded the bus, it was full of luggage, and the seats were also very cramped leaving little space to stretch one's legs, and I felt uncomfortable. I realized that it was the beginning of the challenge related to my fieldwork. The journey to Dessie started at 7 a.m., and we were given 20 minutes to brunch in Debresina (about 200 kms from Addis Ababa). The chauffeur was a fast driver, and we arrived in Dessie at 4 p.m. While I was walking from the bus station to a hotel carrying my luggage, one of the street boys who later became my friend and informant politely asked if he might carry my luggage. I gave him one of my bags and I started asking him what he was doing. He told me that he worked as a shoeshine boy around the Piazza. He went on to tell me that he was an orphan and lived with his brother who was HIV positive. I then asked him about the HIV/AIDS situation in Dessie. My fieldwork begun this way.

The main objective of this chapter is to show a general picture of how the precarious socio-economic situation in Dessie and more generally in Ethiopia affects young people's lives and their sexual behaviour inexorably associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS. By historicizing and contextualizing the changes that have taken place since the mid-1970s, I want to show that these changes and events have had a major impact on the changes taking place in sexuality and the spread of HIV/AIDS in Dessie and more generally nationwide. I am particularly interested in problematizing how poverty, war, and political instability have exacerbated the spread of HIV/AIDS in the country. In order to situate the problem into this larger socio-economic picture, I begin with the Ethiopian context and then move on to the situation in Dessie. The background information presented in this chapter frames and guides the rest of the ethnographic material in the study.

Ethiopian Context

Ethiopia is an ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and geographically diverse nation. Christians, Muslims, and followers of numerous traditional religions live, and the adherents of the different religions have a long and varied history of peaceful coexistence, conflict, and conquest (Clay and Holcomb 1985 cited in Lucas 2001). As the state religion for a long period, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in particular has played a crucial role in the cultural, political, economic, and social life of the people (Hable Selassie and Tamerat 1970).

In understanding the history of Ethiopia, it is essential to recognize that the Ethiopian monarchy and the state created by it had been hallowed for centuries until military junta seized political power in 1974 (Lucas 2001). For more than a century, four autocratic emperors (Emperor Tewodros 1855-1868, Emperor Yohannes 1872-1889, Emperor Menelik, 1889-1913, and Emperor Haile Selassie 1930-1974) initiated a modern nation-building process. Although a modern state infrastructure and modern education and healthcare systems were initiated by Emperor Tewodros and the other emperors who succeeded him, the permanent structure of the state only emerged and took root during the time of the most
popular modern Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie (Pankhurs 1990; Wubneh and Abate 1988; Gilkes 1975 cited in Lucas 2001). Despite good intentions, the development initiatives
undertaken by Haile Selassie’s regime did not significantly transform the structure of the country (Bequele and Chole 1969 cited in Lucas 2001). More importantly, the regime was unable to accommodate the needs of either the younger generation or of intellectuals who were critical of the long-standing social inequalities in general and the archaic land tenure policy in particular (Wubneh and Abate 1988 cited in Lucas 2001). Deep-rooted discontent and severe socio-economic problems instigated the foundation of ethnic and regional separatist movements, and fuelled opposition from students, teachers, trade unions, and from the military, ultimately culminating in a period of intense economic crisis and political turmoil, marked by deteriorating economic conditions, rising inflation, political corruption, mass demonstrations, finally providing the touch-paper for the 1974 Ethiopian revolution (Wubneh and Abate 1988; Ottaway and Ottaway 1978; Gilkes 1975 cited in Lucas 2001).11 The 1974 Ethiopian revolution ended the ancient dynasty that traced its roots to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Zewdie 2002).

The wide range of socio-economic and political changes outlined above have had key implications for young people’s sexuality. After the 1974 revolution, young people started to participate actively in youth associations, and this brought young men and women, boys and girls together, thereby opening up the opportunities for dating, paving the way for premarital sex. Some of the key informants from Dessie commented that youth associations and revolutionary music bands (kenet le abeyot) served as gateways for young people to enter into the world of sexuality and it is since then that young people have become more open to issues of sexuality. One key informant working for an NGO commented:

"Television sets were introduced in the kebeles (lowest administrative units) after the revolution. And they quickly became a legitimate reason for young people of both sexes to go out in the evenings. "I am going to the kebele to watch TV" was always an explanation for a request that was seldom denied parental consent. So young people had no problem justifying going out at 7 o’clock in the evening and returning as late as 11 p.m. When they went out or to school, the boys and girls used to go separately but the innovative youth associations and the kinet le abeyot proved to be the bridges required to bring them together. Before the revolution the girls’ aspiration was nothing less than to end up with a good marriage and such marriages were far less likely to happen if it was said of them "So-and-so’s daughter is seen in such-and-such places!" So they had to be very careful and be mindful of how they were perceived. But all that changed with the coming of these associations. Before the revolution sex was not indulged in in bergus (hotel rooms); rather the young people had to seek shelter in trees and bushes to safeguard their privacy. So it was the kinet le abeyot that changed the situation. And we see more or less the same thing nowadays in the name of peer-education in the Anti-AIDS clubs. They are having peer-education sessions there (laughs)."

He jokingly concluded by saying that the silence surrounding sexuality was broken at that time [during and after the revolution]. This highlights that the change from one regime to another may not only have involved a change in the economic and political sphere but also in the area of sexual values and norms.

Since Ethiopia was among the poorest and least developed nations in the world, the Marxist regime that assumed power and overthrew Haile Selassie’s regime adopted wide-ranging policies to address the social, economic, and political problems of the country; including a national land reform and mass literacy campaigns. The Land Reform Proclamation of March 1975 abolished private and corporate tenancy, nationalized all land, and allocated the nationalized land to state-controlled peasant organizations (kebeles) (Ofcansky and Berry 1993; Griffin 1992 cited in Lucas 2001). In 1974, less than 7 percent of Ethiopia’s population was literate and the country had one of the lowest percentages of educational participation at all levels world-wide (UNESCO 2000; Cedpa 1997 cited in Lucas 2001). Determined to tackle this problem, the socialist regime launched the mass literacy campaign with the ambitious and unrealistic target of reducing illiteracy from 87 percent to zero within eight years (Wubneh and Abate 1988 cited in Lucas 2001), although functional

11 On sober reflection, many Ethiopians (including those who actively participated in overthrowing the regime) do harbour nostalgic sentiments toward Haile Selassie’s regime. This may be because the country moved from the frying pan into a blazing fire after his death (see Henze 1993).
literacy rates were probably lower. The introduction of mass literacy campaigns motivated many young people to pursue formal schooling, thereby inducing the shift from familial training and socialization towards a non-familial mode of education. Formal schooling gave young people the opportunity to meet and interact with peers of the same or opposite sex far away from family supervision (see also Lucas 2001).

