

# AWRA AMBA: A MODEL FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

MARIT TOLO ØSTEBØ

In 2000, Ethiopian Television (ETV) aired a documentary about Awra Amba, a small rural village and weaving cooperative in Northern Ethiopia. Portraying it as a place where women ploughed, men worked in the kitchen and no ‘Harmful Traditional Practices’ existed, the program told the story of a community that radically challenged traditional gendered norms. Awra Amba soon became a model for gender equality not only in Ethiopia, but also beyond. At present, the community attracts close to 10,000 annual visitors, including tourists, representatives from the government and from transnational and international organizations, and experts and beneficiaries of development projects. The community also features in a Finnish-produced interactive educational documentary, “The Awra Amba Experience,” currently marketed as a global learning resource.

Over the past two years, I have had the opportunity to conduct research in Awra Amba. In addition to investigating the history of the community and its religious underpinnings, my focus has been on understanding Awra Amba as a model for gender equality and sustainable

development. Awra Amba is only one of several cases I explore in my current book project, which seeks to empirically and theoretically explore the increased use of models in socially engineered development schemes.

Ethiopia is a country which is particularly conducive for a study of models. First, Ethiopia’s development strategy has increasingly been praised by international organizations and donors as a model for other African countries to emulate. Second, the Ethiopian government has, over the last decade, embraced a rhetoric of models. Model farmers, model women, model students, model villages, model districts, model cooperatives – these are just a few examples of models that have become an integrated part of the development discourse in Ethiopia. They are all central tools in Ethiopia’s overall development strategy. But what constitutes a model and what is the relationship between models and reality? Is it possible to identify some key characteristics that cut across different types of models? How does something, someone, a place, a project, a policy idea, or a particular methodology become a model? What happens when

actors, sites or policies gain status as models? Are models as successful as they often are portrayed? And what are the underlying theoretical assumptions behind the use of models? These are just some of the questions that I seek to explore. It is my belief that an analysis of models in the particular Ethiopian context can contribute in advancing our understanding of the use of models in relation to development and social change, not only in Ethiopia but also beyond.

*Marit Tolo Østebø is assistant professor of anthropology and a faculty coordinator of the Social Change and Development working group.*

