Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This thesis explores why ethnicity was introduced as the basis for the reconstitution of the Ethiopian state in 1991, examining the politicisation of ethnic identity before and after the federation of the country's 'nations, nationalities and peoples' was instituted. The establishment of the modern Ethiopian empire state in the nineteenth century, and the processes of centralisation and bureaucratisation which consolidated it in the mid twentieth, provide a backdrop to an emerging concern with 'regionalism' amongst political circles in the 1960s and 1970s. Ethnicity operated as both resource and product of the mobilisation by which the major movements of armed opposition to the military regime of the 1970s and 1980s, later the architects of ethnic federalism, sought control of the state. Under federalism through the 1990s, political representation and territorial administration were reorganised in terms of ethnicity. A stratum of the local elite of each ethnic group was encouraged to form an ethnic organisation as a platform for executive office. Meanwhile ethnic groups and their elites responded to these new circumstances in unanticipated but calculative ways, often radically reviewing and reconstructing not only their sense of collective interest, but also the very ethnic collectives that would best serve those newly-perceived interests.

The architects of ethnic federalism are influenced by a Marxist formulation of the 'National Question' which incorporates contradictory elements inherent in the notion of 'granting self-determination': the conviction that self-selected communities respond better to mobilisation 'from within', in their own language, by their own people; and the notion that ethnic groups are susceptible to identification, definition, and prescription 'from above', by a vanguard party applying a checklist of externally verifiable criteria. These two sets of assumptions correlate with tenets of instrumentalism and primordialism respectively, which are, as they stand, equally irreconcilable.

An investigation of theoretical approaches to ethnicity and collective action suggests that many conflate the 'real world' and 'socially constructed' referents of the ethnic profile of an individual (the *constituents* of the *individual state* of being an ethnic x), with the fully constructed collective accomplishment which creates members of an ethnic group (conferring the *social status* of being an ethnic x, of which those referents are *markers*). Differentiating the two, and exploring the recursive relationship between them, by means of a consideration of calculative action within the framework of actors' categories (emerging from *emic* knowledge systems) and shared social institutions (premised, whether their referents are 'natural' 'social' or 'artificial', on collective processes of 'knowledge construction'), may improve analysis of the causes and operation of collective action associated with ethnicity and ethno-nationalism.

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia offered the prospect of a shift away from the 'high modernism' of that state's past projects to 'develop' its people, apparently in favour of the collective perspectives of groups of its citizens. The coercive and developmental imperatives of the state that guided its implementation, however, have militated against the substantive incorporation of locally determined social institutions and knowledge.

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Acronyms, Glossary and notes on usage and orthography

Acronyms	
AAU	Addis Ababa University
ALF	Afar Liberation Front
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement (EPRDF)
ANLM	Afar National Liberation Movement
APDO	Afar People's Democratic Organisation
BPLM	Benishangul People's Liberation Movement
CC	Central Committee
COPWE	Commission for the Organisation of the Party of the Workers of Ethiopia
CSA	Central Statistics Authority
EC	Ethiopian (Gregorian) Calendar
EDAG	Ethiopian Democratic Action Group
EDC	Ethiopian Democratic Congress
EDORM	Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ENDP/O	Ethiopian National Democratic Party/Organisation
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Church
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (now ANDM)
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front (now Popular Front for Democracy and Justice, PFDJ)
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESLC	Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate
ESM	Ethiopian Student Movement
ESUNA	Ethiopian Student Union in North America
EUS	Ethiopian University Service
EUSE	Union of Ethiopian Students in Europe
FCSC	Federal Civil Service Commission
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995-present)
GPDF	Gurage People's Democratic Front
GPDUP	Gurage People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement
HNA	Harari National Assembly (constituent part of HPC)
HNL	Harari National League
HNDO	Hadiya National Democratic Organisation
HoF	House of the Federation
HPC	Harari Peoples' Council
HPR	House of People's Representatives
HSIU	Haile Selassie I University
ICRC	International Corp of the Red Cross
IFLO	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia
IGAD	Inter-governmental Authority on Development
ISEN	Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (1980s)

Acronyms	
KPDO	Kambatta People's Democratic Organisation
MP	Member of Parliament
NEB	National Election Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRS	National Regional State: official title for the federated units of the FDRE, also referred to as 'State' or 'Region', or in Amharic kilil
NUEUS	National Union of Ethiopian University Students
OALF	Oromo Abo Liberation Front
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (EPRDF)
PDOs	People's Democratic Organisations
PDRE	People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1987-91)
POW	Prisoner of War
PMAC	Provisional Military Administrative Committee (of the Dergue regime)
PRA	Peoples' Representative Assembly (in Harar NRS, constituent of HPC)
SALF	Somali Abo Liberation Front
SEPDC	Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Coalition (or hibret)
SEPDF	Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (EPRDF)
SLM	Sidama Liberation Movement
SNNPNRS	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' NRS
SMDUP	Sheko-Majangir Democratic Unity Party
SPDP	Somali People's Democratic Party (former Ethiopian Somali Democratic League, ESDL)
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPO	Special Prosecutor's Office
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1995)
TLF	Tigray Liberation Front
TNO	Tigray National Organisation
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front (EPRDF)
UCAA	University College of Addis Ababa
UOPLF	United Oromo People's Liberation Front
USUAA	University Students' Union of Addis Ababa
WIC	Walta Information Centre
WPE	Workers' Party of Ethiopia (of the Dergue)
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front

Ethiopian terms *	
Afaan (Oromiffa)	Lit. 'tongue'; language
Awraja	Imperial sub-provincial district made up of several weredas
Awrajawinet	political/sentimental attachment to awraja, sub-ethnic nationalism
Baito (Tigrigna)	Kebele

Ethiopian terms *	
Barissa (Oromiffa)	Dawn
Blatta	Title signifying learning, given in the twentieth century to senior government officials
Debub	South
Dejazmatch	‘Commander of the gate’; imperial politico-military title
Dergue	Lit. ‘committee’; from ‘Provisional Military Administrative Committee’, used of the regime of 1974-1991
Enset	False banana; staple food in southern areas
Gabbar/gebbar	Tribute paying farmer, peasant, sometimes translated ‘serf’
Gada (Oromiffa)	Age-grade socio-political system of the Oromo
Gemgem[a]	Evaluation (Amharic/[Tigrigna])
Gragn	‘left handed’, used of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim-al-Ghazi (1506-43)
Gunbot	Ethiopian month, approximately June
Habesha	Abyssinian
Hamle	Ethiopian month, approximately July
Hanfishfish (Tig.)	Lit. ‘confusion’, used of 1976 period of division in TPLF
Hibret	Lit. ‘coalition’, used to refer to the SEPDC
Hidar	Ethiopian month, approximately November
Iddir	Mutual savings association for funeral expenses
Itihad (Arabic)	Al Itihad Al Islamiya
Jogol	Area enclosed within the walls at Harar
Kebele	Orig. small geographical unit; widely used after nationalisation of land to denote area of a peasant/urban dweller’s association during Dergue; also used of administrative council/committee of area unit.
Keyi	Lit ‘red’; ‘bright’ or ‘pale’ of skin colour
Kifle hager	Province (Dergue-era)
Kilil	National Regional State, NRS, federated units since 1995.
Malkagna	Representative, patron, ‘lord’ (imperial-era)
Me’isone	All Amhara Socialist Movement
Mereb Mellash	‘Beyond the Mereb River’, area roughly equivalent to Eritrea
Misrak	East
Naft/neft	Gun, rifle
Neftegna/naftagna	Lit. ‘gun-carrier’; coloniser, settler, used of ruling class established in the wake of Menelik’s conquest in the south
Negadras	Head of merchants
Negus/negusa negast	King / king of kings, i.e. emperor
Ras	Lit. ‘head’; prince, lord
Rest/rist	Land owning system providing usufruct rights, and based around lineage; came to mean [inherited/inheritable] private property.
Sabat/sebat bet	Lit. Seven houses, used of Gurage clans
Shanqala	Lit. slave, used esp. of black populations of the western periphery
Simien	North
Tehadso	Renewal

Ethiopian terms *	
Tekempt	Ethiopian month, approximately December
Teklai gezat	Province (imperial era)
Tikur	Black
Waagshum	Aristocratic hereditary ruler of Waag province; below Ras in status; entitled to honours because of royal Zagwe descent
Wegagoda	Welaiyta, Gamo, Goffa, Daro (language or political party)
Wereda	District
Weyane	Revolt, rebellion, revolution; used initially of the 1943 uprising in Tigray, and subsequently of the TPLF and its struggle.
Yeqign ager	Conquered land
Yekatit	Ethiopian month, approximately February
Zemana Mesafent	'Era of the Princes', Mikhael Suhul to Tewodros, roughly 1769-1855
Zuria	Environs

* terms listed are Amharic unless otherwise specified

No attempt has been made to adhere to a systematic orthography of transliteration in the English presentation of terms originating in Ethiopic script. Amharic and other Ethiopian language terms and names are rendered in commonly used and recognised English forms. This includes the less than desirable practice of adding English plural suffixes to Amharic words (*weredas* rather than *weredawoch*).

This system has occasionally resulted in the Amharicisation of non-originally Amharic terms, notably, but not consistently, of the names of Ethiopian languages: Kaffaigna instead of the little known, but more 'authentic' Keffinoono, for instance, whilst the widely known Oromiffa is used in preference to Oromigna. The transliteration into English of Ethiopian ethnonyms enjoys a political life of its own, something not unrelated to the themes of this thesis: it is perhaps necessary therefore, to state at the outset that the choice of usage has been made here in an attempt to achieve clarity through familiarity, and not for any other reason.

Amharic syllabic acronyms (such as *Me'isone* and *Wegagoda*) have been retained only where they are known in English, and no obvious English alternative exists.

Ethiopian (Julian) calendar dates have been kept to a minimum. Where given they are marked EC. The Ethiopian calendar differs from the Gregorian calendar as follows: the year begins on 11 September, and is eight years (January 1 – September 10) or seven years (September 11 – December 31) behind the Gregorian year.

Ethiopian names are not based on family or surnames. For Ethiopian authors, therefore, bibliographical listings and references in the text do not invert first and second names, but provide both: author's name followed by author's father's name. Other authors are listed by surname, with first names also included in references in the text only where more than one author with the same surname is listed in the bibliography.

Introduction

In the early hours of 21 May 1991, Lt Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, President of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, took off from Addis Ababa with his normal security entourage to visit a military camp in the southwest of the country. *En route*, the light plane was diverted to Nairobi, from where the President went into exile in Zimbabwe, ending seventeen years of military Marxist rule, and the so-called *Dergue*[1] regime. A few hours later that day, a press release of the armed opposition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF[2]) claimed that the forces amassed to defend the capital, remnants of the largest army in black Africa, had 'evaporated like dew under a hot sun' (*Statement* by the Supreme Council of EPRDF, 21 May 1991).

Within days then-Prime Minister Tesfaye Dinka had left for London for US-brokered talks with the EPRDF, their Eritrean counterparts, and with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The talks were scheduled for 27 May. By then, however, the movements' forces had captured the Eritrean capital Asmara, and stood encircling Addis Ababa's Bole and Lidetta airports. No conference took place. Instead on 28 May EPRDF troops and tanks rolled virtually unopposed into the city: along the meandering roads from the plains in the south and west, and down the twin routes over Mount Entoto from the north, converging, through the wide avenues of the sprawling city, on the old palace of Menelik II, where finally they met some limited resistance.

Six weeks later, on 1 July, observed by envoys from 15 countries and a range of international bodies, representatives of 27 Ethiopian political organisations and groupings gathered beneath the imposing marble of the OAU's Africa Hall, with its modernist echoes of Haile Selassie's 30-year-old bid to preside over the resurrection of a newly emancipated continent. They met to agree upon a 'charter', a compact for government, which, given the *de facto* separation of Eritrea, would steer the

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[1] Amharic, meaning literally 'committee'. For this and all other Ethiopian terms see the Glossary above.
[2] For this and all other acronyms see the list, above.

remainder of this large country through two further dramatic transformations over the forthcoming 'transitional period'. The first was the reconstitution of the Ethiopian political and economic systems, now to be governed under a series of liberal institutions ostensibly designed to create an elected, representative, and plural legislature, independent judiciary, and accountable executive, alongside an extensively liberalised and privatised economy.

The motivation behind the proposals for political and economic transformation in terms of liberal democratisation is readily apparent. Given Ethiopia's recent past, all were aware of the one-party-state as the spectre at the feast. In view of the early 1990s' climate of political conditionality on aid, the demise of the Soviet donor bloc, and the parlous state of the Ethiopian economy, some form of 'liberal democracy' was pretty much the only option. In the event, the form of government approved by the conference enormously calmed the fears of the international community: all were conscious that its approval and support were requisites according to which the new government might stand or fall. The question then remained not so much why a strategy that looked liberal democratic was adopted, but quite what form of such 'democratisation' would be implemented.

The second radical initiative enshrined in the Transitional Charter of July 1991 was more surprising. This proposed to carve up the rump empire state into a series of federated units, each drawn up along the lines of the major language – or ethnic – groups living within its borders. According to its authors, the adoption of the Transitional Charter in July 1991 would

> start a new chapter in Ethiopian history in which freedom, equal rights and self-determination of all the peoples shall be the governing principles of political, economic, and social life [...] thereby contributing to the welfare of the Ethiopian Peoples and rescuing them from centuries of subjugation and backwardness. (Transitional Conference 1991:preamble)

The text continued with the affirmation of the 'right of nations nationalities and peoples to self-determination':

> To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right:

> a) to preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history, and use and develop its language;
> b) to administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation;
> c) to exercise its right to self-determination of independence, when the concerned nation/nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged, or abrogated. (*ibid.*:Part One, Article Two)

These moves to a system of federalism, which would base both constitutional provision and legal, political, economic, and administrative order essentially upon ethnicity, upon Ethiopia's 'nations, nationalities, and peoples' (who were at the same time explicitly offered rights of secession from the arrangement), proved both controversial and – to many - unintelligible. Internationally and domestically it was seen as an eristic initiative, which set its face squarely against the integrationist nation-building currents then reaching a peak in other parts of Africa – most notably in Eritrea and South Africa, both of whose governments publicly expressed concern about the Ethiopian experiment. Given the ongoing disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, and the collapse and fragmentation, but persisting irredentism, of neighbouring Somalia, such an act of 'ethnicising' politics in Ethiopia - surely thereby of inflaming ethnic passions – appeared to many to be inexplicable, irresponsible and dangerous.

* * *

This thesis investigates how, why, and with what effect ethnicity entered the formal political arena in Ethiopia providing cornerstone and rationale for the reconstitution of the centralised empire state in 1991.

The research considers this question in relation to the periods before and after the introduction of 'ethnic federalism' in 1991, and Sections Two and Three of the thesis are structured accordingly. Section Two (Chapters IV and V) looks back from 1991 to consider the origins of the innovation; Section Three (Chapters VI and VII), meanwhile, looks forward over some of the developments of the subsequent decade, which may constitute its results.

The history of the politicisation of ethnic identity before the federation of the country's 'nations, nationalities and peoples' was instituted, is considered in two parts. Chapter IV discusses the period of expansive conquest over the later part of the nineteenth century, which established the modern Ethiopian state as a multi-ethnic empire. The account briefly considers the controversial issue of continuities between the modern Ethiopian state and a series of ancient Abyssinian and Axumite polities. It considers the processes of centralisation and bureaucratisation by which the empire state was consolidated in the mid twentieth century, and a number of instances of local resistance to them. These factors provide a backdrop to an emerging concern, initially with 'regionalism', amongst the expanded political circles of the 1960s, which blossomed into full-blown divisions within the 'Ethiopian student movement' of the 1970s as to the appropriate application to Ethiopia of the Marxist-Leninist 'National Question'. Chapter V traces and discusses the evolution of the two significant proponents of ethnic federalism in 1991, both of which have important roots going back through the Ethiopian student movement: the EPRDF and the OLF. Ethnicity operated as both resource and product of the ethno-nationalist mobilisation by which these two major movements of armed opposition to the military régime of the 1970s and 1980s sought to win control of the state. The chapter considers the attempts to establish what Anderson (1991[1983]) has famously called 'imagined communities' in Tigray and Oromia, and the factors which may have influenced the differential patterns of success achieved.

Section Three (Chapters VI and VII) considers how, under federalism through the 1990s, political representation and territorial administration were reorganised in terms of ethnicity. Chapter VI looks at the various kinds of 'ethnic mobilisation' which EPRDF attempted to carry out in a range of contexts: in the multi-ethnic south of the country, amongst pastoralists, in the competitive context of Oromia, and in mixed urban areas. It considers the processes by which a stratum of the local élite of each ethnic group was encouraged to form an ethnic EPRDF member organisation as a platform for electoral competition and executive office. The account suggests that there is evidence that the degree to which the ruling party has been able successfully

to renegotiate political representation on its own terms correlates with the extent to which its processes of mobilisation got ‘under the skin’ of the collective culture and understanding of the groups in question. In doing so it draws both on interviews and existing ethnographic data on the areas under study.

The thesis thus explores the implications of the juxtaposition of a range of understandings and discourses about collective identity. The architects of ethnic federalism are, it is suggested in Section Two, influenced by a Marxist formulation of the ‘National Question’ which incorporates contradictory elements inherent in the notion of ‘granting self-determination’. The first is the conviction that self-selected communities respond better to mobilisation ‘from within’, in their own language, by their own people; that this provides a morally superior, and practically more effective, basis for political recruitment, and mobilisation for collective advancement. The second is the notion that ethnic groups are susceptible to identification, definition, and prescription ‘from above’, by a vanguard party applying a checklist of externally verifiable criteria; that Ethiopia’s 'national' or 'ethnic' groups can be externally identified and demarcated, and granted both the status of legal entity, and rights of self-determination. It is the combination of the two which suggests that grants of self-determination to Ethiopia’s groups provides a superior basis for state administration, whilst blurring the key question of how the boundaries and definition of the self-determining units are determined.

The third section of the thesis, then investigates the operation of key premises of the currently dominant political elite, and those who are elsewhere often referred to as ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’. The thesis considers their assumptions, and the resultant strategies of ethnic mobilisation and now federalism they have employed, against popular responses to them. It demonstrates that the political effectiveness of appeals to ethnicity lies, not least, in their capacity to invest politicians with the semblance of ‘internal’ or ‘members’’ knowledge[3], of speaking from within the collective system of belief of the population group they seek to mobilise, and documents a range of

cases in contemporary Ethiopia where this has, or has not, turned out to be the case. Where, as often, the primary dynamic of ruling party mobilisation has been 'from above', with its implementation formulaic and taking little account of the collective beliefs and perceived material interests of the ethnic group in question (the crude 'deployment' of language group member cadres notwithstanding), its success can be shown to have been limited.

Meanwhile ethnic groups and their élites have responded to the new circumstances presented by ethnic federalism in unanticipated but calculative ways, many of which have challenged the roughly-drawn map of self-determining ethnic territories set out in 1991. These processes are explored in Chapter VII. The chapter considers two exceptional instances where groups were, early on, successful in having historical factors taken into account in the demarcation process. It then reviews a range of territorial challenges and conflicts from the SNNPNRS, tracing the various factors which seem to have influenced the responses of ethnic elites, their co-ethnic group members, and the ruling and opposition parties. The account suggests that in response to the new opportunities and constraints offered by a form of federalism which renders a certain formulation of ethnicity both politically salient, and often apparently materially advantageous, Ethiopia's ethnic groups have reviewed and reconstructed not only their sense of collective interest, but also, occasionally, the very ethnic collective 'selves' that would best serve those newly-perceived interests.

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Another way of looking at the approach of the thesis is as follows. Section Two (Chapters IV and V) considers the circumstances and influences which inspired the introduction of nationality-based mobilisation (alternatively 'politicised ethnicity', or 'ethno-nationalism') as the basis for opposition to the regime which held power up to 1991, and as the cornerstone for the constitution of a new one since that date. Many accounts which, projecting chronologically backwards, seek to locate and explain

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[3] As will emerge in Chapter II, below, I adopt throughout 'the standard conception of knowledge as accepted or acceptable belief' and not one in which the belief is 'justified and true in some absolute

nationalist projects with reference to their inherited historical, ideological, and socio-economic contexts, demonstrate a tendency to focus on 'structural' contextual factors, in the process divesting the analysis of an adequate account of the 'agency' of those involved.

This tendency itself mirrors (and may to some extent be explained by) the natural inclination of the nationalist protagonists, or 'entrepreneurs', themselves. In seeking to justify their projects as 'natural' or 'inevitable' and therefore 'legitimate', they often project the motivation for their adoption away from themselves and their fellow protagonists back onto the desirably 'inherent' or 'natural' constituent features of whatever context they operate in. Here the historian's desire to explain that 'it was so' melds with the politician's keenness to demonstrate that 'it could not have been otherwise' and was thus 'rightly so'. In the Ethiopian case, scholarly - like official - responses to the question 'why ethnicity?' repeatedly offer such answers as the following: 'national struggle was essential because of the suffering of our people at the hands of an ethnocratic state'; or 'because the national contradiction had reached the pitch in Ethiopia where there was no getting around it'; or 'given the circumstances, it was the right thing to do in the interests of social transformation and justice'. Dispute then hinges on the validity or otherwise of such claims, effectively reiterating battle lines which have become entrenched amongst Ethiopia's radicals since Walleligne Mekonen's famous 1969 student paper 'On Nationalities' ignited the debate: is it class or nationality (ethnicity) which rightly 'comes first' in Ethiopian politics in the late twentieth century? Or (in Marxist parlance), which is the 'primary contradiction'?

Whilst it is perhaps unremarkable that the leaders of nationalist enterprises (or indeed any other enterprise) present their activities in terms suggestive of their appropriateness, even necessity, the approach becomes a social scientific explanation of the operation of ethnicity less well. Nationalist accounts, in drawing a single causal arrow sharply and simply from pre-existing 'nation' or 'national context' to 'nationalism', commonly rely on some form of 'primordialist' theorising. They posit

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sense' (Barnes 1988:181n7).

the very entity many academic accounts now seek to problematise. Various of the problems associated with this kind of 'true' primordialism are discussed in Chapter II. A central one is that in considering the actions of a group of people, it loads what it imputes to be their 'primordial inheritance' with a weight of explanation it simply cannot bear. Most commentators now agree that the fact that 'x is from this nation/ethnic group and as such bears the (apparently) inherited (and primordial) characteristics of her nationality/ethnicity' is not likely ever to be a sufficient explanation of 'x's ethno-nationalist action'.

Not only would recourse to this kind of explanation constitute a lapse into determinism, but (more seriously) it would be a lapse into a form of determinism which arbitrarily privileges one – and one particularly doubtful – category of causal antecedent (apparent biological inheritance) above, and to the exclusion of, all or many others. Much more insidious, however, has been the idea that although such an account is clearly not a sufficient explanation, it must somehow remain a necessary part of any explanation. Why else could politicised ethnicity, ethno-nationalism, be so powerful, if not at some level because of this link with ethnic 'reality'? This is a notion that has persisted even in the face of repeated examples of perfectly good nationalist utterances and actions performed by non-nationals. If, however, social science is about the explanation of events and action, about tracing and situating the origins, emergence, interaction and significance, of their multiple causal antecedents to the greatest extent that this is possible, this kind of account will be uninteresting, presenting a set of pitfalls best avoided in looking into the antecedents of the change of power in Ethiopia in 1991.

A symmetrical set of pitfalls seems to confront the second part of the investigation, set out in Section Three (Chapters VI and VII), into some of the consequences of the introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991. Here the research question looks forward from 1991, attempting to identify and account for the impact and results of the explicit introduction of ethnicity into political life, as well as what its architects intended by it. Here the obvious tendencies – shared by proponents and opponents of the regime alike - are all in the opposite direction: to stress the 'agency' of the new

political elite at the expense of 'structure' or context; to present all the consequences of their policy initiatives as caused and intended, as unconstrained by the circumstances within which they came about; and therefore to attribute blanket responsibility for all eventualities to that elite and its party of government, now cast as a fearsomely Machiavellian protagonist. So far from relying upon the resources of the primordialist, such an account likely clothes itself in a strong, and probably strongly teleological, brand of instrumentalism – and in doing so risks a lapse not into determinism but into voluntarism: all agency and no structure.

There is no shortage of recent literature on Ethiopia under ethnic federalism which takes this kind of approach, deploying whatever problems have emerged during the period of ethnic federalism as evidence of the malevolence of the government and ruling party which introduced it (or – occasionally – claiming its successes as evidence of corresponding virtue). One of the core problems associated with instrumental analysis is in play here: the tendency automatically to 'read off' motivation for a particular action, the actor's perceived interest in pursuing it, and its consequences, merely from observable circumstances – often also considered to be 'objective' circumstances. As such it does nothing to take into account the knowledge base, or belief system, within which (groups of) actors operate. Ayele Gebre Mariam & Getachew Kassa (2001) is only one recent example of a genre which classifies contemporary 'ethnic conflicts' into those which can be understood as 'arising out of federalism', and those which have 'other' causes (land, water, language, or regional relations) (2001:9)[4]. Much of this literature is as politically 'engaged' and motivated as are the propagandist accounts of the origins of ethno-nationalism described above.

The attempt to shift outside the terms of the oversimplifying dichotomy between 'structure' and 'agency' thus provides the theme of another narrative: that of the move from activist to social scientific interest in Ethiopia's politics. It has recently been suggested that continuing social scientific enthusiasm for 'individual agency',

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[4] In fact Ayele & Getachew's account is an example of relative dispassion: others are less circumspect in blaming federalism for all of Ethiopia's ills.

and its associated voluntarist discourse, serve a range of political and practical purposes, not the least of which are the retention of 'morally or politically expedient' ontological commitments (Barnes 2000:30), or the societal need to be able to identify, blame, and ultimately punish responsible individuals (*ibid.*:20). In what follows, I hope to show that perhaps the most influential feature of the context within which the calculative activities of 'agents' are embedded is the body (or system, or distribution) of 'knowledge' of the world collectively constructed, constituted and shared by the members of the group to which they belong, and that a research focus here can implicitly transcend the structure/agency dichotomy, rendering it redundant in terms of explanatory potential.

In Sections Two and Three (Chapters IV-VII) which follow, I attempt to trace a more complex recursive pattern of influence as different social groups interact internally, with one another, and with their 'real world' surroundings. Methodologically, the development of this kind of focus becomes easier in the later chapters, which deal with the more recent period, and are based on research undertaken virtually simultaneously with the events documented, amongst participants in them. These methods are more likely to illuminate the *emic* perspectives in play than is the case with much of Chapters IV and (less so) V, where sources are either secondary, or primary interviews subject to significant and relevant re-interpretation with hindsight. In Section Three, the account of the mobilisation which EPRDF carried out in the southern and other parts of the country is interwoven with the responses of the communities in question, both based largely on primary data. As the account proceeds, it seems clear that the collective categories employed (government, ruling party, elite, ethnic group, etc.) are themselves overlapping, permeable, and – because continually self-(re)constructing – intrinsically shifting and soluble. As they tend periodically to soften and reform, with many members of ethnic groups interacting in new ways, joining the parties of government or opposition, and indeed other ethnic groups, it can be shown that the perspectives and interests of each 'collective category' themselves are thereby shifted in different ways.

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Here, one runs simultaneously into the limitations of both instrumentalism and primordialism: the activities of all parties are neither unconstrained, and explicable with reference to 'objective material interest', nor constrained, and explicable with reference to primordial inheritance. Less interesting than the operation of agents' 'free will', I suggest, is the recursive relationship between interacting collectives, and the circumstances they perceive - of which the actions, or pronouncements, of other collectives often constitute a primary part. Chapter II offers a discussion of theories of ethnicity, which proposes precisely the interaction that underpins and constitutes the collective, as a useful focus for its study. The chapter traces the influence of three dichotomies between the poles of which the theoretical literature on ethnicity has oscillated: the individual versus the group; the salience versus the content of ethnicity; and the primordial attachment versus the instrumental utility which ethnicity is thought to reflect. It seeks to reconsider these polar oppositions in the light of an approach focused on the social production of knowledge.

The theoretical investigation in Chapter II suggests that many conflate the 'real world' and 'socially constructed' referents of the ethnic profile of an individual (the constituents of the individual state of being an ethnic x), with the fully constructed collective accomplishment which creates members of an ethnic group (conferring the social status of being an ethnic x, of which those referents are markers). Differentiating the two, and exploring the recursive relationship between them, by means of a consideration of calculative action within the framework of actors' categories (emerging from emic knowledge systems) and shared social institutions (premised, whether their referents are 'natural' 'social' or 'artificial', on collective processes of 'knowledge construction'), may improve analysis of the causes and operation of collective action associated with ethnicity and ethno-nationalism.

In sum, then, the empirical account which this thesis offers points to an understanding of the policy of ethnic federalism, and of its architect, the EPRDF, whilst illuminating how little we yet know of the impact of either. The empirical work is informed by ethnographic literature on the interface between the modernist

projects of state-orientated agents and those of rural peasant and pastoralist populations (cf. Donham 1999, Abbink 2000). Scott has suggested that the gulf between these two perspectives – 'high modernist ideology' and '*mētis*' or 'practical local knowledge' – is at the root of the way in which 'schemes to improve the human condition have failed' (1998). This account provides some suggestion of the 'incongruent and incommensurate' terms in which groups commonly perceive identity difference as a matter of kind or conceptual classification and not simply of degree (Anthony Cohen 2000), and of the difficulties this raises for policy makers, themselves incapable of adopting either the *emic* perspective of their citizens, or the (relatively) *etic* position of the analyst (Schlee 1994).

The thesis explores the various means by which communities have sought to prime the inductive processes which performatively build the 'social institution' which *is* the collective, and define and delimit its identity. It therefore explores the great variety of initiatives and sources involved in the invocation of markers and precedents of the collectivity. In this context, the markers of the collective identity about which both group members and outsiders have beliefs/knowledge become important: the more 'natural' (rather than 'socially constructed') or historically compelling they look, the stronger the temptation to impute this 'naturalness' or historicity to the group identified: to impute to ethnic 'status' our intuitions about individual ethnic 'state' or 'nature'.

The account of the introduction of the 'ethnic group' as the basic unit of administration in Ethiopia, and of the 'granting' of self-determination to groups which may or may not have called for it, demonstrates the effects of juxtaposition of various different kinds of understandings about identity. Much depends on the relationship – and perceived relationship – between the identity existing (i.e. believed) within the group, and the identity proferred by the outside world. The thesis thus explores the significance of the nature of the overlap or hiatus between the 'knowledge systems' of ethnic group insiders, and relevant outsiders – in this case the state and dominant political party – regarding the range of identities and collectivities in question. Whilst the former can be seen to be largely incrementally

self-generated in continual response to perceptions of immediate circumstances, the latter is externally, often consciously, manufactured, proferred and prescribed. Once 'imposed', however (and to the extent that this fact is 'visible' to the group) it may become simply another part of 'what the group knows', on the basis of which it forms its sense of interest. This may, in turn, involve modification of how the group defines itself, as part of the reconstruction of a strategy of collective navigation of a changed world. The evidence of such shifts of collective identity after the introduction of a policy of ethnic federalism in 1991 (Section Three), can perhaps be seen to contrast with the apparently more organic development documented in relation to the earlier period (Section Two), although the same responsive and recursive processes are in play.

It is ironic that a policy – ethnic federalism - which embodies a strongly normative premise as to what constitute the 'natural' criteria of a 'nation, nationality, or people' (what is thought to 'constitute' that group as a nation, nationality, or people) can be seen to have elicited striking innovation in group internal self-definition and external self-presentation, the better to conform with (and operate within) these expectations. In other words it is the very 'performativity' of social construction involved in group formation that enables a policy based on the reification of 'natural' groups to look as through it is bringing about what it posits – a process which should in turn lead us to discount the validity of much of what it posits. The thesis suggests that ethnic federalism in Ethiopia *has* 'ethnified' Ethiopian politics, in the obvious sense that, amongst those who are aware of its provisions, federalism has made the ethnic group ('nation, nationality or people') a salient category – a 'prominent solution' – for the mediation of access to state resources and decision-making. Quite what then results from this fact, however, is far from automatic or clear, and depends on the local details of the interface between government pronouncement, policy, and activity, and local group dynamics, circumstances, interests, and responses: essentially on the recursive interplay of overlapping systems of knowledge.

The thesis opens with an account of the events by which ethnic federalism was introduced in 1991 – of the innovation that bears investigation. Given a focus on

‘systems of knowledge’ however, it seems important, also to open with some account of the range of perspectives, analyses, and conclusions about these recent events of Ethiopian political history. Chapter I, therefore, also incorporates a brief review of some of the common perspectives on ethnicity in Ethiopia. This is intended as a further justificatory preface to the rejection of various of the theoretical positions reviewed in Chapter II, and further to contextualise the selection of this research question.

There is no other single issue in Ethiopian politics as inflammatory and controversial as the ‘empowerment of ethnicity’, and the ‘self-determination of nations, nationalities and peoples’, unless it is perhaps the related question of the self-determination of Eritrea. As far as Ethiopian domestic politics is concerned, however, the establishment of ethnic federalism is ‘the main event’, and its architects, the EPRDF elite, its clear protagonists. The system has now been in place for more than a decade, and has had a significant impact on the interface between state and citizenry. Without an understanding of this story, it is perhaps unlikely that much else about today’s Ethiopia can be adequately interpreted.

Section One: Setting the scene

Chapter I. 1991: Redrawing the empire state

This brief chapter focuses on the key events and themes of the change of power in 1991 as the pivotal moment of convergence for the stories of politicised ethnicity in Ethiopia: the 'neck of the hourglass' into which prior histories fed, and from – or at least through - which subsequent evolutions flowed. It documents the extent of the consensus forged in favour of ethnic federalism, and traces elements of its implementation over the transitional period. The chapter is intended to provide a basic account of the events that need to be explained, of the emergence of politicised ethnicity onto the formal political arena as a basis for the reconstitution of the Ethiopian state.

The account is couched in terms of representation and territory, the twin axes of government which formed the major parameters of transformation. They are referred to again in chapters IV and V, where the dynamics according to which they operated prior to 1991 are explored. Chapters VI and VII are then structured to provide an analysis of the results and implications of restructuring along these two axes. This chapter concludes with a note of the depth of controversy which currently attaches to ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

What happened in 1991 and after

Co-opting the participants: reconstituting representation?

A conference of political and ethnic groupings, convened within weeks of the collapse of the *Dergue* in July 1991, approved a 'Transitional Charter', committing the new government to a raft of principles outlining the directions in which it would move, and resigned itself to the *de facto* separation of Eritrea (Vaughan 1994). Most important of the new policy directions was, as already set out in the introduction, the recognition of the self-determination of ethnic groups, of 'nations, nationalities and

peoples', and legislating along these lines was one of the first tasks of the new parliament.

Seats allocated in the new legislature, the so-called Transitional Government (TGE) Council of Representatives, reflected the political balance of power at the time, along with an attempt at comprehensive ethnic representation. EPRDF parties retained a substantial majority, alongside representatives of other ethnically based liberation movements to have opposed the previous regime[5], a raft of newly-established parties representing the smaller ethnic groups[6], and a number of new and older pan-Ethiopianist groups[7]. The parliament elected the EPRDF chairman TGE President, and ratified a selection of ministers reflecting the hierarchy of influence across the spectrum of political organisations represented. Whilst EPRDF retained key portfolios (PM, Defence, Security, Foreign Affairs, etc.), the OLF were offered significant positions including Information and Agriculture, and remaining cabinet jobs were distributed amongst representatives of other ethnic groups.

A Boundary Commission was appointed to draw up an 'ethnic map' delineating the borders of the new political units. On the basis of this new map, proclamation 7/1992 establishing the new 'National Self-Governments' followed in January 1992[8]. A National Election Board was set up, legislation drafted for the conduct of federal, regional (*kilil*), and district (*wereda*) elections, and the first regional and *wereda* elections were held in June 1992. A Constitution Commission was appointed to draft a range of constitutional proposals and questions for popular discussion, and subsequent debate and ratification by a Constituent Assembly, which was finally elected in 1994.

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[5] They included the ALF, BPLM, IFLO), Issa & Gurgura Liberation Movement, Ogaden Liberation Front (Horiale), OALF, OLF, SLM, UOPLF, and WSLF. See Vaughan (1994).

[6] Hadiya, Harari, Kambatta, Gurage, Omotic group, Welaiyta; those later granted TGE Council seats were Agew, Burji, Gedeo, Kaffa, and Yem.

[7] EDAG, EDC, EDU, ENDO.

[8] The original 14 units were reduced to 9 plus Addis Ababa when regions 7-11 (roughly Gurage/Kambatta/Hadiya, Sidama/Gedeo, Welaiyta/*Simien* Omo, *Debub* Omo/Konso, Kaffa/Sheka/Bench) were amalgamated to form the SNNPNRS, in 1992. See Chapter VII.

The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, ratified in December 1994, came into effect following federal elections in mid-1995. It formalised the division of the country into 9 federated states (*kilils* or NRSs) 'delimited on the basis of settlement patterns, identity, language and the consent of the people concerned' (FDRE *Constitution* 1994: Art.46, 47). It provides for the

> unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession [for] every nation, nationality, and people in Ethiopia

defined as

> group[s] of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory. (FDRE 1994:Art.39)

Meanwhile commissions had been established to negotiate the division of resources and responsibilities with the newly established Provisional Government of Eritrea; to manage the demobilisation of the army of the former regime, along with volunteers and disabled veterans from the EPRDF; and to organise the repatriation and resettlement of returnees (and refugees) from conflict in Sudan and a steadily disintegrating Somalia[9]. Food security policies and strategies were revised, with a new in-country network of emergency reserve stores established, and transportation privatised. Programmes designed to consolidate the independence and capacity of the judiciary, to train the police in methods appropriate to the new 'democratic' context, and to prosecute members of the previous regime alleged to have committed crimes against humanity, all billed as attempts to reverse a culture of impunity, were also enthusiastically supported by the international community.

At the beginning of the transitional period, the diplomatic corps was pleased both with the liberal democratic nature of the political reforms undertaken by the TGE, and with the surprisingly inclusive manner in which they were being implemented by the coalition government. Those middle-class and 'intellectual' members of ethnic groups, particularly from the south, whom EPRDF had encouraged to form parties,

and join the TGE in senior positions, spoke of the 'magnanimity of the EPRDF' who, despite their decisive military victory, had apparently committed themselves to share power (interviews, TGE members and conference delegates, Addis Ababa, June-August 1994)[10]. Many took the coalition at face value, and assumed that they were being offered a permanent 'place at the table' representing rural constituents amongst whom they had done little to mobilise political support or establish a party organisational infrastructure (Vaughan 1994). They thought of EPRDF as a northern party, and saw themselves as taking over a complementary role in the south, and on the peripheries.

EPRDF moves south…

It was only in the run-up to the first *kilil* (regional) and *wereda* (district) elections in mid-1992 that the extent of their miscalculation became apparent at national level. Despite considerable opposition from the OLF, It had been agreed in July 1991 that the EPRDF forces would operate as the national 'army' for the duration of the TGE. During the summer months of 1991 they fanned out across the south of the country into areas where they had not previously operated, often spearheaded by small numbers of specially-trained fighters originally from each local area in the south, who as *Dergue* soldiers in the 1980s had been taken prisoner in Tigray, and joined the EPRDF. They quickly established myriad local 'peace and stability committees' from amongst educated local people recruited on the basis of the acceptance and respect they seemed to enjoy amongst their communities. Those who had been members of the workers' party of the former government (WPE) were excluded from government office, and a campaign to track down and arrest senior cadres suspected of involvement in Red Terror and War Crimes galvanised communities and detained several thousand.

With the immediate task of securing the south of the country accomplished by August 1991, in a process further described in Chapter VI, EPRDF continued and

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[9] President Mohammed Siad Barre had fled Mogadisho in January 1991, precipitating the collapse of central government in Somalia.

extended its mobilisation, encouraging those it had identified, and recruiting others to join the party, and establish local chapters of the front in each ethnic area. These parties, commonly referred to as PDOs, from the formulaic acronym which tagged each ethnonym, would mobilise, represent, and – after election – eventually administer their own ethnic communities under federalism. Thousands of young recruits went through EPRDF's *Tatek* political training centre in 1991 and 1992, mostly drawn from Oromia and (what would become) the SNNPNRS, although also from the pastoralist peripheries. Elementary school teachers were targeted for recruitment as enjoying that ideal combination of close proximity and contact with rural populations, a degree of local respect because of their relatively educated status, and the uniform ambition to move on to positions enjoying better remuneration and conditions.

… and the TGE disintegrates

As these EPRDF activities began to run up against rival campaigns, tension mounted. The first instances of this were in Oromia, where the OLF, and also the IFLO and OALF, constituted seasoned and determined competitors (Chapter VI). The OLF nursed bitter memories of military and political collaboration with the TPLF in the early 1980s, and had been infuriated by the EPRDF's establishment of the competitor OPDO in 1989/90 (Chapter V). Violent clashes between the armed forces of the two movements escalated as the elections approached. Finally on the eve of the elections the OLF withdrew from the government, announcing its inability to work with EPRDF, and decision to return to armed opposition. The civil war, which for several days threatened to engulf the country, failed to materialise. After three weeks the military threat posed by the OLF had been effectively defeated, and 30,000 of its fighters taken prisoner in re-education camps.

As other non-EPRDF members of the government began to consider their positions, elections were held, the new PDOs were swept to power, and EPRDF was left in full control of local government throughout the four core regions of Amhara, Oromia,

[10] Interview methods and referencing are discussed in Chapter III.

SNNPNRS, and Tigray. Realising that, with federal elections, their influence and positions in government would vanish, other non-ERPDF members of the TGE began to protest the non-level playing field, and several withdrew. Some joined forces with a diaspora-based opposition bloc, which had been excluded from the beginning. They began calling for a process of 'national reconciliation' which would start the process of state constitution anew, incorporating those increasing numbers of actors who now operated outside the legal framework. Such attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the energetic process they had undertaken so far were anathema to EPRDF, and the rump TGE moved harshly to expel from parliament and detain members of those parties which had been involved in 'illegal' negotiations with armed opponents. Positions polarised. The remaining opposition parties were torn between risking all by withdrawing from the process and elections of 1994 and 1995, or lending a veneer of multi-party legitimacy to a process they now saw as vitiated, by continuing to participate in it.

As TGE pluralism dissolved, observers questioned the capacity of EPRDF to work in coalition with other political parties. By the end of the transitional period, the TGE no longer looked like the magnanimous mechanism for power-sharing some had envisaged. It had, however, served a number of EPRDF purposes well. Firstly it had secured the support of representatives from communities all over the country, including all the major armed liberation movements, for the controversial new state structure of ethnic federalism. This consensus represented an important bulwark against the virulent hostility of sections of the nationalist urban middle class, who – unable to digest Eritrean secession - saw federalism as a further step in the dismemberment of the motherland. Secondly, the TGE won EPRDF a period of grace during which the new arrangement could be viewed by almost all sides (and especially the international community) as marking a distinct ideological break with the past, introducing pluralism, multi-partyism, inclusivity, and apparently 'liberal' democracy. Finally, it won for the EPRDF an essential breathing space within which it was able to establish and activate an infrastructure for political mobilisation in those core areas of the country where it had not previously operated. Thus the transitional period, with the involvement and even, initially, approval of many

outside the party, and with relatively limited visible recourse to violence, achieved the formula which has now become entrenched: a core administered by EPRDF parties, with a periphery administered by EPRDF affiliates or associates.