Though the above initiatives taken by the Marxist regime were impressive, the socio-economic situation in the country went from bad to worse assailed by structural problems inherent in the economy, increased insecurity (red and white terror), and recurrent drought and famine. For instance, in the agricultural sector, which contributed 44 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), 85 percent of employment, and 90 percent of export earnings, grew on average by only 0.7 percent annually during the 17 years of Marxist regime (Gebre 1993). Moreover, until it collapsed in May 1991, the regime was preoccupied with the war with Somalia and was faced with internal ethnic conflicts and civil war throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Following the collapse of the Marxist regime in 1991, a number of disband soldiers (considered to be a ‘high risk group’) returned to their urban and rural home areas throughout the country. It is likely that such an influx exacerbated the intensity of HIV transmission in all parts of the country since about 16 percent from among the first 636 AIDS cases in the country were recruits and military personnel (Negasa et al. 1990; Khodakevich and Zewdie 1993). Indubitably, with the coming of Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) into power in 1991, new media laws allowed the proliferation of love/erotic magazines and tabloids, thereby providing young people with alternative sources of information about sexuality. More importantly, illegal video houses mushroomed everywhere when the current government came to power, although such films had been available in Dessie and elsewhere in the country long before. Both the key informants and young people involved in the study reiterated the ‘negative’ impact of such films and magazines on the sexuality of young people (see Chapter Five).

In 1991, the EPRDF introduced a federal system of governance on the basis of language and ethnicity. The government also accepted and implemented structural adjustment programmes, thereby aggravating the problem of poverty. After 13 years of rule by the EPRDF, unfortunately Ethiopia, still troubled by war with Eritrea, recurring droughts and famine, and ill-conceived socio-economic policies, does not seem to be faring too well in terms of socio-economic development. An estimated 14 million people needed food relief in 2003, highlighting that with each passing year simple survival is becoming increasingly difficult for a significant proportion of the Ethiopian population. “According to the World Bank’s Development Report of 2000/2001, Ethiopia remains the poorest country in the world, when ranked in terms of dollar-dominated per capita income. The Bank’s latest report, using 1999 data, ranked Ethiopia, with a per capita income of US$100, 206th out of 206 countries, ... unchanged from the previous year. The average income for low-income countries for the same year was US$410 in 1999... while the average for Sub-Saharan Africa was US$500...” (Degefe et al. 2002:1).

More recent estimates indicate that about 81.9 percent of Ethiopia’s population lives in absolute poverty, namely on less than 1 US$ a day (UNDP, 2003). Life expectancy at birth is 42 years, and infant mortality is as high as 116 per 1,000 live births. Nearly 50 percent of children under five years suffer from malnutrition, indicating that life is a daily struggle even for those who survive. Only 24 percent of Ethiopians have access to piped water (Jubilee research 2004). The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Ethiopia lacks an adequate basic infrastructure such as health and educational institutions, roads and other facilities in both urban and particularly in rural areas. The prevalence and incidence of different diseases is extremely high for a population with health service coverage below 46 percent. An estimated 60-80 percent of all health problems are due to infectious and nutritional diseases. Forty-nine percent of all reported deaths in 2002/03 could be attributed to malaria, TB, and pneumonia (MOH 2004; see also Kello 1998), although AIDS, not systematically reported by the national health services, may kill more people than malaria. Many of the endemic infectious diseases
and malnutrition facilitate AIDS by weakening the host’s immune system (Wolday and Meselle 2003).  

Since funds, health manpower, facilities and other resources for adequate health care are not available, hundreds of injections may be administered by only a few unsterilized syringes, putting individuals at greater risk of infection with HIV/AIDS. Inadequate services mean that the safety of donated blood and other medical practices may be questionable. Most children below age 12 become infected mainly in the perinatal period or through breast-feeding, although there is also a risk from blood donations, ritual or ornamental tattoos, and other traditional surgical procedures. Owing to the low level of health coverage and other factors related to poverty, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) other than HIV remain untreated, increasing the risk of acquiring HIV. Even drugs to cure TB and other simple antibiotics are not easily available to people living with HIV/AIDS and other poor people. As noted above, structural adjustment programmes prescribed by international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank) require governments to reduce spending on public health, education and other social services, and hence arguably exacerbate the problem.

Until very recently, facilities for voluntary testing and counselling (VTC) of HIV status were not available in the country, and the few that did exist at the time of this study were expensive. There were also problems related to confidentiality and delays with the testing. Only a few government health facilities, mostly in Addis Ababa, provided testing and treatment services. Up to a short while ago, the few hospitals and health centres providing VCT were accessible mostly to visa applicants referred by foreign embassies. The majority of these people were those who wanted to immigrate to the United States through the Diversity Visa (DV) programme. There are also some organizations, including Ethiopian Airlines, that make regular check-ups of their employees’ HIV status. Under normal circumstances, persons who are either suspected of having the HIV virus in their system and referred for serological test or those coming for a voluntary testing should be offered counselling services before the test. In practice, proper pre-test, post-test and on going counselling services by trained and committed personnel have rarely been available outside Addis Ababa.

The silence or denial of the political authorities and the public at large surrounding HIV/AIDS is another pernicious situation that prevails in Ethiopia. Conflicting and unreliable information about the HIV/AIDS epidemic have accompanied this high level of denial (see Chapters Eight and Nine). AIDS first reached epidemic levels in the West (particularly among gays and IV drug-users), but was soon reversed because of the strong commitment by governments and the public to breaking the silence. For economic, cultural, and political reasons, the fact is that the Ethiopian government has been relatively ineffective in educating its citizens about the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (see Chapter Eight). Altman (1995:99) argues that “...routes of transmission, spread of knowledge about HIV, political responses (or lack of them), availability of resources to combat the epidemic are all very much contingent on the larger political environment”.  

The cult of secrecy is strong. People living with HIV/AIDS and their families tend to keep their positive status to themselves to the extent that children hide it from their parents or husbands from wives and vice versa (Admassu 2000; Mequanint 2004). Even doctors do not tell their patients that they are HIV-positive. An Ethiopian tradition, which is metaphorically expressed as ‘silence is golden’, seems to have militated against such openness (see also Beyene 1992). Fatalistically, many people are not willing to be tested, and prefer to live and die without knowing, rather than subjecting themselves to the stigma and discrimination it entails. There are cases in which individuals have declined when offered the opportunity for training abroad that requires an HIV test, although having the opportunity for short or long-term training abroad (particularly in the West) is a goal that many young and adult Ethiopians

12 Clatts (1995) notes that poor standard of living, inadequate health care and the like that expose individuals to the risk of HIV infection also increase the probability of manifestation of AIDS related opportunistic infections within a short period after HIV infection.
cherish being offered. Lack of access to treatment (anti-retroviral therapy) partly explains this problem.

Obviously, there is a need to provide frank and explicit information and advice about sexuality to young people so that they can protect themselves from HIV infection. In Ethiopia, young people cannot readily acquire information about sex, sexual health, and bodily functions, partly because of strong taboos around adolescent sexuality (Chaka 1994; Dear 1994; Melaku 1994). Chaka (1994) asserts that because of the adamantine cultural restrictions, children are not taught about these matters by their parents. There is the culture of secrecy surrounding sex, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, which precludes free discussion in the home and among peers and with sex partners (see Chapter Eight). Children glean titillating information from pornographic films, sex-workers, and erotic magazines, which often may lead them to engage in risky sexual behaviour. In a quandary because of their uncertainty, many young people expressed confusion and misconceptions concerning various sexual practices and HIV/AIDS (see Chapters Five, Six and Eight). Therefore, “given this pervasive secrecy, it is not difficult to see how the emerging AIDS epidemic was like turning on the lights in a room long kept intentionally dark”, as noted by (Setel 1999:103) in Tanzania. Even should they want to, it is often difficult to gain access to relevant services such as family planning. As a result, young people lack the information and resources they require to lead a healthy sex life (Dear 1994).

The predicament of Ethiopian youth

Youth (15-24 age group) constitutes 16.3 percent of the Ethiopian population (CYAO 1995). Socio-economic stagnation, poor governance, and war, intensified by recurrent drought and famine (discussed above) severely affect young people and rob them of any vision of a bright future. Unemployment is a very serious problem, with a significant proportion of the active urban population in Ethiopia unemployed. It is especially a serious problem among youths, who constitute more than half of the unemployed. It is reported that insignificant proportion of the school-age population in Ethiopia has access to higher education. The rest are forced to become low paid workers and ‘hooligans’, as the leaders of the country (including the Prime Minister) labelled them during the civil unrest in Addis Ababa in April 2001. There are few job opportunities for school-leavers, and almost every household is caring for a number of so-called ‘young pensioners’ (wotate terotegnoch).

Many young people with a secondary education end up as street vendors or simply hang around in the town. This indicates that they are under great economic stress, the precursor of hopelessness, occasional depression, self-hatred, and involvement in activities that are commonly known as ‘sexual deviance’ and other deviant behaviours (the sale of sexual labour [girls], drugs (chat), alcohol, theft, rape and the like) (CYAO 1995). There are few opportunities even for those who make it through university. Most cannot find jobs or they are underemployed and the salaries even for those who succeed in securing a job are very meagre. Forcibly or with their own consent, many young people found themselves deployed in the civil war that lasted almost two decades during the Marxist regime, and in the two-year border war with Eritrea under the current regime. These wars have claimed the lives of many young people - often referred to in the slang of the day as the ‘lost generation’ (ye tefaw twelele).

Young people in Ethiopia feel largely forgotten by the government, which for many years has diverted valuable funds from socio-economic development to fund a war and to combat recurring droughts. In April 2001, Ethiopia’s capital (Addis Ababa) experienced its worst civil unrest in years when university student protests spilled over into riots. Thousands of students and out-of-school or unemployed youth were caught up in a wave of looting and the destruction of government, public, and private property. The riots were fuelled by a series of factors, most importantly by a chronic economic crisis that gives youth little hope of jobs. It is

13 Since different societies and cultures have different criteria and perceptions, there are no universally agreed definitions for youth. The United Nations defines youth as the population in the 15-24 age group (CYAO 1995).
likely that the country could face more public violence (possibly on a much larger scale), and the episode signals a serious warning to the government and the general public to consider the situation of the younger generation.14

These days, youngsters are willing to risk their lives in order to get out of Ethiopia.15 The ‘lucky’ ones migrate to the West, while those who do not have either the network or opportunity to achieve this goal end up in the Middle East or elsewhere in Africa. In particular, thousands of young Ethiopian men and women migrate to the Middle East to work as domestic servants. Most of them live under appalling working conditions, and there are reports of physical and sexual abuse by employers.16 Millions of young people also languish in refugee camps in neighbouring countries (Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti) hoping to emigrate to the West. There are still millions of young Ethiopians who do not even have such opportunities and who are forced to live in despair and frustration in their home country. There are reports, which indicate that suicide rates are increasing among young people who succumb to the overwhelming frustration that results from joblessness and failure in educational achievement (CYAO 1995).

As elsewhere, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. It has been estimated that as many as 150,000 children are engaged, in varying degrees, in street-life activities, about 60,000 of them in Addis Ababa. This is perhaps a very conservative figure given by the government, and more recent unofficial reports by aid agencies estimate the existence of up to 600,000 street children country-wide and over 100,000 in Addis Ababa. The problem is worsening because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has orphaned more than one million children (IRIN 2004). As the story will emerge from various chapters (see Chapter Seven in particular), the majority of these children live in conditions of severe deprivation; suffering from inadequate nutrition, exacerbated by exposure to adverse weather and physical abuse while on the streets which imperil their physical, mental, and social development.