The trajectory of the transitional period from 1991-1995 illustrates the difficulties of contemporary assessment of who gains what from changes to Ethiopia's political arrangements. At the outset of the TGE the answer seemed to many observers and participants to be that the many small ethnic parties and liberation movements who became partners in government had gained very considerably. By the end of the period, however, it emerged starkly that it was the ruling party, the EPRDF, which had gained greatly from the legitimating collaboration of these other groups in its reconstitution of the state.

Drafting the new ethnic map: reconstituting territory

The visible involvement of non-EPRDF parties was most important in the drafting of the new ethnic map, since both the project itself, and the content of the decisions reached, were highly controversial. The Boundary Commission, which was established in August 1991, was composed of 10 members, and represented six political groups in addition to EPRDF: three from EPRDF, two from OLF, one Gurage, one Hadiya, one Harari, one Somali, and one Afar. The fact that there was 'all-party' involvement in the negotiations was an enormously important *coup* for the EPRDF: whatever the subsequent complaints of the opposition, there were few from the TGE who remained external to the process of 'founding' the Federal Democratic Republic. In addition to its importance in implicating other players, the spectrum of participants provided useful dynamics in forcing compromise and getting decisions made quickly.

All expected that the OLF would forward strong claims that a large disputed area be incorporated into Oromia, and it was politically important that these were countered not only by EPRDF, but also by a range of representatives from other ethnic and/or political blocs. The balance of actors from different ethnic constituencies (each of whom was encouraged to imagine they were fighting to maximise territory which

would then form their own 'fiefdom') effectively reined in the more ambitious claims of powerful players, whilst diffusing conflict within the group, and deflecting it away from the EPRDF. When the OLF representatives, for instance, claimed much of Amharic-speaking Wollo as 'really' (i.e. historically) Oromoland, the Hadiya commission member is reported to have countered that much of Arsi and Bale should then be regarded as 'really Hadiya or Sidama' (interview, TGE Boundary Commission member, Addis Ababa, 9 November 1999), and both suggestions were consequently dropped. The balance also lent a sense of transparency and legitimacy to the outcome, which could be said to have been 'thrashed out around the table'. And finally, the involvement of a range of actors representing most parts of the country disguised the logical absurdity of 'granting self-determination' to groups in parts of the country which had neither demanded nor fought for it[11].

The Commission drew only the outlines of the regions, and left it to the regional governments to sort out their own internal boundaries. Problems arising along the borders between regions were to be settled at some future date by canvassing the relevant *kebeles* (local council units) and registering the preference of the majority in each. A draft map of 14 regions appeared in the Election Commission Bulletin, Issues 1, 2 and 3, towards the end of the year (Map 8). Bulletin Issue No. 4-5 (June 1992), declared it to be an error and withdrew it, replacing it with a list of the numbered regions and the names of the nationalities included in each. No official map exists to date[12]. Difficult issues were postponed (as Dire Dawa), sidestepped (as *Simien* Omo), or siphoned off for separate negotiation by interested parties (as Harar). Some of these cases appear in Section Three.

Whilst the states are constitutionally 'delimited on the basis of settlement patterns, identity, language and consent of the people concerned', it was current language use which became the single effective criterion applied by the commission, considered a more visible and conclusive marker than, for instance, history. The TGE Commission was dismissive of claims based on history, fearing their open-ended

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[11] Cf. Andreas Esheté (1992).
[12] The appended maps numbered 9 and 10 have no official status.

potential for dispute[13], and preferring to deal in 'currently verifiable demographics' (interview, then-prospective EPRDF member of the TGE Boundary Commission, Addis Ababa, August 1991). Even this was not straightforward. The commission drew heavily on the work of the Dergue's Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (Chapter V), even including amongst its number one of its former research members. ISEN, in a much more leisurely study of the ethnic profiles of the country during the 1980s, had 'found out that of the 580 weredas in the country, only around 30 odd were actually monolingual'. As a result it was concluded that 'language was not a good criterion on which to base an administrative division' (interview, ISEN and TGE Boundary Commission member, Addis Ababa, 9 November 1999). In 1991, however, there was not much argument about adopting this policy, only about certain of the boundaries, notably between Oromo NRS and Gurage, Sidama, Kefficho and Somali areas. The commission did some preparatory work to clear up these disagreements, and other issues were reported back to the council. Meanwhile, Bender's 1976 language map was there for reference, ISEN's copious research used to double-check its accuracy, and the work finished within a few months.

There was a clear political rationale for such haste. All parties sought stability, the reduction of controversy, and the rapid and peaceful demarcation of the areas of local government, which each could then seek to colonise. By contrast, the subsequent periods of dispute, debate, violent conflict and adjustment associated with these boundaries continue to be protracted and painful. If ethnic groups select amongst historical precedents for markers and materials with which to categorise and label their identities and stake out their territories, the hasty administrative revisions of 1991 have contributed additional resources for the further complication of this selection process.

Competing accounts

[13] Thus, for instance, the 1991 conference avoided historical discussion of the Eritrean issue (Vaughan 1994:52) as likely to become mired in multiple competing narratives (Sorensen 1993:38ff.).

> There is a torrent of conjectures on the motives and consequences of recognizing the right to self-determination. (Andreas Esheté 1992:8)

I have already referred in the Introduction, above, to the deep-seated nature of disputes over the primacy or otherwise of the 'national contradiction' in defining the 'objective situation' in Marxist analysis of Ethiopia. In Chapter II, below, I explore the notion of 'performativity' in categorisation: the idea that in classifying a set of events in a certain way we 'make' them as we have categorised them. This notion, however obscurely recognised, undoubtedly accounts for some of the vigour with which EPRDF and the TGE's policy of ethnic federalism are debated, disputed, and attacked. The establishment of ethnic federalism explicitly institutionalises the politically salient classification of Ethiopia's populations according to their ethnic profiles. How this is interpreted depends upon one's political point of view.

The official version: ethnicity as 'conflict resolution'

The proponents of ethnic federalism, for instance, aver that ethnicity already provided the basis for political classification of Ethiopia's populations before 1991: a discriminatory categorisation under an 'ethnocratic' empire state, intolerant and contemptuous of divergence from its core culture, and intent upon 'nation-building' centralisation. Ethnic federalism, according to its advocates, represents an improvement on this discriminatory situation, since the ethnic classification is now overt and egalitarian, backed by justiciable rights, and effective constitutional safeguards. As such the introduction of ethnic federalism is to be understood primarily as a mechanism of conflict resolution.

This position – advanced by the government and taken up by many in the international community unwilling to contemplate the collapse of the lynchpin state of the Horn – is perhaps best set out in the words of the Ethiopian Prime Minister.

> From a purely legal point of view, what we were trying to do was to stop the war, and start the process of peaceful competition [...]. The key cause of the war all over the country was the issue of nationalities. Any solution that did not address them did not address the issue of peace and war [...] People were fighting for the right to use their language, to use

> their culture, to administer themselves. So without guaranteeing these rights it was not possible to stop the war, or prevent another one. […] People were already expressing themselves even at that early stage before the conference in terms of nationalities: that is manifested in the way they organised themselves. (Interview, then-President of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, August 1994)

It is important to note that the critical issue, which divided the Transitional Government (then including the OLF and a number of other pan-Ethiopian and nationality-based organisations who subsequently left) from its opponents, was its assessment of the situation in Ethiopia at the time of the change of power. Most of the government's critics[14] claimed that it was creating a problem where there had been none – that it was ethnicising Ethiopian politics where previously this had not been an issue. The government, pointing to the nature of opposition against the *Dergue* as evidence of the vehemence of the sense of ethnic oppression in many parts of the country, counter claimed that the only way of 'lancing the pain' was to address its roots directly, and meet demands for ethnic emancipation by means of a robust form of self-determination. Whatever the merits of ethnic federalism, there is no doubt that ethnicity had by 1991 long become a significant factor in shaping many if not most of the various power struggles waged by armed 'liberation movements' in different parts of Ethiopia, and was understood as such, at least by their active and elite participants.

Counter views: the inevitability of ethnic conflict

The opponents of ethnic federalism dispute the position of the government on one or both of two grounds. Most, including ethno-nationalist proponents of the federal principles, claim that the new arrangement is not egalitarian and inclusive as alleged, but in practice institutionalises a new and highly discriminatory constellation favouring a new EPRDF, primarily Tigrayan, elite. Others are opposed in fundamental terms: the additionally aver that there was nothing 'ethnocratic' about the old arrangement and that a centralised system is, in principle, much to be preferred. Those who subscribe to this latter view, often share

> the belief that talking about ethnicity creates or reinforces ethnic divisions even when the talk is directed at how to prevent such divisions from overwhelming a future democratic state. (Horowitz 1991:29)

Such profound ideological lack of consensus on how to deal with ethnic issues generates a 'metaconflict', which 'relates directly and exclusively to the ascriptive conflict, and compounds it' (Horowitz 1991:2)[15]. Thus the argument is not only that an ethnic classification will in itself reinforce ethnic division; but, in addition, that the fact of a lack of consensus on the desirability of an ethnic classification is likely (in itself) to exacerbate the conflict in which it can be expected to result.

These are views shared by opponents and critics of the government. They have mounted a range of attacks on the ethnic federal policy and its implementation. Ethnicity has been denounced as a 'red herring', some alleging that there is no such thing as Amhara ethnicity, let alone a tradition of Amhara ethnocracy. Others have suggested that the introduction of ethnicity into political life can only result in disaster, along the lines experienced in the Former Yugoslavia (Walle Engedayehu 1993, 1994). Another set of commentators has questioned the viability of federalism additionally on grounds of expense (Aaron Tesfay 1992 and, more sympathetically, Henze 1994).

Self-determination: an alternative to 'authoritarian high modernism'?[16]

The introduction of ethnic federalism can be seen as closely associated with many of the issues raised in Scott's study of state 'myopia' (1998), which considers possible reasons underlying the frequent failure of large-scale state-sponsored development schemes. Scott's recipe for social and developmental disaster involves four factors. They are: the administrative ordering of nature and society, viewed by means of myopic state 'simplifications', or abridged 'maps of legibility' (*ibid.*:3); a state commitment to high modernist ideology; an authoritarian state willing and able to

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[14] Including some members of the TGE, notably the pan-Ethiopianist ENDO and EDU.

[15] Horowitz concludes that the metaconflict exacerbated the problems of developing democracy in South Africa in three ways: by placing constraints on political discourse; by contracting the range of acceptable political innovation; and by increasing the difficult of finding ways for the parties to the conflict to reach accommodation (*ibid*.:27). Each has relevance in Ethiopia.

use coercion in the achievement of its high modernist designs; and, finally, a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these schemes (*ibid*.:4-5). Each of these factors had long been evident in the Ethiopia inherited by the EPRDF in 1991[17]. A core problem is the 'hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how' (*ibid.*:6). Much more successful would be the elaboration of developmental initiatives based on a form of practical local knowledge, for which Scott coins the term *mētis* (*ibid*.:ch.9).

In what follows I discuss ethnicity as a social status conventionally constructed on the basis of the body of beliefs – the 'system of knowledge' – in play amongst the group in question and those with whom they interact. There is, further, much in the Marxist literature on the national question, so influential in Ethiopia and within EPRDF, suggestive of the value of using ethnicity to get within the 'mindset' of a population, the better to mobilise it to ends defined by the class struggle. Chapter V discusses the perspectives on ethnic mobilisation EPRDF had acquired from ideological sources and from its experience in opposition in the north. Chapter VI investigates the processes of ethnic mobilisation which it carried out in areas of the south of the country after 1991. An interest in systems of knowledge/belief, and in the extent to which external mobilisation can make use of internal patterns of conventional knowledge (and what happens as a result) is a theme of each of these chapters. Following Scott, the interface between local and state 'knowledge' might be expected to be a useful locus for the investigation of the likely political and developmental impact of ethnic federalism and self-determination. Specifically, the extent to which Ethiopian government structures under, and perhaps because of ethnic federalism, are able to take account of 'practical local knowledge', or *mētis*, in formulating their 'schemes for improving the human condition' becomes a matter of considerable practical importance.

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[16] Scott (1998:ch.3).
[17] Scott discusses *Dergue*-era policy, conflating villagisation and resettlement schemes (*ibid.*:247-52).

Chapter II. Frameworks, perspectives, and constraints

This Chapter considers the theoretical resources available to a study of ethnicity. It has three sections. The first sets out the co-ordinates of the 'terrain' of the theoretical literature on ethnicity, introducing four pairs of polar opposites between which it has oscillated. The second summarily reviews theoretical trends and resources, drawing on anthropological, sociological, and political approaches to the study of ethnicity. The third section revisits some basic debates about social construction and collective action in search of tools to build on insights in the literature. Questions of the application of these tools, and methodological issues, are treated in the following chapter.

Introducing the 'terrain' of 'ethnicity'

Collective identity – the nature of community – continues to be problematic. We are constantly reminded that we live in an age of supreme individualism, and yet our problems are those of collectives: how they are forged, how it is that we belong to them, and how they relate to one another. Issues of identity seem at once intrinsically relational, and intensely personal. The most idiosyncratic of individual identity profiles seems somehow to be significant (some would argue 'extant') only in so far as it is communicable, and intelligible, to others. Questions about affect and belonging – what Hearn (2001) calls 'thinking about feeling' – continue to exercise us. How should we account for the extension of affective ties beyond (for example) relations of kinship and shared language or territory? Do we, in fact, really understand the operation of affect, community, and identity even within such relations, whether they are 'actual' or 'metaphorical' (Eriksen 2002[1991])? These are questions the overt political implications of which have been raised by the introduction of a system of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, a country long associated in the literature with a dominant social structure characterised by individualism and vertical stratification (Levine (1965), Allan Hoben (1970)).

They are problems with which contemporary theorising about identity – specifically that about nationalism and ethnicity – have wrestled. The notion that theories of

ethnicity have 'oscillated between a number of polar extremes' maps a useful set of co-ordinates for this theoretical terrain:

> the individual versus the group; the contents of an ethnic identity versus the boundary; the primordial gut feeling of an identity versus its instrumental expression; ethnicity as an all-inclusive general theory versus ethnicity as a limited approach to particular problems. (Banks 1996:47)

Discussions of the operation of ethnicity have wrestled for some time with the concern to move beyond the instrumentalist/primordialist dichotomy (Fardon 1995), a division alternately cast around the modernist/perennialist debate which separates Gellner (1964, 1983, 1996) and Breuilly (1993), from Anthony Smith (1986, 1992)[18]. Primordialism has long been charged (most trenchantly by Eller & Coughlan (1993)) with assuming the fixed nature and explanatory power of the very ethnic 'givens', which much research now problematises. Instrumental or materialist approaches, on the other hand, are often criticised because they lack an adequate account of the emotive strength, and often apparently irrational 'power' or 'pull' associated with ethnic identities (Hutchinson & Smith (1996), Grosby (1994), Robin Cohen (1999)). Common to both approaches has been the placement of ethnicity – reified and defying deconstruction – at one end or other of a causal vector, situating it as either primordial instigator or instrumental consequence of action and interest, and preserving unscathed the essentialism which has dogged the concept (Tonkin, MacDonald & Chapman (1989)). Some accounts purport to clear the ground of the instrumental/primordial dichotomy, whilst sliding towards one or other of its poles (Bayart 1993). Many others seek a synthesis of elements of both schools (Crawford Young 1986). This discussion concludes that they often founder amidst the contradictory currents of causality inherent in the two positions which are, as they stand, irreconcilable.

The debate between those who stress the cultural content of ethnicity, and those who emphasise the salience (or otherwise) of ethnic boundaries and divisions, has seen a number of incarnations, and continues to exercise anthropologists. It was sparked by

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[18] See Mortimer 1999, and Volume 2, Issue 3 of *Nations and Nationalism* (1996).

Fredrik Barth (1970), whose introduction to his edited collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* set out a preference for a focus not on the cultural 'contents' of ethnic identity, but on the boundaries that 'contain' the group. This position drew the fire of Abner Cohen (1974:vii-xv) and Epstein (1978), and has been challenged or criticised in the more recent period by Eriksen (2002[1993]:79), Anthony Cohen (1996:120), and Banks (1996:14-16), the latter noting that Barth relies heavily on the enumeration of the very cultural features he claims he is rejecting. This discussion stresses the recursive nature of the relationship between ethnic boundaries and salience, and the 'content' of ethnic identity, suggesting that boundary, form and substance are more intimately interwoven than is sometimes suggested.

The two poles of community group and individual have also caused problems for discussion of ethnicity. Eriksen claims that 'when we talk of identity in social anthropology we refer to social identity' (2002:60)[19]. Nevertheless much of the literature, including anthropological discussion, tends to treat the collective as an individual writ large, or as an aggregate of individuals. Associated with this, particularly in literature with an instrumental slant, is a failure to problematise the emergence of shared perspectives on, for instance, categorisation, or group interests. In so far as the collective is treated simply as some kind of a rational individual unit, there is a tendency for its interests – and indeed the reified 'interest group' which shares them – to be 'read off' from observation of a set of 'objective' circumstances. This discussion suggests that a focus on the interaction which underpins the collective, and through which it establishes shared knowledge, categories, and social 'institutions', may prompt a different understanding of the relation between the ethnic identity of an individual, and her or his membership of an ethnic group.

The following discussion traces some of the most important strands of theorising on ethnicity. It concludes that recent literature has struggled to reconcile elements of the two established schools of instrumentalism and primordialism. My concern is that, as it stands, this approach is unlikely to succeed given the incompatibility of the premises on which these two schools draw: in short, ethnicity causes action for

primordialists, and does not cause action for instrumentalists. I therefore propose a return to a number of the fundamental debates about collectives in an attempt not to bridge but to transcend the instrumental/primordial dichotomy. These debates relate to the achievement of collective action, the emergence and maintenance of stability in social life, and the achievement and recognition by a social group of shared meaning, knowledge, and interests.

Theorising ethnicity and ethno-nationalism

> African political leaders, experiencing it as destructive to their ideals of national unity, denounce it passionately. Commentators on the Left, recognizing it as a block to the growth of appropriate class awareness inveigh against it as a case of 'false consciousness'. Apologists for South African apartheid, welcoming it as an ally of continued white dominance, encourage it. Development theorists, perceiving it as a check to economic growth, deplore it. Journalists, judging it an adequate explanation for a myriad of otherwise puzzling events deploy it mercilessly. Political scientists, intrigued by its continuing power, probe at it endlessly. If one disapproves of the phenomenon 'it' is 'tribalism'; if one is less judgemental, 'it' is ethnicity. (Vail 1989:1)

The study of ethnicity confronts interrelated terminological, political and conceptual problems. 'Ethnicity' remains a mobile term (Glazer & Moynihan 1975), meaning different things to different people. 'Ethnic' or 'ethnic group' has been used to mean: race; specific major races; socio-cultural groups; sub-groups living among others in a foreign country; or, a group of people who 'contrast themselves or are contrasted by others, on the basis primarily of sharing certain cultural criteria such as language, beliefs and values, religion or history' who may or may not share 'geographical contiguity' and 'racial characteristics' (du Toit 1978:1-4). Recent theorising has stressed the importance of 'contrast' betweem groups.

> For ethnicity to come about, [two distinctive] groups must have a minimum of contact with each other, and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there is no ethnicity, for ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group. (Eriksen 2002:12)

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[19] He acknowledges the exception represented by Anthony Cohen (1994).

The fact that 'ethnicity' is commonly understood both as a 'neutral unemotional referent to those characteristics and qualities that mark an ethnic group' (du Toit 1978), *and* as an instance of a social relation or status, is an ambiguity which renders it conceptually problematic. It is a problem to which I return below. Lack of clarity has probably been exacerbated by the inter-disciplinary pedigree of 'ethnic studies', which has left it a 'conundrum' (Fukui & Markakis (1994), de la Gorgendière (1996)), 'subject to parochial analysis' (Enloe 1986:xi). Its 'chameleon-like capacity' to 'merge with other elements of social identity and solidarity' leave it 'hard to see what would remain of ethnicity if all [these] were peeled off' (Fukui & Markakis 1994:3).

Conceptual and terminological confusion is further compounded by assumptions arising from political antipathy: 'if nationalism was a progressive and worthy topic, ethnicity was a retrogressive and shameful one' (Crawford Young 1986:443). It is only after 'ethnicity has fought and bled and burned its way into public and scholarly consciousness' (Horowitz 1985:xi) that it has been appropriated from its ethnographic niche for study by political scientists and sociologists.

Primordial attachment, and 'assumed' attachment

> The conclusion of the 'primordialists' [...] taking their cue from the work of Edward Shils [1957] on the importance of primordial ties based on language, religion, race, ethnicity and territory, [is the] claim that nations and ethnic communities are the natural units of history and integral elements of the human experience. […] Even more important, 'primordial ties' have always divided the human species, as naturally as have sex or geography, and will always do so. (Anthony Smith 1986:12)

Geertz builds on Shils to describe how 'considered as societies, the new states [of Asia and Africa] are abnormally susceptible to serious disaffection based on primordial attachments' (1967:109). 'Economic or class or intellectual disaffection threatens revolution, but disaffection based on race, language, or culture threatens partition, irredentism, or merger, a redrawing of the very limits of the state, a new definition of its domain' (1967:111). The 'foci of discontent' are enumerated by Smith (1986:12): blood ties, race, language, region, religion, and custom, which

operate as *causes* of conflict, albeit with the important caveat that Geertz is explicitly talking about 'assumed givens', i.e. what the group thinks of as its 'given' inheritance, rather than what actually *is* given[20].

In conjunction with the set of ideas that takes either ethnic attachment itself, or the process of essentialising it to be somehow ancient, natural and innate, is the idea that something about this irreducibility renders it more virulent and powerful than other factors. For Geertz, the nature of the new state means that it comes automatically into conflict with the old societies within which ethnic or primordial sentiment is (taken as) natural. Both notions – the idea that ethnicity is a cogent force, and that it is opposed to modernising social and political development – recur in parts of the literature which do not retain the view of ethnicity as a primordial attachment.

The debate between 'primordialists' and 'instrumentalists' then, is at the heart of the conceptual problem with ethnicity, touching on the direction of the causal vector between ethnicity and action. Centrally, for primordialists, the primordial attachments inherent in ethnicity *cause* and *explain* action; for instrumentalists, actions have other (often material) causes, and ethnicity can be either a by-product, or resource in the achievement of these other events and factors, but *does not cause* them.

In a useful discussion Hearn 'disaggregates the concept of primordialism and questions the linkages between its constituent parts', distinguishing actors' and analysts' primordialism (2001:10)[21]. He demonstrates that 'what primordialists tend to do is to highlight (and less often analyse) systems of symbols, and then assert the

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[20] This is a point stressed by Hearn (2001), often overlooked in readings of Geertz.

[21] 'The 'primordialism of the theorists' […] does not take ethnic essentialism at face value, but rather takes the process of essentialising identities through symbols seriously, seeing it as an important part of what causes national identity (cf Penrose 1995). The pejorative use of the term primordialism in theoretical debates sometimes elides this distinction'. (Hearn 2001:2) One might however want to note that the elision is also fairly strong in many theorists' accounts, that quoted above: for Smith, the divisions based on sex and geography, with which sociological primordialists compare 'primordial ties', are not assumed but 'natural'. I return to this issue below.

emotive power of the same' (*ibid.*:4), and concludes that in fact 'the causal connections are not as tight as they tend to assume' (*ibid.*:10).[22]

Whilst full-blown primordialism, which takes essential identity as self-evident, is not now common amongst theorists[23], there remains a strong consensus that there is something innate, irreducible (something associated with our understandings – perhaps our constructions - of racial or biological ascription) about ethnicity: that at some level it is 'natural', made up if not of 'givens', at least of 'assumed givens'. The strength of this view has seemed to some to be linked to the manner in which ethnicity has been studied, in the ethnological tradition of structural-functional anthropology, under Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown[24]. Early ethnographic studies – which still constitute a majority – tended to document the nature, the cultural content, of the ethnic identity of the group studied contemporary with the visit of the researcher: interest focused upon the *persona* rather than the *salience* of ethnicity (Horowitz 1975). A move towards a more circumstantial or instrumental view of ethnicity, then, required a change not just in the view of what ethnicity is, but also in how it should be studied.

Towards a materialist interpretation: locating 'non-traditional wolves under the tribal sheepskin'[25]

A number of significant steps towards the evolution of a more instrumental view of ethnicity were taken by members of the Manchester School of anthropology (Eriksen 2002:22ff): Abner Cohen, Epstein, Mayer, and Mitchell (Banks 1996:25ff), drew in turn on insights of the Chicago School of urban sociology[26] whose work showed that

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[22] Hearn illuminates a neglected parallel by which Geertz (1973) lies 'in the Gellnerian mode of nationalism as an ideology of transition to modernity (Gellner 1983)' (2001:4).

[23] Soviet ethnos theorists led by Bromley have been 'the most strongly primordialist [...] Bromley's theory of ethnicity proposes that a stable core of ethnicity persists through all social formations' (Banks 1996:17ff). Thus, for instance, 'Soviet Africanists have developed a theory of foci or centres of peoples' ethnic (national) integration and consolidation, drawing on a large corpus of data. Foci are distinctly discernible in modern Africa in the biggest peoples, around whom various ethnoi are grouping' (Andrianov 1979:307).

[24] Primordialism is sometimes also attributed to Barth (see below), who broke with this tradition.

[25] Sklar (1967:6), as well as Hussein Adam (1992:13) and Bayart (1993:56).

[26] Park (1955), and associates. Limitations of the School's work are discussed by Anthony Cohen (1985:28-38), in a critique extending to Gluckman, father of the Manchester School.

> ethnic relations are fluid and negotiable; that their importance varies situationally; and that, for all their claims to primordiality and cultural roots, ethnic identities can be consciously manipulated (Eriksen 2002:21).

Mitchell's 1956 study of *The Kalela Dance* in the copperbelt of what is now Zambia, demonstrated that 'far from being an expression of tribalism, the dance was an expression of social differentiation, and that 'tribalism' in town was merely a 'category of interaction'' (Mafeje 1971:225). As a result of such studies[27], 'a sharp contrast was drawn between ethnicity in the urban areas and rural 'tribe', with lingering implications that the latter represented the genuine unit, and that the former was somehow artificial' (Crawford Young 1986:444). I return below to this distinction between 'real' ethnicity, and 'mere categories of interaction'.

These studies suggested that ethnicity was

> an artefact, created by individuals or groups to bring together a group of people for some common purpose. […] Primordialist ethnicity simply is, it has no purpose (beyond a psychological one of giving individuals a sense of identity as members of a group), […] instrumentalist ethnicity is motivated, it comes into being for a purpose and its continued existence is tied to that purpose. (Banks 1996:39)

Focusing on boundaries

Burgeoning concern with ethnicity in the urban context of ethnic pluralism, inspired interest in the boundaries between ethnic groups, and their interaction. The emphasis placed, seminally by Barth, upon boundaries between ethnic groups represented a significant shift of interest towards the salience rather than the personae of ethnicity in inter-group relations, and Barth is 'nearly always described as an instrumentalist' (Eriksen 2002:54). He broke with 'the simplistic view that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity'. Rather

> Boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them, […. and] secondly, stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations

[27] Including Abner Cohen (1969) (1974).

> are maintained across boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomised ethnic statuses' (1970:9-10).

Treating ethnic groups as 'a form of social organisation' Barth drew two important conclusions. Firstly it is the maintenance of the boundary between groups, the 'continuing dichotomisation of members and outsiders' which allows specification of the continuity of ethnic groups. Secondly, 'socially relevant factors alone become diagnostic for membership, not the overt, 'objective' differences which are generated by other factors'[28] (Barth 1970:14-15). Barth's emphasis on social processes, including processes of social construction, is a resource to which I return below. Primarily because of the value of much of his approach, it is worth detailing some of the criticism it has drawn.

Firstly, Barth, has been charged with primordialism by Abner Cohen (1974:xii-xv), a charge which seems to focus on a widely quoted passage in which Barth concludes that:

> ethnic identity implies a series of constraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play […] regarded as a status, [it] is superordinate to most other statuses, [...] it constrains the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined social situation. [Ethnic identity] is *imperative*, in that it cannot be disregarded and temporarily set aside by other definitions of the situation. The constraints on a person's behaviour which spring from his ethnic identity thus tend to be absolute and, in complex poly-ethnic societies, quite comprehensive. [emphasis in original] (Barth 1970:17)

This passage is open to (and has been given) a range of different interpretations. Barth states explicitly that ethnic identity influences (constrains) behaviour. He comes close to saying that this *must be the case*: constraints 'tend to be absolute'. Importantly, however, by stressing 'socially relevant factors' he stops short of saying that the identities that influence action – are themselves 'natural', or that they could not have been otherwise. Perhaps the most problematic part of his account, however, is its assumption of the durability of the boundaries – the divisions between

[28] Cf. Moerman's stress on emic categories of ascription over cultural features (1965) (Eriksen 2002:12).

categories – around which cultural ‘packages’ shift and sift according to processes of ‘social construction’, which thereby remain constrained. Since these boundaries are themselves the result of processes of collective construction, this problem is perhaps less one of principle than of emphasis in the 1970 account, which, in illuminating the ‘underdetermined’ nature of cultural content, relies overly on the reification of the boundaries which demarcate groups whether sharing or separated by culture[29]. Barth’s later problematisation of the concept of the boundary (2000) serves to correct this difficulty[30].

Secondly, as already mentioned above, Barth produces a ‘catalogue of features, the very approach to ethnicity that [he] claims to be rejecting’. In so doing, ‘Barth reifies a correlation between the physical boundaries of a population and the conceptual boundary of its ethnic identity’ (Banks 1996:14). This tendency to reify categories and units of analysis, as well as the correlation between culture ‘areas’, identity areas, and physical populations, is one it is difficult to eradicate from research which requires categories for description and analysis. Whilst there may be ways to overcome the problem, they seem to pose substantial methodological problems. I return to these questions below and in the conclusion.

Finally Barth’s account of ethnicity has been criticised as neglecting individual ‘self-consciousness, making people members of ethnic groups almost ‘by default’, or ‘by extension’:

> [Barth’s] view […] rests on the assumption that ethnicity is simply generalised to the members of a group […]. In treating ethnicity only as a tactical posture, it ignored both self-consciousness and the symbolic expression of ethnic identity. When we consult ourselves about who we are, that entails something more than […] reflection on ‘who we are *not*’. (Anthony Cohen 1994:120)[31]

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[29] Barth demonstrated that ethnic units do not necessarily coincide with culture units.

[30] Barth’s approach is also criticised as overly coloured by a ‘transactionalist stress on free will and choice’ (Banks 1996:15, citing Asad 1972). As a result of an inadequate stress on ‘very real factors of power and domination’, stratification and hierarchy emerge as ‘consensual processes in which even those who appear to lose out by such processes collude’ (Banks 1996:16). Similar objections are often levelled at social constructivist approaches explored below. The issue, discussed by Barnes (1988) (1993), lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

[31] See also McCrone (1988:29).

Barth's recent assertion that 'people are not merely playing out a structure, they are *each* a locus of reason and construction, using complex embodied imagery that they are trying to fit to what they perceive and experience' (2000:33) should be understood as an attempt to take account of this last set of criticisms. The discussion raises the problems inherent in assuming that analysts' concepts (including that of the boundary itself) are shared by the groups under study, an issue which must confront any subjectivist approach.

Barth's introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* remains one of the most cited, influential, and fruitful texts in the study of ethnicity. Since it was published a significant thread of the literature on ethnicity has dealt with ethnic boundaries and their persistence (Enloe 1986:19) or transformation. Schema of the 'assimilation' (by 'amalgamation' or 'incorporation') and 'differentiation' (by 'division' or 'proliferation') of ethnic groups have been evolved (Horowitz 1975). Analysis of changes of boundaries of ethnic identity suggests that

> cultural change may follow or accompany rather than precede identity change. If so, the significance of a certain cultural mix as a determinant of identity has probably been vastly overemphasised. (*ibid.*:124)

Adjusting to modernity

This view was put forward much earlier in Gellner's account of 'the contingency of nationalism' (1964 ch.7)[32]. His was one of the first unequivocal statements of the view that 'there is nothing natural or universal about possessing a 'nationality'. […] The theoretical problem is to separate the quite spurious 'national' and 'natural' justifications and explanations of nationalism, from the genuine, time- and context-bound roots of it' (*ibid.*:150-151). Gellner invokes the anthropologists' distinction between structure and culture, and suggests the increased instrumental importance of the latter in a modern world where structure has ceased to be the determinant of

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[32] Whilst Gellner is writing about nationalism he also makes reference to 'ethnic loyalty', and refers to different nationalities as one might refer to different ethnic groups: 'the dividing line between ethnic unit and nation is a very blurred one' (Saul 1979:354).

location and identity. In the context of a modern educational requirement usually greater than that which can be met within the village, but which must still create a framework within which village-educated children can retain access to employment and otherwise participate, the instrumental significance of cultural features such as language, becomes clear. Gellner concludes that

> men become nationalists through genuine, objective, practical necessity, however obscurely recognised (*ibid.*:160). The self-image of nationalism involves the stress of folk, folklore, popular culture, etc.. In fact, nationalism becomes important precisely when these things become artificial. Genuine peasants or tribesmen, however proficient at folk-dancing, do not generally make good nationalists. (*ibid.*:162)

Gellner has explained the significance of sub-state loyalty-engendering units in transitional societies, but not why there should also now be 'a new divisive nationalism' (*ibid.*:165). Ethnicity is significant but why does it induce conflict? In answer to this, Gellner cites the impact of uneven development. This kind of economic iniquity brings about a new form of social stratification which 'has little cause to be accepted as in the nature of things […], is not well protected by social mechanisms […], and which is seen to be remediable by secession' (*ibid.*:166). This issue of uneven development recurs throughout more recent Marxist literature on ethnicity, and has been highly influential in Ethiopia.

The 'dialectic of class and tribe'[33]

> There is a real difference between the man who, on behalf of his tribe, strives to maintain its traditional integrity and autonomy, and the man who invokes tribal ideology in order to maintain a power position, not in the tribal area, but in the modern capital city, and whose ultimate aim is to undermine and exploit the supposed tribesmen. The fact that it works, […] is not proof that 'tribes' or 'tribalism' exist in the objective sense. If anything, it is a mark of 'false consciousness' on the part of the supposed tribesmen, who subscribe to an ideology that is inconsistent with the material base and therefore unwittingly respond to the call for their own exploitation. (Mafeje 1971:259)

[33] Saul (1979).

Mafeje's recognition that ethnicity 'is an ideology in the original Marxist sense' provides the opening for Saul's attempt to move Marxist discussion beyond 'an analytical framework which crudely polarizes ethnic analysis and class analysis'.

> Marxists have long argued that 'tribalism', the active political expression of ethnicity in Africa, has been situationally evoked and defined, the 'transitional' reality which enlivens it being the class-structured society of African peripheral capitalism. (Saul 1979:349)

In order to integrate ethnicity into a class analysis, Saul suggests 'tak[ing] more serious the reality of imperialism [...] as an explanation for the politicisation of ethnicity' (*ibid.*:353), concluding that

> on the specific terrain of the centre-periphery contradiction, an ethnic interpellation is at least as likely a possibility as a 'new nation' interpellation. For ethnicity can often draw upon much more proximate and recognizable ingredients – language, symbols, ties of kin both real and imagined – in defining itself and recruiting 'subjects'. (*ibid.*:356)

Secondly, 'the articulation of modes of production has a clear tendency to strengthen ethnicity' (*ibid.*:358), since 'capitalism does not spring into the Third World full-blown' (*ibid.*:357). Normally the 'combat between the two modes of production, with the confrontations and alliances which such a combat implies' would be 'between the classes which these modes of production define. Yet African realities complicate this process'. Finally, Saul explores the possibility that ethnicity has a positive role to play in the ideological class struggle, noting the link Fanon (1967:164) makes between 'fierce demands for social justice' and 'tribalism', in transitional social circumstances, and adding a number of cautionary points about the specificity and exclusiveness of ethnic identity which might be expected to hinder the development of a radical movement.

Conclusion: the need to transcend the instrumental/primordial dichotomy

Most commentators have sought to situate themselves somewhere on the spectrum between 'the primordialist and the circumstantialist' (Glazer & Moynihan 1975:19). Many attempts continue to seek a synthesis of the two positions, which retains a non-instrumental element to identity, without resorting to the 'murky notions' of innate or

racial difference: most end up sliding to one or other of them. The invocation of socio-psychological conflict-producing factors (Rothchild 1991) offers a more sophisticated spin on earlier controversial attempts to 'relate culture to psychological properties, an exercise burdened with ethnocentric dangers' (Crawford Young 1986:446). It is unclear that appeals to psychological complexity succeed: remove emotive references to 'fears' and feelings, and one is left pretty much claiming the 'essentially political determination of contemporary ethnicity': not a synthesis, but instrumentalism again.

For both Fardon (1995)[34] and Bayart (1993), 'the existence, even the irreducibility of ethnic consciousness cannot be denied' (Bayart 1993:42). Yet 'throughout Africa as a whole ethnic discourse seems unavoidable' (*ibid.*:43); it 'offers a democratisation of differences' which as a result seem to 'belong to a single register of difference' (Fardon 1995:2). For both authors this homogenising omnipresence is problematic. Bayart's response is to dismiss ethnicity as analytically useful in terms of contemporary politics (1993:59, ch.1), although in the end

> his attack is on the straw man of primordialism; revealing that as an impostor does not permit the conclusions that ethnicity is therefore mere 'shadow theatre' of 'consciousness without structure'. (Fardon 1995:9n9)

Once again, the argument merely 'reverses the causal arrow normally running from ethnicity to political conflict' (Crawford Young 1986:447), and

> fails to convey the intense passions and peculiarly coercive powers of activated ethnicity. […] The necessity to weave together the instrumentalist and the primordialist dimensions of ethnicity is self-evident. Instrumentalism alone fails to capture the intensity, the passion, the availability of ethnicity for political mobilization. (*ibid.*:450)

To reiterate, the problem that I see with Young's approach is that it is not at all clear how such a 'weaving' process can be undertaken, given two schools of thought which operate less as 'dimensions' of a single whole than as mutually incompatible understandings of the operation of causation vis-à-vis identity and action.

One needs to explain why so many ethnic groups co-exist harmoniously without becoming prey to 'atavistic passions'; and also to allow for the way in which the continuation of 'ethnic salience in advanced societies subverts traditional development theory' (Enloe 1986:268). In sum, then, there is a need to locate ethnicity other than as a coercive causal factor which is powerful because it is suffused with subjectivity, or, at the other extreme, as caused by other factors. It is difficult to disagree with Fardon's convincing conclusion:

> African ethnicity deserves to be treated as a phenomenon more complex than either primordial identity or the flamboyant garb of self-interest. Put like that no-one is going to disagree with me; but I have also tried to demonstrate how writers generalizing on the subject of ethnicity recurrently fall back on some variant of these simple positions. (Fardon 1995:17)

Looking again at collectives…

Thus far, much of this discussion of the literature on ethnicity has focused on the division between primordialism and instrumentalism, between those for whom ethnic identity causes action, and those for whom it is caused by other factors. The other polar oppositions between individual and society, and between the boundary and content of ethnicity, have remained further in the background. I have tried to show how much of the literature falls back onto one or other of the poles of instrumentalism or primordialism, and that attempts to reconcile elements of the two positions fail because of the contradictory approaches to causation they embody. In an attempt to transcend this division I now propose to focus on the nature of the collective, returning to a range of fundamental debates regarding social stability, order, and collective action. This will, in turn, bring the relation between individual and social group centre stage.

The virtues of social construction, and two shortcomings

[34] Fardon's account employs the entanglements described in Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies* to illuminate 'the propensity of ethnicities to be defined contrapuntally in terms of their ostensible cultural contents' (1995:17).

> all of the approaches [of anthropology] agree that ethnicity has something to do with the *classification of people* and *group relationships*. (Eriksen 2002:4)

My starting point is the immensely fruitful social constructivist position elaborated by Barth (1970)[35], and extended subsequently by a range of anthropologists. As already observed, Barth treats ethnicity as a 'form of social organisation' (1970:13) and stresses 'socially relevant' over 'objective' factors (*ibid.*:15), emphasising that

> [n]either of the kinds of cultural 'contents' [of ethnicity][36] follows from a descriptive list of cultural features or cultural differences; one cannot predict from first principles which features will be emphasized and made organizationally relevant by the actors. (*ibid.*:14)

Ethnicity emerges when there is 'self- and other-categorisation' of populations, coupled with acceptance that different standards apply to one than to another. Drawing on Goffman's ideas of interaction and sanction (1967) (1969[1959]), Barth (and Eriksen) seem to locate ethnic groups amongst what Kusch calls

> [o]bvious cases of social institutions. Some social entities […] are clearly social institutions in the common understanding […] like being a member of a group; you are a member if you are taken to be a member. (Kusch 1998:236)

In what follows, my starting point is that membership of an ethnic group – like membership of any other kind of group – is premised on the group's agreement to treat a member as a member: membership is *fully* socially constructed.

In so arguing, however, I wish also to move away from the implications of what I suggest is a limitation common to many nominally 'social constructionist' approaches. The problem lies in the application of notions of construction only to 'social' matters, and not to those which have to do with the 'real world'. Thus for instance, many agree that what we know about norms, conventions, culture, ritual, etc. is a reflection of what we know about the collective construction, invention, and

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[35] as well as the range of criticisms which Barth's work has elicited, summarised above.

[36] '(i) overt signals or signs – the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-form, or general style of life, and (ii) basic value

beliefs of the group under study (or in the case of our own culture, conventions and norms, what we have learned from our social group in the process of our socialisation); meanwhile, however, many also continue to assume that what we know about objects such as trees, mountains, genes, and daylight is a reflection of what we know about trees, mountains, genes, and daylight – i.e. that it can somehow be 'read off' from the real physical world. Social construction, on this understanding, only happens in the social realm. It plays no role in the 'real' or 'natura' world where, according to this view, one can rely on some form of correspondence theory of truth[37] to explain why it is true, for instance, that this tree is a tree.

I think that this approach is wrong, and that some form of what is wrong here lies behind much that is mistaken in our intuitions and understanding about ethnicity. For instance, the foregoing discussion of various kinds of primordialism has shown how many theorists are *not* sure that ethnic group membership is a 'social institution' in the common understanding of the term. Much of the primordialist literature[38] qualifies the idea that 'one is a member of an ethnic group if one is taken to be a member of an ethnic group' (i.e. ethnicity is a social status) with a rider along the lines of 'and also if one *is* a member of that ethnic group – or at least *looks* like one' (i.e. ethnicity is a 'real world' state). The idea underpinning this is that – at some level – ethnicity is to be deduced not only from 'what the collective thinks' but also from 'the facts of the matter' – *what*, as well as *who* the members of the collective 'are'. This is what is behind much of the thinking that suggests that instrumentalism, for instance, can't *really* explain ethnicity, because it is more vivid, 'real', and indissoluble than could be true merely of 'what the group happens to think'.

At this point it is important to set out (and reject) a second common misconception associated with much social constructionism, namely the idea that what is constructed is malleable, changeable, and shifting (that its 'validity' is relative to the

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orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged.' (Barth 1970:14)

[37] Russell (1912) is the best known. Kusch argues correspondence theories have been in retreat (2002:226-31).