All that has just been said reveals that Ethiopia in general and its young people in particular are marginalized and this situation has facilitated the proliferation of HIV/AIDS throughout the country. The discussion that follows about Dessie and its youth is a reflection of the broader marginalization phenomenon.

Dessie

History

The establishment of a strong central government and a national capital towards the end of the nineteenth century gave rise to a number of towns that served as regional capitals. Dessie is such a town with a long history and great historical significance. Different sources indicate

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14 The government seems to be afraid of another wave of civil/social unrest or political threat to which the young people’s current situation may eventually lead, and has therefore issued the Vagrancy Control Proclamation in 2004. This proclamation defines vagrancy (adegna bezenenet) in 12 different ways, and leaves the door open for the police to arrest any one who falls within this generous definition (see Federal Negarit Gazeta 2004). Issuing vagrancy laws in a society where most young people are jobless and job placement opportunities are absent seems out of context. As long as the economic situation is not improved, a single spark will be enough to produce a serious up-heaval.

15 Not only the youngsters themselves, but also their parents are willing to do anything it takes to send their children abroad. One of the most common methods is buying into the Diversity Visa lottery for about US$10-20,000 from those who won but do not have partners. They produce fake marriage certificates and travel to America as partners. It is reported that some European embassies in Addis Ababa are also corrupt and issue visas for US$10-15,000. Shipping children to America and Europe at very early age is described by Wolde-Mariam (1991:179) as “loving cruelty”, motivated by parents’ depth of dissatisfaction with their own present condition and their uncertain future which inexorably compels them to endure the pain of separation from the children they love so much.

16 A case in point is a 20-year-old Ethiopian girl who was on death row in Bahrain. She was sentenced to death for allegedly murdering her Filipino employer out of desperation and was judged to be of unsound mind. The death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in response to pressure from the Ethiopian and international communities.
that the town of Dessie was founded in 1886 by Ras (literally ‘head’ - the highest traditional title below that of king) Mikael (Ali 1997). There are claims that the town had been the centre of the rulers and elite of Wello even before the 1880s (Municipality of Dessie 2000). Since it is strategically located on a small, hilly plain on the highland plateau surrounded on all sides by mountains and endowed with a rocky landscape (with only four possibly entry points at Tita, Kutaber, Shewaber, and Gerado), it was well suited for defence against any surprise attack from enemies. It is highly probable that Ras Mikael took these natural advantages into consideration when he built his palace in Dessie (W/Hawariat 1989; Ali 1997; Municipality of Dessie 2000).

Once Dessie had been chosen to be the seat for Ras Mikael (latter Negus (King) Mikael), it also rapidly became the centre of all sorts of economic (commercial) and social undertakings in the region. Thanks to its strategic location, it served as a transit point for merchants who traded goods from the northern regions of Eritrea, Tigray, and Afar to the central highlands, including the capital. Hence, many past regimes have used the town of Dessie as an administrative capital for the then Province of Wello. Until the 1974 revolution, the town served as a seat for the crown prince and governors who were assigned by the emperors to administer the region. Between 1974 and 1991, it served as the administrative capital of what was Wello Province (kifile-hager) and also housed the regional headquarters of the then ruling party. Since 1991, although its scope of administration has diminished, it has continued to serve as the administrative capital for the South Wello Administrative Zone and currently houses a number of civil, non-governmental, religious and administrative offices (Municipality of Dessie 2000).

**Environment and population**

Dessie is situated 400 kms on the northern road out of Addis Ababa that leads to Mekele in Tigray. Given its mountainous location, much of the land in the town is steep and the floods that have been running down off the mountains over the years have eroded much of the soil.\(^7\)

Owing to its location and its fast-growing population, the town of Dessie is more susceptible to a host of problems than the other towns in the region. Landslides that frequently occur in many neighbourhoods in the town contribute to these problems. In addition to damaging and even destroying buildings and other infrastructure, the frequent landslides have greatly contributed towards a reluctance to investment undertakings in the town.

Dessie is one of the fastest growing towns in Ethiopia. It accounts for 45 percent of all people living in towns in the South Wello Zone.\(^8\) According to the 1994 census, 34 percent of the total town population of 97,314 consisted of migrants, highlighting the important role of migration in Dessie’s population growth, a phenomenon also reported in that census from all other larger Ethiopian towns. Beset by a scarcity of land, deepening poverty, conflict, drought and famine, many rural residents from surrounding areas abandon their abodes and migrate to Dessie to look for wage-labour or seeking relief assistance. Some of them save money and go back home, but many young people remain in the town with no other choice but to enter either prostitution or street life. People displaced by war from Eritrea and Assab have also flocked to Dessie in large numbers, and many of them having to endure unbelievable conditions of poverty.\(^9\) Few of the prostitutes in Dessie (working on the streets

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\(^7\) Dessie lies at an altitude of 2400-2700 metres above sea level, and has a cold highland climate (Dega). Mount Tosa (3,000 metres above sea level) lies on the western outskirts of the town.

\(^8\) According to census results, the population of the town has increased from 36,763 in 1954 to 39,000 in 1964, and to 45,909 in 1974, 71,537 in 1984 and 97,314 in 1994. According to more recent estimates by the Zonal Economic Development and Planning Office for the year 1999, the town had a population of 114,326 people of whom 53,262 were male and 61,064 were female, and the population is growing by an estimated 4.11 percent per year.

\(^9\) When people migrate, sexual values and norms will be modified or changed and new meanings for sexual activities assimilated into existing systems, thereby transforming elements of the more traditional sexual culture. Migration brings people into contact with new institutions, ideas and belief systems, and accordingly, changes the structure of their interactions and relationships. Rughanga and Aggleton (1998:68) argue, “whereas previously [in rural setting], sex had been a marital duty,
or in bars and hotels) and other street youths were actually born in the town; most are migrants from different parts of the country or have been displaced from Assab and Eritrea.\(^9\)

Because of their precarious economic situation, both prostitutes and street children are likely to be infected (or some are already infected) with HIV/AIDS (see Chapter Seven).

Although Amharas are the majority ethnic group, like many other Ethiopian towns, Tigré, Oromo, Afar, Gurage and other ethnic groups inhabit in Dessie. The 1994 census reported that 60 percent and 38 percent of the population in Dessie town were Christians and Muslims respectively.\(^2\) Dessins and Welloyes in general are known for their religious tolerance and Christians and Muslims have been observed living in the same household and sharing various socio-cultural beliefs and practices. Conversion to either religion is not condemned, and people are often seen changing their religion. Intermarriage among different religious groups is in most cases possible, and negative sanctions are normally not expected from relatives or the general public.

In Wello, attitudes towards religious differences are exceptionally good. They are characterized by mutual respect. Not only do Christians and Moslems live next to each other in perfect harmony and absolute peace, but also even within the same family half may be Christian and half Moslem. Moreover, intermarriage between religious groups is rather common. It is a region where bigotry is hard to find, and where the only taboo is inhibition. The imperceptible transformation of certain cultural peculiarities is exemplified by some characteristically Wello names like Amede or Yimam. Many Christians have such names and it is doubtful whether they know the origins of these names. Amede, a typical Welloye form of Ahmed, and obvious Moslem name, turned into Ahmeed, a typical Welloye form of endearment. Yimam is quite obviously derived from imam, the title of Moslem rulers (Wolde-Mariam 1991:18-19).

Wolde-Mariam (1991) attributes such toleration of differences to the linguistic and ethnic diversity of Wello. Zewdie (2002:48) on the other hand explains this in terms of religious repression when Welloyes were forced to renounce their faith (Islam) and accepted Christianity during the time of Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889). The author argues that the then rulers of Wello were baptized with consent; one of these prominent political leaders was Muhammed Ali who was converted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church taking the name Mikael (and became King Mikael later). “Others conformed outwardly, praying to the Christian God in the day time and to the Muslim Allah at night thereby reinforcing the unique juxtaposition of Islam and Christianity that we find to this day in Wello”. In any case, religion is an important aspect of social life in Dessie and more generally in Ethiopia, and it influences the general discourse on illness, health, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and condoms (see Chapters Four and Six). Some people may not even be practising believers, but discourses surrounding their daily life and events are blended with religious sentiments and beliefs.

**Social services and infrastructure**

Until the Italian invasion in 1936, Dessie did not have any of the basic social and infrastructural services such as a water supply, electricity, and roads necessary to facilitate the colonial administration. It was during this disruptive juncture that Dessie underwent a period of accelerated growth because the Italians built all-weather regional roads. The road from Addis Ababa that passes through Dessie and continues on up to Asmara especially boosted the commercial and social activities of the country. Likewise, the Italians built a hospital, a hotel (the present-day Ambasel Hotel), a cinema (the present Dessie Cinema), introduced...
electricity, and expanded telephone and telegraph services (Ali 1997; Municipality of Dessie 2000).

At the time of this study, Dessie had one regional referral hospital with 185 beds, one health centre with five beds, three public and 11 private clinics, 12 pharmacies and one training institution for health assistants/assistant nurses. And since the referral hospital serves patients referred to it from all health centres within Dessie Zone, it is usually overcrowded (Municipality of Dessie 2000). Dessie has a total of 11 kindergartens, 11 primary schools, six junior secondary schools, three senior high schools, one technical-vocational school, and one teachers’ training institute, run by the government, NGOs, or religious institutions. The schools are unable to accommodate the total school-age population of the town and it has been estimated that the number of schools would have to be doubled to provide for adequate space (Municipality of Dessie 2000).

The overcrowded schools accommodated, on average, more than 60 students per class. Two and sometimes three students (mixed or same sex) sat on logs jammed up close to each other and shared one table. In most cases, the buildings are dilapidated, the desks, chairs and blackboards are worn out. The level of qualification of the teachers is far from satisfactory. Some of the high school teachers did not even have an undergraduate degree from a university, and there were no trained teachers for some subjects. As a result, there were cases in which geography teachers taught history or vice versa to fill the gap. Aware of the dwindling remuneration and the ebbing of social respect, most young people who have succeeded in entering colleges and universities all over the country did not want to be teachers, and those who were forced to do so by involuntary placement did not want to continue in this profession. The upshot is that many teachers leave the profession when they find other employment opportunities with NGOs and government organizations. A case in point is a psychologist (councillor) at Hote High School who helped me in recruiting and arranging interviews with students during my first phase fieldwork; he had left the school and joined an NGO when I went back for the second phase fieldwork. I also met and interviewed some NGO workers who used to teach at different levels in the past.

Before 2001, students used to attend high school up to grade 12 and those who scored very competitive marks would enter colleges and universities. The new educational policy dictates that students may only attend high school up to 10th grade and then enter the preparatory programme. What is more disturbing is that the new education policy dictates that the old first year undergraduate courses be covered in high schools in preparatory programmes, and that college/university study should start with what used to be the second year course. It is reported that many students who have entered colleges and universities can barely understand English and other subjects taught at the college/university level and persistently fail in the tests they are given. This challenging situation is invariably attributed to the inadequacy of the high school preparatory programmes, as nothing had been done to upgrade the teachers who were to teach the courses while the content of the subject matter grew increasingly demanding at all levels (to the extent that first year college courses were given at preparatory level in highschools). Young people in Dessie were loud in their complaints about this new educational policy (see Chapter Seven).

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22 In terms of ratios, one hospital bed in the zone serves 601 people, one nurse for 2,598 people, one health assistant for 1,216 people, and one doctor for 4,764 people. These figures, although not sufficient by any standards, give the town a relative advantage in terms of the availability and quality of health services over the other towns in the zone (Municipality of Dessie 2000).