[38] and I suggest that much of what Hearn refers to as the 'primordialism of the theorists', as well as 'true' primordialism has tendencies in this direction.

moving currents of culture, i.e. that it is valid in so far as it is credible); whereas what is 'real' is real: stable, durable, and demonstrably true or false – valid or invalid – according to objective correspondences, irrespective of who knows what about it. On this stereotype, what is socially constructed is obviously a dubious and transient basis for 'knowledge', as compared with the 'scientific' bedrock of the 'real facts'. Thus, for instance, the distinction mentioned above between 'mere categories of interaction' in urban ethnicity (shifting, likely to change and fade with circumstances), and 'real ethnicity' in its original uncontaminated (read non-constructed) form in rural areas (durable, perennial, and, no surprise this, fiercely motivating).

The view that beliefs which are socially constructed are thereby more 'arbitrary' than beliefs based on 'reality' is itself based on a fundamentally mistaken understanding of the role and locus of social construction in epistemology. In conjunction with mistaken intuitions about our knowledge of 'reality', the error is also premised on a misleadingly individualistic understanding of the process of construction. In particular, the view has a tendency to juxtapose the open-endedness and fluidity of the processes of social construction, features which we are able to perceive at the collective level, with our individual experiences and impressions that whatever situation we find ourselves in is not nearly as fluid and open to influence (to construction) as this might suggest. It mistakenly concludes that social construction cannot therefore explain what is going on.

From an individual perspective a well-developed (that is, widely known) conventional social status will undoubtedly be experienced as 'tend[ing] to be absolute' (Barth 1970:17). What constitutes social construction is that each individual member of the collective brings her or his own contribution to the on-going collective creation and recreation of the social status in question, in the very process of knowing about it, and operating in its terms. It is, however, more than likely that this fact of self-involvement will be obscured at the individual level where the self-contribution will appear either so infinitesimally small as to seem irrelevant or – more likely – altogether invisible, subsumed by the collective 'imperative'.

From an individual's perspective, then, collectively constructed convention, always partly caused and constituted by her or his own behaviour, usually seems far from 'chosen' or 'open', far from 'self-constructed'.

A more radical and thoroughgoing approach to social constructionism is required to overcome these two related errors. The errors are (i) an understanding of processes of collective construction as restricted only to the social realm, and (ii) the assumption that they provide a less stable basis for knowledge than empirical evidence offered by the natural realm[39]. A more radical and comprehensive approach to constructionism will deliver a better understanding of how empirical factors relate to the construction of the social status of ethnicity, and of why such a conventional status can appear to be compelling. It will insist upon the instrinsically social nature of 'knowing' which draws on (but does not boil down to) individual acts of observation and experience[40]. By extending a coherent approach to the social aspects of concept application *throughout* our cognitive experiences – to so-called 'real world' or 'natural kinds' as well as 'social kinds'[41] – the approach will clarify the basis for our beliefs, and of the conventional 'socially constructed' nature of *all* categorisation – whether of social or natural kind 'objects'. On this view collective construction, based on interaction, provides the basis for mutual intelligibility, social cohesion and stability, and collective action itself.

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[39] My suggestion is not an original one. The approach I propose employs ideas worked out in the Edinburgh School of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (also known as the 'Strong Programme' in the SSK) by Barry Barnes, and David Bloor, and elaborated by Martin Kusch. The position incorporates ideas about meaning finitism and classification (Barnes *et al.* 1996, Bloor 1997, Kusch 2002:ch.15); on natural and social kinds and self- and alter-reference (Barnes 1983, Kusch 1998); on the role of interaction – rather than 'norms' – in achieving social order (Barnes 1988, 1995); on causal explanation and voluntaristic notions of agency (Barnes 2000); on the nature of power as a fully self-referential social kind, a function of the distribution of knowledge in a collective (Barnes 1988, 1993). These various areas of work result in what has been called the 'performative theory of social institutions' (Kusch 1998:255). This position is premised upon an important statement of commitment to investigative symmetry and cognitive relativism (Barnes & Bloor 1982:20-47). It states that the features of social institutions, as developed in the performative theory are conventionality; self-reference; self-validation; finitism and performative character; collective good and predictability; rights duties and obligations; interconnectedness; change and contest (Kusch 1998). The position has recently been developed into a theory of communitarian epistemology (Kusch 2002), according to which knowledge itself is a 'social institution'.

[40] And reject as false the epistemological stereotype of 'pattern recognition' from reality (Kusch (1998:256ff), an elaboration of Barnes (1983:525-6)).

Realist intuitions about ethnicity and ethnic 'features'

It is useful to spell out the mistaken stereotype of classification because of the vigour with which it pervades our assumptions about how actors recognise 'real' members of their – or another - ethnic group. The stereotype runs as follows.

> When individuals encounter worldly entities that fit [learned and remembered] patterns they attach the respective labels. The empirical properties of the encountered entities determine whether or not they fit the pattern; the empirical properties thus determine how the entities will be labelled or classified. (Kusch 1998:256)

This stereotype of concept formulation and application applies widely, if not uniformly, in terms of the way we think we see and describe the 'real world'. It is exceptionally pervasive, and at a number of different levels, in terms of the ways we think about ethnicity, or at least suggest that actors do. Ethnic actors think they define the ethnic group (establish the concept of the ethnic group), and identify its members (apply the concept) by reading off from 'the facts', or at least the 'observable facts', about the nature of group members, namely ethnic 'features'. I argue that group members (and indeed any 'full-blown primordialist' theorists, or government policy makers who remain wedded to the idea of an intrinsic 'real world' 'naturalness' of ethnic status) are wrong in thinking that this is what is happening. Secondly, I argue that the fact that, albeit mistaken, this remains the pervasive stereotype of what is happening in ethnic identification is *in itself* relevant in terms of the formulation, operation and application of any particular conception of ethnic group. In particular, I suggest, it may help account for much-discussed ideas about the 'virulence', 'effectiveness', 'durability', or 'vigour' of ethnic formations.

The point can be made by setting out the alternative understanding of concept application we apply to those concepts we can and do commonly think of as 'socially constructed'. Here

> neither pattern recognition nor empirical properties play any role in concept application. There cannot be patterns of empirical properties in

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[41] The distinction, coined by Barnes (1983) and developed by Kusch (1998) is elaborated below.

> this case because social kinds cannot be discriminated by means of our senses: a husband need look no different from a bachelor, and a prisoner no different from a free man or woman. (Kusch 1998:256)

This formulation, close to that of Barth above, may demonstrate the resilience of our intuition that, in fact there *is* something 'real' and 'observable' about ethnicity, provoking the response that that ethnic group members *are different* from prisoners or husbands, that they *are* in some sense empirically identified, and *natural*. This conviction seem hard to eradicate, given that we generally *do* believe that even . 'metaphorical kinship' or 'assumed givens' will somehow 'show up'. The very vigour of this intuition itself feeds the performative processes which create, build, and sustain the fully constructed conventional social reality of ethnic group membership.

Partly because of conceptual and terminological ambiguity, there is more than one level at which the *pattern recognition* stereotype tends to creep back into our thinking about ethnicity. A first level is the assumption that ethnic members are members because of something intrinsic about their nature. Those who have stepped away from 'ethnic givens' in favour of 'assumed ethnic givens' (from 'full-blown' to 'theorists'' primordialism) have avoided this application of the stereotype. Ethnic group members *cannot* be read off from their empirical properties. Nevertheless the stereotype of classification by pattern recognition does not evaporate at this point. The notion frequently persists that the categorisation 'member of an ethnic group' is based not on collective consensus, but still somehow on 'the nature of the thing categorised': if we rule out 'the group members' as 'the thing categorised', dismissing the idea that *they* can be identified empirically or 'from their nature', something else has to be identified as 'the thing categorised'. What often happens is that the categorisation 'member of an ethnic group' is judged to be made on the basis of the nature of 'the ethnic group's ethnicity', again understood in empirical rather than conventional terms (i.e. in terms of observable 'real' markers of ethnicity rather than beliefs about it).

This is a notion which persists even in analyses which recognise that the 'empirical features' of ethnic nature include *only* '*assumed* givens' and '*constructed* features'

(language, culture, religion, etc.). In substituting ‘the group’s ethnicity’ for ‘the group’s members’ we tend to conflate the emblems conventionally selected to label, or provide a shorthand ‘marker’ of the *social status* ‘member of an ethnic group’, with the empirical features which we consider *constitute* the *individual state* of ethnic identity. One of the reasons why we slip particularly easily into this conflation is that we tend to think that ‘markers’ of ethnic status, unlike markers of other social statuses, are somehow ‘ineradicable’, part of the core of identity of each individual: unlike wedding rings, or badges of office, for instance, we do not tend to think of ethnic ‘givens’ – even ‘assumed givens’ - as so easily slipped off. This is a confusion fostered by the persistence of multiple meanings and referents for the term ‘ethnicity’. It has close links to the problem of the dual perception of the nature of social construction, seen at the collective level as invented, individually as imperative. It is primarily, however, a function of our intuitive difficulty in recognising that the categorisation of real world referents is conventional and constructed, and not ‘pattern matched’.

> attributions [of status] classify things not by anything internal to them but by what lies outside them – what is directed toward them, or attached to them, or associated with them. […] That something counts as having a status is what constitutes it having a status. […] Our dominant form of naming and classification refers to context and confers status. Our dominant paradigm of naming and classification imagines that reference is made to the nature of the thing classified. Why this curious incongruity exists it is hard to be sure. But there is no doubt that it does exist, and that there is a continuing inclination to understand the dominant form in terms of the dominant paradigm. The consequence is that what is due to status is attributed to nature instead. (Barnes 2000:148)

This ‘curious incongruity’, I have suggested, is particularly hard at work in the widespread conflation of ethnic ‘status’ with ethnic ‘state’.

To reiterate, ethnic group membership is – like any other group membership – the result of being taken as a member by the collective. The selection of the factors which cause one to be taken as a member – the ‘markers’ of membership, of the social status – *as well as their application*, are matters of convention, something which is unaffected whether or not the list of selected factors includes some ‘natural’

or 'real world' distinguishing 'features'. The fact that members of one group are 'recognised' by one means, and those of another by another, is pure convention[42], as is the degree of rigour with which such conventions are or are not enforced. Whilst the nature of the markers of recognition does seem to have *some* bearing upon the likelihood of the category being maintained and reinforced or not[43], the essential point is that *categories* are in the eyes of the beholders, the collective and its members, and not in the nature of the objects or features categorised, and that this applies to real world objects ('natural kinds') as well as to social conventional 'objects' ('social kinds').

I now consider in turn the following questions: how should we extrapolate a coherent constructivist epistemology to encompass the 'real' world as well as the 'social' realm? What kind of understanding of 'the collective' and of the role of interaction is required to underpin such a perspective? What does this then mean about the basis for collective beliefs, in general, and collective and individual beliefs about ethnicity, in particular? How do beliefs about ethnicity relate to beliefs about interests?

Situating the 'real world' amidst social construction

> [I]t is not the empirical characteristics or describable properties of a human being that make her an individual of a specific name, but nonetheless her physical manifestation is relevant to how she is identified. […] what actually allows identification of 'the same' human being in a changing body is not the essence of an individual within but continuing references to that essence from without. It is the ring of speech and action around the body, no particular part or component of the ring but merely the persistence of such a ring over time, that constitutes the human being *qua* individual. (Barnes 2000:146-7)

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[42] Thus, for instance, race has 'a dubious descriptive value' but 'exists as a cultural construct whether it has a 'biological' reality or not': 'if influential people had developed a similar theory about the hereditary personality traits of red-haired people, and if that theory gained social and cultural significance, 'redhead studies' would for similar reasons have become a field of academic research […]' (Eriksen 2002:5). See also McCrone (1998:25ff).

[43] This is to say that here is some feedback mechanism between the persona and the salience, between the cultural contents and the boundaries of ethnicity, that the two do not function fully-independently of one another. I return to this below.

This section explores an approach to knowledge of the real world which incorporates a coherent approach to social construction, whilst retaining an important difference between beliefs which have a ‘real world’-referent, and those which are fully conventional, and socially constructed, with no referent ‘out there’.

Real observation

There are constraints on the observation of reality. It is not collectives or omniscient individuals that carry out empirical observation, but individuals each with a finite, separate, and contingent series of empirical experiences. Individuals have neither ‘bird’s eye’ nor ‘universal’ access to the real world, and are thereby denied the possibility of distinguishing what is ‘really true’ from what is ‘really false’ about that world (Barnes & Bloor 1982:31)[44]. Individuals do not share the experience of empirical observation of others, but they do regularly receive ‘testimony’ from others regarding their observations, and this provides a large proportion of what individuals consider that they ‘know’. Barnes (1995:99ff), and Kusch (2002:201ff) provide accounts of how children and social outsiders become ‘competent’ members of a community by means of processes of ‘ostensive learning’ according to which they are taught to categorise their observations ‘correctly’ or ‘incorrectly’, according to categories and concepts which are the product of social construction and collective convention. Thus whilst the (say) five instances of a child’s observation of cats are triggered by the ‘real world’, the knowledge the child has that these five experienced objects are (i.e. that they should be categorised as) cats, whilst the objects of another three observatory experiences are not (i.e. that they should not be so categorised), is learned conventional knowledge. It cannot be ‘read off’ from the objects, or the facts of what the child observed, but draws on a wealth of ‘background knowledge’ provided by the child’s teachers[45].

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[44] Without something equivalent to a rationalist ‘bridgehead’ (Hollis 1967), the distinction between validity and credibility is inaccessible to the observer. It is ‘not an absolute distinction, but one whose employment depends upon a taken-for-granted background. […] Without [background knowledge], the distinction itself could never be put to use, or its contrast be given an application.’ (Barnes & Bloor 1982:30)

[45] It is this which allows the child to begin to formulate a distinction between validity and credibility. ‘Materials for cognitive models […] do not take their meaning from their correspondence with objects in the world […] To use them, people must fit them to the particular contexts of events and lives,

Meaning finitism

It seems quite straightforward to claim that the concepts and categories which the member of a collective learns are learned partly from the collective's reports. But why does that make them conventionally, rather than empirically based? Why can they not just be an aggregate 'reading off' all of the community members' empirical observations of the world – effectively 'pattern recognition' from reality, as our intuitions suggest, and by an aggregate community which has greater observatory access to the 'real world' than an individual would? An answer is offered by the theory of 'meaning finitism'[46], which contends precisely that 'meanings are social institutions', that is, they are conventional (Kusch 2002:206). An important premise of meaning finitism is that each and every judgement about the application of a particular category to a newly encountered entity 'involves, or can be reconstructed as, a judgement concerning *similarity*' (*ibid.*:203). The set of known examples (the 'learning set') of things that can be categorised as, say, 'cat' is finite (and almost certainly different) for each individual considering the next application of the classification. Because of this, each individual's judgement as to whether or not a new instance is or is not also a cat is never a judgement of identity, but always of the form of the 'extension of an analogy', an extrapolation on the basis of the finite knowledge of 'catness' at her or his disposal.

Logically, therefore, since it is not a judgement of identity, the judgement *could always go either way* – it is 'open-ended'. In this sense the meaning of the classification 'cat' is 'under-determined', and can always be significantly shifted by the next application made of it – say, for instance, to a cat-like dog. The meaning of a categorisation which has a real-world referent, then, is 'under-determined' by the real world: correct application of a 'real world' concept is not a matter of correlation with some 'essential catness': it could not be, because any given observer has no means of

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whereby they reason and try to comprehend what happens to them, and in their world.' (Barth 2000:31).

[46] The most important accounts of this central, but profoundly counter-intuitive position are Barnes *et al.* (1996:ch.3), Bloor (1997), and Kusch (2002:ch.15).

observing such 'essence'. What, then, gives stability to this underdetermined identification? What prevents the application of the category 'cat', for instance to that cat-sized dog?

The answer lies in the social nature of learning. The appellation 'cat' is used correctly in so far as the community will let the user 'get away with' her or his usage (Kusch 2002:204). What gives stability to the meanings of 'real-world' or 'alter-referential' concepts and categories is collective consensus, not the fleeting, contingent, and partisan observations of individuals. In many instances individuals' views will be in tune with those of the collective within which they have learned to use the category 'cat'. In others they may vary.

> Active intervention will be necessary to modify routines and automatic responses, at the individual psychological level, in order to keep tradition constituted and allow the routine implications of traditional knowledge to unfold at the collective level. It may be that minority deviance has to be overruled here, or that majority opinion defers to expertise and/or to power, or some other route to consensus may be negotiated. [H]owever consensus is established, whether easily or with difficulty, the outcome will be a revisable judgement. (Barnes 1995:113)

At this point it is perhaps useful to return briefly to Smith's summary of the primordial view, cited above, that 'primordial ties have always divided the human species, as naturally as have sex or geography, and will always do so' (Anthony Smith 1986:12). This passage needs further investigation when considered from the perspective of meaning finitism. For whilst all manner of sexual or geographical features may undoubtedly be 'out there' in the real world, the classificatory system according to which we may or may not recognise them, and may or may not consider that 'they divide us' are matters of constructed convention: there is nothing 'natural' about the way in which sex and geography divide us (i.e. nothing that can be 'read off' from the real world), any more than there is anything 'natural' about the way in which ethnicity, even if it happens to be premised on actual biological difference, does or does not do the same[47].

'The effect on belief of 'the facts'[48]

Once again, it is important to reiterate that the constructivists' view of our knowledge of the real world does not posit that *all* belief/knowledge is 'fully' 'completely' and 'only' conventional – and never anything else[49]. Barnes & Bloor *do not* deny the impact of the real world, even though the causal role they attribute to it – necessarily given their relativist account – might seem a step down from that which empiricist/realist intuitions would suggest. They advocate an

> open and matter-of-fact stance towards the role of sensory stimulation [and] any other of the physical, genetic or psychological and non-social causes that must eventually find a place in an overall account of knowledge. The stimulation caused by material objects when the eye is turned in a given direction is indeed a causal factor in knowledge and its role is to be understood by seeing how this cause interacts with other causes. of *unverbalised reality* that is the focus of the beliefs in question.

Nevertheless,

> the effect of 'the facts' on a believer plays the same general role whether the belief that results is a true one or a false one. […] reality is a common factor in all the vastly different cognitive responses that men produce to it. Being a common factor it is not a promising candidate to field as an explanation of that variation.[50] (Barnes & Bloor 1982:33-4)

Sahlins provides an account which is evocative of the appropriate balance to be struck between social and natural factors in explanation:

> material forces in production contain no cultural order, but merely a set of physical possibilities and constraints selectively organized by the cultural system and integrated as to their effects by the same logic that

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[47] I am grateful to Irene Rafanell, for her determination and clarity on this point.

[48] (Barnes & Bloor 1982:33)

[49] Many critiques of radical social constructivism mistakenly charge it with idealism, or suggest that reality serves it only as a series of tokens to bear socially constructed meanings and institutions (Latour 1999, 1992). See Bloor (1992) (1999).

[50] The 'equivalence postulate' in the sociology of knowledge is specifically *not* that it is completely irrelevant whether a belief is false or true (or indeed that beliefs are equally true or equally false – both of which positions they reject as faulty), but rather that (a) no meaningful sense can be given to the distinction between the truth and the falsity of beliefs because we don't have any independent vantage point from which to assess this, and (b) the truth or falsity of beliefs does not alter the manner of their explanation or the nature of the combination of causes (social, psychological, 'real world', etc.) which together bring them into being.

> gave them cause. The material forces taken by themselves are lifeless. Their specific motions and determinate consequences can be stipulated only by progressively compounding them with the co—ordinates of the cultural order. (Sahlins 1976:207)

Natural and social kinds: self and alter-reference

We now have two different categories of ‘objects of belief’: social kinds, which are fully constructed or conventional, and natural kinds whose categorisation is constructed or conventional, but which *also* have a ‘real world’ ‘alter-referent’ ‘out there’, to which cognitive response is made. Conventional belief, meanwhile, is ‘belief about belief’ – that is, it is ‘self-referential’.

> Take away talk, and whatever is referred to as a social kind [money, marriage] ceases to exist. That should occasion no surprise: in the case of social kinds, the talk, ultimately is the referent itself. The case of natural kinds is not equally straightforward: take away all talk, and the *category* ‘elephant’ disappears. What so disappears is our communally instituted and maintained taxonomy of animals and our exemplars and prototypes for what elephants look like. But whatever it was that we formerly referred to as ‘elephants’ will still be there. (Kusch 2002:68-69)

Thus, for instance, if we take ethnicity to be a social kind,

> if persons A, B and C believe that C is a member of their ethnic group, then C’s ethnicity is constituted by the mutual belief of A, B and C. If they all change their minds, then C’s ethnic membership evaporates into thin air. C’s ethnicity is nothing but this mutual belief in C’s ethnic membership. The mutual belief is thus a belief about this mutual belief; that is, it is self-referring. By the same token, it is also self-validating: the mutual belief of A, B, and C, that C is a co-ethnic is what makes this very same belief true. (adapted from Kusch (1998:236))

The fact that beliefs about social kinds, and the conventional component of beliefs about natural kinds, are self-referring and self-validating constitutes a fundamentally important feature of this kind of belief: belief in such beliefs brings them into being; the more they are believed, the more they are true; they are ‘performative’. Notice here that the paragraph cited reads more easily when one inserts the phrase ‘ethnic

membership' than the term 'ethnicity'. This is, I suggest, symptomatic of the sort of conflated 'double referent' which the term 'ethnicity' has acquired, referring in much usage both to social status (member of an ethnic group), and to individual state ('instrinsic' individual ethnic nature). Whereas the notion that a person's 'group membership' disappears once all talk about it is removed is quite readily intelligible, we are intuitively extremely resistant to the notion that a person's 'ethnicity' evaporates in quite this way. We tend to think of an individual's ethnicity as being made up of what constitutes the individual *qua* individual, rather than (or as well as) what constitutes the individual *qua* member of a group.

People as artificial kinds?

Kusch adds to natural and social kinds a further category of 'artificial kinds':

> Finally, turning to the case of typewriters, once we withdraw the talk and the performatives, typewriters *qua* typewriters will cease to exist. But we shall leave behind a changed physical world. (Kusch 2002:68-69)

Some of the complications and confusions associated with ethnicity can perhaps be suggested by relating different aspects of the concept to these three kinds of kinds. The social status 'member of an ethnic group' seems a relatively straightforward social kind: take away all talk of ethnicity and ethnic membership and the social status conferred cease to exist. What about the people so categorised? Take away all talk of ethnicity and the people we formerly referred to as 'members of the ethnic group' remain, whilst the category has disappeared. On the other hand, can we really say that 'the people remain', independent of their categorisation as 'members of an ethnic group', in quite this straightforward way? Is there not, perhaps a sense in which various of the social conventions they adopt, including that of ethnicity, have a hand in 'creating' them, in many different ways, of which perhaps the clearest is the influence such conventions have in shaping processes of human reproduction.

Consider, for instance, Kusch's explication of his category 'artificial kind':

> ‘typewriter’ has *alter*-reference, and there are models, paradigms, and prototypes of what a typewriter ought to look like and how it ought to work. Yet ‘typewriter’ differs from [elephant or rose] in that the individuals classified as typewriters do not exist wholly independently of the classifying activity. Instead, the classifying activitiy is part and parcel of a social process that essentially involves physical actions bringing the classified individuals into existence. In the case of artificial kinds, human action makes it so that the individuals referred to fit the prototypes, rather than vice versa. (Kusch 1998:246)

One might wish to argue, along these lines, that (at least second generation) members of an ethnic group might, depending on the norms of endogamy or exogamy associated with the group, be better regarded as artificial than natural kinds. In so far as ethnicity (in common with a whole range of other social statuses) is a social institution potentially associated with human reproduction (and this is clearly a contingent matter), would one not perhaps wish to argue that human beings constitute an artificial kind, ‘brought into existence’ by a (range of different kinds of) social process?

Social institutions as the basis for beliefs

> For something to be a social institution it is sufficient that *some* collective has a self-referential belief about it. It is not necessary that this collective be extensive. […] It is important to recognise the *performative* or *finitist* aspect of social institutions. Social institutions are performed, and their path is not predetermined by rules and norms. (Kusch 1998:237)

A basis for *all* of our beliefs, then, is the self-referential, self-validating (performative) conventional knowledge that we learn from the collective, supplemented in the case of *alter*-referential objects by such empirical observations as we may make. Far from the shifting, arbitrary ‘optional extra’ of popular conception, social ‘construction’ turns out to form the basis for knowledge. I turn now to consider what sort of understanding of the collective is required to underpin the notion that individuals’

> acts and comprehensions are tested against the acts of others, and the resistance of the environment. There is a constant creativity in this; and people may use multiple images and perform a multiplicity of operations

> as they grope for an understanding of the world, fallibly exchanging, adjusting and reconstructing their models as they harvest the experiences that ensue. (Barth 2000:31)

Human sociability and susceptibility: the 'proto-normative system'

> [H]uman sociability is deep seated and pervasive. [… O]ur sociability should be conceived of as a continuing profound, mutual susceptibility, which finds expression in aligned cognition, shared language and knowledge, and indeed in the existence of all manner of powers, skills and capacities that can be readily combined and co-ordinated with those of other people. [… R]ather than restricting us to, or confining us within, a given social order, our sociability is what facilitates its production and allows its continuing reconstitution and recreation. (Barnes 1995:3-4)

Individual knowledge is premised on interaction with the wider collective, and is only stable in its terms: 'normativity can only exist for interacting individuals' (Kusch 2002:196)[51]. The approach discussed so far requires a focus on inter-subjectivity and interaction, on the collective or interacting social group; it rejects methodological individualism. Rather, it sets out a model in which the very nature of ongoing social interaction (characterised by a continual process of mutual sanction and susceptibility to sanction)[52], itself offers the key to co-ordinated action[53], and to the achievement of normativity.

> Members will be differentially susceptible to those particular forms of communication originating from fellow members. But the form of the system will be much the same everywhere. It will be constituted of agents who, of their nature as it were, are both susceptible to the evaluations of others *and* disposed to offer such evaluations to others. These will be agents to whom verbal and symbolic communication is normal and natural, and on whom the evaluations implicit in such communication will have effects. (Barnes 2000:68)

This has a number of important implications for how we might want to go about studying the social status of ethnicity, and its relationship with collective action. First and foremost, both are underpinned by interaction, and the collective discourses,

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[51] See Kusch (2002:ch.14) and Bloor (1997).

[52] Cf. Goffman on face (1967), Scheff on shame (1988), both references made by Barnes (2000:67-8).

[53] See Barnes (1995). 'Collective action will not be accounted for by any theory that deals in independent individuals.'

beliefs, and body of knowledge generated thereby. Interaction (incorporating imitation, sanctioning, and self-correction (Kusch 1998:267-8)) is a continual process, generating knowledge (of the social status of ethnicity, for instance) which, albeit potentially experienced as stable, constraining, or 'imperative' at the individual level (or not, according to the conventions in play), is so, but is also subject to reinforcement, undermining, development, or transformation, as a result of ongoing collective iteration. In the case of social statuses, such iteration *of itself* performatively creates (knowledge about) those statuses: hearing, knowing about ethnic group membership *constitutes* ethnic group membership. Ethnicity as social status, then, is always a contemporary project, of an actual existing and interacting community, continually renewed, continually new, and the function of ongoing interaction, consensus and sanction:

> the collective consensus and the process of sanctioning constantly shape and determine one another. The consensus sets the standard for the sanctioning, and the sanctioning protects and creates the consensus. (Kusch 1998:270)

The system admits of change and variation. 'Consensus' is achieved by means of myriad encounters between individuals or groups of members of the collective[54]. The sanctioning and consensus-forming processes, then, are local to these encounters, and reflect individual variation of experience and interpretation amongst the parties to them[55]. If there is a lot of interaction between two groups, all other things being equal, the sanctioning and consensus-forming (and interpretation) processes will be vigorous and dynamic. If interaction – as it always must be - is restricted or interrupted, or newly influenced by interaction with third and additional parties, 'drift' or 'change' will set in.

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[54] This account, suggestive both of the active role of the individual, and of the fact that this active role is that of an individual-in-a-setting, not of an individual *per se*, satisfies Anthony Cohen's concerns with symbolic communication and self-consciousness, above.

[55] Kusch's 'model of local consensus' posits an array of mobile clocks which, in order to 'keep time', each time they encounter another clock in the array, adjust their settings, as a pair, to the average of the times they show, before departing for the next such collision: 'in this scenario, all consensus is local and temporary, and none of the clocks can 'know' what the 'collective consensus' – that is, the bandwidth of all times – of all clocks would be' (Kusch 2002:206).

An ethnic status is the persistent accomplishment of a group of individuals *as members of a collective*, inhering in what they know about that status; and what they know is a function of their interaction and agreement, repeated or shifting.

Initial Implications for an understanding of ethnicity as a social status

The implications of the approach I have suggested for an understanding of ethnicity are profound.

One is that the level and extent of conventionality associated with ethnicity goes much deeper than is usually recognised. At a first level, the issue of whether or not group members or group outsiders recognise someone as a member of an ethnic group is a matter of convention, arising out of the ongoing interaction of the collective. The conventions according to which an ethnic group is identified and categorised from within, and from without, may well differ, since interaction patterns within the group, and with non-group members, *may* be different. Interaction patterns and experiences across the group are also not likely to produce uniform understandings of the conventional basis of the group. Given that ethnic groups are often regarded as extending across thousands of members – in Ethiopia, some as running into millions – we seem to be in the realm of Anderson's 'imagined community', and the extent and nature of any constructions of the ethnic self which are shared will be contingent upon the considerable vagaries of the extent and nature of interaction and distribution of testimony and empirical experience on this wide scale.

Whether or not the distribution of this convention coincides with the borders of the ethnic group demarcated by it is just as much a contingent matter as is the coincidence of cultural and ethnic boundaries; as Barth noted, an ethnic boundary may be characterised as well by interaction which crosses it as by an interruption in interaction between those on either side of it. Since consensus is local, each individual member of the interacting collective which 'shares knowledge' of the conventional status will have a slightly different perspective on precisely what that convention amounts to. Similarly, any piece of new information relevant to the

categorisation and marking of groups will, in so far as it is disseminated, and belief in it locally 'constructed', form part of the knowledge from which consensus about groups and group membership is locally constructed. If, as a result of widespread government propaganda and mobilisation campaigns the categories 'nation, nationality, and people' become widely known and widely, if variously, incorporated into the basis for conventional attributions of status, it can be expected that the attributions of status will shift in similar but not identical ways over this same broad canvas. Whether and how they do shift, however, will nevertheless remain contingent upon myriad processes of local consensus formation, based upon the specifics of interaction amongst group members, and between group members and the source of these new categorisations – cadres, government officers, and whatever news or political media may be in operation.

Also conventional will be the selection of 'markers' which label or identify the group membership in question, and the means, regularity, and rigour with which members of the community recognise them as markers: they may have everything or nothing in common with what outsiders, including constitution makers, regard as ethnic markers. Again, since consensus is local, a 'single' ethnic identity status will be identified by means of innumerable slightly different (even significantly different) processes. Questions about whether ethnic group membership is to be regarded as natural, stable, durable, exclusive, or inescapable, are also all contingent matters of local convention. Answers to them need to be investigated rather than assumed in each case; they may well depend on the kinds of features which are considered to mark the status: if physical features are regarded as unchangeable, and have been selected to constitute an important marker, the status may be regarded as 'inescapable' or 'natural' – more so, perhaps, than if linguistic competence is a more important factor, and individuals are seen to acquire members' status by learning it[56].

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[56] although particular features might be likely to correlate with certain kinds of interpretation, there is nothing to say that they always will do – this is also a matter of convention: communities which do not share western beliefs about the relative malleability of language competence versus biology, might well reach different conclusions. As ever, whilst the effect of the facts may be to prompt certain social responses, it will not dictate them.

The means of investigating how ethnicity operates in any given situation, then, is to consider what people know about ethnicity – about salient group membership; what they genuinely believe it to constitute. For if they believe it divides them from their neighbours, it will do so; if they do not, it will not. Of investigative interest then, are questions of what they believe, how and why they have come to believe it, and what action such beliefs may influence. An assessment of the impact of ethnic federalism, for instance, should enquire primarily into what people know about it. Whether or not ethnic federalism has 'ethnified' Ethiopian politics, becomes a question of whether and how it has shifted patterns of knowledge, and modified popular conventions allocating social statuses of group membership. Answering it would encompass an investigation of the beliefs of all those germane to the situation, inside and outside the group; one difficulty would be to know quite how to delimit the research community, the distribution of whose knowledge is to be investigated.

A second set of implications of this approach is that the nature of ethnic group membership is contemporary: temporary, local, and transient. In fact, we should probably be talking, with Fardon (1995) about ethnicities rather than ethnicity. There is nothing ancient, atavistic, or immutable about any particular social status of ethnicity: it is, quite literally, continuously and locally re-constructed (or dissolved) in the course of social interaction. Views which stress the primordial or perennial nature of ethnicity are, I suggest, conflating the thing marked (the social ethnic status) with common intuitions that those features which mark it are ancient and immutable, and that they not only mark it, but also constitute it (the individual ethnic nature). In societies where there has been little mobility, and little interaction with the outside world, it may well be that what we might wish to call 'ethnic' social statuses have remained apparently little changed over long periods, based on similar patterns of interaction. This does not make the status in any way immutable: it simply means that the way in which it is daily reconstructed is closely reconstitutive of an existing situation: there is little 'drift' in the array.

This is an entirely contingent matter. Shifts in the system or pattern of beliefs of the community could be introduced in all sorts of ways, and because the reconstruction

of the ethnic status is continuous, such changes could be expected to change its course. Because of the performativity associated with the self-referential nature of such beliefs (beliefs about statuses *constitute* beliefs about statuses and *make them true*), the introduction of outsiders' views about the nature of the ethnicity (the basis for ethnic group membership) operating within the group, will, *ipso facto*, shift the nature of ethnicity in so far as they are believed by members of the group.

At this point, most of the tenets of primordialism look as though they have to be discarded. Ethnicity is not natural, perennial, fixed, or immutable: it cannot be 'read off' from empirical features of the real world, but is continuously and continually recreated by the collective. One of the key features of primordialism, however, seems in this approach to have been reinstated in a surprising way: understood as a social status as suggested, clearly *ethnicity does cause or influence action*. In so far as an ethnic status forms part of what individuals or a population know at any given moment (part of their contemporary system of beliefs), and in so far as it is regarded as salient, it will influence the calculative processes underpinning action. Now it seems appropriate to investigate those calculative processes further, considering how much can be drawn from the resources of instrumentalism.

Barnes argues that the social group, and its interaction, predates any form of collective action – including the formulation of collective interests and consensus regarding them.

> [S]tatus groups emerge from individuals who are already together, whether interacting in a distinct context of social intercourse or in a condition easily transformed in that direction. It is not that independent individuals have prior interests that induce them to combine in particular ways and act together. Rather it is that individuals living and interacting together are able, on the basis of their knowledge of their situation, to evoke conceptions of shared interests and to enjoin action to further them. (1995:144)

Actors and interests: reworking instrumentalism for collectives.

Several points of relevance for the investigation of ethnicity result from this view[57]. If interaction, not interests, is the first step towards collective action, it seems only sensible that our interest in explanation should focus upon those relations which *may be* most likely to constitute the first bases of human interaction – namely those, based on proximity, with family and neighbours. Thus the components from which ethnicity is commonly constructed may be reconfirmed as a commonly likely focus of interest – at least in those relatively many situations where these *do* constitute the first bases of interaction[58]. As Calhoun puts it:

> The reproduction of cultural tradition is supported by social practices that discourage or limit experimentation with alternatives, and inhibit searches for other ways of seeing things. Ethnicity embeds us in a web of such practices and in a social group which constantly reproduces them and may view any challenge to them as disloyalty. (Calhoun 1997:130n7)

We need to exercise caution about 'reading off' the salience of ethnic group membership from circumstances that seem to us as analysts to prompt it: if ethnic group membership is a social status, the salience or otherwise of ethnic group membership is also a social status, and so is the 'interest' of the ethnic group. That is, ethnicity is salient if the ethnic group takes it to be and refers to it as salient, and the group has an 'interest' if it believes it has an interest. Whilst real world factors may be taken into account in the collective calculations that arrive at these conclusions, the conclusions remain 'talk about talk'.

In the empirical account which follows in Sections Two and Three I try to suggest that, although the actions of groups can be explained as constituted by the actions of calculative agents (and that these calculations can be investigated), the relationship between these calculations and what, as analysts, we might want to think of as their 'real' collective interests is complicated by the social nature of the processes involved. The point is brought out by Calhoun:

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[57] I do not reproduce the details of Barnes' arguments that his schema (interaction-organisation-interests-action) accounts better for collective action than that offered by Marx and Weber (situation-interests-organisation-action). See Barnes (1995:188ff).

[58] This, for instance, might go some way to answering the question which Banks suggests Epstein (1978) fails to answer: 'why an ethnic identity rather than a class identity or a gender identity or some other identity should be so important' (1996:38).

> An understanding of identity that goes beyond the notion of interest is […] important. […] many of the new social movement examples […] do not seem intrinsically close to a rational choice explanation but involve unconventional sorts of interests and especially processes of continual redefinition of interests because of reconstitution of identity. (1991:53) […] the rational choice to take extraordinary risk may depend on the social construction, in the midst of unusual collective action, of a personal identity that makes *not* taking a given risk more certain to imperil the self of the actor than taking it. This sort of calculation cannot be understood in terms of an approach to rational action that takes actor's identities as fixed attributes of individuals or one that analyses individual action solely in terms of interests derived from various external sources – such as class position. But it can be understood. (*ibid.*:69)[59]

Caveats regarding the straightforward understanding and elaboration of collective interests and identities as directly based on observable 'real' circumstances, remain to the fore in the following exploration of collective identity construction as a calculative and continual response to what is known (believed) by the collective in question. Much of the foregoing discussion has had the function of distancing this analysis from much of primordialism. At this point, symmetrically, a range of caveats regarding the kind of instrumentalism which 'reads off' interests from 'objective circumstances' should be clear. The account given in what follows seeks to distinguish between the 'effect on belief of "the facts"' (Barnes & Bloor 1982:33) and the constructed conceptualisation carried out by the collective in fastening on a response[60]. It therefore pays particular attention to the 'markers'[61] of 'reality', and the empirical causes[62] which seem to assume importance in the process of construction of ethnicity (see below), whilst also assessing the *nature* of that significance, and that of the relative systems of knowledge of the various actors and commentators, as they influence the emergent motivation of the collective.

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[59] One of the most striking instances of just such an apparently 'inexplicable' construction of collective interest is explained in Turton's account of Mursi - Nyangatom relations (1989)

[60] Albeit with Bloor's caveats about setting up a tug-of-war between 'reality' and 'society' (1997:3).

[61] I mean emic 'markers' as opposed to the 'features' observable from a social scientific perspective 'etic' to the group in question (Schlee 1994) (see below). I would tend, for instance, to agree with Schlee's critique of Levine (1974) that he effectively neglects 'emic markers' in focusing on common 'form' ('etic features') in his identification of Ethiopia as a 'culture area' (1994:140).

[62] 'which must eventually find a place in an overall account of knowledge' (Barnes & Bloor 1982:33)

Barnes, as I have mentioned, insists that the collective must pre-date collective interest, and that collectivities are not ‘naturally’ brought into existence by pre-existing shared interests, which somehow inhere in ‘reality’ (Barnes 1995:174-192). Once established, however, it is clear that perceptions of interest – individual and collective – will have a feedback effect on processes of categorisation. In his account of meaning finitism, Kusch notes that whilst there is often little difficulty in reaching agreement on the classification, for instance of a series of cats as cats (not least, he suggests, because of our similar physiology and linguistic training), there is always room for difference:

> Our judgements of similarity do not always coincide. And they tend to diverge in particular when we have different interests (goals and aims). […] Whether or not a child judges a newly encountered entity – say a stuffed toy – to be relevantly similar to her exemplars (of real cats) might depend on whether the child is interested in watching an animal chase after a ball, or whether the child is eager to caress the furry body of a cat-size creature. If the latter interest looms large, then the perceived similarity between the stuffed toy and live cats will be higher than if the former goal is more salient. To that extent, similarity is in the eye of the beholder. (Kusch 2002:203-4)

All of this suggests a recursive relationship between categories or statuses and interests, perhaps tantamount to nothing more than the observation that a population grouped and interacting in one way will see their interests differently from the same population categorised and categorising differently. What is problematic is that the groups that emerge, the statuses by which they are defined as groups, and the perceptions of their interests they generate are all contingent – and shifting.

What appears throughout is the continuous existence of individual judgements of similarity: the contemporaneity of construction and reconstruction of collective identity, and of the collective sense of self-interest. This prompts a reconsideration of the significance of ‘historical legacy’ (along the lines discussed in Section Two), suggesting that all and any known precedents can be effective as ingredients or markers of identity – precisely in so far as they *are* known. On this view, the priority often accorded to those markers which may appear to have historical longevity, is interpreted as a function of the performative power of what is known of their

pedigree, and their subsequent respected *contemporary* status, and not somehow intrinsic to their atavism *per se*.

The 'real', material conflicts, problems, and dynamics which the identity politics of contemporary Ethiopia reflect and seek to address clearly do have 'deep historical dimensions' (Schröder 1998:28). It seems important, however, not to assume that such 'history' and 'reality' have much, or exclusive, explanatory power, but to stress the selective contemporary exploitation of *available* resources and precedents – be they of yesterday or several centuries past, 'truly' or 'falsely' perceived. Whilst the *events of* a group's history remain a 'heavy inheritance' in the sense that they cannot be undone, their selection and categorisation *as elements of the narrative* of its history, remain – like all such processes - 'underdetermined': at the collective level, in so far as they are known, they form an endlessly malleable and selectable treasure-trove of resources. What makes 'history' or 'identity' look like an inheritance which is impossible to escape is our individualised perspective: as individuals, we are not often visibly at liberty to manipulate the resources of history (or identity) at will – but only as a tiny part of the larger collective, whose pre-existing views, culture, consensus, and conventions we do indeed very much 'inherit' in a continuous process of mutual learning, informing and sanctioning. At the individual level the 'real' events of history *become* the narrative of history, as the 'real' elements marking separate identity *constitute* the narrative of identity. The two are not fully separable. It is the juxtaposition of the individual with the collective level that makes identity look at once fixed and unchanging, *and* endlessly malleable.

What is true of histories is true of futures: ethnic groups, like all other groups, are motivated by what they calculate to be their interests. As analysts we may or may not feel we have an understanding of a group's 'real' or 'objective' interests. The extent to which we do, and whether the group shares our view, are contingent matters. How they construct their collective sense of interest will be a function of what they know. Whilst the 'objective circumstances' are undoubtedly 'out there', their selection and categorisation as *elements of the narrative* of the group's interest, remain – like all such processes – 'underdetermined'. Rather than interest arising out of (an

understanding of) real circumstances, collective interest, I have argued, emerges from collective interaction, prompted, but not determined, by empirical circumstance. Once a sense of interest has emerged in this way, the performativity it enjoys is likely to shape the perception and categorisation of these circumstances, and, by processes of 'bootstrapped induction' (Barnes 1983) to influence the future pattern of interaction which will generate it. This is the recursive and mutually constitutive relationship which ethnicity and interest enjoy.