23 About 32 percent of the school age population in the town are illiterate and about 34 percent of the children between the ages of 5 and 9 did not attend primary school for reasons that include lack of adequate income, shortage of schools, and lack of parental interest to send them to school. Although confounded by a host of other socio-economic factors, lower rates of premarital sexual activity for both boys and girls are associated with higher levels of educational achievement and clear educational goals (Moore and Rosenthal 1993). It seems that instead of going to school, many children in Dessie seem to be engaged in various street-life activities such as shoe-shining, washing cars, portering, and street vending (such as selling local roasted grain (kollo), lottery tickets, newspapers and the like).
Most of the schools have very large compounds, and some of them are surrounded by bushes and thickets that present opportunities for young people to sneak out for rendezvous and sex (see Chapter Three). This temptation was easy to succumb to as they had plenty of free time on their hands because of the scarcity of teachers, shortage of classrooms and other essential facilities. This meant that students attended classes in two shifts. In a society where other recreational facilities are scarce, a shift system presented ample time for school pupils to indulge in chewing _chat_ and visit pornographic video houses or the Arera bush area very close to Hote High School, notorious for hosting young people's sexual activities (see Chapter Five). Education in Ethiopia is almost the only means of upward mobility for young people. Dejected by the deteriorating quality of education and the absence of more opportunities to enter the few higher educational institutions, students seemed to have lost any hope of fighting their way out of their predicament through education (see Chapter Seven).

Housing conditions in much of Dessie are no better than slum level. Although the housing problem is one of the biggest challenges in most urban areas of Ethiopia, Dessie town has the dubious honour of ranking first in Amhara Region in terms of housing problems (Municipality of Dessie 2000). A significant proportion of the town's population did not own a house; five or more people lived in the average housing unit which had a single room and many people were homeless. Most of these houses had been built many years ago from wattle (wood/bamboo and mud) and were roofed with corrugated iron sheets, and as a result some were dilapidated and in a dangerous condition. Nature has also played a hand and landslides and erosion have caused the collapse of many houses, producing a rather depressing picture. Since Dessie is hemmed in by mountains, there is not sufficient space to build new houses. The majority of the houses in Dessie are sub-standard (no toilet or kitchen facilities), and few people have the means either to build a new house or repair their old one. An urban renewal project introduced late in 2002 aims at improving conditions in the town though this will be at the expense of the poor. During my fieldwork in late 2002 and early 2003, I saw many shanties around the main street inhabited by the poor being bulldozed.  

**Economic activities**

Dessie serves as a major transit point for both long-distance buses and lorries as it is where roads to different place such as Addis Ababa, Afar Region, Gondar and Gojam (now Amhara Region), and Mekele (Tigray Region) meet. Dessie is also close and on the road to a number of religious tourist sites (such as Gishen Mariam, Lalibela, and Axum). As a transport hub, Dessie is a popular night stop for truck drivers, long-distance bus and other passengers, which has prompted the construction of many hotels, bars, restaurants, and tea rooms; these form an important centre of business life and economic activities. 23 There are also a number of local

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24 The manager of Dessie town, who is perceived to be an architect of such urban renewal projects, is nicknamed Ariel Sharon (Israel Prime Minister) for his "cruel measures" in demolishing slum dwellings and giving the land to those who could afford to construct one or more storey buildings.

23 As early as 1991, there were 32 hotels and 163 bars (Ali 1997). It is presumed that such establishments may have doubled given the relatively liberal economic polices followed by the government since 1991. The distinction between bar, hotel, restaurant, or nightclub is a grey area in Dessie. Here is an excerpt taken from a diary written after roaming around the town at night with Arsat. We went into a sort of a nightclub near the Piazza; they call it the Getahun Fiseha Hotel but much of what we saw inside did not much support our perception of it as a hotel. We sat down with drinks. It wasn't even half past ten and things were already in full swing. Those slim pretty girls (no older than 20) with tight jeans that revealed the shape of their thighs and hips and with bikini tops that left all their body in between the breasts and the jeans bare were all over the dance floor. Young males filled the room listening and dancing to the hot hip-hop and Congolese music enlivened new and then by a mix of Amharic music from the DJ. Our next stop was the Axum Hotel (yet another nightclub) a little down from the Piazza. It was around midnight and the music there roared out like a supersonic jet at take off and reduced the human voice to nothing. It was crammed wall to wall with young people roughly within the age range of 12-35 and the floors teemed with 'dancers' who could be more appropriately described as staggering rather than dancing. Both the Axum and the Getahun Fiescha are big hotels in Dessie, but this description highlights that they are also nightclubs.
taverns such as tej bets (traditional honey-wine/mead houses) and tela bets (traditional beer houses) that cater to passengers in transit and local residents. There are also a number of prostitutes in all hotels, bars, tella and tej bets. Trade in agricultural and industrial products is another economic activity in the town. Muslim traders operate many groceries and retail shops (shekateshekte suqoch), which sell everything from local produce to international merchandise. The town is also home to different small-scale industries and production centres, including a soft-drink bottling plant, brick production, textile plants, metal works establishment, furniture enterprises, food- processing plants and the like. Many poor people are engaged in petty trade like selling chat, firewood and other street life activities. Two major open-air markets (Segno Gebeya [Monday Market] and Robi Gebeya [Wednesday Market]) that serve the surrounding areas in addition to the town population take place in Dessie (see Ali 1997 for detail discussion of these markets).

In the midst of this misery, the young people seem to be primary victims of unemployment, lack of housing and sanitary conditions, and the dearth of adequate schools and health institutions in Dessie. The young people are also the age group and primary actors most affected by becoming inveigled into street life and prostitution, and most affected by unwanted pregnancies, abortions, STDS, HIV/AIDS, begging, drug use (chat, cigarettes and alcohol), and other deviant behaviour.

The predicament of Dessian youth

The situation of young people seems to be particularly bad, even critical, in Wollo since drought and famine afflict this area more often than in any other part of Ethiopia.

The region of Wollo may have the world record in recent famines. There were widespread famines in this region in the years 1966-67, 1972-73 and 1984-85. The last two were brought to world attention through the TV reports made, respectively, by Jonathan Dimbleby and Mohamed Amin/Michael Buerk. The first was hardly known outside the area. But with or without the knowledge of the world, the Wollo people have gone through this traumatic disaster three times in less than one generation. It would be difficult to find any region in the world that has been so devastated by famines in the last generation. Until any other evidence disproves it, Wollo can claim a world record in famines (Hareide 1991: 140; see also Ali 1997).

The 1972-73 famine is considered to be one of the various reasons, which besmirched the name of Emperor Haile Selassie’s regime and led to its eventual downfall. Instead of mobilizing the relief assistance, the government attempted to conceal the famine from the international community, indeed even the rest of Ethiopian society. It was Jonathan Dimbleby (British journalist) who filmed and exposed the tragedy to the international community. Confronted by the misery of recurring drought and famine and prompted by political motives, the Marxist regime that replaced Haile Sellassie’s reign tried to relocate famine stricken people in other parts of Ethiopia, particularly in the northwestern and western areas. Since the resettlement programme was carried out without the consent of the people themselves quite apart from leaving a great deal to be desired, most of them returned to their original abodes immediately after the fall of the Marxist regime in 1991. Since it is located very close to the northern war-torn provinces (Tigray and the former province of Eritrea), Wello is also one of the provinces most affected by the impact of the civil war and by the recent war with Eritrea.

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26 Tej bets are mead houses selling drinks made from fermented honey and the local plant gesho (Ramus primovides) that has a low alcohol content. In the old days, it was a very popular drink among the elites and the royal families. Tella bets are houses serving local beer made mainly from barley and gesho. Both tej and tella are the most commonly consumed and least expensive alcoholic drinks compared to those produced locally by local and foreign breweries, distilleries and wineries (see Tesfaye 1988). There are lower class prostitutes in such places and hence, most of the street youths involved in the study reported that they frequented such places. Tej and tella bets also cater to the needs of rural people from the surrounding areas, particularly on market days. Ali (1997) identified 150 local taverns as early as 1991.

Several military camps have been set up in different towns in Wello (Bati and Kemise, for example) since the Derg regime.

It would be superfluous to reiterate that poverty is a severe problem in Dessie, as evidenced by the congestion, the deteriorating roads and sanitation services, and an ever-growing number of street children and adults. Although statistics are not available, the key informants estimated that the unemployment rate in Dessie is higher than the national average. There were no universities, colleges or other higher training institutions at the time of this study. As a result, many young people had little or no access to vocational training and educational opportunities. There was an acute shortage of public recreational services such as sporting facilities, parks, cinemas, theatres, and public libraries. The only cinema/theatre in the town (the Wello Cultural Centre), for example, was crumbling down, for it had been a long time since it had seen any maintenance. This has contributed to the flourishing of illegal video houses throughout the town (see Chapter Five for more discussion of pornographic films). The sporting facilities were no better. The only football stadium in the town seems to have been abandoned before its construction even really took shape. There were no properly built fields for a host of other sporting activities such as handball, basketball, lawn tennis, and volleyball. There was only one single public library that can only answer the needs of about 200 readers. To escape from this unpleasant reality, most young people find solace in the vicarious exciting activities within their reach like chewing chat, drinking alcohol, and smoking and sexual activities.28

For many young people street activities such as begging, petty theft, prostitution, and involvement in other deviant and criminal activities have increasingly become the only alternatives for survival or just part of their daily routine. Dessie is said to be a safe place, but group rape and more generally sexual harassment and violence is a constant fear of schoolgirls, street girls, and prostitutes (see Chapters Three and Five). It seems that lack of opportunities encumbered by hopelessness and an inability to fulfill customary economic roles and obligations to win the hearts of women has led young men to commit group rape and other sexual violence to boost their masculinity and self-esteem (Silberschmidt 2001).

Conflict and violence among young people is also part of their daily lives. In the early days of the current government (1991-92), I was told that young people in Dessie organized themselves into different gangs and were drawn into a wave of clashes with each other. There were three gangs bearing group names: Ager Gizat; Robit Sefer; and Arada (the names of different neighbourhoods in Dessie). These groups were notorious for clashes that led to bloodshed and even the death of young people. Girls, who lived in places where the gangs operated were kidnapped and raped by boys of contending groups. When the government consolidated its power, some of them were arrested and jailed. Others were shot dead. I was told that some of them also died of AIDS as they had grown used to kidnapping and raping girls.

Even at the time of this study, a stroll around the places where the street children and other out-of-school youth concentrated revealed that they were engaged in bloody fights. The police regularly dragged the combatants off to the police station. Although street youths had no permanent dwellings that they could call home, by default every corner belongs to those who work in that area, and any attempt by ‘outsiders’ to use that area could provoke stiff fights. The competition for sleeping places (bemda) was also common. I was able to observe one self-proclaimed gang boss commandeering someone’s ‘sleeping place’ or property left on the street and another one fighting back. All in all, socio-economic conditions for the youth in Dessie, and apparently it was the same story in other Ethiopian towns, seem to have reached a

28 It appears that dependence on chat can be partly attributed to joblessness and loss of hope of any improvement. When I asked some young people why they go to the chat houses (chat betoch), they asked me in turn “Where else do you say we should go? We have no other place to go!” They obtain a small amount of money through various illicit or legitimate means and spend it on chat, cigarettes, local alcoholic drinks, and sex.
point from which they could sink no lower. Under such circumstances, deprived of any adequate basic necessities (food, shelter and clothing); with no education, training and job opportunities, fear of AIDS becomes a 'luxury'. As a result, many street youths reiterated that they are more worried about how they can satisfy their daily needs for food than they are about AIDS. Even for the majority of school pupils, HIV/AIDS competed with their worries about their future lives (see Chapter Seven). As will be shown in Chapter Four, the precarious economic situation delays marriage and has far-reaching implications for dating, premarital sex, and mate selection. Since marriage is a distant mission for many young people, premarital sex in particular has gained increasing importance (see also Lucas 2001). Prisoners of their precarious economic situation, the street youths did not report having same-aged girlfriends with whom they could form a romantic relationship (see Chapter Three). Added to this, deepening poverty also forced women to transact sex for money, often without condoms (see Chapter Seven).