Chapter III. Scope and Ambition of the Thesis

This brief chapter aims to do two sets of things, each of which relate closely to methodological concerns. The first is to provide an account of the methods by which the study was carried out, giving some impression of the scope and nature of the research undertaken, as well as the perceived advantages and constraints of the approach adopted. Included in this discussion is a note on terminology adopted. Building on the theoretical discussion in Chapter II, above, the second purpose of this chapter is to consider the kinds of lines and focus of investigation likely to prove appropriate to a constructivist approach, given the scope of the research outlined. This is intended to link the empirical discussion of Sections Two and Three which follow, with some of the ideas of the theoretical approach outlined previously in Chapter II.

Methodological issues

Sources

A study of the politicisation of ethnicity in Ethiopia is a study of how ethnicity is involved in the way the Ethiopian state and groups of its citizens view and approach one another, and of the consequences this has had. In trying to untangle developments in the views, beliefs, and understandings of different populations, I have drawn on evidence of their experiences and responses provided by both secondary literature and primary sources.

Secondary literature

I draw on the English language literature on Ethiopia primarily from three disciplines: history, politics, and anthropology. Since the focus of my interest is the relation between the modern Ethiopian state and its citizens, politics is clearly my 'home discipline'. However, for a number of reasons, many of which relate to the nature of the research environment for political scientists in Ethiopia over the period

in question, the literature in politics proved the least rewarding of the three interrelated disciplinary categories.

In the last decade of the imperial regime, Perham's seminal study of *The Government of Ethiopia* (1969[1948]) was re-issued, and her groundwork extended in two important but divergent ways. Whilst Clapham (1969) illuminated the workings and institutions of the imperial government over the critical period of centralisation and modernisation of the middle twentieth century, Markakis (1974) explored the patterns of socio-economic forces for change in the wider society over the same period. This exemplary series of imperial-era studies of the Ethiopian state was overtaken, in the wake of its overthrow, by a much larger, and often considerably less satisfactory range of studies of the bloody events of the change of government, and the new revolutionary regime[63]. Much was written too soon afterwards for satisfactory evaluation of either. The ruthlessness with which the military government silenced its critics through the Red Terror of the late 1970s, and the escalation of the civil wars in the north through the 1980s, offered a domestic research environment inimical to political science. After two decades, it did prove possible to update analysis of the new institutions, structures, dynamics and policies of the central government (Clapham 1988), whilst work on the socio-economic forces, which raged around it with increasing violence, had to be carried on outside the country's borders (Markakis 1987)[64]. Meanwhile, a lot of other ink had been spilled to polemical rather than analytical effect.

English language history on Ethiopia, too, has had its limitations. As Donham and James note, for a long time

> Ethiopian history [...] had been focused on the metanarratives of the nation – in the case of Ethiopia, the preservation of its independence against colonial odds. Emperors' lives, their battles and foreign intrigues [...] furnished a seemingly natural way to shape stories and to distinguish periods. (Donham & James 2002[1986]:xviii)

[63] Including, for instance, Ottaway M & D (1978), Halliday & Molyneux (1981), Lefort (1983), Schwab (1985)

[64] Interestingly neither approach devoted particularly extensive analysis to the political force, the TPLF/EPRDF, which would emerge a few years later to lay claim to the Ethiopian state.

Although many historians of Ethiopia have been criticised for overt bias in favour of the exploits and culture of its ruling class (and for corresponding neglect of the experiences and perspectives of their subjects)[65], there is much to be gleaned about social development from the scholarship which characterises the historical literature[66]. Its resources provide the bulk of the material from which much of Section Two of this thesis is fashioned.

The publication in 1986 of Donham & James' edited collection, marked a shift away from widespread Abyssinia-centricity in Ethiopian history. It also marked the beginning of a very fruitful collaboration between history and anthropology, which allowed for the elaboration of popular experiences of processes of social, economic, and political development from all over the country, as an alternative way to 'shape stories and distinguish periods'[67]. The late 1980s also saw the emergence of another set of voices seeking to articulate stories at variance with the 'official' perspective of the Ethiopian state, namely those which grew from the nationalist movements in Eritrea and Oromia. Whilst many nationalist accounts - particularly in politics – intended primarily to contribute to the polemics of the period, Oromo studies in particular also produced history and anthropology of lasting value[68].

In the last four decades, then, a contested research environment throughout the Horn of Africa, and one often hostile to an overt focus on state power and its operation, has resulted in a situation where much of the most informative work on political relations (particularly from the points of view of citizens) is to be found in social anthropology and 'historical ethnography'. Thus, for instance, Section Three of this thesis, dealing with developments since 1991, draws on such authors as Abbink (1991) (2000), Donham (1999), Hogg (1993) (1997), Schlee (1989) (1994), and the

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[65] See Chapter IV below.

[66] Of outstanding importance are, for instance, Bahru Zewde (1991) (2002), Crummey (2000), Gebru Tareke (1996[1991]), McCann (1987), Mohammed Hassan (1990), Richard Pankhurst (1961) (1966) (1968) (1990), Rubenson (1966) (1976) and Trimingham (1965[1952])

[67] The recent publication of a successor volume (James *et al.* 2002), demonstrates the continuing vitality of this interface, irrespective of the uneven quality of its contributions.

various contributors to Donham & James (1986[2002]), Fukui & Markakis (1994), and James *et al.* (2000). It is in the nature of much of this work that, in the traditions of ethnographic scholarship, it is often tightly focused on one or a number of specific research communities and locations. Whilst many of the authors cited offer analysis which transcends their temporal, geographic, or ethnographic focus[69], one of the drawbacks of this literature is that its rich resources have not always been utilised, and are not always easily usable, to inform political analysis at the level of the state.

Unpublished graduate and undergraduate theses constitute an increasingly important body of secondary literature on Ethiopia and its various ethnic groups. In the course of this research, I have been able to gain access to sources at libraries at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University, and the Ethiopian Civil Service College. Both offer rich resources produced by their students who, as the years have passed under ethnic federalism, seem increasingly keen to study and write about their home regions. Amidst much which has been of use to this study, the bibliography lists only those works cited in the text.

Documents and primary literature

Whilst the early sections of Chapter IV are drawn entirely from secondary sources, the study of the evolution of the student movement in the late 1960s, as well as much of the discussion of the TPLF and OLF in Chapter V also draws on documentation produced by participants in these circles. The line between secondary analysis and primary documentation becomes particularly blurred in the case of the student and ethno-nationalist movements, since many of the protagonists of each have authored their own contemporary analyses and commentaries which now also constitute a subject of research[70]. These are perhaps only the most visible instances of the way in

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[68] Baxter (1986) reviews the field of Oromo studies at that time. See notably, Bartels (1989), Bassi (1996) (1997), Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi (1996), Gemetchu Megerssa (1993), Mohammed Hassen (1990), Mekuria Bulcha (1988).

[69] Donham (1999) is notable.

[70] Articles by Walleligne Mekonen (1969), Andreas Eshete *et al.* (*Challenge* 1970), Tilahun Takele (1970), are notable examples. See Chapter IV below.

which all analysis and commentary feeds, categorises and creates our subsequent understanding of events.

Relevant documentation related to the Ethiopian student movement, EPRP, and *Me'isone*, is listed under 'publications of Ethiopian Political Organisations', even where these are not specifically cited in the text of the thesis. The same is true of relevant documentation produced by the TPLF/EPRDF and OLF in the period up to the withdrawal of the OLF from government in 1992. These documents were obtained from a number of library and archive sources, including those of the movements themselves. Since my survey of this literature was restricted to the literature in English, it focuses on what was originally explicitly intended and produced for external consumption and propaganda. Literature produced by the Fronts consists primarily of Bulletins, Magazines, and Press Releases, published by their foreign relations bureaux; that published by the student bodies was intended both for student debate in the diaspora, and to be shared with solidarity organisations internationally. Although much of it is not specifically cited or quoted, its study has provided an essential background to the preparation of interviews on related and subsequent events.

Interviews

Notes and transcripts of a wide range of interviews of different kinds, conducted between late 1988 and mid-2002, constitute a primary resource of this research. My interest in the issue of politicised ethnicity dates from interviews and conversations during a first visit to Ethiopia in October-December 1988, several of which are cited in the text. My academic work began in 1994 with a pilot study of the Charter conference in July 1991 which launched the TGE (Vaughan 1994). This project drew on 22 formal interviews conducted with delegates to the conference between June and August 1994[71]. It established that semi-structured interviews in English, with Ethiopia's political elite, recorded at the time either electronically or in note form,

[71] 21 conducted in Addis Ababa and one by telephone internationally. It also drew on analysis of the 18 hour ETV videotape and translated transcript of the proceedings.

produced useful and illuminating transcript material; and that formal interviews were frequently usefully supplemented by informal and unrecorded conversations.

Fieldwork specifically for the purpose of this thesis was conducted during the period I was resident in Ethiopia between January 1998 and March 2000, and again during April-July 2002. Formal notes and/or transcripts of around 80 structured and semi-structured interviews conducted over the period in Addis Ababa are on file. Further fieldwork was carried out outside Addis Ababa as opportunities arose: significant visits included: October-November 1998, Mekelle, Tigray NRS (12 interviews); May 1999, Amhara NRS (25 interviews); September-November 1999, SNNPNRS (39 interviews) and Western Oromia NRS (36 interviews); January 2000, Harar, Dire Dawa, Jigjiga (15 interviews); June-July 2002, SNNPNRS (76 interviews), Amhara NRS (10 interviews), Tigray NRS (16 interviews). The overwhelming majority of these interviews were recorded by simultaneous notetaking, by hand; a very few were tape recorded. In both cases, recordings or notes were then transcribed; in a small number of cases, transcripts were returned to interviewees to be verified.

Interviews in Addis Ababa and Mekelle, and outside Ethiopia, concentrated on the political elite: veterans of various of the political movements discussed in the study, particularly the student movement, the TPLF, and the OLF. They also included academics and prominent individuals, many of them contemporaries of the protagonists in the previous categories.

The majority of those interviewed outside Addis Ababa, meanwhile, were state-sector executive officers or civil servants, including teachers, at *kilil,* zone, *wereda,* or *kebele* level. Interviewees in the regions also included members of ruling and opposition political parties; officers of private sector NGOs, religious bodies, and commercial organisations; peasant farmers, and elder and 'respected' members of communities, often singled out by local respondents for their reputation for historical or cultural knowledge; and a small number of expatriates living and working in the areas in question. Interviewees were selected as those participating in local politics, in the widest sense of the term. Interviews were designed to elicit information and

views on the following topics: the organisation and activities of the state at each level; the activities by which state and political party structures had been established, and the processes of mobilisation which had brought respondents (or others) to participate in them; local understandings (amongst state/party and non-state/party actors) of 'nationality issues' as they had been experienced under EPRDF; the development of local politics over the period from 1991, and local perceptions of the impact of 'ethnic federalism' locally and nationally. Interviews conducted in Ethiopia's regions were attempting both to elicit data specific to events and developments in different locations, and also to trace patterns of experiences and perceptions common to different categories of interlocutors. In order to build up a picture along both of these lines, a relatively large number of interviews were conducted over an extended period, and attempts were made to revisit locations (and, where possible, interviewees) on more than one occasion.

Interviews are cited in the thesis text as follows: (interview, category or description of interviewee, location of interview, date of interview). Although all interlocutors gave permission for their comments to be recorded and used, and many expressed their willingness for quotations to be attributed, willingness to be named was not uniform. In view of the political sensitivity of many of the issues under discussion, this came as no surprise. I have therefore adopted a policy throughout of not naming interviewees, attempting instead to contextualise their remarks by providing some relevant indication of the status of the person quoted, without compromising their anonymity where necessary.

The majority of interviews were conducted in English. A large minority were conducted in a mixture of my limited Amharic and English, or involved translation from Amharic or another Ethiopian language. In most cases translators were found 'on the spot', which often 'softened' the atmosphere of the interview, turning it into a more relaxed discussion to which several people who knew one another were party. Attempts were made, of course, to ensure that translators were close or acceptable to, and trusted by, the interviewee.

This approach had a number of advantages. It allowed me to build up a number of relatively detailed pictures of the situation in a range of different locations in Ethiopia[72], sufficient to sustain individual analysis and comparative assessment. It allowed me to gain a sense of trends and developments over the second half of the decade of the 1990s. Finally it allowed me to gain a sense of the patterns of interface and juxtaposition of the views a range of interlocutors, differently located vis-à-vis the state. It had, of course, a number of constraints.

Constraints of the approach and methods used

The most significant of the constraints of the research methods adopted, and of the combination of methods and theoretical approach, can be set out as a series of interrelated problems. Fieldwork based on several series of relatively short visits tended to draw on the views of those 'easily accessible' to interview, such that the resulting 'interview set' is representative of certain sectors of communities, and not of the society as a whole. Secondly, an approach designed partly to generate comparative data regarding patterns of processes in different locations, does not offer the depth of understanding of a more traditionally ethnographic approach. Additionally, the competing imperatives of breadth and depth proved equally difficult to satisfy on an approach investigating patterns and systems of knowledge and belief in and around a large number of different interacting groups.

A further factor, which I do not discuss in further detail below, has been the outbreak and prosecution of the Ethio-Eritrean War between May 1998 and mid 2000, and the standoff between the two countries in the period since. These developments had the prompt effect of curtailing the extent of fieldwork undertaken in the north of the country, particularly in Tigray NRS, and amongst the upper echelons of the ruling party. A more insidious effect of the outbreak of the war, however, was a perceptible shift in the public perspectives of many associated with government, away from emphasis on the virtues of self-determination under federalism, in favour of a new

[72] It is worth noting that a number of areas were excluded from first hand research of this kind. They include eastern areas of Oromia NRS, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambella NRSs, and Afar and Somali NRSs (beyond visits to Assaiyta and Jigjiga).

stress on the advantages in wartime of unity and strength in diversity. The fact that the Eritrean Head of State had, in mid-1998, publicly identified ethnic federalism a weakness of the Ethiopian state and ruling party, lent an edge to many of the interviews conducted over the period.

Categories and prominent solutions: 'interviewing ethnic groups'

It is easy, in studying Ethiopian politics, to continue to give an account which perpetuates elite narratives, for the simple reason that Ethiopia's English-speaking elites are more accessible than the rural peasant majority. It took a long time before historians of Ethiopia were able to get away from the heroic metanarratives of the nation, to look at the preoccupations of Ethiopia's *Southern Marches*. So too has the reach of this research undoubtedly been constrained by the existence of a 'prominent solution' for establishing the views of rural and remote ethnic groups: namely, the availability for interview of their English- and/or Amharic-speaking elite representatives.

I have made comparative use of existing ethnography, in combination with a large body of diachronic interview data, which seeks commonalities and difference in order to draw wider conclusions about the impact and operation of politicised ethnicity. Interviews were primarily with elites and those who are able to speak English: they tended to focus on the classes able and interested to influence the political life of the community, at least at the level of local government. This seems appropriate since the subject of research was the operation of ethnicity in the overtly political sphere. It does however, have a number of negative consequences.

One is that when the thesis, as in Chapter VII below, discusses the 'responses of ethnic communities' it is actually often setting out the responses of urban-based ethnic elites that could be documented by this kind of research. I have been interested in the views of those who are interested in the Ethiopian state and in interacting with it. This means that the thesis has tended to document the views of the relatively powerful over those of the powerless, whose views remain under-investigated.

Absent here are the perspectives of the so-called 'rural masses', and, particularly, of women. The attitude of an elderly peasant farmer, asked his opinion of the three regimes under which he had lived, is sobering:

> However you turn the pot on the fire the food still tastes the same (Interview, farmer, near Weldiya, *Simien* Wello, May 1999).

Problematising the unit of analysis: non ethnographic deconstruction of the 'ethnic group'

The constraint set out above is particularly problematic when dealing with ethnic groups, constituted, as I have suggested in Chapter II above, of a myriad of local consensus-forming interactions. Vansina has commented that

> it is not possible to make generalizations about ethnic consciousness, because every case is the product of its own history. […] The ethnic unit cannot be used as a valid unit of observation […] It is necessary to pinpoint the actual places where the observations have been made (Vansina 1990:20).

I have stressed the importance of emphasising collective values as a prism through which material resources and circumstances are filtered. Similarly Hallpike emphasises 'the study of values and belief systems as integral elements of society', and asserts that 'interaction of the organs of the body occurs on the level of physical cause and effect. But societies, while they are indeed systems of action, are also systems of meaning' (1972:14). He continues however, that 'social solidarity is [itself] culturally relative and cannot be appealed to as an 'end' to which institutions contribute' (1972:16). This theme - the problematisation of social solidarity itself - is taken up by Turton in his discussion of the relations between Mursi and their neighbours: 'the materialist explanation [is] that warfare is a means of establishing and maintaining the separate political identities of neighbouring groups. Warfare is a

cause, not a consequence of political identity' (1989:80). Thus the nature of the 'groupness' or solidarity associated with any groups is itself a problematic[73].

This thesis does not purport to reap what Barth calls 'the full harvest of a serious practice of 'participant observation'' (2000:25)[74]. Rather than a prolonged ethnographic study of one or several of Ethiopia's ethnic groups, it is based on a series of systematic investigations into the developments of a forty year period across the country, which most seemed to have a bearing on the story of politicised ethnicity in Ethiopia as it related to the establishment of ethnic federalism in 1991. As a result it does not attempt a full depiction of how 'social institutions [such as ethnicity] are given coherence by [a system of beliefs and] values' (cf. Hallpike 1972:15). This kind of account would require immersion in ethnographic participant observation.

The theoretical position elaborated in Chapter II prompts a focus on interaction, and systems of knowledge. Seeking to illuminate the operation of knowledge and convention within or around an ethnic collective, I have investigated the interaction between collectives, focusing in particular on that category of ethnic elites who have engaged with the ethnic narratives of the state, and with each other. This interaction is better explained, I argue, by a more rigorous account of social constructivism than instrumentalists, primordialists or so-called constructivists usually provide. The thesis suggests the explanatory superiority of radical social constructivist approach to recent events in the political history of Ethiopia.

A note on terminology

This research does not include an investigation of the relevant terminology in the Ethiopian languages now used for instruction, administration, or for official purposes in different parts of the country. Clearly, the clusters of meaning and context which

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[73] Secondly, there is a recursive relation between the factors which mark ethnicity and those which constitute it.

[74] '[the anthropologist's] immersion in joint action during fieldwork surely builds a growing *community* of experience with his companions which establishes not only that foundational level of sociality to which he refers, but also some of the preconceptual, experiential bases […] that his

attach to the terms by which the constitutional phrase 'nations, nationalities, and peoples' (the Amharic *behieroch, behieresewoch, ena hezboch*) have been translated in different zones and regions, could be expected to shed light on the (range of) local understandings of these categories.

Even in English, however, the decision to adopt the terms ethnicity and ethnic (group, federalism, etc.), in preference to 'nation', 'nationality' (and the cognate 'nationalism') generally preferred in Ethiopian discourse (about the 'national question' or 'nationality issue') is already controversial. In a classic article of the Ethiopian student movement period, Hagos Gebre Yesus (1970:22) objected to the 'fatuous preoccupation with ethnicity'[75], just as the previous chapter touched on much that is terminologically and conceptually unsatisfactory about the term.

The Ethiopian constitutional triplet of 'nation, nationality, and people', however, also has ideological and descriptive shortcomings, primarily because it is so strongly associated with the writings of Stalin and Lenin as to be immediately evocative of Soviet perspectives.

> Nationality in the Marxist-Leninist lexicon, can have one of two meanings: a people in a prenation state of development, that is to say a people who, for whatever reason, have not yet achieved (and may never achieve) the more august station of nationhood; or a segment of a nation living outside the state where the major body of the nation resides. Being classified as a nationality rather than as a nation can have political implications. (Walker Connor 1994:xv)

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companions use to construct their cognitive categories and pathways of thought and reason' (Barth 2000:25)

[75] Which he describes as the basis for a 'narrow and reactionary outlook' itself a 'typical petty bourgeois characteristic'. One alternative term popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the Ethiopian student movement began to wrestle with the 'National Question' was 'regionalism'. This has not been adopted here because of two sets of limitations, descriptive and ideological. Firstly, the collectives discussed here often do not occupy, and are often not usefully defined by, 'regions' either because they are scattered and mixed amongst others, or because the territories they regard as theirs are smaller than that term usually indicates. Secondly, and perhaps more problematically, as the student movement debates wore on into the 1970s, 'regionalism' became associated with the ideological position and dominant faction that rejected 'nationality-based mobilisation' as invariably subordinate to the class struggle (see Chapters IV and V below). 'Tribe' and 'tribalism' are not a set of terms which need much rejecting in the Ethiopian case, as they have only relatively rarely been used in or about Ethiopia. This perhaps reflects the relatively large size of some of the groups involved, and the absence of a European colonial categorisation process, with which the term – indeed the concept – may perhaps be said to have originated.

‘Nation’ and its cognates seem, in common English usage, normally to have something to do with the state. Those who adopted these terms in Ethiopia *did* intend to effect a transformation of the relations between Ethiopia’s ethnic groups and the Ethiopian state. The terminology they have used therefore serves precise, if often not precisely articulated, ideological and political purposes[76]. For all these reasons, it is terminology best avoided here.

A series of more recent cautionary comments about ethnicity has included the idea that

> The choice of an analytical perspective or ‘research hypothesis’ is not an innocent act. If one goes out to look for ethnicity, one will ‘find’ it and thereby contribute to constructing it. (Eriksen 2002:177)

One response could be that in contemporary Ethiopia one doesn’t need to go looking for ethnicity – it is already being deployed perfectly effectively by collectives and government servants.

Much of the argument of this thesis, however, is that the categories and understandings of Ethiopian planners and Soviet ethnos theorists alike are based on fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the collectives so categorised. It is perhaps therefore best to make use of a concept (ethnicity)

> locate[d] in the observer’s head [as] an analytical tool devised and utilised […] to make sense of or explain the actions and feelings of the people studied. There are a number of advantages to this perspective. First, it shifts the ‘responsibility’ for ethnicity from the ethnographic subjects on to the analyst. This is not to say that the ethnographic subjects are not responsible for their ‘ethnic’ actions: they are fully responsible for their actions but it is for the analyst to decide whether – if at all – ethnicity is a useful tool to make sense of those actions. (Banks 1996:186)

[76] The hierarchical classification of nations (possessing all of those features identified by Stalin), nationalities (lacking perhaps one) and peoples (lacking several or most, but still resisting agglomerative classification) leads directly to prescriptive judgements of which collectivity should

Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia on a constructivist approach

The empirical Sections Two and Three of this thesis seek to explore the recursive relationship between collective identities and collective 'interests'. They seek to root both in collective conceptions (social constructions) of reality and of other beliefs (i.e. in collective belief systems) rather than merely upon the individual, intuitively 'pattern matching', experiences of 'the facts' (Kusch 1998:258). In this manner, the underdetermined nature of collective 'knowledge', and the power of performativity in establishing shared constructs, can emerge. A sense of the difficulties likely to confront Ethiopia's policy-makers (and instrumentalist theorists of ethnicity), who I argue are working with a more straightforwardly instrumental schema, may perhaps also become apparent.

Criteria vs indicia: emblems and features: ethnic markers

One way of investigating the operation of ethnicity as a social status, and to compare it with the operation of other social statuses is to consider the way in which we regard it as marked, and the beliefs we have about those markers. Marking social statuses is a widespread phenomenon. Husbands and wives, for instance, are commonly distinguished from others by wedding rings, or distinctive styles of dress or hair; leaders and those others whose office confers a particular social status, by various badges or insignia of office. Such empirical markers provide a useful shortcut means of relaying information about the statuses in question. It is relatively straightforward in these cases for us to distinguish between the status in question, the person to whom that status is attributed, and the marker. This is so because we consider each of the statuses in question to be attachable and detachable by agreement. Divorced partners can remove their wedding rings and can be regarded as no longer married[77]; retired policemen, or those off duty, no longer have the status of law enforcers when they have removed their uniforms. These are social statuses where the idea that they are 'natural' does not form part of the convention which

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aspire to, and gain its own state. The Ethiopian state, like the Soviet Union before it, has been at pains not to categorise its extant constituents according to these types.

[77] Providing the relevant norm of marriage permits divorce.

constitutes them. In instances of ethnicity where this is not the case, where ethnic markers are seen as something natural, it has proved more difficult to separate out the status, the individual who bears it, and the factors which mark it[78]. The common conflation of status and nature in categorisation is discussed in Chapter II above.

The likely importance of a focus on ethnic boundaries has long been understood (Barth 1970). This discussion further emphasises the importance of *markers* of identity and of its boundaries, in establishing what kind of identity is at stake, and how it is constituted. I suggest that there is an underdetermined feedback influence between the kind of boundary/identity markers selected as significant, and the nature of the identity marked: some will be more rigid and exclusive than others, and to some extent this will be prompted by the factors chosen to bound it. The empirical account further suggests that although there is considerable scope for innovation and flexibility in the responsive development of collective identities, it is unusual for groups to innovate 'from scratch'. In most of these instances it can be shown that some previously known entity, era, or characteristic is being invoked to serve, and confer legitimacy upon, the (often entirely new) purposes of the group, or its more politically articulate members.

The discussion suggests that the collective definition of identity is a daily, contemporary process of re-creation and innovation, comprised of calculative action by the group on the basis of the information and system of beliefs available to it. Collective action is enhanced, underpinned, and rendered possible within the context of the shared knowledge of the community, and this means that the co-ordination of decisions is supported, and deviance sanctioned, by drawing upon elements of collective knowledge. I argue that it is for this reason that appeals to traditional, historical, and pre-existing experiences (in so far as they are collectively known), as well as to known or shared identity 'markers', are effective: they form part of an already familiar knowledge system, and represent elements of what is most likely to be a shared 'prominent solution' in terms of group formation.

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[78] There are other instances in which the 'thing marked' is commonly conflated with its marker. The most commonly discussed is the social institution of money, marked by coins or currency. See e.g.

This is another way of saying that, on the one hand, the process of developing and sustaining a sense of collective identity, group cohesion, or shift, is a fully self-referential social act of permanent construction and reconstruction, using the material of shared beliefs which are themselves secured by normativity in interaction rather than by the 'reality' supposedly represented by these markers:

> Talking about the meaning of a concept is just another way of talking about whatever it is which constitutes the normative standards of its right and wrong application. We cannot presuppose meaning in order to explain normativity; we must explain normativity in order to cast light on the nature of meaning. (Bloor 1997:7)

On the other hand, however, what makes this process of construction particularly suasive and effective is the convincing illusion that it is somehow 'natural' or 'true', that it is valid as well as credible, and that it corresponds with a pre-existing empirical reality suggested by the selected markers, which include beliefs about 'natural kind', or 'alter-referential' indicators like phenotype (or any element of biology, or ecology), as well as beliefs about 'social kind', or 'self-referential' ones, such as culture and language. The priority of credibility over validity in influencing group formation and action is persuasively indicated by the perfectly effective manner in which 'false' beliefs about non-existent 'natural kind' 'alter-referential' indicators bound and define group relations[79]. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this in the literature on the Horn of Africa region is Schlee's account of Rendille beliefs that biological differences distinguish them from their neighbours, as evidenced by 'knowledge' about the different lengths of their pregnancies (believed to be seven months in the case of some adjacent groups, up to eleven in the case of others) (Schlee 1994:133).

Barnes (1988:15-20, 82-84)

[79] Schlee puts the point succinctly: '"Being aware" is a precondition for the use of a cultural element as an "identity marker". But one can "be aware" of something that is factually wrong, and this does not affect its usability as an identity marker in the slightest way' (1994:139). I would suggest, however, that his wider discussion is vitiated by his faith in the possibility of a 'fully etic' perspective which he associates with 'scientific' anthropology.

Language as vehicle and marker of identity

> Language and specifically words carry an imprint from the past in the present. (Vansina 1990:8-9)

As explained in Chapter I, language was adopted as the primary indicator of difference between Ethiopia's populations for the process of ethnic federal boundary demarcation in 1991-2. As a result, language is a salient factor in all of the studies of cases from 1991 explored in Section Three, be they challenges to ethnic federal boundaries based on claims to separate language group 'status', or attempts to push towards the assimilation of different language groups or dialects. A few words about the operation of language as a means of underpinning or marking collective identity are therefore in order. It is, for instance, ironic, that the factor which has been singled out in Ethiopia since 1991 to distinguish different ethnic groups, because it is observable, is usually regarded as one of the least reliable, given its relative fluidity, and the fact that many individuals are speakers of more than one language.

Three points need to be emphasised here. They are, the essential fluidity of language development, particularly oral language development; the importance of events which categorise *and fix* a particular oral form of a language as 'different' from others; and thirdly the differential conventions attaching to the perceived status and value of different languages, amongst those who do or do not speak them. Characteristics of oral language traditions are that they tend to exaggerate differences between different 'language groups'. This contrasts with written linguistic forms, in response to which convergence and divergence is more easily visible as, either, other written forms remain differentiated despite apparent similarities, or oral forms start to coalesce around the new written 'prominent solution', regardless of existing differences. Chapter VII illuminates the significance of moments when languages and language families are 'classified' (as for instance in academic studies of which Bender *et al.* (1976) is the most important), and when oral languages are written down (as often, for instance, in the preparation of Wycliffe Bible Society translations). In both cases, linguistic classifications which had been fluid become fixed, supported by authoritative available evidence of correct or incorrect classification.

Chapter V notes the importance of mother tongue in marking off the protagonists of nationalist struggle in Tigray and Oromia. Chapter VI goes on to note the differential values placed by different social strata on their different mother tongues, and the impact this has in complicating approaches to ethnically based ‘self-determination’, and the educational and administrative use of local languages. In the decision to adopt a particular language two sets of interests are commonly in place: the advantages of the state reaching out towards the rural population in a language which allows them to access state services and narratives; and the advantages of the rural population reaching up to the state in a language which will alow them to negotiate a relatively broad range of the services and opportunities offered by the state, accessing, for instance, jobs and education at national level. Where mother tongue languages have a relatively high status and utility, perspectives can be expected to converge on the adoption of the local language; where a national language is widely spoken, and local languages confined to a relatively small group, the opposite is often true. The difficulty of predicting such correlations and consequences (of reading off actions from objective interests in this way) is, however, sharply demonstrated by a number of the cases explored in Chapter VII.

Section Two
Legacies, resources, causes, inventions: historical roots and routes[80] to 'ethnic federalism'

> There are few countries in Africa that are as enriched and burdened by the past as Ethiopia (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:xii)
>
> History often does not have a future; it can be 'over'. (McCrone 1998:59)
>
> Selectivity occurs mainly for social reasons. Some topics are worthwhile, others are not. Certain individuals or groups of people are interesting, others are not. The effects are loss of information and the creation of a profile of past history which is the historical consciousness of the present (Vansina 1985:190)

This section considers the historical background to the establishment of ethnic federalism in 1991. Historians, like natural scientists, are commonly conceived as unearthing data in accordance with which the details of a picture of 'what really happened' (or, for natural scientists, of 'the real world') is gradually generated with increasing accuracy. In the popular imagination they operate, like neo-Livingstones, gradually filling in the blank spaces on the map of Africa with the locations of rivers, mountains, and dangerous tribes – locations whose accuracy can be checked by means of subsequent comparison with 'the real thing' – or at least other sources of information about it. The difficulties of the kind of empiricism on which such a view is based are set out in Barnes & Bloor (1982) and raised in Chapter II, above.

In the explication of politicised ethnicity, or nationalism, it seems clear that a historical account is required to play two roles, which, whilst distinguishable, cannot be fully separated. These are both in play in this account. The first is that of explanatory 'cause' of subsequent events: because a certain historical sequence of events documented had previously taken place, it can be seen that the sequence then observed to have followed on was natural, likely, and intelligible; it can perhaps even be demonstrated that the precedents outlined contribute to a causal explanation of subsequent events. Of course our knowledge that this is the case is contingent, and, since the events in question involve the actions of groups of people, it is also

intrinsically connected with the second role played by history, that of 'resource' in the hands of its protagonists. Here the edges of 'valid' history are – rightly, and as they always must be – blurred with the constructivist notion of 'the invention of tradition' and its 'credibility'.

> For all that human beings often appear as the recipients or even the receptacles of tradition, it is none the less they who have created (constructed, invented) it. How then can they be regarded as controlled by it or subservient to it? […] If constructivism is accepted, the presumption must surely be that tradition is the *continuing* collective accomplishment of human beings, that it is lacking in any power of its own and that it exists through the continually exercised powers of human beings themselves. (Barnes 1995:112)

What may seem, at the individual level as the 'inexorable weight' of tradition, can, at the collective level, be understood as the creation of the social group, as the sum of what it knows[81]. Introducing arguments from meaning finitism in classification, to develop a finitist account of knowledge, culture, and tradition, I have suggested how it is possible to demonstrate that the application of a particular classification remains formally underdetermined. Far from arbitrary, a classification effectively becomes 'determined' in so far as it has been constructed and sustained by the collective.

What is true of the collective identification of an ethnic group is much more self-evidently true of any instance of the collective understanding of history, the 'facts of the case' notwithstanding. What is particularly difficult to establish, however, in reconstructing this historical narrative from the current vantage point, is quite which elements of it would have been familiar to which groups of its protagonists at which points. This is to point up again the contingency of our understanding of history not only as 'cause' but also as 'resource', as well as the limited sociological validity of direct extrapolation from 'events' to 'collective knowledge of events' to 'collective action'[82].

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[80] Cf. McCrone (1998:34), paraphrasing Hall (1996:4), amongst others.
[81] As suggested above, this approach seems to offer a way of overcoming Anthony Cohen's objections (1994:120) to Barth's account (1970).
[82] This issue has been touched upon in the discussion of 'interests' in Chapter II above.

This preamble is intended partly as a reiteration of the warning (already suggested in the Introduction to the thesis) against the separation of the two Chapters, IV and V, which follow, and against the separate 'reification' of the processes described in each. To understand Chapter IV as 'setting out the reality' and Chapter V as simply explaining 'what was done with it' (structure and agency, again) would be to underestimate the complexity of the feedback loops, indeed the continual interaction, between 'the effect of the facts' and the social construction of them. It would also serve to obscure the extent of 'unknowability' inherent in both.

In sum, then, it is worth reiterating the caveat that the relationship between 'facts' and 'construction' remains underdetermined, and that this has profound consequences. Calhoun points this up nicely, with respect to the relationship between nationalism and history.

> Some nationalist self-understandings may be historically dubious, yet very real as aspects of live experience and bases for action. […] Other claims, by contrast, may fail to persuade because they are too manifestly manipulated, or because the myth that is being proffered does not speak to the circumstances and practical commitments of the people in question. In between are claims that are accepted as part of orthodox ideology but which people are aware may be questioned. People may even join in public rituals that affirm narratives they know to be problematic, but gain an identification with these as 'our stories', a sense of collusion in the production of these fictions […]. (Calhoun 1997:34)

Chapter IV. Building and dismantling the traditions of the empire state

> Modern Ethiopia dates from the reign of the Emperor Menelik II (E. Sylvia Pankhurst (1955) quoted by Greenfield (1967[1965]:96)

> Ethiopia's history contain[s] an analytic truth […]: from time to time, the nation disintegrated into component parts, but it never disappeared as an idea and always reappeared in fact. (Marcus 1994:xiii)

> Ethiopian nationalism under the imperial regime was Abyssinian nationalism writ large. The state was named the Ethiopian Empire, a designation that broadened its identity without altering its essence. The essence derived undiluted from the Abyssinian core, and the process of national integration was tantamount to assimilation into the culture of the empire builders. (Markakis 1987:73)

This chapter considers the historical context to the emergence in the mid-1970s of the protagonists of ethnic federalism, the ethnically-based opposition movements, TPLF and OLF, discussed in the following Chapter V. The account is presented in three sections. The first briefly considers the process of nineteenth century imperial expansion and conquest from areas commonly referred to as Abyssinia[83], which constituted the formation of modern Ethiopia. It looks briefly at the controversies attached to the question of historical continuity of ancient Abyssinia with the modern Ethiopian empire state; it considers various of the traditions of the pre-existing Abyssinian/Ethiopian polities on which the dominant culture and 'myth of origin' of the empire state subsequently drew, and which entrenched a situation in which divisions of ethnicity and class were widely seen to coincide. Most importantly, however, it examines the two primary consequences of this expansion as regards the subsequent constellation of ethnicity and power: the incorporation of a multi-ethnic southern area, and the bifurcation of a large and historically influential mono-ethnic bloc to the north. The second section of the chapter looks at the processes by which

[83] The distinction between 'Ethiopia' and 'Abyssinia' is discussed by Ullendorff (1955:4). Here I use Abyssinia (probably from the semitic regional name 'Habashat', cf. Levine (1965)) to refer to the northern highland areas predominantly inhabited by Orthodox Christian, Amharic- and Tigrigna-speaking populations; and Ethiopia (from the Greek, probably αίθω όψ, 'burnt face') to refer to the area encompassed by the modern state, itself roughly coincident with the area of the empire state established under Menelik II. Significantly for this thesis, of course, 'while Abyssinia has been a

the consolidation, centralisation, and bureaucratisation of the imperial state over the mid-twentieth century served to promote potential sources of opposition to it, and activate the conflictual potential inherent in what has been called an 'ethnocratic' arrangement. Finally the chapter reviews the course of events by which sections of the Ethiopian student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s came to apply to Ethiopia a Marxist analysis of the 'National Question'. It gives a brief review of the emergence and radicalisation of the student movement; and of the role of external ideology, and the Eritrean movements, in inspiring discussion of self-determination and providing examples of political struggle through armed opposition. These developments laid the groundwork for the shift from student-based protest to the establishment of a series of political organisations and armed movements which, after the coup of 1974, went on to challenge the military regime which succeeded the Emperor.

The chapter seeks to provide sufficient background to suggest an explanation of the emergence, amongst intellectual circles in the late 1960s, of the idea that the contemporary constellation of ethnicity and state power in Ethiopia was problematic, and in need of explicit restructuring. In this sense, then, the chapter is unashamedly teleological. It does not provide a general review of Ethiopian history of this period. It does not seek either to justify the emergence of a concern with ethnicity as appropriate, or vilify it as inappropriate; merely to explain how and why the view seems to have emerged, and how and why it is not shared by all, but remains contested. Nevertheless, the discussion is restricted to some of the issues which, with hindsight, seem to have a bearing on the activation and operation of ethnicity vis-à-vis political power, in the process attempting to draw attention to various of the many controversies associated with these issues. This process of selection, like those it studies, itself results from (and forms a tiny future constituent part of) Vansina's 'historical consciousness of the present'.

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relatively homogeneous state, the Ethiopian Empire was a mosaic of ethnic groups and cultures' (Markakis 2000:11)

Forging the nexus of ethnicity and access to power

> The nexus between ethnicity, state power and access to resources was forged in the aftermath of the expansion, when land, the prime resource in the conquered areas, was expropriated and distributed to the Abyssinian nobility, clergy, soldiery and state officials. (Markakis 2000:8)

On 'not being an indifferent spectator': the creation of the empire state

> 'If Powers at a distance come forward to partition Africa between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator' was Menelik's message to the European colonials powers in 1891 [Rodd to Salisbury, 4 May 1897 (F.O. 1/32)] (Markakis 1974:24)

> The road south was […] paved with dreams of wealth and success for many of Menilek's subjects. (Marcus 1994:79)

Between 1855 and 1898, under the successive rule of the three Emperors Tewodros II of Gondar (r.1855-1868)[84], the Tigrayan Yohannes IV (r.1872-1889)[85], and Menelik II of Amhara Shoa (r.1889-1913)[86], the heritors of a shifting pattern of Abyssinian kingdoms were unified into something approaching a single polity, which from 1875, from a base consolidated by Menelik II in Shoa, pursued a dramatic policy of expansionary conquest east, west, and south. Within two years of the battle of Adua, which put an end to Italian encroachments from Eritrea in the north in 1896, the 'process of territorial expansion and the creation of the modern empire-state had been completed' (Bahru Zewde 1991:111): the empire had swollen to a point approaching the boundaries of today's Ethiopian state[87]; by 1908 these had been delimited (if not always demarcated) in a series of international agreements[88].

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[84] For the career of Kasa Haylu (or Kasa Maru from his place of origin) from Qwara, to Gaffat, and finally to defeat and suicide at Maqdala see Rubenson (1966) (1976), Crummey (1969) (1971) and contributors to Taddese Beyene *et al.* (eds) (1990). He was crowned *negusa negast* in 1855 in Gondar.

[85] See Zewde Gabre-Sellassie (1975), Taddese Beyene *et al.* (eds) (1990), and Rubenson (1976).

[86] See Marcus (1975), Darkwah (1975).

[87] Cf. Rubenson's Map 5 of the extent of Menelik's territorial claims in 1891 (1976:316), and Holcomb & Ibssa's sketch map of Abyssinian conquests in 1897 (1990:73-4 Map 15).

[88] With French Somaliland (Djibouti) in March 1897; British Somaliland (June 1897); Italian Eritrea (1900); Anglo Sudan (1902); British East Africa (Kenya) 1907; and Italian Somaliland (1908). The series of maps in appendix incorporate international boundaries essentially based on these agreements (except for the annexation of Eritrea from 1960 to 1991).

At the outset of this short period, the overwhelming majority of the polity's populations had been, like their rulers, Orthodox Christian speakers of the two major languages descended from a common semitic linguistic ancestor[89], Amharic and Tigrigna. A little over forty years later, the old Abyssinian populations of Orthodox believers, whilst still providing the majority of its rulers, and the cultural type to which those rulers uniformly conformed, constituted only a minority of the Ethiopian Empire's subjects. With the expansion, modern Ethiopia was constituted as a 'mosaic' of multi-ethnicity, no more a 'nation-state' than any of the other products of colonial conquest which pressed around it to fill the African continent[90]. The diversity of the new state's populations encompassed culture, economy, and language, with 'about a dozen Semitic languages, 22 Cushitic, 18 Omotic, and 18 Nilo-Saharan' (Bender *et al.* 1976:13)[91]. It extended to religion, with each of the four major categories of animism/Paganism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity well represented in this 'region of religious confusion' (Trimingham 1965:15). Trimingham further observes, as many have done, that this was a diversity 'in keeping with [Ethiopia's] morphological and climatic conditions' (*ibid*.:5)[92].

After the drive towards a unitary centralised state under Tewodros II, which brought to a close the fragmented 'Era of the Princes' (or *Zemana Mesafent*, 1769-1855, see Abir 1968), Yohannes IV's approach to centralisation was different, envisaging a 'loosely united Ethiopia, with autonomous regional rulers under an emperor exercising benevolent political suzerainty' (Bahru Zewde 1991:60). Competition between two of these rulers, Menelik of Shoa, and Tekle Haimanot of Gojjam, particularly over the control of lucrative long-distance trade routes to the south, was an important factor precipitating subsequent southward expansion and conquest. The battle of Embabo in mid-1882 at which Menelik defeated his rival (Caulk 1975),

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[89] See Donham Map 2 (2002[1986]:19). Hetzron & Bender (1976:25) discuss whether Ge'ez and the modern languages 'had a common ancestor shared by all of them', suggesting links between the whole range of modern Ethio-semitic languages. See also Ullendorff (1955) and Leslau (1957).
[90] The several mono-ethnic colonial possessions carved from Somali areas also fell short of the nation-state model, becoming subject to irredentist rather than secessionist pressures (Touval 1963).
[91] Bender's figures include the languages of Eritrea.
[92] Trimingham identifies four principal regions: the Ethiopian-Kaffa plateau, the Eastern Rift valley, the Somali-Oromo plateau, and the central massif between these two last. Donham (2002[1986]:17-8)

opened up the south-west to his troops, at the same time securing his eventual succession of the Tigrayan emperor. Menelik's victory at Chalenquo in early 1887, a year before Yohannes IV's death in 1889, had the same effect in the east, paving the way for his conquest of Harar and the Hararghe highlands (Caulk 1971a, 1971b). His defeat of the Italians at Adua in 1896, which forestalled the colonial counter-threat from the north, completed the triangle of military victories, which 'were crucial in establishing Shewan hegemony over the Abyssinian north and in conquering the south' (Donham 2002[1986]:23).