Romantics: Sexuality and HIV/AIDS in Dessie

The availability of information about sexual issues depends largely on how free people are to talk about sex (Campenhoudt et al. 1997). In most parts of Ethiopia, the culture demands men, and women in particular, suppress their sexual desires, and not wear miniskirts, or other provocative clothes that expose their bodies. As a whole talking about sexual issues openly is not approved of and it is considered shameful or even sinful. Many ways are resorted to minimize sexual desires. Besides cultural and hygienic reasons, female circumcision, for example, is partly practised to suppress women's sexuality. All these measures imply that sexual desire and pleasure are portrayed as something to be avoided, and it is possible to classify much of Ethiopia as a prudish society (at the risk of making judgmental statement). In highland Ethiopian culture, the absence of traditional systems (like that of ssengas in Uganda) that teach young people (both boys and girls) about sexuality and techniques to experience sexual pleasure partly substantiates my argument (see Kinsman et al. 2000 for the discussion of the role of ssengas in Uganda).

The situation in Wello appears different, and the place is hailed as a haven of love and romance. Wolde-Mariam (1991:19) argues:

Love reigns in Wello. Most Ethiopian monarchs understood this fact. Some examples from recent times include [Emperor] Tewodros, who was married to a Wolloye but failed to capitalize on it; [Emperor] Yohannis, who legitimized the appointment of his son as the governor of Wello by having him marry a Welloye; [Emperor] Minilik after him, who also married a Welloye, as did [Emperor] Haile Sillase, perhaps the last monarch.

Broadly speaking, in public discourse Welloyes are known for their relative openness in talking about sexuality and are believed to be more sexually active. It is often said that Welloyes do not respect their marriage vows, and are ready to pay all due regard to sex (including extra-marital relations). There is even a saying that a woman, if she is not readily susceptible to sex with different people, will be branded “a woman fool enough not to have sexual partner other than her husband”. There is also a musical tradition praising the place, and the beauties it harbours in songs. Most of the cultural and romantic songs in Ethiopia emanate from Wello and are composed of words that express, explicitly or implicitly, the feelings of love the opposite sexes foster for one another. As much as I would like to challenge this stereotype, my experiences in Dessie have left me with ambivalent feelings. At this juncture, I would like to say that such discourse is partly true and partly stereotyped. It is

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29 Though I have painted a very bleak picture of Ethiopia and Dessie, I must admit that Ethiopia has a number of good things and the potential resources to be able to free itself from such predicaments provided that good governance is in place. Undeniably, Ethiopian people do have many strengths and assets such as patriotic feelings, family cohesiveness, their own indigenous religion and other cultural values that can be activated and used for poverty reduction. Ethiopia is also home to some of the world's greatest athletes.
my impression that as compared to other parts of Ethiopia, girls are much bolder in approaching men. Besides this come-hither approach, I found an active and lively youth culture and observed men and women meeting, socializing and romancing in ways that may not happen in other parallel towns. The teachers also told me that students indulge in sex in the compound of the school under the cover of darkness, which was very difficult to confirm. If the claim is valid, I must say that I never heard of such things in the area I grew up during my own school days. The responses I received from my interviewees also partly hint at this openness, but it needs a comparative study to state that Dessie youths are more open than others.

The stereotyped explanation about Welloyes and Dessians was more pronounced among young government employees who came from other parts of Ethiopia and had been stationed in Dessie for a long time. When I asked them why they were not married, they replied that they did not want to get married to women from Dessie as they are not trustworthy. Time and again, they told me that people from Dessie are ‘promiscuous’ and about the difficulty of finding a faithful partner from Dessie/Wollo.30 When ‘natives’ of Dessie were asked about such popular beliefs, some of them said that it is not so easy and good to draw a generalization of that nature. Some in fact expressed their disappointment at any proof of such a ‘false assumption’, and defended with their own ethnocentric opinion. Others admitted that people in Dessie discuss sexual issues so openly that others will be shocked to hear them use such words like *ems* (vagina), *qula/kolet* (penis).31 They said that it is not embarrassing for them to use these words, and even women are bold enough to ask for sex.

My choice of Dessie as a research site, therefore, was influenced by the presumed openness and willingness of people to talk about sexuality. Although there is no statistical data that is up-to-date and based on large-sample size to demonstrate the magnitude of HIV/AIDS, Dessie is one of the most affected towns in the country as well. The sero-prevalence study conducted as early as 1988 in 23 urban centres among female commercial sex-workers reported mean HIV prevalence of “17%, ranging from 1.3% in Massawa to 38.1% in Dessie” (Mihret et al 1990, emphasis mine). More recent data from the Family Guidance Association (Northeast Branch) shows that out of 364 people voluntarily tested for HIV/AIDS (in six months in 2002) 103 (that is 28.3 percent) were found to be positive, thereby highlighting that the prevalence rate in Dessie is higher than the national average (6.6 percent) and that of Addis Ababa (13 percent). Those who tested positive came from different sectors and socio-economic and age groups, including young people, prostitutes, civil servants, factory workers, and married and unmarried persons from Dessie and its surroundings.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has briefly reviewed the historical and socio-economic conditions of Dessie within the broader Ethiopian socio-economic and political context on the assumption that broader structural factors surrounding individuals strongly influence their lives, their sexuality and the spread of HIV/AIDS. This description is intended to put sexuality and HIV/AIDS in a wider context in order to develop a proper perspective for appreciating the external dimension of the issues involved. It therefore appears that the political, economic and social crises, which have affected Ethiopia for so long, have facilitated the spread of HIV/AIDS. In a nutshell, as in many other African countries, HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia represents the scenario “old crisis, new virus” (Jochelson, Mhibeli, and Leger 1991:158 cited in Setel 1999:51) or “creeping disaster” (CVM 1994:1 cited in Cruise 1995). Under such circumstances, focusing

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30 On the contrary, ‘natives’ of Dessie commented that many men who came to Dessie (Wello) from other parts of the country got married because of the beauty of women. In Amharic it is said that: *Wello yegeba zembilo ayiweatam* (literally one who comes to Wello never leaves alone).

31 It should be noted that conversations related to sexuality are referred to indirect and ambiguous way, and uttering these words in public is considered extremely embarrassing or a sign of indecency in most parts of Ethiopia.
only on cognitive models as a strategy to prevent HIV/AIDS may not produce the desired result. I make no claims to be exhaustive in reviewing relevant socio-economic situation of Dessie and Ethiopia, but hope that the chapter provides the background to understand the situation in which young people express their sexuality and their perception of HIV/AIDS in the chapters that follow.