Coming to power in Shoa, Menelik inherited a prosperous region with traditions of autocratic leadership (Bahru Zewde 1991:45), which had already expanded to control neighbouring Shoan Oromo populations under his grandfather Sahle Selassie (r.1813-1847) (Marcus 1994:65, Bahru Zewde 1991:61). Menelik's suzerainty had extended to encompass Gurage areas even before his defeat of Tekle Haimanot at Embabo. Between 1882 and 1886 his forces moved west to conquer Nekempte, Qellam (Gambella), Jimma and the other Gibe river states, and Illubabor, as well as south-east into Arsi, where they met greater resistance but eventually prevailed. After the defeat of Harar in 1887, the kingdom of Welaiyta finally fell to Menelik with great bloodshed in 1894, providing foot-soldiers for further brutal pushes west into Kaffa (defeated 1897), Konso, Benishangul, and Asosa, and east into Bale and the Ogaden. Maji in the southwest, Borana in the far south, and the Afar sultanate in the northeast were added over the course of the subsequent decade (Map 1 shows the situation at the time of Menelik's death in 1913) [93].

This process had two consequences of long-term significance for subsequent patterns of ethnicity and power in Ethiopia. Firstly, the new empire's rulers were, whether by assimilation or inheritance, Abyssinians (*habesha*), and specifically Amharic-speaking Christians: they forged a system under which, in many parts of its newly expanded territories to the south, class and ethnic divisions coincided, establishing a

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notes that 'the territory […] was not a haphazard collection of ecological zones created only by the fiat of colonial powers', but to largely skirts the edges of the highland plateau.

nexus or coincidence of potentially conflictual dynamics. Secondly, power shifted south, reflecting the new economic interests of Ethiopia's Shoan Amhara rulers now based out of Addis Ababa. Up to this point Tigrigna-speakers had regularly wielded power over large areas of the Abyssinian core, dominating them as recently as Yohannes IV's period. The bifurcation of the northern highlands with the cession of *Mereb Mellash*[94] to the Italians, a deal initially 'signed' at Wichale, and sealed in the wake of the battle of Adua[95], seemed to render Tigrayan loss of power to the Shoan Amhara dynasties irreversible.

The empire in the north: 'identity jilted'[96]

> *Welamo sil abiet abiet*
> *Sidamo sil abiet abiet*
> *Gamo sil abiet abiet*
> *Tigre gorebetegn yetalian gorebiet*
> (Welamo answers yes, Sidamo answers yes, Gamo answers yes,
> But Tigray, the Italians' neighbour, gives me grief.)
> (attributed to Menelik II, cited by Bureau (1993:iv) drawing on Baeteman (1929:1063))

Ethiopians have long speculated about three possible explanations for Menelik II's failure to capitalise upon his victory over the Italians at Adua, drive the Italians out of *Mereb Mellash*, and reunite the Tigrigna-speaking part of the Abyssinian core[97]. They are, firstly, a fear that his absence during a potentially extended campaign in the north would encourage rebellion in the (much more lucrative) south; secondly, his dim view of the prospects of success; and finally the Machiavellian determination often attributed to him permanently to weaken his northern rivals (Gebru Tareke (1996[1991]:232n25); see also Marcus (1975:176). In the north, Menelik II's

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[93] Different authors give different dates. Although Holcomb & Ibssa (1990:73-4) provide a visually impressive chronological series of maps of the 'invention' of the empire state, dates given here follow Bahru Zewde's unsurpassed synopsis (1991:ch.2).
[94] the territory 'beyond the Mereb River' – meaning Eritrea.
[95] 'paradoxically Adwa was both a negation and an affirmation of Wichale' (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:41). Post-Adua a new treaty was signed clarifying Italy's recognition of Ethiopian independence. For the debate between Rubenson and Giglio on the question of Italian intentions at Wichale and discrepancies between the Amharic and Italian texts, see Rubenson (1976:385n415).
[96] The title of Alemseged Abbay's study of 'the divergent paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalist struggles' (1998), an invaluable resource, couched in less convincing theoretical terms.

decision has long been a thorn in the side of Tigrayan nationalists: the seminal instance of Shoan perfidy, which only served to entrench the resentment that had already grown up at his ouster of Yohannes IV's son Mengesha from the imperial succession (cf. Rubenson 1976:368). A key figure in shaping northern Ethiopian perspectives of this period has been that of Ras Alula and his 'struggle to maintain Tigrean hegemony under Yohannes IV and then to preserve its autonomy under Shoan dominance' (Erlich 1996[1982]:xi). His rise to become Yohannes IV's governor in Eritrea (1877-1887), his failure to preserve Tigrayan hegemony, or create a common Eritrean-Tigrayan alliance against Menelik on Yohannes' death (1889-92), and finally his acceptance of Shoan hegemony under Menelik (1894-1897), continue to resonate in the north, albeit with different effect on either side of the Mereb River.

Whatever Menelik II's intentions in the period after Adua, the bifurcation of the Tigrigna-speaking highlands had a profound and immediate impact, converting

> a region which might (once in a while, anyhow) provide an emperor, into one in which local notables squabbled for local prizes, and in the process rendered themselves increasingly dependent on either the colonial authorities in Asmara, or the Shoan emperor in Addis Ababa. (Clapham (1988:205-6), also cited by Alemseged Abbay (1998:21-1))

As if to add injury to imperial insult, much of Tigray was devastated between 1888 and 1892 by an exceptionally severe rinderpest epidemic and famine (Richard Pankhurst 1966), which affected a large part of Sudan and East Africa. Its impact may have strengthened Menelik's southward impetus (healthy cattle from newly-incorporated Harar and Bale were distributed to those affected), and curbed his resolve to pursue Ethiopian interests in Eritrea post-Adua (food supplies in the north being at a premium) (Bahru Zewde 1991:71). In Tigray however, the much-'remembered' dark days of the famine, have become conjoined in the popular imagination with the advent of rule from Amhara Shoa (interviews, Tigrayan farmers, Sheraro area, November 1988).

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[97] Bahru Zewde singles out Gebre Egziabher Gila Mariam as particularly 'unsparing in his criticism of Menelik' (2002:66,134).

There is considerable debate as to the historicity of such an 'ethnic' interpretation of these events in Tigrayan and Amhara areas at the end of the nineteenth century. Whilst Adhana Haile Adhana asserts that 'Amhara' and 'Tigrayan' were political rather than ethnic categories at the time (1998)[98], Alemseged Abbay adduces evidence from the following two decades strongly suggestive of the 'ethnic' flavour that these categories had, as 'the political power of the Amhara was accompanied by their cultural hegemony' (1998:45). This may be an instance where the set of conventions attaching to what we now think of as ethnonyms was either shifting or multiple.

Whatever the conventions which were attached at the time by various sections of the two populations to the two categories, the writings of Tigrayan Gebre Hewet Baykedagne (1912) and Amhara Afewerk Gebre Yesus (1901), indicate that they were well established in common use - unsurprisingly given the clear juxtaposition of the two written language blocs – and often involving a degree of animosity or competition. The 'virulently anti-Tegréan sentiments' and 'unjustified vituperation' with which Afewerk wrote, elicited a 'sober criticism' from Gebre-Hewet, commenting on the 'impoverishment of [Tigray], the migration of its people, and the rampancy of banditry, largely a result of the political disarray that had ensued in Tegray after the death of Yohannes at Mätämma' (Bahru Zewde 2002:133).

The division often resonated powerfully in the period since the two wrote. Gebre Hewet's correlation of the impoverishment of Tigray region with the advent of Amhara rule, has become a central precept of the nationalist movement in Tigray, as discussed in Chapter V. Meanwhile, the title of the first Amharic novel, *Tobia*, written by Afewerk, has, during the 1990s, become better known as the name of a leading anti-government private newspaper. The complicated period between the battle of Adua, and Mussolini's occupation of Ethiopia in the run up to the Second

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[98] Cf. Teshale Tibebu's comparable contention that 'Amhara and Galla were not ethnic terms. Amhara was a metaphor for power (and the person identified as such could as well be an Oromo from Shawa, a Gurage, a Tigrayan), and Galla for the relative lack of it, (a shorthand for the conquered 'others'). For Muslims, Amhara meant a Christian with a gun' (1995:45).

World War, provided numerous instances of patriotism and treachery on the part of Amharas and Tigrayans, as elites from either side of the border switched sides, often more than once. This history has provided an abundance of accusatory material sufficient to show that each of the two ethnic communities was more or less loyal to the Ethiopian state than the other[99].

During the period after the Battle of Adua, then, the Amharic language became entrenched as the language of administration of the Ethiopian empire state, under its new Shoan rulers[100]. The main impact of the cession to Italy of *Mereb Mellash* was politically to divide and to weaken the Tigrigina-speaking highlanders vis-à-vis their Amharic-speaking neighbours to the south, removing them from the centre to the edge of the polity. For the time being, little otherwise changed in what was now a relatively peripheral and impoverished part of the empire: Tigrayan elites retained local powers under Menelik, and traditional arrangements governing land and taxation were barely modified.

The empire in the south: neftegna, gebbar, *and slave*

> The expansion that established the present borders of Ethiopia also sowed the seeds of future conflict. While Abyssinia had been a relatively homogenous state with deep Christian roots, the newly acquired territories were inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups among whom Islam predominated. (Markakis 2000:8)
>
> New sources of conflict were also created. By alienating lands of the annexed societies and thereby reducing them to servitude, and by imposing on them Abyssinian culture, the conquerors planted the seeds for national and class antagonism. (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:40-1)

The northerners who moved south with Menelik II as the conquered country's new rulers, came from a situation in which the overwhelmingly dominant majority (of a relatively homogenous population) were adherents of Orthodox Christianity, and

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[99] Thus, for instance, those who resent Afewerk's anti-Tigrayan sentiments are keen to stress his 'fulsome espousal of the Fascist cause' (Bahru Zewde 2002:57), whilst the ranks of Tigrayan elites of the period provide numerous examples of similar perfidy. Consciousness of such issues, of course returned with a vengeance during the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war.

[100] Yohannes IV had already tried 'to avoid becoming a parochial Tigrean monarch. Amharic, not Tigrinya, was made the official language at his court' (Erlich 1996:2).

semitic language speakers (of Amharic or Tigrigna); they were members of a highland socio-economic system in which Muslim minorities, Falasha adherents of an early form of Judaism, and pockets of speakers of the indigenous Cushitic Agaw language Himtanga, were all marginalized politically, socially, and economically. Non Orthodox Christians were barred from holding political office, and Muslims denied land rights. Many of these norms were now imported south, as Menelik II's Shoan Amhara and Amharicised Oromo followers were installed in positions of authority over the newly-subjugated territories, settling on land they were granted, and as local elites were encouraged to join the ranks of the new ruling group.

Bahru Zewde (2002:132) documents how Tedla Haile, writing in 1930, suggested there remained three alternatives for dealing with the southern peoples[101]: enslavement and expropriation, assimilation, and indirect rule. Whilst Tedla's recommendations focus on assimilation, elements of all three strategies were vigorously pursued. Areas which succumbed to Menelik without resistance retained a degree of autonomy based on a form of indirect rule through existing elites, who paid an annual fixed tribute to the Emperor. These included kingdoms and sultanates at Jimma, Nekempte, Qellam (Gambella), Asosa and Benishangul, Awsa in Afar, and parts of Gojjam (Bahru Zewde 1991:86).

Those areas, meanwhile, which had put up a fight against incorporation, saw the imposition of so-called *gabbar-malkagna*[102] relations transferred from the north. The heavily extractive Abyssinian system of multiple appropriation of labour and 'surpluses' was extended south, divested of the complex arrangement of hereditary land tenure safeguards which had underpinned it in the north. The conquered lands now 'came under the jurisdiction of Menelik's generals, providing them with the

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[101] He also details the 'cursory and unscientific ethnographic survey of the country' on which Tedla's views are based, which is a salutary reminder of the knowledge base of the time.

[102] There is an enormous literature on the operation of this system, its relation with traditional land tenure patterns in the north, and the extent to which both should be understood as a 'feudal arrangement'. See Crummey (2000), Cohen & Weintraub (1975), Allan Hoben (1973), McCann (1987), and Ellis (1976), whilst Fullerton-Joireman (2000), Markakis & Ayele Nega (1978) and Stahl (1974) deal more explicitly with the period after the Second World War. Bahru Zewde (1991:87) gives, I think, one of the most succinct and best summaries of the system which the Abyssinians exported and adapted to the south at the end of the nineteenth century.

source for both their wealth and their military strength. […] officials and retainers of the governors were then assigned a number of *gabbar* commensurate with their rank […] rang[ing] from 5 to 100' (Bahru Zewde 1991:88). This system encompassed most of the newly conquered territory, and included Kafa, Illubabor, Borana, parts of Shewa, and Harar(ghe). In the south, then, the traditional northern role of *malkagna* (representative, patron) was played by military settlers from the north, who came to be known as *naftagna*.

Not content with the expropriation of labour, surplus produce, and (gradually) land from the newly created southern *gabbars,* the new ruling class also took labour in the form of slaves. A long-standing endemic slave trade was given new impetus by the extension of Ethiopia's borders: 'in the absence of effective and responsible administration, Menelik's incorporation of new areas only tended to accentuate the predatory tendencies of the ruling class and the soldiery' (Bahru Zewde 1991:92-93).

Each of these strategies had implications for the constellation of ethnic groups vis-à-vis the state and state power. Whilst some groups were targeted for slave-raiding[103], others were reduced to a tenant- or serf-like status, the full implications of which only emerged later in the twentieth century, when land began to be appropriated in large volume (the effects of the changes in the system of land rights were initially obscured and mitigated because those who took land needed peasant labour, so that the process did not immediately result in widespread alienation). The elites of some other groups, meanwhile, emerged as a minority whose status, livelihood, and culture became increasingly and entwined with the emergent cultural, religious, military, and political dominance of the Shoan Amhara Christian aristocracy.

> By absorbing the traditional polities Menelik was able to construct a broader social base to the imperial state. […] A new dominant class that was trans-ethnic and transregional was definitely emerging parallel to the evolving state society. […] As subordinated ruling groups in the occupied territories accepted Christianity and became fully dependent on

[103] These were often identified on the basis of phenotypic features. The Amharic term *shanqala*, commonly translated as 'slave', was long used to refer to the people of the periphery, distinguished by their black skin and height, features of which Abyssinian culture continues to be acutely conscious.

> the imperial state for the conditions of their reproduction, they lost their organic ties to indigenous communities. (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:40-1)

Those who wished to join the ranks of the powerful were absolutely required to demonstrate their loyalty to the empire by means of a specific set of cultural credentials. Although many members of the new ruling class were not Amharas from Shoa, they were increasingly required to behave as if they were, conforming closely to a set of stereotypical cultural features and markers. These included fluency in the Amharic language, adherence to Orthodox Christianity (often involving the change of Muslim or other personal names to Amharic ones with a Christian meaning), and the adoption of a set of norms of Abyssinian codes and styles. Assimilation was not a matter of choice: it was sanctioned in ways which made it essential.

> The religious conversion of ambitious local leaders was encouraged by means of incentives for adherents of Orthodox Christianity (public office, the economic benefits of the state, land and property rights) all denied to non-believers. (Markakis 1987:73-4)

> Baptism into Orthodox Christianity, then, provided an effective and vigorous focal criterion for testing, securing, and marking the loyalty of southern elites, providing in one go the 'religious foundation, which blended together faith, state, and nation' (*ibid.*:73). Whereas in the north, religion had proved a 'unifying ideology, [it] now became a divisive factor in the multicultural state' (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:41).

Woven around this hegemonic cultural core, a reinvigorated series of myths of origin and legitimacy of the state was now fashioned from the 'ancient' fabric of the conquering polity's long ancestral lines on the highlands. Where its resources proved threadbare, traditional warp was supplemented with elaborately manufactured new strands of weft. It was around this time, for instance, that the narrative of the Solomonic origins of the imperial dynasty in the *Kebra Negast* ('Glory of Kings') was revivified, and reworked to stress the primacy of Shoa. All manner of imperial paraphernalia was introduced in the period in question, including much now commonly regarded as ancient in origin, including for instance, the adoption of 'the the lion of Judah […] as part of the Imperial styles, [which] is of no great antiquity' (Ullendorff (1968:11), drawing on Rubenson (1965)). Such refashioning and

fabrication has, of course, complicated contemporary perceptions of historical continuity.

'Talking to butterflies'[104]*: ancient Abyssinia in the present?*

The processes of unification and expansion described above undoubtedly reflect a combination of internal and external dynamics, in the context of the European scramble for Africa. The dynamics and interpretation of imperial expansion remain controversial, and two central controversies are as follows. Did Menelik II's conquests reunite territories which had previously (and, by implication, properly) formed a part of, or at least rendered tribute to, historical Abyssinia, or should they be considered as acts of colonial aggression no more justified than the adjacent projects of aggrandizement undertaken by Europeans? Secondly, and relatedly, should these conquests be lauded as key to the survival and consolidation of an independent African giant, a beacon for nationalist aspiration across the continent, or decried as evidence of African complicity in an extractive form of 'dependent colonialism' (Asafa Jalata 1993) whose iniquities have yet to be reversed, leaving us today with the few disgraceful remnants of unfinished, albeit 'internal', colonial business?

These questions – less queries of historical fact than calls for normative judgements about legitimacy, justice, and 'proper' reparation of damage – have been debated for well over a generation in Ethiopia. Answers to them often serve as shorthand means of marking out the respondents' positions on a host of political issues, including their views of ethnic federalism, and rely on the accumulation of supporting historical evidence either way. Given the complexity of the historical processes involved, there is, of course, no shortage of material to bolster any number of interpretations associated with the two views. The current account is concerned less with weighing up the facts, or assessing the antiquity of each claim, than with tracing the processes by which the questions, and the views which prompt them, emerged.

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[104] 'There was never a Queen like Balkis, From here to the wide world's end; But Balkis talked to a butterfly, As you would talk to a friend […]'. (Rudyard Kipling, quoted by Ullendorff (1968:143))

Regarding Eritrea, Calhoun has remarked that 'arguments over antiquity matter rather more in appeals to external audiences' (Calhoun 1997:132n8), presumably because less proximate audiences work with more schematic categories of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' claims[105]. This fact undoubtedly goes some way to explain the vigour these arguments have enjoyed in the Horn of Africa. If those fighting for or against self-determination from the Ethiopian empire state in the recent period had an important external audience, so too did Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II before them, surrounded by European colonial ambitions. Performative statements about Ethiopia's antiquity and extent –claims which attempt to bring into being what they assert – have a long history in the region. Performative success was – as ever – greatly enhanced by the perceptible exaggeration of the right and proper 'natural' truth of what was claimed. Thus

> Ethiopian emperors often made extravagant claims, […] Menelik himself surpassed them all by declaring to the European powers his intention 'to re-establish the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia up to Khartoum, and as far as Lake Nyanza with all the Gallas'. (Markakis 1974:23, quoting Rodd to Salisbury, 4 May 1897 (F.O.1/32))

Menelik II's 'more modest' 1891 claims were widely published in a circular: not content that their written assertion would fix colonial beliefs about Ethiopia, 'the wily ruler dispatched his soldiers […] to establish proof of control and pre-empt rights of possession' (Markakis 1974:24-5). In the event, it was nevertheless the written agreements (inherently more easily 'documented' and better 'known' amongst decision makers than the situation on the ground) that formed the basis for demarcation.

Fuelled by Menelik's rhetoric and the enthusiasm of the Church, the tradition took root that imperial expansion sought only the rightful return to highland populations of areas from which they had only been expelled during the period of Ahmed Gragn

[105] Sorenson (1993) contrasts the 'narrative constructions of history and identity' of Eritrean nationalists (relying on 'more recent historical emphasis' (:49) and appeals to international law (:186)) with those of Ethiopian unionists (the historicity of Greater Ethiopia in antiquity (:40ff)). His useful discussion succumbs to the temptation to judge relative 'authenticity'.

(r. c.1526-1542) and the subsequent Oromo incursions (usually dated from movements into Bale beginning in the 1520s). That is seems clear that Menelik II pushed the frontiers of the Ethiopian state to areas beyond the reach even of the renowned medieval empire-builder Amda Tseyon (r. 1314-1344), or the maximal limits ruled by Zera Yacob (r. 1434-68), did nothing to shake this belief.

Polemical emphasis on modern Ethiopia's continuity with the ancient polity correlates with what is often a perennialist focus on the continuity of Abyssinian cultural norms and socio-economic circumstances. Not surprisingly, therefore, it also draws on academic assertion of such continuities, particularly where these assertions are incautious enough to lend themselves to the interpretation that both the particular set of continuities selected for analysis, and their cultural contents, are in some sense 'right' in virtue of their 'truth': 'valid' in its widest sense.

The work of Donald Levine (1974, 1965), and Harold Marcus (1994) has come in for particular criticism along these lines[106]. Levine's later work rejects the 'erroneous view that before the conquests of Menelik II in the late nineteenth century the other peoples of Ethiopia had lived independent and self-sufficient lives' apparently not least on the circular grounds that this view 'fails to provide any leverage for getting at the properties of the larger Ethiopian system directly' (1974:21): by positing 'Greater Ethiopia' as a 'single societal system' (1974:69), and documenting pan-Ethiopian traits common to its groups of citizens, Levine is able to prove it such. The work is something of an exemplar of the performativity of categorisation. A core problem for Levine and Marcus' approaches is that they attempt to 'read off' a 'correct' classification of the nature of Ethiopia from 'the facts of the matter'; thus for Marcus Ethiopia's people have 'natural allegiances', its peasants uniformly share a 'historical connection to the state', such that any development which

> encourage[s] the break-up of the larger nation […] will give way inevitably to renewed national unity as the logic of geography, economics, tradition, and political culture once again come to dominate politics. (Marcus 1994:xiv)

[106] Although much of the ethno-nationalist literature associated with the Eritrean or Oromo causes, is at least equally guilty of flat assertions of truth, and 'true' political interpretation.

Such assessments neglect the problem that any preferred classification of Ethiopia will remain under-determined by 'natural' facts, and its preference and performance a matter of convention rather than correspondence. There is nothing inevitable about the evolution of conventions, whatever the weight of 'logic' of the circumstances in which they evolve. Even those few slices of the history of the population(s) of an area as large as modern-day Ethiopia over the period since the Queen of Sheba, which have been researched and documented, are rich enough to resource any number of interpretations. What is clear is that the interpretations which have survived and dominated have done so primarily because they have had influential patrons. In the period under question, the newly-established imperial state, evidently keen to boost its credentials, was, by a significant margin, the most influential.

Inflaming the nexus: waking after a thousand years[107]

> The imperial state was founded on an explosive conjunction of antagonistic class and ethnic divisions that made it inherently unstable. To stabilise it, the state administration […] became highly centralised and bureaucratised, and Ethiopia built the largest army in black Africa (Markakis 2000:7)

> 'We remind you finally that all of you are by race, colour, blood and custom, members of the great Ethiopian family'. (Speech given by Haile Selassie I in the Ogaden in 1956, *Ethiopian Observer* December 1956, cited in Healy (1983:99))

This section explores the factors and processes which contributed to emergent resentment amongst various of Ethiopia's ethnic populations regarding the 'ethnocratic' rule to which they were subject. These include the experiences of different groups during Italian occupation and the Second World War; attempts by Haile Selassie I to curb the authority of regional aristocracies; the expansion of the education system, and of employment opportunities in the extended government bureaucracy; and a series of regional and local rebellions in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It suggests again the contingency of the 'effect of the facts':

although the imperial arrangement which placed southern groups under northern rule was forged in the 1880s, it became controversial only when significant relevant 'patterns of knowledge' supported such controversy; it was not the iniquity *per se*, but its shared categorisation as such which provoked a reaction.

New categories, new experiences: Italian occupation and British administration

In the period from the 1890s to the early 1930s, then, successive Ethiopian regimes under Menelik II (d. 1913), Zewditu (r. 1913-1930) and Haile Selassie II (r. 1930-1974), had worked to establish the legitimacy and integrity of the situation in which the multi-ethnic Empire was ruled and 'unified' under an Abyssinian state. The five-year period of Italian occupation of Ethiopia from 1936-1941, along with British involvement and the process of disposal of Italy's colonial possessions during and after the Second World War, introduced either the experience or the possibility of a range of alternative administrative and sovereign arrangements. A number of factors associated with the Italian occupation had significant effects relevant to the subsequent relationships between ethnic groups and the state.

Firstly, the Italian conquest demolished the inevitability, and undermined the 'divine' Solomonic credentials, of two generations of Abyssinian rule. This was compounded by the ignominious circumstances of Emperor Haile Selassie's flight into exile. Secondly the Italian occupation presented many of Ethiopia's subject peoples with an alternative experience of imperial rule, from which a number drew comparisons unfavourable to the emperor's return. A third factor exacerbated the trend: an Italian policy of divide and rule, which 'to facilitate the conquest' deliberately sought 'to foment internal discord and warfare' pitting Ethiopia's subject races against the Amhara regime, from the 1936 Maichew campaign onwards actively offering a range of inducements (Sbacchi (1985:36), Greenfield (1965:230)). In particular, Italian hopes rested on Ethiopia's non-Amhara and Muslim populations: thus

[107] Cf. Gibbon (1899). His 'misleading […] but by no means wholly inept commentary on the isolationist tendencies of the times [the Middle Ages]' (Pankhurst 1961:390) provides the Ethiopian *locus classicus* of a 'metanarrative of the nation' extrapolated to encompass its citizenry.

> Oromo oppression under Amhara domination became the central theme of Italian propaganda and of de-Amharization campaigns. Amharic was displaced as the legal language; and Arabic, Oromonya and Kaffinya were taught in schools. (Sbacchi 1985:160)

Despite the Italians' best efforts Oromo 'nobles and ordinary people were perplexed and disoriented' by the conquest, and remained 'mistrustful' (*ibid.*:161). Eminently more reliable was the response from Ethiopia's Muslims who 'gave the Italians unconditional help in return for the Italian government's support of their religion and institutions' (*ibid.*:161). Poor relations with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were a function of Italian attempts to curry favour with Ethiopian nationalist sentiment by removing it from the orbit of Alexandria (Perham 1969:124). More importantly, however, they reflected Italian support for Islam, of which Mussolini sought to present himself as a regional champion. The period of occupation saw an intensive programme of mosque construction, and a number of schemes for the establishment of centres of Islamic study and propaganda (Sbacchi 1985:36,162-4). As a result, many of Ethiopia's Muslim and non-Abyssinian populations recount with nostalgia the relatively favourable conditions they or their antecedents enjoyed during the Italian period. Italian development of infrastructure, driving roads into previously inaccessible areas, and drilling wells amongst pastoralist groups, particularly to the benefit of Ogadeni Somalis, impressed many.

A number of communities were, then, unenthusiastic about the return of Abyssinian imperial rule, and there were even doubts and new ideas amongst those who resisted Italian rule. A republican patriot movement, for instance,

> argued for the unity of all patriots. […] It advocated a federalist approach to accommodate the diversity of Ethiopia's constituent regions. (Bahru Zewde 1991:175-6)

Encouraging such views was a fourth significant factor: the most important of the various administrative arrangements of the period incorporated a strong correlation between sovereign or administrative unit, and language area. Thus, for instance, when the six territorial governorships of Italian East Africa (Map 4) were established

‘ethnic principles were applied in dividing the territory’ (Sbacchi 1985:85)[108]. Sbacchi goes on to observe that

> the main Italian concern was the elimination of the Amhara’s claim to superiority over other populations. [They] framed the division of Ethiopia into Governorships in such a way that [this] hegemony was eliminated. Employing Amhara in government offices and using the Amharic language in non-Amhara territories was prohibited (*ibid.*:159)

The establishment of the six governorships of Amhara, Oromo-Sidama, Harar (including Arsi), Somali, and Eritrea (including Tigray and ‘Danakil’) sought to take into account ‘traditional laws, customs, religion, and language’:

> This was difficult to achieve. […] The principle of providing unitary ethnic local government […]proved to be unworkable. Administrative boundary lines cut across ethnic groups. Next to the ethnic principle, the geographical criterion was adopted, followed by economic interests. […] the principle of political opportunism prevailed, rather than the ethnic one, although the latter was followed when possible. (*ibid.*:86)

The significant parallels between ethnic federalism in the 1990s, and Italian administrative arrangements in the 1930s have drawn little or no comment in the recent period[109], a fact which presumably reflects the considerable continuing reticence relating to the period of Italian conquest: parallels with occupying fascism could be expected only to exacerbate the resistance of pan-Ethiopian nationalists in 1991, and were hardly likely to enhance the legitimacy of the incoming transitional government. Nevertheless it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Italian period provided important and widely known and experienced precedents, which must have had a bearing on the politicisation of ethnicity over the subsequent period. Centralised Abyssinian rule was no longer the only option, the single ‘prominent solution’, but had to be explicitly fostered and bolstered to exclude an alternative political solution, which the Italians had not only elaborated but also imposed and implemented all too clearly. The fact that the possibility of alternatives to centralised

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[108] Differentiation of the ‘Amharic parts’ of Ethiopia from the other parts of the empire had already formed a basis for Mussolini’s demands to the League of Nations in late 1935 (Sbacchi 1985:17).
[109] Gebru Tareke (1996[1991]:48), who also draw on Sbacchi, is an exception.

Amhara rule did not neatly disappear with the defeat of the Italians simultaneously proved and exacerbated the impact of these precedents.

A fifth factor, and one which does seem explicitly to have exacerbated nationalist investigation of alternatives to the restitution of Shoan imperial rule, is a thread of ambivalence in both Italian and British policymaking of the period, alternating so-called 'Shoan' with 'Tigrayan' policies. The Italians, in the run up to the invasion, had pursued a twin-track policy, attempting to sow disaffection amongst the Tigrigna-speaking populations, whilst adopting a conciliatory approach to the Ethiopian government. The post-Italian British Military Administration in Eritrea, and ambiguously mandated administrative involvement in Ethiopia[110], perpetuated this ambivalence, continuing to administer Tigray from Asmara rather than Addis Ababa[111]. Divergences between the British Foreign and War Offices meant that British policy wavered between the restitution of centralised rule from Addis Ababa, and the amalgamation of Tigray with Eritrea, establishing a so-called 'Greater Tigray'[112]. Meanwhile, intense and fragmented political activity and lobbying in support of a multiplicity of potential fates for the various parts of Eritrea characterised Eritrean politics in the decade from 1941 up to its federation with Ethiopia in 1952 (Trevaskis 1960).

Ripples from these occasionally violent uncertainties also affected Ethiopia, with revolts in eastern Tigray; western Oromo leaders forwarding a petition to the League of Nations for a separate protectorate pending independence; and the British continuing to administer the rich Haud pastureland inside the Ethiopian border, exacerbating violent conflict over grazing access between the Ogaden and other Somali clans, until as late as 1954. It took what Greenfield has called 'two decades of intrigue' (1965:ch.15) for Haile Selassie to attain anything like the autonomous,

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[110] See Greenfield (1965:271) and Bahru Zewde (1991:178-183) on the 'mutilated' nature Ethiopian independence under Anglo-Ethiopian agreements of 1942 and 1944.

[111] 'British plans for both Eritrea and the Ogaden […] amounted to a perpetuation of the administrative divisions set up during the Italian Occupation' (Bahru Zewde 1991:181)

[112] The 'Tigray-Tigrigne' project (see Trevaskis (1960), Erlich (1986), and Tekeste Negash (1997)). Vaughan (2000) discusses its resonance in subsequent Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalism.

stable, centralised arrangement he sought, and many of the fault lines exposed during the period of the Second World War and its aftermath remain problematic.

The subsequent influence of this disrupted period has perhaps been under-investigated in relation to ethnic federalism. It was, after all, the first time in which the possibility of modern administration of Ethiopia on the basis of 'the ethnic principle' was not simply mooted but extensively implemented via a local administrative system of 'residencies' (Sbacchi 1985:ch.11), which directly affected the lives of the majority of its subjects. Amongst many of Ethiopia's Muslim and peripheral populations it left a memory of comparatively better treatment at the hands of the state which remained well nourished and alive amongst descendant communities in 1991.

Curbing the old regional elite: imperial centralisation…

Commentators agree that 'the basic policy of Haile Selassie [was] a centralising one' (Clapham 1966:90, cited in Schwab 1972), continuing the tradition of 'the great centralising emperors from 1855 onwards' (Clapham 1988:27).

> It was to be the major historical achievement of Hayla-Sellase that he finally succeeded in realizing the unitary state of which Tewodros had dreamt (Bahru Zewde 1991:140).

During the reign of Zewditu, in his role as regent, Haile Selassie had accumulated a range of powers, embarking in the process on a power struggle with the conservative forces of the traditional elites. In the period up to 1930 he had met and faced down early challenges to his increasing powers from the regional aristocracy.

A year after his coronation *negusa negast,* in 1931 Emperor Haile Selassie declared a new constitution which 'set up the juridical framework of emergent absolutism' (Bahru Zewde 1991:140). This gave the emperor absolute powers to appoint and dismiss the nobility, to administer justice, and grant land and other honours. The nobility meanwhile, lost their independent authority also in foreign relations, the acquisition of arms, and warfare (*ibid*.:143). Imperial determination to curb the

power of the regional elites continued in the post-war period. A new regional administration established after 1941 provided for 14 provinces (*teklai gezat*), around 100 counties (*awraja*), and 600 districts (*wereda*). Haile Selassie kept a firm rein on the power of the regional aristocracy, regularly shuffling them from place to place, and gradually bureaucratising the central government. Thus

> Haile-Selassie continued where the Italians left off in reducing them to dependence on the centre. (Clapham 1969:67)

Whilst using the aristocracy to 'maintain connections between the central government and the more traditional sectors of the state' (*ibid.*:71), the emperor conferred increasingly few senior titles (*ibid.*:67), and allocated positions of greatest influence to those whom he had himself raised to high office, rather than to members of the nobility (*ibid.*:68).

For the first time in Ethiopia's history, Haile Selassie had succeeded in curtailing the power of Ethiopia's regional elites, and with it the autonomy of her regions. A professionalised national bureaucracy and army performed the functions traditionally carried out under shifting alliances of decentralised fiefdoms nominally subservient to the 'king of kings'. In order to fill these structures, in an era of modernisation, Emperor Haile Selassie needed educated administrators. His reign, then, saw the dramatic expansion of education in Ethiopia, in what was perhaps the single most important socio-political transformation of the period.

…and bureaucratisation: educating a new elite.

> The Emperor is certainly the hub of the government, but he is far from being the whole of it; for to further his policy of centralisation, and to carry out the new and complex tasks involved by modernisation and administrative expansion, he has had to recruit a ruling class of administrators and politicians – aptly termed 'the new nobility'. (Clapham 1969:64)

After the Battle of Adua, Ethiopians had begun to go abroad for education, or benefit from mission schools or educational facilities in neighbouring Sudan and Eritrea. In 1908, towards the end of the reign of Menelik II, the first modern school in Ethiopia

was opened in Addis Ababa, followed in 1912 by the Alliance Française schools in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa. During the decade after the establishment of the Teferi Mekonnen School in Addis Ababa (1925), schools began to be opened in different parts of the country. A further increase in the numbers of Ethiopians sent abroad during the 1920s produced a class of educated Ethiopians prominent in state administration in the post-Italian period. The development of education not only trained personnel to staff the growing state apparatus, but also 'disseminat[ed] ideas of change' (Bahru Zewde 1991:109). It established a class of young people sufficiently educated and experienced to begin to understand the iniquitous basis on which the imperial state was established. Where these individuals also happened to be assimilated members of the ethnic groups most disadvantaged by the arrangement (as increasingly), they began not only to understand it, but resent it.

Bahru Zewde's recent study of the 'reformist intellectuals of the early twentieth century' gives a flavour of the intellectual 'exuberance and vibrancy of the 1920s', during which the association – even collaboration - between Haile Selassie and various of the intellectual group, constituted 'a fascinating experiment in social and political reform' (2002:210-211). This was an experiment to which the Italian invasion and occupation put a stop. Whilst many of the older generation of intellectuals went into exile, a majority of its younger members were executed by the Italians, creating 'a generation gap in the intellectual and political history of the country' and contributing to 'the drab intellectual climate that marked the post-war period' in which 'the educated elite saw its mission as one of loyal and dedicated service rather than engagement in social and political critique' (*ibid.*:211).

As a result, 'the first fifteen years after the Liberation were dominated by divisions between largely traditional forces, notably the nobility, and the personal *protégés* of the Emperor' (Clapham 1969:87). This situation gradually shifted as educated politicians worked their way through the ranks of government, such that 'since 1961, most of the important ministers have been men with advanced education' (*ibid.*:88). Simultaneously, the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration and the Ministry

of Finance, along with the emperor, the major forces representing the centralisation of the political system' (Schwab 1972:138). The educated elite, however, had not

> scaled the 'commanding heights' of the political system, which are still held by a man, who, whatever his claims to be a moderniser, is very far from them in outlook; and they have not so far provided that driving force which is what the government most obviously lacks. (Clapham 1969:91)

All appointments and decision-making continued to centre upon the person of the emperor, so that with his removal in 1974, the only group with sufficient organisational capacity to replace his rule was the army.

The language of instruction

> The strength of a country lies in its unity, and unity is born of [common] language, customs, and religion. Thus, to safeguard the ancient sovereignty of Ethiopia and to reinforce its unity, our language and our religion should be proclaimed over the whole of Ethiopia. Otherwise, unity will never be attained [...] Amharic and Ge'ez should be decreed official languages for secular as well as religious affairs and all pagan languages should be banned (Sahle Tsedalu, Memorandum, Ministry of Pen Archive 29.11.25/1.8.33, quoted by Bahru Zewde 2002:140)

When the first of Ethiopia's schools opened in 1908, teaching was in French, since no materials existed in Ethiopian languages. After the liberation Amharic was made the language of instruction in the first two school grades, and a decade later, as materials were produced, was used throughout primary education. Competence in Amharic and English were compulsory requirements for the school leaving certificate, and for entry to Addis Ababa University College, which had been established in 1950. This gave Amhara children

> a distinct advantage over the rest. Furthermore, the *neftegna* tended to congregate in towns where secondary education was available, and their children had an advantage there as well. The result was grossly uneven ethnic representation among university students. (Markakis 2000:11).

Meanwhile, missionaries were required by law to learn Amharic and to use it as the language of instruction in mission schools. Although they were allowed to translate the bible into local languages, they were required to use the Ge'ez alphabet, with

contradictory effects: at once 'spreading familiarity with the alphabet of the dominant language' and, by disseminating local languages in written form, providing 'a significant catalyst in raising the consciousness of ethnic identity and solidarity' (*ibid.*:11).

Rebellion and regionalism

The middle decades of the twentieth century, after the liberation from Italian occupation, saw a series of regional or local rebellions in different parts of Ethiopia: the *weyane* rebellion in eastern Tigray in 1943; the eruption of Bale between 1963 and 1970; the uprising in Gojjam in 1968; disturbances in Yejju in Wello in 1948 and 1970; and the uprising in Gedeo in 1960. Whilst these disturbances are often bracketed together (, in fact they have little in common as to origin, cause, duration, form, or participants. Whilst few of these instances drew, at the time, on an explicitly or widely-shared ethnic rationale[113], the precedents of local, non-Shoan resistance to Shoan rule they constitute, have offered potentially resonant resources to subsequent generations of ethno-nationalists.

The *weyane* in Tigray (further discussed in Chapter V below) seems to have arisen when administrative corruption and greed ignited a situation of existing instability and insecurity, and one awash with weaponry in the wake of the Italian defeat. In the case of Bale, the measurement of land, which began in the early 1950s, had reduced peasants to a serf-like status; new measurements and taxes in 1963 triggered widespread alienation which was fed by Muslim antagonism in the face of the venality and arrogance of Christian settlers and overlords. The longevity of this uprising was also a result of its entanglement with the cause of Somali irredentism, and the involvement of the so-called Western Somali Liberation Front, which had been established with cross-border support soon after the independence of Somalia from colonial rule in 1960, to fight for that end.

[113] The Bale case perhaps comes closest.

Gojjame resistance was initially triggered when a new Shoan governor tried unsuccessfully in 1950 to increase taxation in the province, which had, to that date 'successfully resisted pressures from the political centre' (Bahru Zewde 1991:216). When increases were again attempted at the end of the following decade, resistance was this time suppressed with force. The Yejju and Gedeo cases similarly seem to have their roots in fears of, or actual land alienation, and associated taxation.

Whilst Bale offered 'ideal grounds and location for effective guerrilla warfare [being] peripherally located and inhabited by distinct ethnic groups' (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:200), few of the other cases offered the potential for sustained and threatening opposition to the central government. Two factors seem to have operated as triggers for a shift in the nature of opposition to the imperial regime, which thereafter could gradually be seen to operate more or less at the national level. These were the attempted coup of 1960, and the annexation of federated Eritrea, effectively completed with the imposition of Ethiopian law the previous year. Whilst the coup attempt of Mengistu and Germame Neway was relatively easily suppressed at the time, and Haile Selassie succeeded in having the Asmara parliament vote away its own autonomy, seeds of a different level of dissatisfaction had been sown in each case. Of the various groups amongst whom these seeds took root, the growing body of students at Haile Selassie I, later Addis Ababa, University, was the most important.

The Ethiopian student movement and the 'National Question'

> Teferi, do not teach these children of the poor or else they will sit on your head. (advice given Haile Selassie I by Kassa Wolde Mariam, HSIU President 1962-1969, cited by Balsvik (1985:244)).

The dynamics of the increasingly active and radical student politics of the last 15 years of the imperial regime remain deeply contested in Ethiopian political circles; few of the students' preoccupations is more vigorously contested than that referred to by its Marxist label as 'the National Question'. Until recently, almost all of the political organisations and movements which had fought over the Ethiopian body politic since the 1970s, including many of those which continue to do so, could and

often did trace their roots back to the student movement, or could identify its strong influence upon them. Political fissures which continue to divide Ethiopians can in many cases be traced back to student debates in the final years of the imperial period: to divisions between generations, cliques, or diaspora groups of activists; or to disputes over ideology, analysis, or the application of either to different aspects of the Ethiopian situation, then as now.

The rise of the Ethiopian student movement constitutes a watershed in modern Ethiopian political history: it was arguably as transformative of the political culture and ideas of Ethiopia's elite as Menelik II's expansion had been of its political space. Many of the events that followed in its wake proved equally bloody. In the absence of political parties and strong associational life, the 'students emerged as the most outspoken and visibly the only consolidated opposition group', constituting 'a disproportionately large section of what could be called the bearers of public opinion' (Balsvik 1985:xiii). Remarkably 'the social and political awakening of the Ethiopian students [was] a spontaneous self-accomplished process achieved in a situation of great isolation' and 'an environment hardly conducive for its development' (Markakis 1974:358).

The movement's critical significance is no doubt responsible for the extraordinary levels of popular mythology which have surrounded it ever since. It has been credited or damned with responsibility for just about everything that has happened in Ethiopia since the early 1970s. On the other hand, neither the students, nor the various political organisations descended from them, came to power after 1974. Rather, as briefly discussed in Chapter V, the military seized power, establishing a regime which rapidly turned on and consumed most of the major successors to the Ethiopian student movement, during the Red Terror of the late 1970s.

This fact has perhaps further deepened the romanticism, often uncritical and idealised, with which the heady student period (a sort of 'age of innocence') has often subsequently been viewed, particularly amongst Ethiopian diaspora communities. What had always been internecine struggles amongst the more

committed student factions became, after the rise of the *Dergue*, literally deadly. The deaths of so many have undoubtedly further constrained the ability or willingness of survivors to analyse the experiences of their 'generation' (Kiflu Tadesse 1993, 1998; Babile Tola 1989). Those who had an interest in formulating a critique of the student movement in order to learn from its mistakes, and further their struggle in opposition, often did not survive to tell their stories[114]; those who escaped were often silenced by the bitterness or guilt of longevity; those who remained in Ethiopia by the ongoing imperatives of survival.

With the exception of Balsvik's remarkable outsider's work (1985), both political and academic analysis of the student movement remained relatively fragmented for most of the *Dergue* period[115]. The efflorescence of official political enthusiasm for it in and since 1991, suggests that its emotional, ideological, and strategic pull had remained strong. Not for the first time, the change of government in 1991 provoked a new consideration of the student movement's legacy, not least by a new regime keen to lay claim to it. The EPRDF has repeatedly emphasised its debt to those elements of the Ethiopian student movement, who first elucidated notions of self-determination of nationalities within the Ethiopian empire state, and laid the ideological basis for political mobilisation on the basis of 'nationality'. In 1991 other members of the Transitional Government joined them in averring that it was only then – twenty years later – that the student movement was finally 'coming to power'[116].

In this post-1991 reconsideration, Walleligne Mekonen, author of the November 1969 article 'On the question of nationalities in Ethiopia', emerges as a focus for singular veneration. A well-established narrative holds that it was in his terse analysis that the national question burst onto the scene, fully formed and endorsing

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[114] The more realistic – albeit not always dispassionate - analyses of the student movement have come from survivors in this category. Gebru Mersha's unsentimental account (1987) is a good example.
[115] Other pre-1991 work includes Alem Asres (1990), Ambaw Ayele (undated MS), Babile Tola (1989), Fentahun Tiruneh (1990), Gebru Mersha (1987), Getachew Wolde Meskal (1984), Hagos Gebre Yesus (1972) (1977), Legesse Lemma (1979), Melaku Tegegne (undated MS), Beyene Negewo (1977), Tesfaye Demellash (1983), Teshome Gebre Wagaw (1982).
[116] Comment made by Tesfaye Habisso, July 1991 Charter comment (English translation of the ETV video soundtrack of the proceedings, Assefa Gezahegn for the author, June/July 1994).

self-determination up to and including secession, transforming Ethiopian politics forever and at a stroke. Like most oft-repeated political mythologies, this one is a considerable oversimplification. Although the contribution of Walleligne's paper does indeed seem to have been fundamental, it emerged from a collective accumulation of experiences, discussion, and thinking over a period. It is the purpose of this section to trace and explain the main dynamics of this development, both before and after Walleligne.

I have already noted that the dynamics of the student movement and its application of Marxist analysis of the problem of nationalities are deeply contested. An alternative account, which has grown up over the intervening decades, can be cited as a good exemplar of this. According to this version, also a distorting simplification, the application of the National Question to Ethiopia was not the true-bred child of the Ethiopian student movement at all, but the illegitimate offspring of Eritrean secessionist nationalism of the time. Far from reflecting bitter experiences and genuine concerns with the governance of all parts of the Ethiopian state, the argument continues, discussion of the self-determination of nationalities within the student movement represented nothing more than the success of a subtle campaign of manipulation by Eritrean activists, designed to distort and subvert the radical movement in the furtherance of their own secessionist objectives. But for a few Italian-influenced Eritrean die-hards, this line continues, the issue probably would never have arisen, and certainly would not have merited the attention it received. The conclusion of this argument is, of course, that without these pernicious alien influences of 1960s internationalism, an Ethiopia 'decapitated' of Eritrea would not now 'languish' under ethnic federalism at all.

This is an assessment often put forward since 1991 by the incumbent government's opponents, not least with a view to divesting the ruling party of an important domestic component of its ideological pedigree, and undermining the legitimacy of its flagship political project. It has been fed by the form of much of the literature on Ethiopia written between 1974 and 1991, in which, if index entries for the national question appear, they habitually signal discussion only of Eritrean moves for

independence from Ethiopia. It is true that Eritrean nationalism played a significant role both in raising and shaping discussion of the national question within the student movement. It is one which has, however, usually been assumed rather than investigated.

The following account considers in turn: the process of overall radicalisation of the student movement; the way in which a concern with 'regionalism' gradually emerged, culminating in explicit discussion of, and disputes over the National Question; and various of the factors which may have influenced this process: the competing impulses of modernism and traditionalism; ideological influences; and the roles of diaspora politics and the Eritrean nationalist struggle.

Radicalisation of the Student Movement

> There is no doubt in my mind that some of our students increasingly view themselves as political persons [...] (Memo from HSIU Dean James Paul to HSIU President Kassa Wolde Mariam, 6 October 1966, quoted by Balsvik (1985:169))

Balsvik identifies five phases in the 'steady radicalisation' (Bahru Zewde 1991:222) of the Ethiopian student movement. These cover what she calls 'challenges to authority' from 1958 to 1962; 'demands for participation' from 1962 to 1966; a period of confrontation between 1967 and 1968; the 'revolution that failed' in 1969; and the prelude to the subsequent change of government from 1970-1973. Radicalisation over this period was extremely rapid, as reflected by the evolution of student publications:

> In 1956 the editorial in the first issue of the student paper invited students to write articles on any topic 'except politics and religion' [*University College Calls*, 1 (1), 1956]. In 1968 an editorial in *Struggle* [2 January] stated: 'the basic role of the university students in our country is to make the masses conscious of the suffering they are enduring resignedly'. (Markakis 1974:358)

Balsvik summarises a set of factors influencing this set of changes. The impact of modern western education was clearly key, as was the way student opposition was

affected by ‘the anti-colonial, nationalist emancipation process in Africa’ (1994:86), influenced by: the proximity in Addis Ababa of the OAU; the presence of several hundred scholarship students from other parts of Africa from the end of the 1950s; and the revelation at the Addis Ababa UNESCO conference on education in 1961 of Ethiopia’s poor record vis-à-vis other African countries. A third factor was the global ‘flowering of political activism in the student environments of the 1960s’ along lines that were ‘anti-imperialist, anti-American, anti-authoritarian, and inspired by Marxist theory’ (*ibid.*:87). Here the influence of left wing publications, radical Peace Corps volunteers, and an extremely active diaspora were important. Finally, the repressive response of the government ‘did more to gather the students behind the protests than any ideological or factual arguing could ever have done’ (*ibid.*:89). Popularity born of repression was compounded by the regime’s tendency to vacillate between beating student demonstrators, and ‘encourag[ing] them to petition the Emperor’. The tactic of closing the schools ‘invariably backfired, since the government was obliged to seek ways to lure the students back [and] accept embarrassing compromises which served to embolden its youthful opponents’ (Markakis 1974:360).

Every compromise reinforced the visible fallibility of the ‘divine’ imperial regime. The government’s failure to address the students in political terms was exacerbated by indecisive university authority. Opinion varies as to the role of the numerous foreign members of the university teaching staff. According to Balsvik ‘many were authoritarian and paternalistic, and few took student involvement seriously’ (1994:91). Andargachew Tiruneh meanwhile claims that

> a lot of the school and university instructors from the West were sympathetic to and, in the case of the Marxists among them, advocates of the trends within the student movement. (1993:135-6)

The situation was presumably, as everywhere, that the instructors, whether Ethiopian or foreign, were not a uniform body.

As a result of this constellation of factors, the mid-1960s saw the beginning of the ‘really militant phase of the student movement’ with ‘the emergence in 1964 of a radical [under cover] core known as the ‘Crocodiles’’:

> the students' uncompromising opposition to the regime, as well as the beginning of acceptance of Marxist ideas, is traceable to this period. (Bahru Zewde 1991:223)

Evolution of concern with 'regionalism'

Discussion about the national question was slower to emerge onto the students' rapidly radicalising agenda than a range of other less controversial issues. This reflects a policy climate in which 'the nationality issue was a taboo subject, and even after years of fighting in Eritrea and elsewhere, was not part of public discourse' (Kiflu Taddesse 1993:52).

> The Ethiopian government avoids any reference to ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, and […] also actively discourages non-official inquiry in this field. (Markakis 1974:51n.3)

As a result of imperial dissemination of the Amharic language, the assimilation of non-Amhara populations to Amhara culture and religion throughout the twentieth century, and university admissions policy, all students were fluent in Amharic. In addition to date and place of birth 'University College of Addis Ababa cards also noted race, religion […], but by the time HSIU opened [in 1961] it was illegal to ask a person's ethnic origin' (Balsvik 1985:43). Kiflu confirms that most students were hostile towards 'the political assertion of ethnicity'.

> Student writing extolled Ethiopian nationalism, a sentiment perceived to transcend all other identities and loyalties'. […] The Abyssinian nature of Ethiopian nationalism and identity was taken for granted. No mention was made, for example, about the neglect of all other languages in favour of Amharigna, or the identification of Ethiopia with Christianity. (Kiflu Tadesse 1993:52)

In the early 1960s student support for unity could be taken for granted. Students wrote in support of reuniting Eritrea with 'the motherland', and supported the war against Somalia in 1964. Such was the appeal of national unity that it could still serve as an effective brake on academic freedom (President Kassa Wolde Mariam *News and Views* 16 November 1962:2, cited in Balsvik (1985:116)). For several years, student publications continued to provide

> abundant evidence of enthusiastic pride in and loyalty to Ethiopia, even if toward the end of the 1960s there was a clear tendency to turn against the government's one-sided, pretentious propaganda about the country's past and present. (Balsvik 1985:279)

Even at the end of decade, a comparative study found Ethiopian students less likely to refer to tribal and regional identities than their African peers (Klineberg & Zavalloni 1969:241).

The first indications that the position of nationalities within Ethiopia was beginning to be regarded as complex and problematic came with a series of reflections on what it meant to be an Ethiopian, of which the best known is Ibsa Gutema's *Ityopyawi Man New?* ('Who is an Ethiopian?'), which won a poetry prize in 1966. In the same year, the university paper *News & Views* (30 April) carried an article by Haile Mariam Goshu reflecting on 'Ethiopianism' as 'transcend[ing] personal, tribal, and regional loyalties'. By the end of 1968, however, *Struggle* had adopted a more controversial – if still tentative - editorial line, stating, in Balsvik's summary, 'that although there was a feeling of nationalism in Ethiopia, it had not yet in the country as a whole or in the student body become stronger than the regional and tribal impulses' (1985:279).

Around 1967, then, it seems that the 'nationalities issue' began to be discussed in closed study circles of the more theoretically conscious students (Kiflu Tadesse 1993:53); it was also on the agenda at the 1967 meeting of the National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS). Various reasons are put forward as to why the national question became so important around this time. Four interrelated factors seem to have been in play: increasing criticism of the neglect of Ethiopian culture in the educational curriculum; burgeoning interest in Marxism-Leninism; diaspora discussion of the 'national question' at home; and the activities of Eritrean nationalists after 1960 (Balsvik 1985:278). Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

Also significant, however, were 'ethnic sentiments' and 'divisions' within the university which students 'acknowledged and deplored' (*ibid.*:279). An influential factor seem to have been the closure of the university boarding system after which 'students from the same school background and language group tended to find accommodations together', with the result that 'at the end of the 1960s almost half the dormitory rooms were occupied by students on the basis of ethnic connections'. (*ibid.*:279-80). This situation at once reflected and fostered the prominence of ethnic affiliation, and Tigrigna, Oromiffa, and Gurage languages began to be spoken on and around the campus.

Tension seems to have been developing between the three major student language groups: Tigrigna-, Oromiffa- and Amharic-speakers. In one instance it resulted in a 'serious fight involving these two groups of students [Tigrayan/Eritrean and Amhara] [which] went on for several days, reportedly on a 'tribal basis'' at the Laboratory School of the Faculty of Education in 1967 (Balsvik 1985:281; see also Kiflu Tadesse 1993:52). Oromo consciousness was rising around this time, in the wake of the banning of the Metcha-Tulama organisation in 1966, and no doubt fanned in the capital by the trial of its leaders in June 1968. On campus, 'radical Oromo groups were forming, led by student activists such as Baro Tumsa, Ababiya Abajobir, Zegeye Asfaw, and Yohannes Negewo' and 'a Tigray students' association […] existed unofficially in the university' (Kiflu Tadesse 1993:52)[117].

The University Student Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) presidential elections of November 1968 seem to have provided something of a trigger for more concerted, public, and bitter discussion of the nationalities issue amongst student leaders in Addis Ababa. Many expressed concern that the defeat of Tigrayan 'radical' Tilahun Gizaw by Amhara 'moderate' Mekonnen Bishaw was soured by 'ethnic politicking' through the hustings period, during which, the radical camp alleged, a whispering campaign had linked Tilahun with secessionist Eritrean nationalism (interviews, former members of the student movements, Addis Ababa, November 1997, Addis

[117] These developments are discussed in Chapter V.

Ababa and Mekelle, October-November 1998; cf. also Kiflu Tadesse 1993:52)[118]. The stakes were, of course, raised dramatically when, a month after his election as USUAA President the following year, and the simultaneous publication of Walleligne's article in *Struggle,* Tilahun was assassinated.

Explicit discussion of the National Question

> Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities, with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organisation and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? Is it not made of a people with a particular tongue, particular ways of dressing, particular history, particular social and economic organisations? Then may I conclude that in Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigrai Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation, the Sidama Nation, the Wellamo Nation, the Adere Nation, and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation. (Walleligne Mekonen 1969:4)

Walleligne Mekonen was an Arts undergraduate from Amhara Saiynt in Wello. His paper, over thirty years later, reads like a blueprint of the ideological position advocated by the TPLF/EPRDF. He proceeds to contrast the 'true picture' of Ethiopia he describes, with the 'fake nationalism' of the ruling class, based on Amhara/Amhara-Tigray supremacy which, since 'culture is nothing more than the super-structure of an economic basis', reflects the economic exploitation of the south by the Amhara/Amhara-Tigray *neftegna* system. Neither the impoverishment of Amhara and Tigre peasants, nor, he argues, the elevation of individual assimilated southerners to positions of influence does anything to undermine the facts of this situation, albeit the result of 'historical accident'. To change it, he says, 'we must build a genuine national state' in which

> all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, […] where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music, its history. [...] a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally. (*ibid.*:5)

[118] Mekonen Bishaw was, with Mesfin Wolde Mariam, one of two representatives of AAU at the 1991 Charter Conference. He was amongst those academics controversially dismissed by the TGE in 1992.

This is to be done not by military coup, and not by movements such as those in Bale or Eritrea, since 'they do not attempt to make a broad-based assault on the foundations of the existing regime'. Most controversially of all (and of great relevance to the constitutions of the 1990s), Walleligne went on to say, he did 'not oppose these movements just because they are secessionists. There is nothing wrong with secessionism as such':

> As long as secession is led by the peasants and workers and believes in its internationalist obligation, it is not only to be supported but also militarily assisted. […] We should never dwell on the subject of secession, but whether it is progressive or reactionary. A Socialist Eritrea and Bale would give a great impetus to the revolution in this country and could form an egalitarian and democratic basis for reunification. […] In the long run, Socialism is internationalism and a socialist movement will never remain secessionist for good. (*ibid.*:6-7)

In putting a distillation of radical student discussion on this issue on paper, Walleligne's article not only shattered taboos on the discussion of nationalities within the empire state, it also wrenched a profound shift in the frame of reference of the domestic student movement which had, in public, essentially advocated Ethiopian unity. In positing an independent Bale the paper undoubtedly sounded absurd or naïve to many (interviews, former students, Addis Ababa, November 1997, October 1998). Its power lay in forcing its readers to think the unthinkable: the issues raised by peripheral nationalists in Eritrea and the Ogaden were now brought straight to the heartland of the empire state. Walleligne's article had challenged the integrity and sustainability of the mythology of imperial unity just as effectively as the 1960 coup, and the nationalists' challenges, had demonstrated the possibility of shaking its physical inviolacy.

Walleligne's article also played a significant role in the transformation of student politics into the seedbed for a series of radical political organisations. The paper defined both the purpose such an organisation might fight for, and also a possible organising principle: the equality and autonomy of nationalities. The paper is couched not so much in theoretical terms as in the practical political terms of 'what

we must do' and 'how we must do it'. As such it marked a crucial turning point for the domestic student movement from activism to action.

Factors associated with the emergence of the nationality issue

Modernist versus traditionalist dynamics within the Student Movement

A number of authors have commented on the ways education tended to alienate Ethiopian students from their background. Donham (1999) suggests a fundamental ambivalence in the attitude of Ethiopian students towards modernising processes during the *Dergue*, one which was at once imitative and hostile, proud of Ethiopian identity, and embarrassed by Ethiopia's backwardness.

> Modern education imbues [the student] with admiration and longing for such secular values as enlightenment, progress, equality, efficiency, and prosperity which he finds manifestly lacking in his world. The realization that Ethiopia lags behind most other African countries in the drive for development comes as a painful shock. (Markakis 1974:188)

'Strong dissatisfaction with education in Ethiopia' began at the Sixth Congress of the NUEUS (Balsvik 1985:240), fuelled by high levels of student failure because of language deficiency, and the irrelevance of a university curriculum (Markakis 1974:1988) poorly designed to convince Ethiopians to work in the countryside (Ginzberg & Smith 1966:115-6). Students were concerned that

> the schools had failed to transmit *culture* and *heritage* and to imbue the student with an *identity*. Opposition was voiced to foreign educational advisers who were incapable of devising solutions to Ethiopian problems and seemed to have created a system designed to destroy Ethiopian culture. (Balsvik 1985:240)

The 'mini-skirt riot' of March 1968, where (male) students disrupted a campus fashion show they claimed exemplified 'cultural alienation, moral degradation, [and] western imperialism' (Kiflu Tadesse 1993:46), exemplifies these tensions. Frustration was regularly directed at the Ethiopian Orthodox church, whether from a Marxist rejection of religion, or from those who had joined the *Haimanote Abew* ('faith of our fathers') Student Association to denounce neo-colonialist influences,

and the failure of the official church to engage with populations in the south. On the one hand 'the fact that many activists felt Ethiopian identity was somehow connected to the tradition of the Orthodox Church means that this view had not yet become controversial'. Meanwhile, however 'the clandestine circulation of Oromo proverbs and songs shows that there were definite signs of a search for identity on the part of Ethiopia's subject peoples' (Balsvik 1985:242).

A factor of far-reaching significance was the programme of Ethiopian University Service, under which, from 1963 onwards, students spent a compulsory year 'work[ing] in the field for the purpose of establishing contact and rendering service to essentially rural communities for the purpose of aiding national welfare and improving student understanding of local community needs problems and developments' (Balsvik 1985:141, citing EUS handbook). Initial student reluctance shifted to enthusiasm after the first year, with student recognition of the need for teachers in rural areas, and the establishment through the 1960s of 'links of solidarity and communication' between the EUS student teachers and their secondary school student pupils.

EUS was envisaged by the university establishment as a mechanism for diffusing ethnic sentiment, and a deliberate policy of sending students to areas other than their home regions was adopted, in an attempt to foster pan-Ethiopianist loyalties in the face of emergent regional nationalisms (interview, former University Dean of External Affairs, Mekelle, October 1998). In the event two much more significant results of the programme were expanded student knowledge of situations in different parts of the Ethiopian empire, and the establishment of an effective network of links with the high school student body throughout the country. The radicalising impact on both groups rapidly became apparent, and from 1969 the service component of EUS was reduced and students 'given increased workloads to discourage outside activities' (Balsvik 1985:145). The widespread disruption of schools in 1969 suggests that these moves probably came too late.

In giving members of the student movement firsthand experience of life in different parts of the empire, the EUS programme was seminal. Most students' knowledge of the problems confronting Ethiopia's peasants remained sketchy, however, and many have concluded that the movement's 'appraisal of the internal Ethiopian situation left something to be desired'. Rather, it was 'swept off the ground […] by European ideologies and organizational models' (Andargachew Tiruneh 1993:29-30), in 'an uncritical, hasty, and impetuous emulation of [ideological] currents then in vogue' (Gebru Mersha 1987:31).

Ideological influences on the emergence of the national question

> Marxism was presumed to be an unchallengeable truth […] it generated a mass hysterical loyalty. Many did not read it […] they were obsessed by it. (Dawit Wolde Giorgis 1989:10-11)

Marxist thought exercised a strong influence on the students, and the large Marxist-Leninist corpus on the National Question formed an essential component of their ideological 'curriculum'. Two different strands, or 'applications', of the National Question in the Marxist Leninist tradition are often identified (Blaut 1985, Davis 1969)[119]. Stalin's 1913 treatise on 'Marxism and the National Question' provided an approach designed to resolve the national question within a multi-ethnic empire such as the Soviet Union. Lenin's writings, meanwhile, provided a broader theoretical approach to the questions of self-determination and nationalities in an era of imperialism, which found particular resonance in anti-colonial situations. Both strands were studied, argued over, and often conflated by the various factions of the Ethiopian student movement, and many of the divisions which emerged reflected divisions in the perspectives on the nature of the process by which the Ethiopian empire state had been established. Central to Marxist-Leninist approaches were the commitment to the right of secession for appropriate units in the context of socialist emancipation.

> The union of states must take place voluntarily, 'on a truly democratic, truly internationalist basis, which is *unthinkable* without the freedom of

[119] Walker Connor's 1994 account does not distinguish between them, being sympathetic to neither.

> separation.' [Zinoviev & Lenin 1930[1915]:373] 'A socialist of a great nation or a nation possessing colonies who does not defend this right is a chauvinist' [Lenin 1930[1915]:235]. (Davis 1967:195)

The question for Ethiopian radicals, then, was whether or not the empire state incorporated colonies or fully-fledged nations, and, if so, whether those advocating their secession were 'socialist' forces deserving of support. Eritrean, Ogadeni, and (increasingly) Oromo nationalists favoured the categorisation of their secessionist claims as 'Colonial Questions', deserving, in Lenin's terms, rights of self-determination. Those with a stronger commitment to the authenticity of empire were drawn to the Stalinist preference, whilst accepting self-determination, for regional autonomy over 'national cultural autonomy'[120]:

> Stalin found that national-cultural autonomy was undesirable for several reasons. First, national-cultural groups are inter-class groups, in which proletariat and bourgeoisie are supposed to find more in common with each other than with the people of their respective social classes in the rest of the population. Nationality, he declares, is a bourgeois principle. (Davis 1967:163)

I do not go into the niceties and sophistry of the ideological debates which took place in Ethiopia, other than to comment that they did not reduce the ambiguity and range of possible interpretations as to the 'correct' application of Marxist-Leninist principle to particular cases, and particular nationalist movements in practice. They lent ample resources to all of the parties to pre-existing divisions amongst activists, and spawned new factions. Since a series of separatist 'national questions' was being fought out in various parts of the empire state, debate focused on whether or not these should be supported, and under what circumstances. For all its fire and vigour, Walleligne's seminal paper, for instance, stopped far short of clarity on the immediate practical problem of whether or not the Eritrean Liberation Front should receive support from the students.

Diaspora politics

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[120] Lenin also described Bauer's national-cultural autonomy as 'an opportunistic dream picture of people who have lost the hope of building consistent democratic institutions' (from 'Theses on the National Question' (1913), quoted by Davis (1967:164)).

> [The student movement] had two distinct components: the external and the internal. (Bahru Zewde 1991:222)

Diaspora students were able to operate with greater freedom and better organisation outside the constraints imposed by the Imperial regime. More controversial topics like the National Question were first discussed outside Ethiopia. Ideological influences from the Soviet Union and China reached Ethiopians at North American and Western European universities, members of the Ethiopian Students' Union in North America (ESUNA) and the Ethiopian Students' Union in Europe (ESUE). 'Distance, and better access to revolutionary literature, uncensored', and less preoccupation with 'day-to-day realities' (*ibid.*:225) meant that the diaspora groups developed more coherent and sophisticated theoretical analyses than those at home; and indulged the luxury of acrimonious infighting over them.

Major divisions over the national question took place in the international arena. Two months before the publication of Walleligne's paper, the ESUNA congress in September 1969 had debated a series of four presentations on 'regionalism' in Ethiopia, by leaders who represented a generation of activists slightly older than the radicals in Addis Ababa[121]. As a result of this debate the congress adopted a series of resolutions, which

> condemn[ed] regionalism as an inseparable part of our opposition to feudalism and imperialism [and] oppose[d] all separatist movements since their objective is contrary to the Ethiopian people's emancipation from feudalism and imperialism. (ESUNA (1970) *Challenge*, **10** (1) 58)

Any chance that the differences between those advocating the principled right to secession and the ESUNA position could be mediated and reconciled by discussion, was abruptly terminated with the publication of a paper by 'Tilahun Takele'[122].

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[121] The papers, by Andreas Esheté, Hagos Gebre Yesus, Alem Habtu, and Melesse Ayalew, were published in *Challenge* **10** (1), February 1970.

[122] The pseudonym was chosen to symbolise 'two generations of opposition to the Hayla-Sellase regime': the Black Lion Takele Welde-Hawaryat, who opposed the emperor from the moment he went into exile in 1936, and the student leader Tilahun Gizaw, who had been murdered in 1969 (see Bahru Zewde 1994). The paper is assumed to have been written by the radical student group which set up in Algiers after their 1969 hijacking of an Ethiopian Airlines plane, under the leadership of Berhane Meskal Redda, who went on to lead the influential EPRP.

> Venom […] is the hallmark of the style injected into leftist politics by Tilahun. His intention was not to enlighten the ESUNA leaders; he was out to destroy them, to deny them any quarter in the ranks of the student movement. (Bahru Zewde 1994:490)

The paper's combination of abusive personal vitriol, and exclusive emphasis on the 'one true' understanding of the national question, set the tone for future intransigence and bloodshed between the heritors of the various factions of student politics. It advocated the recognition of the right of self-determination, including secession, of nations and nationalities within Ethiopia, concluding (with Lenin)

> if we demand freedom of secession for […] all oppressed and unequal nations without exception we do so not because we favor secession, but only because we stand for free voluntary association and merging as distinct from forcible association. (Tilahun Takele (1970:53), quoting Lenin 'A caricature of Marxism and Imperial Economism' *Collected Works XXIII*, p.67)

Tilahun Takele split the students, opened the door to support for the Eritrean nationalist movements, and 'chart[ed] an ideological trajectory whose full impact is being felt only today (Bahru Zewde 1994:483-4).

Eritrea: a precedent for nationalist struggle

> Struggle in Eritrea has given prominence to the manifold nationality problem in [Ethiopia] […] eventually, after a long and agonising consideration, the radicals came to accept the Eritrean movement on its own merits and, consequently, they explicitly upheld the unconditional right of self-determination for all nationalities in Ethiopia. (Markakis & Nega Ayele 1986:65-7)

Balsvik identifies the influence of the Eritrean liberation movements as the most important factor in raising concern with the national question amongst Ethiopian students: 'the mere existence of the conflict in Eritrea forced the[m] to take up the topic' (1985:278).

The relationship between the Ethiopian student movement and the Eritrean nationalist movement, particularly in its second incarnation following the establishment of the EPLF in 1971, was a recursive one. It is clear that from the annexation of Eritrea and annulment of the federal arrangement in 1959, there were

close links between the student bodies in Addis Ababa and the diaspora, and radicalisation in Eritrea. Thus for instance, the 'underground conglomerate of radical nationalism', the cultural *Mahber Teatre Asmara (MTA)* was established in 1961 by

> singers, composers, poets and university students returning from the Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa. MTA served as a recruitment centre and fund-raiser. It also provided an outlet for the frustrated population.[123] (Ruth Iyob 1995:102)

The rise of nationalist sentiment and expression in Eritrea coincided closely with the period of radicalisation of the Ethiopian Student Movement. A high point of this radicalisation - the massive Addis Ababa student demonstrations in 1965 for 'land to the tiller' - coincided with a three day strike of secondary school students in Asmara demanding a referendum on the future of Eritrea and the return of its jurisdiction over social and economic institutions (*ibid.*:105-6).

Many of those who split from the ELF to form the EPLF in 1971, had been members of the student movement in Ethiopia, acquiring much of the radical perspective they brought to the younger organisation[124]. The Eritrean question was an integral part and key catalyst of the discussion of the national question, but the emergence of the issue was not merely the result of manipulation by Eritrean nationalists. The fact that many EPLF nationalists emerged from the Addis Ababa student movement demonstrates that the inter-relationship between the two groups was complex.

Nevertheless, the International Union of Students' resolution of support for the ELF in Cairo in 1966 was something which Ethiopian students had to respond to. Most were strongly opposed to it, precipitating a resolution at the NUEUS Sixth Congress the following year affirming that Eritrea was an indivisible part of Ethiopia (Balsvik

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[123] Interestingly this form of cultural troupe later emerged as a potent instrument in the hands of ethno-nationalists groups in Ethiopia.

[124] Isaias Afewerki, for instance, had left AAU to fight with the nationalists in 1966; other leaders who abandoned their studies in Addis Ababa were Haile Mariam Wolde Tensaie, and Muse Tesfa Mikael. Amanuel Gebre Yesus attempted in 1969/70 to convince the other members of the Algiers group to fight in Eritrea, and his eventual departure to do so forced the others to engage with the issue.

1985:282). From then on, Ethiopian student opposition to Eritrean secessionism echoed in student politics[125]. As Balsvik summarises

> Strong concern for Ethiopian unity was expressed […] The official stand of NUEUS and USUAA seems to have been outright condemnation of the ELF up to 1968-69, whilst most Eritrean students favored it, but conditional support grew. (*ibid.*:283)

The fact of an armed struggle in Eritrea had two results. Firstly, it forced the student movement to confront the practical implications of principled support for self-determination, and to consider concrete resolutions for or against support to the Eritrean nationalist leadership. The support shifted when nature of leadership shifted, from the more conservative Muslim-dominated ELF, to the more radical, better-educated EPLF. It was, for instance, when the newly formed EPLF sent messages of solidarity to the student movement that it split over whether or not to provide support. Secondly, active Eritrean nationalism set a precedent for armed struggle against the imperial regime, which, when factions of students themselves considered the future of their struggle, provided exemplar of the organisation of a liberation movement, cradle for practical education of all kinds, including military training, and useful conduit to contact and support in the internationalist movement.

[125] As for instance, in Tilahun Gizaw's defeat in the student union presidential elections of 1969, mentioned above. 'Tilahun Gizaw and his supporters […] were accused of being agents for this or that secessionist organisation. According to *Struggle* and Tilahun Gizaw, "tribalism, ethnocentrism and localism" were exploited in the campaign and decided the election against Tilahun' (Balsvik 1985:282)

Chapter V. The protagonists of ethnic mobilisation

This chapter investigates selected developments relating to the status of Ethiopia's ethnic groups over the 17 years of the Military Marxist *Dergue* regime, which ousted the aging Emperor in September 1974, in the so-called 'creeping coup'. It documents, in particular, the emergence of the protagonists of ethnic mobilisation, and architects of ethnic federalism in 1991. It is arranged in three sections. The first briefly provides a contextual review of *Dergue* policymaking in relation to the nationalities issue, and the ongoing dynamics of state centralisation. The second looks at the origins, emergence, and ideology of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF, and the process of its reincarnation as the elder member of the EPRDF. The third section of the chapter traces the origins of nationalist sentiment amongst the Oromo and the origins and development of the Oromo Liberation Front, OLF. By 1991 the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF had emerged as the twin political and military forces poised to take over the state. In tracing their emergence and development, this chapter explores the processes by which ethnicity became one of the principle axes of political conflict in Ethiopia.

Context: the Dergue regime

Centralisation continued

The Provisional Military Administrative Committee (PMAC) and the *Dergue* constituted a group of 120 relatively young soldiers, ranging in rank from private to major[126]. 'Innocent of ideology and bereft of political programme' (Markakis 2000:15) they looked to the noisy urban influence of the students and intelligentsia, and rapidly adopted much of their radical Marxist rhetoric and revolutionary terminology. In response, the various political organisations, which had split as they emerged from the student movement, became further divided over whether or not to co-operate with the *Dergue*, with *Me'isone* (the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement)

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[126] See Clapham (1988), Gilkes (1982); Andargachew Tiruneh (1993), Halliday & Molyneux (1981). Keller (1991[1988]), and Ottaway M & D (1978) also cover the period in detail. Also of interest are Assefa Endeshaw (1994), Alem Abbay (1991), Giday Degefu Koraro (1987), Thompson (1975).

agreeing that it would, and the larger Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) opting to continue the struggle. The divisions seem to have been exacerbated by ethnic categorisations: '[I]n the popular perception, MEISON also came to be identified as a predominantly Oromo organisation, and EPRP as predominantly Amhara – perceptions that became self-fulfilling'. (Africa Watch 1991:102)

The most significant and rapid consequence of the new Marxist colouring of the military's approach was its almost immediate move to nationalise the economy, including rural and urban land, a move already proclaimed and pretty much implemented by the end of 1975[127]. Nationalisation of land 'destroyed the economic foundation of the imperial system and ruled out a return to the *status quo ante*'. Cultivators were given usufruct rights over plots divided roughly equally between them.

> Those who benefited most were the people in *yeqign ager* [conquered land, the south] who were freed from the exactions and services due to alien landlords. Most of the latter […] congregated in the towns, or returned to the region of their origin. (Markakis 2000:16)

Accompanying and facilitating the implementation of land reform was the *Dergue*'s dramatic innovation in local government, the introduction of the *kebele* (literally 'neighbourhood') system[128]. As a result of this system, Ethiopians were organised into urban dwellers' or peasants' associations 'each covering a defined territory and responsible for all the people in it', under its own administrative council and officers (Clapham 1988:131). *Kebeles*[129] came to assume powers over almost all aspects of Ethiopian life during the period of the *Dergue*, and constituted the tool by which the state was able to reach deep into every community. They still do. In rural areas, the early powers of peasants' associations included the distribution of land under the reform programme, and the establishment of judicial, trading, and administrative systems. These were extended by proclamation at the end of 1975 to include the

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[127] There is a large literature on the *Dergue*'s land reform. See, for instance, Dessalegn Rahmato (1984), Cohen & Koehn (1980), Ghose (1985), Clapham (1988:ch.7).

[128] Clapham traces its origins in the candidates' use of recognised *iddirs*, during the imperial period, to organise electoral support (1988:131).

establishment of 'peasant defence squads and agricultural producers' co-operatives' (*ibid.*:157).

In urban areas, *kebeles* were responsible for rent collection, judicial tribunals, and a range of social services 'under government supervision'. Their powers were also soon extended to encompass

> registration of houses, residents, births, deaths and marriages, and the collection of local taxes, whilst the public safety committee was empowered to 'carry on guarding and security activities in accordance with directives issues by the Ministry of Interior' [Proclamation 9 October 1976]. (*ibid.*:132)

The widespread implication of the urban *kebeles* in the bloodshed of the Red Terror[130] earned them a feared notoriety, the scars of which are still perceptible in local government relations. By the end of the 1970s, and now with Soviet advice[131], the Dergue had established an elaborate hierarchy of government premised on 'democratic centralism'. The government's extreme intolerance of opposition was vigorously defended in terms of the need to 'safeguard the achievements of the revolution'. The *kebele* system formed the outermost level of this centralised hierarchy, by means of which these 'safeguards' were bloodily implemented.

The overwhelming commitment to centralisation did not change with the introduction of the constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in 1987, which institutionalised the single party system of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE). The Dergue essentially retained the pre-existing regional

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[129] Although the term was associated only with urban areas during the *Dergue* period, it applies to both rural and urban units, and since 1991 has come to be applied again to both.

[130] Africa Watch estimates that 'well in excess of 10,000' were killed during the Red Terror (1991:101). 'The worst atrocities of the period' started in February 1977 when Mengistu 'labelled the EPRP [assassination] campaign the 'white terror', and Atnafu Abate promised 'for every revolutionary killed, a thousand counter-revolutionaries executed' [Lefort 1983:199]. The promised ratio was not to be much of an exaggeration' (Africa Watch 1991:102). By mid-1977 the EPRP had been effectively wiped out in the towns, and the *Dergue* turned on its erstwhile ally *Me'isone*, with further rounds of slaughter in October and December 1977, and through much of 1978. See Kiflu Tadesse (1998), Babile Tola (1989).

[131] The dramatic reversal of superpower alignment in the Horn followed Mohammed Siyad Barre's miscalculated attempt to reincorporate the Ogaden by force, sensing Ethiopian weakness in 1977. Moscow unceremoniously relocated its military advisers from Mogadishu to Addis Ababa.

administration system based on the *awraja* and *wereda*, simply renaming imperial *teklai gezat* as *kifle hager*, subdividing a number of units, shifting a number of boundaries[132], and declaring a range of nominally 'autonomous areas' (compare Maps 6 and 7). Whilst regional first secretaries of the party had some degree of autonomy, over, for instance, resettlement, the goal of the regime remained the 'centrally commanded and organised state – which it ha[d] inherited and sought to extend' (Clapham 1988:128).

Attitudes to nationalities

The incoming military regime was quick to denounce the Abyssinian chauvinism of its predecessors, and proclaim the equality of all nationalities and cultures in Ethiopia. The presence of Oromo Teferi Banti as second-in-command of the *Dergue* up to his death in 1977, and of significant numbers of Oromo in the ranks of the allied *Me'isone* and heading the land reform (so popular in Oromo areas), meant that 'the regime was often regarded as an Oromo one' in its early years (Clapham 1988:215)[133]. The *Dergue* promised the abolition of traditional customs which 'hamper the unity and progress of Ethiopia', and removed the official status (and much of the property) of the Orthodox Church whilst recognising Islam. It tolerated an upsurge in the printing, broadcasting and teaching of languages other than Amharic[134], and an enthusiasm for cultural diversity. At the political level, however, there was little room for manoeuvre.

> [In] the soldiers' perception 'national contradictions' [were] limited to the realm of culture. The overthrow of the feudal regime, [they] claimed, had ended national and class oppression, and guaranteed the equality of all peoples and cultures in Ethiopia. Consequently national contradictions no longer existed, only the legacy of cultural oppression remained. (Markakis 2000:16)

[132] The areas constituting *Simien* Omo, for instance, were brought under one region at this time. See chapter VII.
[133] Amongst those commentators to have taken this view are, for instance, the Ottaways (1978:84).
[134] The multi-language literacy campaign, which began in 1979, is discussed below.

The commitment of the new regime to the 'indivisibility of Ethiopian unity'[135] was never in question. The clearest demonstration that this was the case came with its abrupt confrontation of the nationalist campaign in Eritrea. When the ELF and EPLF rejected the attempts of the *Dergue*'s Eritrean Prime Minister, General Aman Andom, to persuade them to give up their goal of independence and join the socialist revolution, the parties went swiftly back to war[136].

Given its socialist credentials, and the long-running ideological debates within the Ethiopian Left over the issue of self-determination of nationalities, the *Dergue* had, nevertheless, to be seen to recognise these rights, and respect for them was enshrined in its 1976 Programme for the National Democratic Revolution.

> The problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded the right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. A nationality within its environs has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, to use its own language and elect its own leaders and administrators to lead its internal organs. (PNDR, 1976: part 2)

Dergue pronouncements were careful to refer only to nationalities, never to nations, which, in Marxist terms, might be expected to enjoy potential rights of secession and independence: these options were never in view. Even nominal self-government failed to emerge during the first decade of the regime. *Dergue* policy-making and propaganda made much of the cultural emancipation of nationalities, determinedly ignoring calls for corresponding political autonomy. Whilst in substance there was remarkably little change, the form of Dergue policy on nationalities, and the mythologies underpinning it, *did* mark a shift from that of Haile Selassie. An instance illustrative of the difference is the Dergue's appointment of chief administrators who originated from the regions in question, in an attempt to assuage regional disaffection[137]. These appointees found themselves simply 'caught between

[135] PMAC, 'Ten Point Programme' of late 1974.
[136] General Aman was killed on 22 November 1974, ending all possibility of conciliation in Eritrea.
[137] In contrast with imperial shuffling of regional elites (in all areas except Tigray), in a relatively successful attempt to break the regional ties of loyalty which underpinned traditional fiefdoms.

the centralisation of the regime, and the intensification of local opposition' (Clapham 1988:202).

As the centralising policy came under increasing strain in the late 1980s, and as part of the reforms that ushered in the PDRE and new constitution, the Dergue announced the establishment of a number of 'autonomous regions' in the more recalcitrant parts of the country (see Map 7). The arrangement was premised on the work of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN), which had been established on Soviet advice in 1983, to investigate the potential for a political structure along the lines of the Soviet model. In order to obtain the demographic data required, the regime carried out a population census in 1984, which incorporated enquiries about mother tongue and religious affiliation.

There were two notable shortcomings in the data. Firstly, it was incomplete, since it did not cover 'insecure areas' in Tigray, Eritrea, and the Ogaden. Secondly, census-takers and researchers encountered confusion about the ethnonyms by which various groups identified and classified themselves: some used names different from those used by outsiders or the government; others used clan or religious descriptions instead of ethnonyms. (Interview, ISEN member, Addis Ababa, November 1999). Many of these problems (and some of the categories identified at that time) continue to cause difficulties (see Chapter VII). Nevertheless, the census provided the major source of information for ISEN's researchers who, taking language as the criterion of identity, produced a list of 89 ethnic groups in the country (ISEN undated). ISEN members supplemented the census data with a number of visits to study different parts of the country at first hand, and considered the available ethnographic and socio-linguistic data[138].

ISEN's staff of around 20 people[139] worked under the close supervision of the political section of the regime, the Commission for Organising the Party of the

[138] They also made a number of study tours to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The relationship between Soviet ethnos theorists working under Bromley at the Institute of Ethnography of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and the work of ISEN would bear closer investigation.
[139] They were civil servants and academics seconded from Addis Ababa University.

Workers of Ethiopia (COPWE), as a kind of 'secretariat' to the official Constitutional Commission (interviews former ISEN members, February 1998, November 1998). Although much effort was invested in the elaboration of possible constitutional arrangements based on Ethiopia's ethnic groups, ISEN's researchers were under no illusions that ethnicity or the language criterion would guide the final arrangement.

> The Institute was expected to help 'resolve minor contradictions among nationalities', on the principle that 'chauvinism and narrow nationalism must be eliminated' [ISEN 1984a:9], and as these phrases suggest, the latitude open to it was slight. (Clapham 1988:200)

On the contrary, it was Mengistu Haile Mariam's declared view that 'what is to be done, should be done from the viewpoint of unity' (ISEN 1984b). Fortunately, the results of research demonstrated that only 30 of Ethiopia's 580 *weredas* could be considered monolingual (interview, ISEN member, Addis Ababa, 9 November 1999), and language-cum-ethnicity was happily abandoned in favour of more acceptable criteria associated with economic development.

In the constitutional blueprint that finally emerged[140], none of the larger ethnic groups was placed within the borders of a single administrative unit. Although the new constitution included provisions guaranteeing rights to cultural and linguistic expression (and indeed separate territory), the government was simultaneously engaged in resettling and villagising rural populations, processes of

> ethnic integration […] which will actively undermine the local enactment of rights and principles set out in the Constitution. This is perhaps the inevitable contradiction besetting the 'ethnic policy', based on the tension between declaration of rights and actual economic and policy measures. (Abbink 1991:12-13)

Meanwhile, nominal 'autonomy', was offered to a number of territories populated by those with 'a distinctive way of life and language', but also on the basis of a modicum of 'economic unity'. Most of the proposed 'autonomous areas' were also those where conflict was most intense, and where there was little or no risk of

anything being implemented. The proposals, which provided 'only the most formal and symbolic expression of local self-government' (Clapham 1988:204) were too little and too late. They fell far short of stemming what was now considerable centrifugal momentum, and, particularly in Eritrea, were greeted with scorn by the opposition movements. Of these movements, the TPLF, with its calls for full autonomy of nationalities within a democratised Ethiopia, was emerging by this time as amongst the most powerful. The following section explores this trajectory.

The politicisation of ethnicity in the north, and the emergence of the EPRDF

This section considers the operation of ethnicity as both resource and product of the emergence of nationalist sentiment in Tigray in the period to 1991. It is organised in six sub-sections. The first briefly recapitulates some of the factors associated with the origins of Tigrayan disaffection, a number of which have already been referred to in Chapter IV. Secondly, I discuss the so-called *weyane* rebellion of 1943, later 'reinvoked' to serve as both precedent and call to arms for the TPLF's nationalist struggle in the late 1970s. Thirdly, the section catalogues a number of the events which triggered explicit nationalist organisation in the early 1970s. Fourthly the discussion briefly considers the construction of the nationalist project under the TPLF, and the processes by which the organisation undertook the mobilisation and manufacture of ethnic nationalism, with the resources already explored. A fifth section details the process by which the TPLF sought to act on a wider stage with the establishment of the 'democratic front' in 1989. Finally the discussion reviews some of the ideological tools the movement brought to its capture of the state, and formation of the TGE, in 1991.

Although the account sketches something of the development of the TPLF, and its relation with its constituents, it does not purport to offer anything approaching a history of what is known to outsiders about the organisation, not least because this

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[140] Nine drafts of the constitutional text are held in the ISEN archive. For details of archive holdings see ISEN (1983[1975EC]) (1987[1979EC]), and NEB (1996[1989EC]).

has already been admirably assembled by John Young (1996)[141]. The account focuses on processes of social construction of a common understanding, not least of the nature of the national group itself; of collective responses to, and selection from, socio-economic and historical circumstances. As suggested in the introduction and in Chapter II, I consider a focus on social construction to be a means of gaining an improved sociological understanding of what is in play; I specifically reject the view that it serves to *undermine the validity* of nationalist projects by demonstrating them to be 'constructed' rather than 'real'. Before considering the projects of the TPLF and the OLF, both of which have been repeatedly subject to precisely this kind of 'attack', it is perhaps appropriate to reiterate the view that it is precisely their collective *construction* which renders both of these projects real, effective – and of considerable sociological and political interest.

Tigray's 'perennial disaffection'[142]: origins and resource-base of ethno-nationalist sentiment

> Nostalgia nourishes self-esteem, and compensates for what is no longer enjoyed. It suffused the collective memory in Tigray and was easily domesticated by the TPLF. […] Treated as history-less by the absolutist Amhara state, Tigrayans reacted by summoning the past. (Alemseged Abbay 1997:332)

TPLF interlocutors interviewed in the course of this study were adamant that anti-Amhara feeling in Tigray was widespread during the reign of Haile Selassie I, and that this was not restricted to the ruling or educated elite. Many singled out two historical factors.

> Firstly, Tigray, like other parts of the empire-state, was made part of the new Ethiopia by force, and this took place against the background of

[141] Published as Young (1997a). A fuller account awaits a Tigrigna-speaking historian with greater access to documentation and participant interlocutors than has been available to date. Accounts in English with useful material on the TPLF and Tigray under the TPLF in the period up to 1991, many written by 'participant observers', include the following: Abreha Hailemikhael (1995), Adhana Haile Adhana (2000), Bennett (1982), Clapham (1989), Duffield (1995), Duffield & Prendergast (1994), Firebrace (1983), Gebre-ab Barnabas (1998), Gidey Zera-Tsion (1991), Hammond (1989) (1999a) (1999b), Hendrie (1989) (1991), Kahsay Berhe (1991), Kane (1992), Keleman (1985), Medhane Tadesse (1994), Peberdy (1985), Smith (1982) (1983), Solomon Inquai (1985), Taddese Abay Mehari (1994), John Young (1998) (2000).

[142] Markakis (1987:63)

> rivalry between different parts of Abyssinia. The second historical factor was the hatred and suspicion which had arisen between Tigrayans and Amharas, due to the repeated battles between different centres of power.

Of particular interest in this account is its focus not only on the events of history, but also on the fact and manner of their repetition and inculcation so as to form a knowledge base shared throughout the collective: to constitute a social institution.

> This history had been repeated and inculcated by the ruling class, so that it spread hatred and suspicion even amongst the common people, feelings were not just restricted to the ruling class. However, these views were particularly strongly disseminated amongst the youth, students and intellectual classes. [They] cannot be dismissed as a minority issue in Tigray: they were widespread. (interview, TPLF founder member, Mekelle, October 1998)

Quite how far these beliefs in their political interpretation did, and do, extend throughout Tigrayan society is controversial. There is plenty of evidence, however, of a range of ideas which, at least from the mid-twentieth century, seem to have contributed to a well-established Tigrayan sense of self, and of the Amhara ‘other’.

Crucial to this sense of self seem to have been three interrelated notions of the purity, originality, and continuity of Tigrayan culture, particularly in its strong association with Orthodox Christianity. Thus, for instance, Markakis observed provocatively at the end of the imperial period:

> [o]ccupying the area which comprised the core of the Aksumite empire and speaking a language that is considered to be a close derivative of Geez (the language of the Aksumites), Tigre provincialism thrives on the conviction that it represents purity and continuity in Ethiopian culture, in contrast to the admixture that has diluted this tradition in the region south of the Takkaze; the Tigre are apt to refer to the Amhara contemptuously as half-Galla. (Markakis 1974:48)

In the consciously less controversial terms of the 1990s, the Tigrayan historian Adhana observes that:

> Tigray formed not only a durable component of the Ethiopian nation but was also part of the backbone of the Ethiopian state. […] Christian Aksum must be said to have comprehensively defined and anchored the

> Ethiopian state since it came into formal existence. (Adhana Haile Adhana 1998:43)

John Young also reports Tigrayan and TPLF focus on the centrality of the church in the continuity of the Ethiopian state, reiterating Greenfield's argument (1969[1965]) that it was the Christian Church and its doctrine and institutional apparatus that were the key links between ancient Axum and the modern state of Ethiopia, rather than the imperial throne; and that the church constituted the crucial institutional link supporting Ethiopian interconnection between the frequently warring provinces. This applied even within the Tigrigna-speaking bloc. During the Era of Princes (*Zemana Mesafent*) 'Tigray became 'virtually independent', its rulers 'wielding power comparable to that exercised by the emperors of former time'' (John Young (1996:32) quoting Hess (1970:50)). Tigrayan Emperor Mikael Suhul however 'failed to establish a Tigray dynasty' (Adhana Haile Adhana 1998:44) and his successors Welde Selassie (Enderta) and Subagadis (Agame) were less and less able to wield authority over the Tigrigna-speaking region as he had.

Continuity, once again, was provided by the Church: and the site of continuity of the Ethiopian Church, scene in the fourth century of Ezana's conversion and Frumentius' ministry, was Axum in the heart of Tigray (Tadesse Tamrat 1972:21ff)[143]. The emergence of competition between Tigray and Amhara was mirrored, and no doubt exacerbated, by competition within the church between the two important centres at Axum, and the monastry at Debre Libanos in Shoa, established by Tekle Haimanot in the thirteenth century, which sprang back into prominence when the area was reincorporated with the southward expansion under Menelik II. Christian competition was closely bound up with the introduction of the mythology of the Solomonic dynasty, which 'also marked the beginning of a competition for dominance between Amhara and Tigrayan elites' (John Young 1996:31).

> [Menelik] was the name which legend gave to the first member of his dynasty, the son of Sälomon and Sheba. Hence our king styled himself Menilek II. He also emphasized the elements of the legend which […]

[143] The circumspect treatment accorded the Tigrayan orthodox church by the Marxist TPLF is discussed by John Young (1996) (1998) as prominent amongst the factors behind its success.

> had strong association with Shäwa […]. Finally, Menilek tried metaphorically to move Aksum to Shäwa. He planned a magnificent new church, the center of a new capital, at a place he called Addis Alam, 'new world' [….]. He richly endowed the church, called it [like the church in Axum] St Mary of Zion, and gave its head a title, *neburä'ed*, hitherto the monopoly of the head of the Aksum church. (Crummey 2000:221)

These developments came at a time when Tigrayan politics were reasonably cohesive, and its elites could be expected to resent and resist them: '[Yohannes] unified all the local dynastic houses and his reign witnessed an expansion of the Tigray political elite. To that extent, it can be said that Yohannes forged Tigray into a protonation' (Adhana Haile Adhana 1998:44-5). However,

> this protonation expressed itself in historical-political rather than ethnic terms. The focal points were Aksum and Ethiopia rather than the Amhara and the Tigray. The linguistic division between these two groups was still irrelevant, in contrast to some arcane doctrinal differences between them which proved politically contentious. (*ibid.*:44-5)

This view contrasts with the much quoted observation of Walter Plowden in 1848 that

> Teegray is now almost universally acquainted with the Amharic language, and their customs, food and dress have become so assimilated to those of the Amharas as not to require separate description, though their hatred of that people is undiminished (Plowden (1868:39).

The events which followed Yohannes IV's death and defeat at Metemma are discussed in Chapter IV, above. After the Battle of Adua, the loss of Eritrea, and the severe famine of the 1890s,

> Tigray found itself politically orphaned, militarily battered, economically shattered and psychologically disoriented. […] Tigray manifested its political disorientation in various ways: periodic outbursts of fratricidal civil war were interspersed with temporary reconciliations […] the political behaviour of the Tigray political elite was in constant flux (Adhana Haile Adhana 1998:45-6)

It was during this period, between 1889 and 1935 'when Tigray was confronted with an unfamiliar polity' that 'ethnicity appeared on the political scene in Tigray, along with dynastic claims and individual political ambitions' (*ibid.*:46). This was a period

during which there was little change in Tigray, and when the stagnation and under-development, much resented by later generations of nationalists, took root:

> During modern times, socio-political changes were much slower in Tigre than in other regions in Ethiopia. Shoa underwent a centralization of power under Menelik […] Ethiopia's southern regions had been annexed to the empire […] with inevitable repercussions for their political, social and cultural institutions. Tigre, in contrast, was barely affected. (Erlich 1986:129)

By the time Haile Selassie was well established, only Tigray was ruled by hereditary leaders. Tigrayans were more divided than those in other parts of the country, as a result of the longer history, better establishment, and greater segmentation of the elites in question (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:135). This fragmentation provided numerous opportunities for collaboration, primarily with the Italians across the Mereb, which, Erlich stresses, 'did not stem from a separatist instinct or a modern sense of Tigrean nationalism'. Rather

> the ultimate goal of the Tigrean chiefs co-operating with the foreigners was to eliminate local rivals in order to be recognized as Tigre's *negus* by Ethiopia's emperors. The Shoans for their part, unable to force an Ethiopian centralist government on Tigre[144], chose to promote local jealousies and rivalries, thus helping to preserve the *status quo*. (Erlich 1986:131)

A precedent manufactured: the first weyane

> The motives for rebellion exemplif[y] the ideological contradiction that characterized *weyane*'s […] ideology of protest, [which] drew upon a combination of ideas and symbols: ethnic pride and particularism, memories of a 'golden past', the symbols of Tigrean royalty and the greatness of Yohannes IV, xenophobia, and religious conservatism. (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:116)

> There is no doubt that [the *weyane*] tapped a deep source of discontent in Tigre and among the Raya Oromo. It stemmed from peasant dissatisfaction – it was primarily a peasant revolt – coupled with overtones of Tigrean desire to be independent of Shoa. (Gilkes 1975:190)

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[144] Hammond cites British Foreign Office evidence that Menelik 'tried to impose his own governors on Tigray, but met massive resistance' (1989:16).

The so-called '*weyane*' or rebellion, which brought together the 'divergent interests' of agro-pastoralists of the lowlands, highland cultivators, and a 'sectarian nobility' against the government in eastern and southern Tigray in 1943 (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:89), has acquired a retrospective status in excess of the events of the time. The rebellion developed in three phases, spreading from Raya and Wajirat in May, to capture the provincial capital, Mekelle, in September, before defeat and collapse in October 1943 (*ibid.*:106-7). Even at the time, it was the suppression of the revolt, rather than the uprising itself, which had a lasting impact, being

> a main watershed in Tigre's history. Following this, the emperor finally managed to demilitarise Tigre and thus deprive the leading families of the province of their source of independent power. (Erlich 1986:133)

More than thirty five years after the event, however, the revolt itself gained prominence when the youthful leaders of the TPLF explicitly reinvented it as the popular nationalist precedent, and widely recognisable indigenous advertisement, for the movement's own struggle. At its first congress in 1979 the TPLF's name in Tigrigna was changed from the original *tegadelo harnet hezbi Tigrai* ('Tigray people's liberation struggle', adapted from the ELF's *tegadelo harnet Ertra*) to *hezbawi weyane harnet Tigrai* ('Popular Revolution/Rebellion for the liberation of Tigray'):

> we wanted to take something from our own history. (Interview, TPLF member then researching the organisation's history, Addis Ababa, October 1998)

Gebru Tareke's comprehensive and detailed account of the original *weyane* uprising of 1943 (1996[1991]) suggests that its re-incarnation as a precedent for revolutionary nationalist struggle involved considerable creative thinking. He concludes, firstly, that the *weyane* did not show evidence of a widespread 'class consciousness', and lacked a coherent set of goals: the 'diversity of interests compromised ideological clarity', and what resulted was a rebellion rather than a revolution. It was unclear that its 'leaders were committed to the peasant cause [being] primarily interested not in destroying or even in reforming the *status quo* but in finding a comfortable place within it' (1996[1991]:122). Secondly, the *weyane* was not Tigray-wide:

> The aggrieved parties united, temporarily, around a sense of 'provincialism'. Yet the notion of provincialism cannot be stretched too far […] Only Enderta, Kilte Awlaalo, Tembien, and Maichew were fully involved. The local chiefs of Agame, Aksum, and Shire remained on the fence until the outcome of the conflict was known (*ibid.*:121)[145].

Despite its various historical shortcomings as a prototype for the revolutionary ethno-nationalist project with which it has come to be associated, nevertheless, in the late 1970s the original *weyane* offered precisely the kind of minimal, but broadly familiar, framework suited to re-upholstering in TPLF hands. Memories concentrated on a number of features useful to later mythologizing. Firstly, even its historian agrees that the first *weyane* did involve a 'fairly high level of spontaneity and peasant initiative' (*ibid.*:121); it demonstrated considerable popular participation, and reflected widely shared grievances. Secondly the uprising was unequivocally and specifically directed against the central Amhara regime of Haile Selassie I, rather than the Tigrayan imperial elite. It therefore 'manipulated traditional symbols of identity and ethnic homogeneity' (*ibid.*:122). This point seems to have been of particular importance. One of those party to its invocation in the early days of the TPLF comments as follows.

> To be honest, I learned about [the *weyane*] later in more detail, and it is difficult to separate out what I knew then from the study we made about it later on. What we understood at the beginning was that it was a popular uprising. […] The areas which were actively involved were [not the whole of Tigray] and this is perhaps why it is dismissed as not being a nationalist issue. However, the movement called for justice, self-administration, lower taxation and the expulsion of corrupt officials [and] blamed the central Amhara government for these problems. […] It *was* national in character because it was specifically aimed at the central government and its apparatus in Tigray (interview, TPLF founder member, Mekelle, 7 October 1998).

Thirdly, the original *weyane* was put down with the assistance of British bombers, a factor which cemented the popularly perceived alignment of external 'foreign'

[145] This reveals the significance of the fact that Tigray continued to be ruled by its factional traditional elite and points to a key difference with the south of the country: 'In the south the gentry […] would not dare incite the peasantry because they themselves would have become the principal target. In the north the disenfranchised nobles could have challenged the state only by inciting the peasants' (Gebru Tareke 1991[1996]:83)

aggressors[146]. Fourthly the *weyane* briefly controlled the Tigrayan provincial capital, Mekelle, an important precedent as the TPLF sought to emulate it in the 1980s. In a fifth parallel, an immediate trigger of the rebellion in 1943, the brutality of imperial militia particularly around Quiha, resonated strongly as the Red Terror spread to the same area in the late 1970s. Finally, although the *weyane* had happened within the living memory of older members of the community at the time when the TPLF began to talk about and draw parallels with it, it had been concentrated in a relatively small geographical area, such that many remembered it happening, rather than remembered experiencing it. As a result it constituted an appropriately dimensioned, but essentially 'empty' category, eminently suited to bear whatever conventional meaning later interaction and propaganda would invest it with. In the late 1970s, the invocation of the *weyane* of nearly forty years previously

> did not contradict the remembered landscape. And herein lies the potency of history as political ammunition. (Alemseged Abbay 1997:333)

Triggers for nationalist organisation: well-told tales

> During the later period of Haile Selassie I the region faced open discrimination in terms of education, allocation of employment opportunities, etc., and these measures offended the emerging intellectual class. Gradually the sense of discrimination touched every sector of society, and was thus becoming a national issue. Once such a combination of repression and denial of equal opportunities is established, the youth and intellectuals are bound to be unhappy, and their feelings of neglect and suspicion will start to grow. Eventually this evolved into a coherent movement, and blurred divisions. (Interview, TPLF founder member, Mekelle, October 1998)

This section briefly enumerates a series of incidents and events commonly construed as both 'triggers' and 'markers' of emerging nationalist sentiment, in the few years before the establishment of the TPLF. It is interesting that the repertoire of events has itself become noticeably fixed and formulaic, with very similar accounts emerging from a significant number of the interviews carried out in the course of this research,

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[146] British planes bombed Mekelle on market day, inflicting 'considerable casualties' (Gebru Tareke 1996[1991]:111), a precedent which undoubtedly resonated during the TPLF campaign against the *Dergue*, which saw similar bombings of Tigray's market centres, and which was remarked upon when a British Ambassador visited Mekelle early in the TGE.

and to be found in, for instance, Hammond (1998), Alemseged Abbay (1998). The uniformity of reference observed is indicative of the subsequent construction and reconstruction of the narrative, consistent both with its ‘repetition and inculcation’, and with the performative theory of social institutions. This is in itself illustrative of the difficulty of establishing the situation before the impact of nationalist telling and retelling of histories, a problem of which many interlocutors were conscious.

There are three notable events that are commonly retold, together with a standard set of common experiences. Firstly, in 1969 the meteoric career of the Tigrayan football team was eclipsed when it was promoted to the premier league, where it was no longer victorious. In 1973 it was returned to the second division, but at an October tournament the team was disqualified. The ban resulted from a dispute in which team members added a ‘y’ to the Amharic name placard they had been issued, altering the official ‘Tigre’, commonly considered a veiled slight to national pride, to their preferred ‘Tigray’. The anecdote is recounted by many interlocutors, and retold by Alemseged Abbay (1998:100-02). A second event, also recounted in detail by Alemseged Abbay, is the establishment of the Tigrayan ‘Folk Troupe’, *Bahli Tigrai*, in 1969-70.

> Folk poems and music were collected and shown on stages all over Tigray […] Many wept. [...] Such cultural revival created fertile ground for the upcoming war of liberation. Indeed *Bahli Tigrai* was designed as a vehicle for political ends (*ibid.*:99-100).

A third powerful anecdote, less widely retold, concerns the organisation of a funeral cortège to return to Tigray the body of a Tigrayan teacher, who had died in Harar, along with the (Amhara) provincial education officer, apparently after some sort of disagreement between the two.

> The imperial Ministry of Education arranged for the Amhara’s body to come back to be buried with honours, but not the Tigrayan’s, although they never established who had killed whom. Suhul organised for [the teacher’s] body to be returned to Addis Ababa, and a large convoy of Tigrayans assembled in solidarity and brought the body to Mekelle *en masse*. It was a major show of Tigrayan feeling (interview, Tigrayan former academic, Mekelle, October 1998).

The person of 'Suhul', an early member of the TPLF, emerges as a key convenor and instigator of nationalist sentiment during this period (cf. Hammond 1998:27-29). Although older than those in student circles, as a delegate to the imperial parliament from western Tigray, he enjoyed increasing status amongst the radicals, particularly as (in another set of common recollections) his exploits began to challenge the more conservative nationalist activities of *Ras* Mengesha Seyoum, and the Tigray Development Organisation (interviews, TPLF veterans, Mekelle and Addis Ababa, October-November 1998).

A series of radicalising experiences were common to those emerging from high school into university over the period, the cohort which went on to form and lead the TPLF. The close contact between high school students in all Tigrayan towns, and the EUS student teachers who arrived to teach them each year from 1970 was mentioned above. By 1973 their collaborative efforts had closed the high schools in Tigray for two months; in 1974 they remained shut all year. Meanwhile, Addis Ababa University had a Tigrayan student association, dedicated to the study of the problems of the people of Tigray, and the need to regenerate its economy, culture, and language. Increasingly, the relegation of the Tigrigna language in favour of Amharic became a focus of frustration (*ibid.*:19), with bitterness developing over the common student jibe which labelled Tigrigna *ye wuf qwanqwa* (a language of birds).

The eventual formation of the TPLF in February 1975 was a function of the juxtaposition of the aspirations and experiences of educated Tigrayans as high school and university students, with their awareness of life in an impoverished, underdeveloped, and stagnant Tigray, problems increasingly perceived as the result of a deliberate and ethnically-motivated government policy of discrimination against the northern region. If these experiences generated a non-specific disgruntlement, what marked the boundary of a much more specific 'us' and 'them' was undoubtedly the requirement in Haile Selassie's modernising centralising empire state to speak and write the language of the imperial regime – Amharic. Language had come to mark a boundary between 'us' and 'them' to an extent that shaped their decisions as the student radicals moved to armed activities.

> There was a discussion about what form of struggle: armed, yes, but organised how? If people come from the same nationality, then even radicals and non-radicals can talk to each other with confidence, where radicals of different nationalities might not. Armed struggle was going to be a serious matter. If secrets were to be kept from betrayal, then this dynamic would be most important (interview, former academic, Mekelle, October 1998).

Mobilising and manufacturing ethnic nationalism and the ethnic nation

> Nationality was the primary contradiction in the sense of being in the forefront of people's minds in Tigray, such that they couldn't get beyond it to consider any other basis for mobilisation. It is in people's minds and you have to focus on it because they are not going to be mobilised without it being addressed. It occupies them in a fundamental manner; it was the primary concern for the majority of the population: it was easily felt as a main slogan amongst ordinary people, much more than the class issue (interview, TPLF founder member, Mekelle, 8 October 1998).

A wide range of the subjects, motifs, and themes explored above were now woven into the fabric of the Tigrayan 'imagined community', and a wide range of techniques of teaching, and dissemination employed by the TPLF to render this imagining a broadly collective one[147]. This section highlights a few of the most important features and vehicles of the ethnic mobilisation, which underpinned the successful development and consolidation of the nationalist movement.

The Tigrigna-language poetry and song, and the cadres, cultural troupes, radio broadcasts, and cassettes that spread them, were central. The TPLF evolved highly sophisticated mobilisation and propaganda mechanisms, based around a core network of *kifle hezbi* or lead cadres (also described as 'public relations officers', interview, TPLF historian, Addis Ababa, January 1999). These relatively senior political cadres were resident over extended periods within particular communities, to learn from, mobilise, and teach populations with whom they had lengthy interaction and got to know well. In this essentially Maoist approach, the priority accorded to continuity of contact with rural populations provided the key means by which the Front learned about rural life, and learned when to push for change, and

when to compromise (cf. Young 1996). Initiatives couched in the language, proverbs, and histories of the people worked better, and long immersion in rural culture equipped TPLF propagandists to recognise, use, and even develop this conventional knowledge.

> "In 1974 I came to realise my national identity through the songs. They stirred emotions in me." (TPLF fighter quoted by Hammond 1998:20).

In addition to its development of a repertoire of songs and poetry, the nationalist movement made a significant investment in Tigrigna language and curriculum development. Tigrigna had been used as a literary language for the publication of newspapers, books, and articles, so this undertaking was one of reclaiming and re-establishing a heritage widely felt to have been undermined by the imperial and *Dergue* regimes. Since the majority of the population of Tigray was illiterate, these initiatives also served the developmental purpose of emancipation from poverty.

The fight against poverty provided another strand of nationalist rhetoric, which stressed the responsibility of successive Amhara governments in impoverishing Tigray. Towards the end of the *Dergue* government, its own rhetoric about Tigray played helpfully in tune with these arguments, referring to the impoverished province contemptuously as a 'liability' (Alemseged Abbay 1998:119), having 'nothing but stones'. Nothing deterred, the nationalists celebrated Tigray's famously stony ground commencing massive programmes of stone bunding that transformed the look of farming hillsides in an attempt to improve their productivity. In addition to 'periods of hardship [which] tend to be stronger forgers of identity' (*ibid.*:333-4), motifs which evoked the glories of Tigray's past were also brought to the fore. Thus a competition to design an emblem for the Front, selected one incorporating the ancient obelisks at Axum.

As this discussion has outlined, there was no shortage of 'nation-building' material at the disposal of nationalist propagandists. There were, however, important political and ethnic fault lines amongst Tigrayans, which this 're-categorisation' sought to

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[147] see Alemseged Abbay (1998:118ff), Hammond (1998:*passim*).

overcome. The early period of TPLF history was marked by competition with three other organisations: the conservative Tigrayan nationalist EDU of Mengesha Seyoum, and others of the imperial elite; the Tigray Liberation Front, TLF, a radical proponent of 'greater' Tigray-Tigrigne nationalism, wiped out early on in a reportedly bloody purge; and the EPRP, the Tigrayan-led pan-Ethiopianist movement which had established bases in north-eastern Tigray, and suggested the TPLF form military units under its political leadership. The competitive challenges of each of these three organisations had been effectively quelled, or pushed outside Tigray, by the end of the 1970s (see Young 1996, 1998, and Vaughan 1994), leaving the TPLF with a strong sense of the urgent practical imperative of uniting its constituents.

One of the early periods of division within the organisation during its first years, the *hanfishfish*, or confusion, is often cited as illustrative of the struggle to establish affiliation to a pan-Tigrayan identity, above and to the exclusion of regionalist sentiments of *awrajawinet*. Although this interpretation is controversial, and officially denied, disquiet at the existence of an east/west division within TPLF, and its domination by cadres from the western Axum-Adua-Shire axis (to the disadvantage of Tembien, Enderta, and Kilte Awlaelo) has proved remarkably resilient over several decades of official insistence on Tigrayan unity. Whatever its other merits, the notion of an undercutting east-west political division in Tigray is also one of the less fortunate legacies of the invocation of the first *weyane.*

Before concluding it is worth stressing the limitations of 'national consciousness' in Tigray, where

> [t]he invention of history and the selective summoning of the past had limited impact in remapping popular consciousness. […] Peace was what [Tigrayan civilians] yearned for, not political independence, flag, national anthem, etc. (Alemseged Abbay 1998:170-1)

Whilst these conclusions should not be exaggerated, they do nevertheless offer a useful balance to an account focused on an exploration of ethno-nationalist invention, which has not discussed the daily experiences of Tigrayans during the *Dergue* period. Clearly the extraordinary brutality of government campaigns of

imprisonment and torture, enforced resettlement, manipulation of food aid, and military activity including the bombardment of civilian centres and markets, all designed to 'dry up the sea' within which the front swam like fish, left many Tigrayans with no alternative, and no hesitation, in joining or supporting the front (Africa Watch (1991:ch.8,11,15,16), Hendrie (1991)).

If the *Dergue* did plenty of mobilisation work for them, the TPLF, kept a determined focus on the 'mass popular base' that was to underpin national struggle (Markakis 1987:254). Central to the securing of that mass popular base was an early Marxist understanding that, 'men do not in general become nationalists through sentiment or sentimentality, atavistic or not, well-based or myth founded' (Gellner 1964:160), and that national sentiment alone would not nourish the attempt to remove the *Dergue*. From an early stage, nationalist rhetoric was underpinned by the commitment to deliver socio-economic advantage to an overwhelmingly rural peasant population. Even the terminology used in songs and poems to describe these benefits had collective or nationalist overtones. Terms like *shewit*, meaning a new green ear of grain, was regularly used interchangeably of the vehicles bringing relief grain from the Sudan, and of the youthful fighters, the new green shoots of a people.

From narrow nationalism to fraternal ethnicities-in-arms

> "Le fondement de l'Ethiopie est le Tigré", écrit Gebrè-Heywèt qui ajoute: "C'est le Tigré qui, entre tous, devrait le plus appeler de ses vœux la longévité du royaume d'Ethiopie". Ces remarques qui caratérisent bien le double attachement de l'auteur, à sa région et à son pays, ne manqueront pas de faire plaisir à ceux qui craignent aujourd'hui que le provincialisme, sinon même la revendication ethnique, ne constituent des obstacles à la construction nationale. Ce rappel de la grandeur tigréenne est tout de même un fait assez exceptionnel de la part d'un "japonisant" se consacrant en général assez peu à l'affirmation des fiertés régionales. (Bureau 1993:iii-iv)

This section sets out the events by which, having exploited Tigrayan nationalist sentiment in its mobilisation strategy, the organisation then in the late 1980s reversed the thrust of its propaganda in a bid to convince the population of Tigray to endorse an extension of the armed struggle to other parts of Ethiopia. The domestic

difficulties encountered in this process, which reconstituted the TPLF as a founder member of the EPRDF, now stressing its dual commitment to Tigrayan and Ethiopian nationalism, were considerable.

When EPRDF fighters entered Addis Ababa in May 1991, they did so formally under the joint military command of the four organisations which then comprised the front: the TPLF, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM)[148], the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO)[149], and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM)[150]. The EPRDF had been established by the TPLF and EPDM in early 1989, in an agreement which formalised the 8-year *de facto* alliance between the two movements. EPRDF sources report that the official establishment of the Front had been put off for some years in the hope that it might include other parties (interview, EPRDF politburo member, Addis Ababa, July 1994).

Little is documented about the period when the TPLF tried to convince its fighters and their families in the peasantry to move beyond the borders of Tigray, but it is known to have been fraught (author's notes 1988).

> A[n] immediate obstacle to the EPRDF's advance was caused by TPLF fighters, and Tigrayans generally, questioning the need to carry the war south into Oromo and the Amhara populated lands. Fighters in Gondar and Wollo reportedly 'thought they were at the end of the world' […] some 10,000 fighters virtually spontaneously withdrew and returned to Tigray. One TPLF cadre attributed this problem to the Front's emphasis on the national problem and the legacy of feudalism which fostered parochialism. (John Young 1996:117-8)

Two factors helped the TPLF leadership overcome popular opposition to an Ethiopia-wide campaign, over the course of two years of debates across Tigray. One was the continuation of the *Dergue*'s aerial bombardment of Tigray. Although the

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[148] On the establishment of the EPDM by the 'Belessa faction' of the EPRP, and TPLF facilitation of this process, see Vaughan (1994:6) and below.
[149] On the formation of the OPDO from amongst Oromo POWs of the TPLF and EPLF, and Oromo members of EPDM see Vaughan (1994:6-7).
[150] This small body of *Dergue* officers captured by TPLF notably at Shire in February 1989 was disbanded soon after the establishment of the TGE.

battle for Shire Enda Selassie, concluded in early February 1989, was certainly a 'turning point' (Tekeste Melake 1994), marking the end of *Dergue* forces on the ground in Tigray, it did not prevent aerial attack from bases to the south. Secondly, the Tigrayan clergy 'argued forcefully that Tigrayans were part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and they should not be separated from it' (John Young 1996:117).

The discussions which took place in Tigray during 1988 and 1989 were protracted and difficult, and laced with ethnic language and imagery.

> 'No, we should free Tigray and think of ourselves, our future, the development of our land and lives: isn't that what you have taught us to value, to struggle for? How can we send our children to fight in those other areas – let alone for the Amhara: isn't it their oppression of us we have been fighting? No. Remember what our Tigrayan king [Emperor Yohannes IV] did when Tekle Giorgis [Waagshum Gobezie] sent him a bowl of *teff* as a peace offering! He burned it and sent it back. And that is what we must do now if the Amharas ask us for help!' (elderly peasant farmer, TPLF *baito* congress, near Sheraro, December 1988, author's note of interpreter's account of the intervention)

The kind of sentiment, which had been actively encouraged by 1988 for more than a decade in most of rural Tigray, now proved difficult to reverse.

EPRDF ideology and the 'national question'

This concluding section briefly comments on the objectives, self-perception, and the ideological tools at the disposal of the TPLF/EPRDF by 1991. As descendants of the Ethiopian Student Movement, the EPRDF's leaders saw the Ethiopian project of ethnic federalism as one in a series of Marxist-Leninist approaches to the National Question.

Whether or not premised on radical constructionism, a wide range of social scientific approaches to ethnicity, as explored in Chapter II, increasingly focus upon the 'social construction' of ethnic identity: the importance of the culture and interaction of the collective in the production of the norms and 'social institutions' associated with ethnicity; and the key role of the *self*-definition and constitution of ethnic groups. Since they regard the components of collective identities as the intrinsically shifting

products of continuous collective reinvention (in response to changing circumstances and perceived interests), these accounts therefore stress the inherent difficulties of incorporating them as the fixed basis for the permanent demarcation of administrative boundaries. Meanwhile, the Stalinist approach to the national question, in which EPRDF thinking is firmly grounded, has a more ambiguous attitude to the potential utility of the 'nation, nationality or people' as a unit of governance.

Marxist-Leninist understanding of the so-called National Question incorporates two contradictory elements in thinking about 'nationalities' and their 'self-determination'. The first is the (laudable, and demonstrably true) idea that you can mobilise (indeed even define or create) a community more effectively and get it engaged in its own political development if you mobilise it from the inside; that is, with its own members, in its own language, using its own cultural traditions and knowledge system, etc.. This is clearly in tune with the social-constructivist position. The second element of Stalinist thinking is not: this is the view that the criteria for the establishment of 'nations, nationalities, and peoples' are objectively and externally identifiable, and verifiable independently of the views of their members. It is this component of Marxist thought which has resulted in the notion that a vanguard party may legitimately grant self-determination to a community from the outside, in that process identifying and prescribing the ethnic criteria to define the group, and demarcating geographical borders around it. Both strands are clearly apparent in EPRDF thinking. They can be interpreted as reflecting mutually incompatible elements of primordialism (the notion of the intrinsic 'naturalness' of certain nations and nationalities, and corresponding idea that a 'correct' map of their location can be drawn up) and of instrumentalism (suggestive of the political mobilisation and construction of a malleable ethnic identity).

Shifts in EPRDF policy regarding the implementation of ethnic federalism seem to reflect tension between these two competing urges – to prescribe from above, or to facilitate from within the groups in question. At various moments throughout the 1990s, changes of policy can be seen as instances of a (belated but welcome) move

from the former to the latter, and are explored in Chapter VII below. Meanwhile, it remained a critical core conviction of the EPRDF that Marxist-Leninist advocacy of nationality self-determination would in fact neutralise, not foster, ethno-sub-nationalist sentiment (seen as the result of economic iniquity)[151]. It could be introduced, therefore, as a means eventually to achieve greater national integration and cohesion (once economic access is democratised and expanded). Whilst EPRDF has given in to a number of demands for separate organisation and administration, therefore, it is highly unlikely that this is regarded as a desirable end in itself. The underlying urge to *voluntary* integration and unity remains at the core of party ideology. This desired outcome is, of course, understood by Marxist-Leninists to be contingent upon levels of expansion, integration, and security of the national economy that have yet to materialise in Ethiopia.

EPRDF thinking on democracy, also coloured by Marxism-Leninism, is rooted in

> 'the all inclusive participation of the people' (EPRDF 1995:12),

The ethnic group represents the highest effective level where such collective participation is deemed possible. What the Front calls 'popular democracy' is based on communal collective participation, and representation based on consensus. Its perception of democracy is shaped partly by ideological conditioning, and partly by historical experience, fusing class theory with ethnicity. The validity of Marxist and Maoist precepts of mass political mobilisation were confirmed by the TPLF's success in Tigray, where the peasantry was mobilised on an ethnic basis, which became also the mode of political participation and representation:

> The only coalition we seek is with the people; and the democratisation we seek is the democratisation of society and social relations (interview, then-President of the TGE, Addis Ababa, August 1994).

EPRDF has, thus, never appeared as an organisation committed to pluralism for its own sake. This has been particularly visible in terms of its attitudes to resource

[151] Much has been made of a shortlived preference for Tigrayan independence set out in an early TPLF constitution/manifesto, apparently revised after less than a year. It seems clear that the

distribution and the delivery of services, views entrenched by experience gained during the cross-border period of the 1980s. During this period, the organisation consolidated its clear understanding of the value and potential of the coincidence of interest between peasant populations benefiting from socio-economic development, and the party consolidating its support base as a result of being seen to provide the means of such development[152]. Competitors, be they political or developmental, represent a significant problem in this consensual model. The most serious of them has been the OLF.

Ethnic organisation in the South: Oromia and the OLF

In 1991 the OLF was the only other organisation with a significant military presence in central areas of Ethiopia, and with the TPLF/EPRDF became a key member of the TGE. This section briefly reviews the emergence and development of Oromo nationalism and the difficulties it has faced in attaining its political objectives. It considers relations between the TPLF and OLF during the *Dergue*, and the establishment of the OPDO.

Origins of Oromo nationalism

Oromo nationalist commentators have identified 'three phases in the Oromo struggle against Ethiopian colonialism. During the first phase, various Oromo groups and their leaders resisted colonialism locally.' (Asafa Jalata 1993:151). A series of Oromo rebellions[153] marked the end of the period of consolidation of 'settler colonialism', and represented localised, scattered and sporadic resistance, often to specific iniquities of the *naftagna-gabbar* system. The events of the Italian

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overriding dynamic of TPLF/EPRDF thinking has been integrative rather than secessionist.

[152] de Waal (1998) has given a favourable (if undeveloped) analysis of these dynamics.

[153] In Raya and Azebo in 1928-30 (Asafa Jalata 1993:152-3); in collaboration with Enderta Tigrayans during the first Weyane (above); in Harerghe and Wollo between 1943 and 1948 (*ibid.*:152,154). Mohammed Hassan identifies a 'prototype of Oromo national consciousness in the resistance movements of the 1880s and 1890s' (1998:193).

occupation and its aftermath triggered the first formal Oromo proposal for autonomy with a view to eventual separation from the Ethiopian empire state[154].

In a second phase, from 1960 to the mid-1970s, resistance took on more sustained and coherent forms (as in the case of the Bale farmers' revolt of 1963-68[155]), and better organisation (as with the merger of a number of Oromo welfare organisations in 1963 to form the Metcha-Tulama Self-Help Association[156]). When in 1966 Metcha-Tulama began to discuss contentious issues such as land, and began to 'articulate the dissatisfaction of the Oromo with the government and particularly with their position in society' (Wood (1983) in Asafa Jalata 1993:157), the government moved swiftly and violently to curb its activities[157], before finally banning and repressing it in 1967. This, as most commentators agree, ushered in the third phase of Oromo nationalism.

> In 1967 by imprisoning its leaders and dissolving the Association, the government won a pyrrhic, short-term victory. […] by 1974 its policy unwittingly transformed Oromo politics beyond recognition. The Association's demand for equality within Ethiopia was transformed into the OLF's commitment to self-determination in Oromia. The Association's efforts to spread literacy in the Amharic language and Sabean script were transformed into literacy in *Afaan* Oromoo using the Latin alphabet: what was unthinkable in 1967 became feasible by 1974. (Mohammed Hassan 1998:212)

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[154] A proposal was put before the League of Nations in 1936 that a Western Galla Confederation (comprising Wellega, Illubabor, and Jimma) be ruled by Britain under League mandate 'until we achieve self-government' (Gilkes (1975:211); G1-Pro-ldn Western Galla, British Archive Document, 1936, quoted by Asafa Jalata (1993:153)).

[155] Bale 'left in the minds of the Oromos the sense that if they were effectively organized their fight against Ethiopian colonialism would one day regain for them their freedom' (Asafa Jalata 1993:160). See Gebru Tareke (1996[1991]:125-158), Asafa Jalata (1993:158-160), and Markakis (1987:191-202).

[156] See Mohammed Hassan (1998:181-221), who draws on Olana Zoga (1993). Whilst Mecha-Tulama marked 'the beginning of co-ordinated Oromo resistance' (*ibid.*:183), nevertheless 'the goal of the leaders of the Association was the recognition of Oromo identity, within the larger Ethiopian identity itself'. (*ibid.*:190). The objectives of the Association were multiple: 'improving the welfare of the Oromo nation; [and mobilizing it] toward a common goal by undermining the colonial policy of divide and rule on the bases of religion, class, and region' (Asafa Jalata 1993:155).

[157] Mohammed Hassan (1998:205). As well as army officers, frustrated by an official policy capping the promotion of Oromo officers, who had been uniformly loyal during the 1960 coup attempt (:198), 'the Association also attracted Oromo students from Addis Ababa including […] Ibssa Gutama, Baro Tumsa, Yohannes Lata, Mekonnen Gallan and Taha Ali [who went on to become] founding members of the OLF' (:203).

Mecha-Tulama's activities continued underground, and in 1969 a militant faction trained in Aden was arrested in Mogadishu attempting to return to Ethiopia to launch armed opposition. Oromo student papers began circulating in 1971 the first conference of the Ethiopian People's Liberation Front (December 1973) was followed the next year by armed infiltration in the Hararghe area. This group carried out effective mobilisation on the land issue, and maintained effective contact with Addis Ababa student circles until in July 1974 the first formal meeting of the OLF adopted a secessionist programme.

Following the demise of Haile Selassie I in September 1974, Tadesse Biru was released, and the so-called Oromo Cultural Committee petitioned the new government to allow publications in Oromiffa using the latin script. Its requests were refused[158] and Tadesse Biru was executed the following year. Once again the nationalist project was driven underground, and when a 30-man committee of the OLF revised its programme in 1976, the organisation's rank and file was reckoned to number around two hundred.

Obstacles to the development of Oromo nationalist consciousness

A range of reasons 'why it [took] so long for Oromo nationalism to develop' (Mohammed Hassan 1996:69) have been suggested. Shortcomings in education, communication, transportation, the media, standards of literacy and the growth of literature, and, interestingly, the 'intensive interaction among people' all impeded the 'crucial environment for the spread of a national consciousness' (*ibid.*:69, quoting Alter (1989:77)). Additionally, Oromo nationalism 'took shape against economic exploitation, military subjugation, and 'political and cultural domination'' (Mohammed Hassan 1998:186); Ethiopia's ruling elites 'did everything possible to prevent [it …] by destroying Oromo religious and cultural institutions, by dividing the Oromo along religious and regional lines, and most of all by undermining the growth of the Oromo language and the flourishing of written literature in that language' (*ibid.*:187); finally the two governments opposed a force which threatened

[158] A clandestine newspaper in Oromiffa, *Barissa [Dawn]* appeared in 1976.

‘the disintegration of Ethiopia’, and also ‘to abort the realization of the dream of greater Somalia’ (*ibid.*:189). Each of these factors, in play before 1974, continued to influence events thereafter, inhibiting the ‘flowering of Oromo freedom’[159], and undermining the nationalist project of the OLF.

The political potential of the overwhelmingly large[160] and strategically located[161] Oromo ‘ethnic group’, were it ever to be effectively mobilised, has been a prominent theme of the relatively few pages which commentators have devoted to it[162]. Were this group, occupying land which provides the ‘backbone’ of the Ethiopian economy, ever to be united, it could ‘tip the political balance decisively’ (Markakis 1987:258): ‘if Ethiopia were to break apart, or if any serious insurgency was to operate […] Oromo opposition would have to be at the base of it’ (Clapham 1988:216)[163].

To date, however, Oromos have not been active and united for independence, and three related reasons for this can be posited. Whether or not (and it seems unlikely) divisions between Oromos were the result of machinations of the Ethiopian elites, as the nationalists suggest, the wide geographic dispersal of Oromiffa-speaking populations, and the diversification of regional groupings have been factors with which those intervening (whether to forge a single nation or not) have had to contend. This diversification had socio-political implications as

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[159] ‘Addi bilisumma Oromo Ha’dararuu!’ (‘Let Oromo freedom flower today!’) is the slogan of the OLF.

[160] At the end of the imperial period ‘the relative strengths of the major ethnic groups remain[ed] a matter of guesswork’ (Markakis 1974:51). The OLF long claimed that the Oromo population represented an absolute majority of the population of the Ethiopian Empire (Gadaa Melbaa 1988:96). The 1984 government census gave a figure of 29.7%, whilst the 1994 figure was 31.1%.

[161] Territory inhabited by Oromos stretches from near the border with Djibouti to Kenya, from the border with Somalia, almost to the border with Sudan in the west.

[162] Studies of the *Dergue* period by Andargachew Tiruneh (1993), Clapham (1988), Keller (1988), and the Ottaways (1978) each devote no more than a couple of pages to these issues. Works on the imperial period tend to give even less space to the subject.

[163] Fascination with latent Oromo power goes back to Manoel de Almeida in the 1620s:‘if God had not blinded them, and willed that certain families or tribes among them should be at war with one another constantly, there would not have been an inch of land in the empire of which they were not the masters’ (quoted by Markakis (1974:16)). A deep-seated fear of ‘the Oromo threat; has arisen quickly at times of political change or instability – so quickly as to suggest its cultivation as a useful rallying mechanism by successive regimes.

> different Oromo tribal groups evolved quite different political systems, which varied from small acephalous clusters of agnatically connected neighbours to quite complete kingdoms. (Baxter 1978:284)

During the formation of the Gibe states in the four centuries preceding the advent of Menelik's invading forces, the sedentarisation of Oromo pastoralists brought class stratification in its train, and this substantially undermined the traditional *gada* system[164], with rich families replacing *gada* leaders in the hierarchy (Mohammed Hassan 1990:95). In these areas of the western region the Abyssinian state encountered the familiar (centralisation of power within a defined and defended territory (*ibid.*:93,97)), and this influenced the manner in which local elites were retained when it was assimilated. The experience of the relatively well-educated protestant west, however, contrasts strongly with that of Arssi and Borana, where *gada* survived longer and marginalisation was more pronounced. Meanwhile in Wollo and areas to the north, religious differences are not acute, and that there is little separation of Oromo political identity:

> northern Oromos have something of the Tigrean ambivalence towards the Ethiopian state: not only is secession a much less evidently viable proposition form them than for Oromos further south, but they have occupied leading positions in the state' (Clapham 1988:216).

Differently again, in Hararghe, and some areas of Bale and Arssi, where 'ethnicity, religion, and exploitation have coincided, and where the religious factor has not only differentiated the indigenous from the settler population within the region, but also provided a link with external assistance from across the Somali frontier', nevertheless 'no common Oromo identity [has] resulted'. (*ibid.*:217)

A second problem confronting Oromo nationalism has been the economic context within which they were operating. The wealth of many Oromo territories was one of the primary motives for Menelik's expansion. Their continuing economic significance undoubtedly attuned successive regimes to respond rapidly to any

[164] Asmarom Legesse (1973) provides the classic ethnographic account, but see also Bassi (1996:150) regarding the political import of *gada*, which 'is certainly a very strong symbol of Oromo ethnic identity, but, as with most symbols, may have multiple meanings'.

serious threat of revolt. A high degree of incorporation of Oromo elites[165], and relatively high levels of economic development following the 'displacement of the empire's centre of gravity southwards' (Markakis 1974:97), both militated against such resistance. During the Dergue period, the early redistribution of land removed what had become the central focus of economic grievance against the state[166], and took momentum from incipient Oromo nationalism (Markakis 1986:261, Clapham 1988:216). After land reform, and despite continuing discrimination, Oromo peasants were relatively rarely in the common situation of their Eritrean and Tigrayan counterparts who had 'nothing to lose' in economic terms by joining the nationalist movements. In addition, firm state control of Oromo areas was reinforced during the 1980s by means of extensive and repressive villagisation, and resettlement[167].

Underlying all of these issues is the question of assimilation. Baxter's notion of 'permeable clan structures' (1978), incorporates the idea that Oromo social systems were prone not to unite, and were open to assimilation of groups that they came upon, and by the Ethiopian state. Even the relatively centralised Gibe states 'failed to coalesce into one political entity' (Mohammed Hassan 1990:100). As a result, 'the history of the Oromo people is a story of fusion and interaction by which all tribes and groups have altered and been transformed constantly' (Mohammed Hassan, quoted by Baxter 1978:177). Oromo capacity for assimilation perhaps primarily accounts for their perception by a succession of Somali governments as 'pre-ethnic raw material' (Gellner 1983:84) waiting to be moulded into either a Somalised or Amharised form. Whilst nationalist accounts claim that an Oromo national identity has long been formed[168], it remains far from clear precisely what this means in political practice.

Suffice it to say, then, that there has been a range of socio-economic, historical, and geopolitical obstacles in the path of an effective and co-ordinated Oromo challenge

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[165] See Markakis (1974:115), Asafa Jalata (1993).
[166] Discontent had emerged in the wake of Haile Selassie's reforms of 1966, which had lifted a veil of confusion surrounding land tenure, and illuminated the degree of expropriation which had taken place in southern areas.
[167] See Clay & Holcomb (1986), Africa Watch (1991).
[168] Cf. Keller (1998:115) and other contributors to the volume edited by Asafa Jalata (1998).

to the Abyssinian state. As opposition to the Dergue regime developed during the 1980s, it became the view of the TPLF that these obstacles were compounded by the organisational and ideological weaknesses of the OLF and its leadership.

Relations between the OLF and TPLF/EPRDF

The two organisations first came into contact soon after the OLF opened an office in Khartoum in 1978[169]. The OLF reportedly found co-operation with the EPLF easier than with the TPLF:

> Our claim [that the independence of Oromia was a colonial question] was parallel to that of the EPLF in Eritrea. As a result, political issues were never such a fundamental problem between us. (interview, OLF former deputy-chairman, Toronto, August 1994)

Whilst the TPLF disputed the OLF's colonial analysis of the Oromo situation,

> it was not an issue to prevent co-operation against a common enemy between the two organisations. (interview, TGE Foreign Minister, Addis Ababa, July 1994)

Unlike the EPLF, the OLF was 'prepared to leave the door open to the possibility of coexistence within Ethiopia' (interview, OLF former deputy-chairman, Toronto, August 1994).

In 1983 a series of meetings were held between the TPLF, OLF, WSLF, and ALF, which resulted in a number of joint press releases and statements, amongst which one issued by the OLF and TPLF in Khartoum announced their decision to co-operate at a tactical level. The first TPLF unit left for the OLF base area in Asosa in October/November 1984[170]. Sources from both organisations report that the military training units remained around a year, but that the relationship continued to be uneasy.

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[169] With the deterioration of its relations with Somalia after the creation of the SALF, the OLF turned west for support.

[170] 'The unit was led by Kinfe [Gebre Medhin] from which you can see how much importance we attached to military co-operation with the OLF' (interview, TGE Foreign Minister, Addis Ababa, August 1994).

According to the TPLF, political differences soon crystallised into disagreements over military strategy, hastening the collapse of relations, and the withdrawal of the TPLF contingent. The TPLF disapproved of the increasing clashes between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the OLF, and (they claim) tried to convince the latter that helping the Sudanese government maintain a buffer zone along the border with Ethiopia was 'not their war'; that they should move out of the lowland border areas around their headquarters at Asosa where the population is Benishangul rather than Oromo, and into the highlands of Wellega 'in order to be in touch with their own population' (Interview, TGE Foreign Minister, Addis Ababa, July 1994). The criticisms launched by the TPLF hinged on the Maoist theme of the correct relationship between a liberation movement and rural people, and the need to be closely integrated with the population.

> The problem of the OLF was that it was basically a foreign-based leadership: they were totally alienated from the day-to-day realities at home. We had been trying to invite them to our base area, to map out common strategies, but were continuously frustrated. (Interview, TGE Foreign Minister, Addis Ababa, July 1994)

The recriminations continued to focus on the nature of the OLF leadership and escalated, culminating in 1986 with the publication of a TPLF paper denouncing it as 'incapable of leading the Oromo struggle' (Interview, former OLF deputy-chairman, Toronto, August 1994)[171]. The withdrawal of the main contingent was now followed by the removal of the smaller number of TPLF cadres who had remained with the OLF to work in medical, mine laying, and other non-combat roles.

OLF anger was further exacerbated by what they saw as TPLF attempts to recruit Oromos from Sudan, Somalia, and the Middle East, and to intrude onto Oromo nationalist territory. Here the geopolitical disadvantages of the Oromo nationalist claim to represent the whole of the vast Oromo-inhabited area became acutely apparent. As noted above, by the time the TPLF extended its activities outside

Tigray, the consolidation of its control over the province was complete. The establishment of similarly uncontested authority over the rural areas of the vast region of Oromia, by contrast, was, during the *Dergue*, never a possibility for the OLF – or any other organisation. The military advantages of strong consolidation in a manageably compact geographical area, with relatively easy access, for instance through Sudan, had always to be weighed against the political need to be seen to operate throughout the whole of the region which the OLF aimed to liberate. The bloody nature of the internal split which had created the IFLO in 1978[172], and the aggressive activities of the latter in the east of the country, left the OLF painfully aware of the potential of threats to their claim to represent all Oromos. The geographical difficulties of the liberation of Oromia were always profoundly exacerbated by the poor relations between the OLF and the Somali government, relations which some reports suggest were not enhanced in this period by the activities of the TPLF office in Mogadishu.

The OLF report that

> from the early 1980s we got a hint that they [the TPLF] were planning a fight with the Oromos. From 1979 through the 1980s we were agreed with them upon voluntary unity based on self-determination. But they were starting to express doubts, and this was obvious when they came up with the two options of a tactical 'United Front' and a strategic 'Democratic Front', suggesting we join the former. Effectively what they were saying was 'we will use you for now, and then thrash you later when it suits us'. (Interview, OLF Foreign Relations Spokesperson, London, August 1999)

Meanwhile the TPLF, having abandoned any possibility of working on this strategic level with the OLF, was still keen to have a strategic Oromo partner suitable for membership of its proposed 'Democratic Front'. Concrete progress towards the establishment of an Oromo organisation from amongst Oromos who included POWs held by the TPLF in Tigray, was apparent from 1988. The already bitter divisions

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[171] This happened around the same time as the TPLF similarly fell out with the EPLF after describing it as only a tactical not a strategic ally. Observers suggest that both developments were linked to the rise of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) after 1984.

[172] On the departure of Abdul Karim Ibrahim (Sheik Jarra) see Markakis (1987:263); on the alleged connection with the assassination of Baro Tumsa and others see Asafa Jalata (1993:169).

between the OLF and the TPLF were merely entrenched with the formal establishment, in 1990, of the OPDO. It is hard to avoid Gebru Tareke's conclusion that 'there is absolutely no question [but that] this force has been created under the tutelage of the EPRDF in order to counteract the OLF' (1996[1991]:224). Keller goes further, arguing that 'the strategy of the EPRDF in dealing with its most serious ethnically-based opposition is to 'divide and conquer'. It has created a party, the OPDO, that serves as a counterweight to the OLF' (1998:115)[173].

[173] At the time it was not only Oromo nationalists who opposed the creation of the OPDO: some of TPLF's staunchest supporters in Europe responded with dismay to what they saw as 'the end of any pretensions to the commitment of TPLF to self-determination' (personal communication, 1989).

Section Three. Mapping power and ethnicity in the Federal Democratic Republic

> The capacity of the Ethiopian State to implement a blueprint as complex as that prescribed by Soviet [nationality] theory, while maintaining the Leninist centralised autocratic hegemony which appears to be the core value of the [*Dergue*] regime, is open to doubt. But, if pursued, the strategy is likely to have a powerful influence on the development of ethnic consciousness, and the categories through which it is expressed. (Crawford Young 1986:449)

> The political process is good, but its implementation is a disaster. When EPRDF came they tried to win people over saying things like 'no-one is forced to pay tax!', but the farmers replied that 'tax is what makes us sure that the land is ours'. And it is the same with ethnicity. They came along and disturbed the social relations; without thinking they disturbed things which have taken a long time to settle. (Interview, civil servant, Bonga, Kaffa zone, June/July 2002)

The form of 'revolutionary democracy' embraced by the EPRDF seeks to exploit the performative power of the unified and mobilised participation and will of the community - of the ethnic group. The key to achieving that unity is the recognition of diverse nationalities, the harnessing of their 'nationalisms', and their political mobilisation at this highest level where unity is possible and effective. The problem for the Ethiopian opposition parties in the early 1990s as now was that this was not the playing field upon which they thought they were competing. The problem for the EPRDF remains that their strategy has met with varying degrees of success, encountering both difficulties apparently inherent in the project, as well as obstacles thrown up by the manner of its implementation. As the quotations above indicate, the introduction of ethnic federalism has had a profound, varied, and unpredictable effects on the great range of conventional beliefs which may be said to underpin 'ethnicity' in Ethiopia.

This third section of the thesis describes the activities of the EPRDF primarily in areas where they had not operated prior to 1991, to organise local party and administrative structures on the basis of ethnicity. The account attempts to illuminate the critical importance of the ethnic federal structure to the viability of the EPRDF's project of political mobilisation, the inextricable connection between the two axes of

territory and representation, and the centrality of language in both cases. It also seeks to illuminate the extent to which little was left to chance in constructing this structure. The strategy of mobilisation and organisation which the EPRDF implemented in some rural areas, for instance, remained almost invisible until the outbreak of a rash of PDOs (People's Democratic Organisations) was announced in the capital. During the course of the fieldwork conducted, however, the extent of the preparation and planning with which the party attempted to put the perceived instrumental value of ethnicity into operation was repeatedly and forcefully outlined. In other areas, notably Oromia NRS, EPRDF's 'intent to compete' was well known before the change of government.

Inherent in the EPRDF's attachment to the idea of nationality-based mobilisation, along with the idea that it is morally better than other forms (i.e. that ethnic self-determination is democratic, emancipatory, non-discriminatory for the first time in Ethiopia's history, and therefore a good thing), is the idea that it works better - i.e. that people are more responsive to political education and encouragement given to them (in the words of a TPLF founder member, interviewed, Mekelle, October 1998) 'in their own language by their own children'. These two chapters, then, attempt to establish whether, and under what circumstances this view may be right. They document the translation of political insight and experience generated during the anti-government campaign in Tigray and other parts of the north, to the establishment (or consolidation) of government and party structures all over the country.

The two chapters are set out in terms of the two axes of government – representation and territory – briefly elaborated in Chapter I, above. They are also organised to distinguish the projects of political mobilisation by which the ruling party sought to influence representation (Chapter VI), from the 'responses' of the ethnic populations, which have often focused on the renegotiation of territorial demarcation (Chapter VII). Chapter VI considers some experiences as the party attempted the mobilisation of different groups, revealing competing conceptions of 'legitimacy' of representation and of its 'indigenousness', and of the relation between the two.

Chapter VII explores the territorial implications of the policy of ethnic federalism, exploring how incrementally evolving self-conceptions of group identity have been jolted by, and redefined in response to dramatically transformed circumstances vis-à-vis the salience and opportunity afforded ethnicity.

In 1991, as the *Dergue* regime was defeated, and ethnic federalism introduced, it was already clear that

> the political ecology of nationalities is now in a process of far reaching change. The various groups can no longer be considered in isolation: the political ecological infrastructure has already been decisively affected and restructured by the Ethiopian State itself. The interesting aspect to follow now would precisely be the evolving pattern of interaction of this politically and culturally dominant elite and the designated nationalities. (Abbink 1991:12)

The following two chapters attempt to begin to trace precisely this pattern as it unfolded with the new federal arrangements.

Chapter VI. Reworking representation: political mobilisation at the limits of 'revolutionary democracy'

> From an initial position of great moral and political strength, President Meles Zenawi and the EPRDF have fallen back into the old Ethiopian tradition of attempting to rule single-handedly and autocratically, without consent of, or input from, the governed. (Herbert Lewis 1994:5)

> Yes, we needed to build a coalition, but we needed to build a coalition essentially in rural areas. Some of the groups that came out after the transitional arrangement felt that, because they were similar in view with the EPRDF the EPRDF should ally with them. We don't ally with groups. We ally with people. Eighty-five percent of the population lives in rural areas. Any alliance that helped us to mobilise this eighty-five percent we made; any that didn't, we didn't. And we have succeeded, not only because of those who were positively inclined to the EPRDF but primarily because of those who were not, because these people are reference points. We need these reference points. It is not a question of magnanimity: we need these reference points to show the peasants the other side of the coin, so they can choose, based on an understanding of the facts. Because that is the only type of decision that can sustain grassroots participation. (Interview, Chairman of EPRDF and then President of the TGE, Addis Ababa, August 1994)

> The local authorities treat us as an enemy of EPRDF and therefore of the people, rather than as an opposition: they told the people 'if you support that party you are fighting the government in power; that party doesn't even have a police force: no law protects them.' And even the police said 'we don't know that organisation: if you elect them we won't give them any help'. (Interview, opposition party officers, Karate, Konso special wereda, 19 June 2002)

This chapter explores the various strategies with which the EPRDF has attempted to mobilise support in different parts of the country – and the different levels of success with which they have met. The chapter opens with a brief account of events in the Southern Nations' Nationalities' and Peoples' National Regional State (SNNPNRS), which presents a complex and contradictory picture, being the region where EPRDF's doctrine of ethnic self-determination has enjoyed its warmest post-1991 welcome, but also the only area in which the organisation has faced even localised electoral defeat[174]. I suggest that whilst the premise of the advantages of talking to

[174] See Tronvoll (2000) on the 2000 elections in Hadiya.

groups 'in their own languages through their own children' was a good one in so far as it represented an attempt to get 'inside' the group in question, in practice its implementation and the results have been mixed. This has been not least because of misconceptions about the means by which ethnic groups are (re)constituted and maintained. Meanwhile, in the pastoralist periphery, explored in a second section, EPRDF has worked by means of coalitions with traditional elites, not attempting to work from within these communities. Section three returns to the narrative of Oromo nationalism, begun in Chapter V above. It considers how overt competition between alternative constructions of proper representation has inhibited government mobilisation in Oromo areas. The chapter concludes with a brief review of events in regional urban centres.

'Un museo di popoli'[175]: animating the exhibits

> Southerners are the genuine Ethiopian federalists, if you like, because they don't want independence, since the groups are too small, but they want an Ethiopian framework which can both protect their unity, and defend them against the Oromos and Amharas. (Interview, foreign NGO consultant, Arba Minch, then *Simien* Omo zone, 13 October 1999)

> The small southern groups accept Ethiopian identity. (Clapham 1994:30)

EPRDF mobilisation in the SNNPNRS

> During the training we were taught by Tigrayans who told us "you can play your national play, and we ours". I came back here and we continued the discussion process. I went with Shekecho, Majangir, and Sheko people to Masha where we had a further meeting. EPRDF gave us that freedom to speak together, and to write. (Interview, school teacher, Tepi, then Kaffa-Sheka zone, 7 October 1999)

When EPRDF forces took control of Addis Ababa in May 1991, its cadres and fighters had barely set foot inside the borders of the area now administered as the SNNPNRS. There had, however, been significant prior preparation for the organisation's swift move into this area which is, more than any other, responsible

[175] Conti Rossini (1937:169).

for Ethiopia's reputation as a 'mosaic of distinct peoples'[176]. Versions of the following account of ERPDF's recruitment, training, and deployment of southern cadres, are to be heard with minor variation all over the south, and beyond, and I quote it at some length as typical.

> I was involved from the beginning [of the establishment of the zone]. I was a soldier in the *Dergue*'s army and was captured by the TPLF in [February 1989] at the battle of Shire [in western Tigray]. I stayed in Tigray until [October 1989]. We had political education about the nature of the *Dergue* and the ERPDF. Our teachers were a Welleye and a Tigrayan. The group of POWs were given the choice whether to stay in Tigray or go back to the *Dergue* (700 chose this option) or go to Sudan (100 did this but they found it not conducive so they returned to us). There were 23,000 soldiers captured at Enda Selassie[177], and 16,800 of us were southerners. We had our own caucus organised within EPDM, and we were led by Tadesse Gurmuz and Tefera Meskele[178].
>
> When EPRDF reached Addis Ababa, I was in Wellega with their forces. From Wellega we reached Mizan Teferi around two months later. There were two of us cadres – one Bench and me from the Dizi. There were 11 other fighters with us, but since they were not from this area they stayed behind whilst we started to talk to the people. We were looking out for educated people who could join the movement, but we were also careful not to target people who had any connection with the Dergue.
>
> The Bench People's Democratic Organisation was organised in [1991-2], and elections were held in [1992-3]. The Me'enit separated off in Yekatit [February 1993] to form their own party, the Dizi in [May 1993], and the Sheko in Hamle [July 1994]. (Interview, zonal official, Mizan Teferi, Bench-Maji zone, 9 October 1999)

Four points are interesting here. The first is the existence within the apparently pan-Ethiopian EPDM of a caucus of several hundred EPRDF fighters from ethnic groups in the southern region who were separately organised, educated, and mobilised[179].

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[176] Ironically the metaphor is Levine's (1974:21), who notoriously rejected the perspective it depicts (see Chapters I and IV). Although some 45 ethnic groups are administratively recognised within SNNPNRS, the 1994 census indicated that 13 of them account for 93% of its population (then reckoned to be just under 10.4 million), with only three of these (Welaiyta groups, Sidama, and Gurage groups) each accounting for more than 10% of the population of the region (*1994 Census, results at Country Level, Volume I, Statistical Report*, FDRE/CSA 1998:73-4).

[177] Albeit high the figure is consistent with claims at the time (Africa Watch 1991:266).

[178] Tefera Meskele, a Welaiyta, went on to the leadership of the SNNPNRS and EPRDF organisation(s) in Simien Omo, until his removal on corruption charges in 1999. See Chapter VII.

[179] In view of EPDM's dramatic trajectory from pan-Ethiopian nationalist EPRP to ethnic ANDM, official insistence on the immutability of the organisation's position on the national question draws

Interviews established that these cadres had received instruction on how to establish new parties well before the fall of the *Dergue*, in other words well in advance of the first outside inkling that EPRDF intended to establish its own ethnic PDOs all over the country.

The second point of interest is the careful positioning of southern cadres to move quickly into their home areas as the government forces collapsed, and the care they took to 'go on ahead of the other EPRDF fighters' to talk to elders and opinion-formers in their own groups. After what is often described as a few days of seeking to reassure their communities, these returning sons called in their 'more experienced comrades to discuss in more detail with the people' (interview, zonal official, Mizan Teferi, 9 October 1999; a pattern corroborated by interviews across SNNPNRS, October/November 1999). It seems likely that there were both long-term and short-term considerations in play. The EPRDF's immediate needs were to find a means of communicating with rural populations (relatively few of whom spoke Amharic) to calm alarm and uncertainty at shifting events, and to counteract the propaganda of the previous government (whose cadres were still operational in many places), which had portrayed the EPRDF in gruesome terms. Further, the movement wanted to distinguish itself from the *Dergue*, and above all convince the local population that it was not just another group of 'invading Abyssinians'. As already suggested, it wanted to present itself from the start as understanding local populations 'from the inside'; as an organisation which they could safely support and trust, since they were being encouraged, by their own brothers, to establish their own organisations, and join or forge alliances with EPRDF 'as equal partners'.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that the strategy began a process of elision of party and state, simultaneously selecting proto-administrators and establishing the ubiquitous interim 'Peace and Stability Committees', in the process of promulgating the party's ideology and seeking to recruit members. The same people were targeted for both,

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scepticism. One can conjecture that EPDM's enduring pan-Ethiopian veneer formed a convenient gloss: a) within the terms of which Ethiopians of all ethnic backgrounds were encouraged and able to join EPRDF; b) which deferred the need explicitly to abandon the organisation's pan-Ethiopianist

and the training they received for both purposes (in the interests of stabilising a precarious vacuum) was a political and ideological one given by the party. Until such time as state structures were in place, the seamless process of consolidation and expansion of both party and administration, begun with POW education hidden in the mountains of Tigray, continued unconstrained and at breakneck speed throughout the south under the banner of 'peace and stability'.

The final point of note is the strategy of targeting 'educated people' best able to help establish organisational structures on the ground. The southern cadres who had already become members of EPRDF were relatively few in number and (since almost all were rank and file POWs) relatively uneducated[180]: they were valued by the organisation more as a key to initial contact with small southern populations than for their long-term suitability as community leaders, and most of the original group seem subsequently to have been replaced[181]. Interviewees were ambivalent as to whether those put forward to represent their communities were selected by the communities or by the initial group of cadres, but it is apparent that the cadres had clear instructions as to what sort of people they were looking for.

> [Those of us] who were chosen all went to Awassa for training. We attended meetings, and stayed there for a month. We studied how Ethiopia had been during the Dergue, then about EPRDF and its policies. After the month they said to us 'you four are teachers: you have already got the idea, so you should go back to the area and teach the people why it is that EPRDF has come to help them'. In particular we had to tell people about the need for them not to sell their land. So then the four of us who were more experienced returned home, whilst the others who

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origins; and c) which happily contributed to concealing from outsiders (and competitors) the meticulous ongoing preparation for ethnic-based mobilisation in the south post-*Dergue*.

[180] The leadership of the southern caucus was made up of senior officer POWs, crucially supplemented by a number of 'intellectuals', including Dr Kassu Yilala and Dr Ahmed Hassan who joined the organisation overseas. As Calhoun has observed of China, in Ethiopia also the term 'intellectual' 'carries a broader reference than in the West. It means more or less all educated people.' (Calhoun 1991:71n5) Thus party members are regarded in two categories as either 'peasants' (who pay a small fixed subscription), or 'intellectuals' meaning all others (who pay a percentage of their income on a sliding scale).

[181] Comments such as the following were commonplace: 'Originally in 1991 there were 7 EPRDF soldiers who came here and were from this area. […] All 7 are now out of politics: either because they were ill or because they were evaluated to be inadequate' (interview, private sector officer, Tepi, Kaffa-Sheka zone, 8 October 1999).

> were only 10th and 11th graders[182] stayed on for a longer training. (Interview, teacher, Tepi, then Kaffa-Sheka zone, October 1999)

Rural schoolteachers were obviously of great interest to EPRDF, as were other junior government employees of local origin. Such individuals were targeted to become members of the party, and remain in overwhelming numbers the backbone of local administration[183]. They became attractive recruits for EPRDF since they were based in rural areas and apparently enjoyed that winning combination of close contact with the rural community, and – in view of their relatively higher levels of education – a degree of status and respect amongst their rural neighbours. In 1991, existing EPRDF members from the south had few if any formal educational qualifications or experience. Effecting at least a marginal improvement in the educational level of core cadres was therefore a priority for the party. However, an equally significant factor in the recruitment of primary teachers was their uniform ambition to escape their rural postings and move on to higher things[184].

Class distinctions and political affiliation

EPRDF seems to have recognised the potential of existing socio-economic cleavages in small towns and rural areas, and by the late 1990s a fairly clear class distinction could be observed between supporters of the government and those of the opposition. Junior elementary teachers, lower members of the local bureaucracy, and school leavers – those, in short, who had everything to gain from joining the ranks of the party of government – have often become its enthusiastic members[185]. Meanwhile, those who may already have enjoyed a rather higher status in rural areas (which they may have feared risking), and who are frequently less than enthusiastic about the

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[182] students sit the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate (ESLC) at the end of 12th grade, so 10th and 11th graders would be relatively senior high school students.

[183] This is a situation also reportedly commonplace during the previous regime.

[184] The disgruntlement of rural schoolteachers at the hardships of their lot has long been documented (Wrinkle (1953), Aklilu Habte (1960), Bowden (1976)). Bowden (1976:475) summarises a litany of grievances including economic factors, poor working and living conditions, lack of opportunities, isolation, and low social prestige.

[185] 'Most of those who are brought in to administer the zones can be considered a "lumpen intelligentsia". The social resentment of this class which has not gone on to success or to university is something which has been exploited by the party and in this sense they have been much cleverer than their competitors.' (Interview, foreign observer, Addis Ababa, September 1999)

overnight political rise of their juniors – those, in fact, typified by head-teachers, graduates, and professionals, as well as those with some inherited wealth – very often filled the ranks of opposition organisations. This pattern has, of course, been modified over the course of the decade, as the educational profile of EPRDF members and local administrators has been transformed by the impact of the Civil Service College degree and diploma programmes, from which so many have graduated. The point remains that those who support the party of government have usually won both their education, and the other advantages they enjoy, at its hands. Those who have led opposition to it, on the other hand, often had 'independent means' of some kind, whether educational, professional, social, or economic.

The parties which made up Beyene Petros', Southern Peoples' Coalition (SEPDC, or *hibret*), for instance, were also often represented by teachers, but usually more senior ones than those joining EPRDF. (Those who gained some seniority under the previous government, and who became members of its Workers' Party (WPE), were precluded from office and ruling party membership.)

There is more than one interpretation of this situation. Opponents assert that EPRDF quickly proved itself an organisation that anyone with any real education, independence, or community standing rapidly left, or had nothing to do with it from the beginning. Others suggest that EPRDF targeted the 'lumpen intelligentsia', calculating that the higher educated group were likely to prove 'class enemies' of their peasant-orientated policies. Others still, that they saw in this strategy a means to undermine their competitors:

> The problem was that other liberation movements didn't understand the danger and potential of existing social cleavages. EPRDF did, and were thus able to portray the nationality based movements that mushroomed in 1991 as upper class organs, as for instance they did with the Sidama Liberation Movement, SLM, suggesting that they had actually opposed land reform, and were controlled by feudals and aristocrats. (Interview, foreign observer, Addis Ababa, September 1999)

The SLM's leaders, who joined the TGE in 1991, were particularly vulnerable to the EPRDF populist rhetoric, which soon labelled them 'class enemies'[186]. Unsurprisingly, SLM left the TGE along with the OLF, announcing likewise a return to armed struggle[187]. Whether the EPRDF acted on the basis of ideological conviction or of considerations of power or both, it is worth reiterating a point suggested above. The TPLF/EPRDF has always deployed a double-edged sword against its enemies, one equally capable of despatching pan-Ethiopian challengers with its ethno-nationalist blade, and co-ethnic competitors with its alternate edge, that of superior class analysis. After 1991 the ideology of class struggle became the more important weapon, given administrative arrangements which themselves militated against the operation of multi-ethnic or pan-Ethiopian organisations. It has been deployed in almost all cases where ethnic competitors either emerged or existed.

EPRDF's failure (or determination not) to recruit the 'ethnic elite' in each case seems to have had negative consequences in terms of local perceptions of party legitimacy and 'ownership'. In many instances the low calibre and lower socio-economic profile of those commonly recruited into the party has been, in itself, enough to engender a sense of mistrust.

> They seem determined to recruit the most worthless and useless people, and then of course they kick them out for corruption. Corruption and turnover of personnel is an acute problem in this area. It is such a constraint that we almost think there is a deliberate policy of

[186] Several had been given official positions by the Dergue, later becoming disillusioned and defecting initially to the SALF, and in 1982 setting up the militant anti-Dergue SLM with an office in Mogadisho (Markakis 1987:294n38). Wolde Amanuel himself, having represented the Sidama at the July 1991 Transitional conference, was subsequently added to the SPO list of those wanted in connection with alleged Dergue-era crimes, and fled abroad.

[187] Support for the SLM, which seems to have continued to be quite strong in some parts of the area, was kept in check amongst the crucial middle class by the selection of a Sidama SNNPNRS President, and of Awassa as the regional capital. Development (and enrichment) opportunities were good in the cosy environment of Awassa's exponential mid-1990s expansion. Although control of the process of allocation of land leases in a number of SNNPNRS's urban centres (particularly lucrative in Awassa) had attracted inter-ethnic wrangling and controversy for some years, enviable (and envied) flagship development projects in Awassa and Yirgalem muted the appeal of SLM complaints about 'abuses' of Sidama land rights, and the trade in that most valuable Sidama product, coffee.

> destabilisation. (Interview, private sector professional, Awassa, 15 October 1999)[188]

Such suspicions have been greatly exacerbated by the visibility of the local EPRDF PDOs' 'outside backers', which has substantially vitiated the organisations' claims to indigenousness and legitimacy[189]. Opponents object that, whatever its pretensions to local credibility, and whatever the benefits and advantages of its enthusiasm for indigenous languages and localised administration, EPRDF's apparent unwillingness to recruit those capable of independent pursuit of local interests, call into question its real motivation.

Language and class

Before considering how EPRDF interacted with its competitor organisations in the south, it is worth noting that the constellation of ethnicity (and language) and class has operated subtly differently in the south than was the case in Tigray. This has resulted in a clearer correlation between class profile and enthusiasm for ethnic self-determination, especially as regards the prioritisation of mother-tongue languages, in some of the southern cases. Twenty-five years ago

> [a]mong university students, the Tigrinya-speakers appeared more loyal to Tigrinya than did the [Oromos] and Gurages to their mother tongues. (Cooper 1976:299)

Cooper attributed this factor to the relative prestige both of Tigrayan ethnicity and of the Tigrigna language[190], which helped to counter the influence of 'educational and

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[188] Northern cadres at the Second EPRDF Organisational Congress, held in Awassa in early 1993, also expressed concern about the 'poor levels of conscientisation' of their southern comrades (interviews with delegates, Awassa, January 1993).

[189] The presence of Tigrayans in advisory positions within the SNNPNRS was much talked about, and particular vitriol focused on the figure of Bitew Belay, the then TPLF Central Committee member often referred to as 'the Viceroy of the South'.

[190] 'One factor that serves to promote or retard language shift is the relative prestige of the groups whose languages are in contact. Groups whose prestige is high are less likely to abandon that symbol of group identity, the mother tongue, than groups whose prestige is low […] The cultural kinship shared by Amharas and Tigrinya speakers and their participation in a common tradition have given a greater prestige to the latter, vis-à-vis the Amharas, than to other groups. While the prestige of a language in general is inseparable from the prestige of those who speak it, Tigrinya also has a source of prestige which is independent of its group, namely the fact that it is the only Ethiopian language besides Amharic in which publication is regularly carried out. […] Current publication yields prestige

occupational mobility' associated with the adoption of Amharic. In the south, by contrast, where indigenous languages were less widely spoken, were often not written and standardised[191] and certainly not used for publication, and where Amharic-speaking settlers were rather more widespread, the incentives for those with education to learn, even adopt, Amharic were clearly greater[192]. When the TPLF had advocated the renaissance of Tigrigna in Tigray, the policy had met with a uniformly enthusiastic endorsement, driven equally by peasants' concerns to be able to access courts, administration and services without intermediaries, and by the middle class desire to reassert Tigrigna's 'fine literary tradition' (which had enough basis to sustain the widespread interpretation that it had been falsely slighted and repressed), and to gain employment.

In the south, middle class attitudes regarding the adoption of indigenous languages for education and administration have been more ambivalent, and the calculations as to their relative 'value'[193] vis-à-vis Amharic more complicated. As a result, whilst peasants often seem to have been enthused by EPRDF's 'empowerment' of their language, in some cases their more educated (and often correspondingly more mobile and/or urban) brethren have seen the potential pitfalls associated with the policy, and reacted at best with indifference[194], at worst suspicion. Many increasingly view the use of local languages in education (and the concomitant loss of Amharic, the only

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to the language and provides an additional incentive for those who speak it natively to retain it.' (1976:298-9)

[191] See Chapters III and VII on the importance of written text in 'capturing' a language by establishing a norm around which dialects coalesce, as well as the tendency of oral language groups to exaggerate dialect difference.

[192] 1994 census figures for the SNNPNRS indicate 312,929 claiming Amhara ethnicity, and 438,403 claiming Amharic as a mother tongue; the two figures for Tigray NRS, and in particular the discrepancy between them are all significantly smaller. These figures pale into insignificance however when compared with those to be found in Oromia where Amharas number nearly 1.7 million, and Amharic mother tongue speakers over 2 million (see below, this chapter). Also significant are figures for those with Amharic as a second language: 16.6% of the population in SNNPNRS; 11.2% in Oromia NRS; and only 7.1% in Tigray NRS (respective regional analytical census reports (Volume II) pp.44-5).

[193] Measured on a range of criteria, all of which seem to incorporate ideas of status and usefulness in varying proportion.

[194] Even members of the local government are phlegmatic rather than enthusiastic: 'Although Hadiyigna is our working language, actually we don't use it all that much. All kinds of languages are used in the zone – Amharic, Hadiyigna, Kambatigna, and Silte. There are large number of Silte traders in this area, and more than half are Silte in Hosaina' (interview, zone Bureau head, Hosaina, Hadiya zone, October 1999)

possible '*lingua franca'*) as potentially isolating, and restrictive of the mobility and opportunities of the next generation – effectively as evidence of an abiding Abyssinian determination to 'divide and rule'. In areas such as Hadiya and Kambatta, for instance, such suspicion has become something of a marker of opposition to EPRDF – even where the ethno-nationalist groups have otherwise welcomed the principle of ethnic self-determination. By mid-2002 anecdotal evidence was building that in some parts, those with the resources to do so are increasingly now sending their children to be educated in towns where schooling is available in Amharic. With the decline in the ability of many school-leavers to communicate in Amharic visible in many parts of the South by the end of the decade, even ambitious peasants began to question the benefits of educating their children in indigenous languages which would do nothing to facilitate their upward or outward mobility. In a number of areas, Amharic has been retained for education and administration.

Despite the different constellation of interest in the south than in Tigray, southern responses have not been uniform. The very different manner in which the language issue has played out in *Simien* Omo, which is discussed in Chapter VII, seems to support the contention of Chapter II, that collective conclusions and actions reflect the prevalence of conventional beliefs, as well as collective interests.

Imposing legitimacy

There are persistent and widespread reports that EPRDF has responded to competitors in the south with a systematic strategy to undermine opponents, old and new.

> In Gedeo, the repression was as strong as in Oromia, because there was a strong local movement […] people do not particularly want to talk. Gedeo is similar, because the armed resistance in the 1950s and 60s to Amhara landlordism made it difficult to get support for the EPRDF organisations. Compare also the case of the SLM: they have members and followers underground, but they cannot operate openly. (Interview, foreign observer, Arba Minch then *Simien* Omo zone, October 1999)

The recent results of this situation in Gedeo are vividly documented by Pausewang, who describes ‘an atmosphere of distrust and fear’ (2000:117), and confirms the suggestion that ‘the tense relations between the two competing parties may partly be explained by recourse to history’ (*ibid.*:118).

Whilst these accounts are significant because they are of such frequency as to suggest a political pattern, their significance is difficult to establish, because of the difficulty of ascertaining levels – let alone profiles - of popular support for any of the non-EPRDF organisations or individuals involved. More significant, therefore, has become the case of the opposition Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO), which in 2000 generated an unprecedented level of support, or at least of opposition to EPRDF.

Hadiya, Kambatta, and the campaign against the southern coalition

> They cannot let us only have a sniff at democracy: they have to allow us to eat it too! (Hadiya elder, quoted in Tronvoll 2000:149)

The Hadiya (and similarly also the Kambatta) case offers a particularly clear demonstration of the correlation of class and political divisions amongst the rural and small town populations. The parties that made up the SEPDC, including Beyene Petros’ own Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO), count many relatively senior and experienced teachers amongst their members, along with local businessmen, and social elites. HNDO and EPRDF representatives both acknowledge that a major cause of the strong electoral showing of the HNDO in 2000 federal and NRS contests, was the very public failing of an EPRDF administration in Hadiya, which had been riven by corruption scandals[195].

Nevertheless, it is unclear quite how the HNDO managed to present itself as a preferable alternative to the ruling party. Observers agree that, from the elections in

[195] HNDO won 6 out of 7 of the constituencies where elections were rerun in mid-2000. A number of interlocutors also suggest that the vote was also influenced by local anger at the deployment of ‘mostly Tigrayan’ special forces in the area before and between the initial and repeat election dates.

1992 until early 2000, HNDO had little in the way of visible organisational infrastructure in Hadiya areas, especially as compared with the EPRDF.

> In [1991-2] we had an office in this area, but it was closed down. They refused us permission directly, saying 'you cannot give your political idea to the people'. They only wanted the EPRDF candidates to participate in the election. […] I actively participated in the election in 1992. We had so many people and supporters. (Interview, HNDO representative, Hosaina, 17 October 1999

Songs and poems seem to have been used to disseminate information about HNDO electoral symbols (Tronvoll 2000:164). Such strategies, and the strength of protest feeling, may have helped to counteract a relative paucity of resources and organisational capacity. It seems, however, that deeper social dynamics may also have been in play in this case, and that these may have hinged upon perceptions of 'authenticity' and legitimacy of ethnic representation.

The HNDO chairman and his fellow leaders, for instance, were extremely well known amongst the extensive middle-classes in the relatively many small market centres and towns of Hadiya, of which Hosaina and Shone are only the most important. Dr Beyene's canvassing in Hosaina in 1992 drew a large crowd. As a professor at Addis Ababa University, whose name and voice were from time to time heard on the national and international media, he had a status in the eyes of the aspirant Hadiya population which EPRDF's school-leaver cadres could never attain. He was thus in a position both to draw on, and to generate Hadiya ethnic pride amongst the elite and the wider population in a way which was not open to them. A range of examples emerged in the course of fieldwork, where appeals to the authority of 'elders', or historical family connections, had been used to promote and lend credibility to moves against the ruling party or government[196].

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[196] Another instance of this would be the role of the leader of the Welaiyta delegations to Addis Ababa in 1999, Wana Wageisho. His nomination and claim to speak on behalf of his people drew at least in part upon his wife's status as the niece of King T'ona, the legendary warrior/leader who had galvanised local resistance to Menelik (interview, delegation members, Welaiyta Sodo, 13 October 1999). See Chapter VII below.

Ironically, a good parallel could be drawn here with the preference and support given in *Dergue*-era Tigray for the TPLF leadership. Tigrayan peasants and *petite bourgeoisie* in the late 1970s and 1980s supported and followed not other peasants, but their university-educated elite, overwhelmingly also the scions of Tigray's socio-economic elite. Beyene Petros and his colleagues could be seen to be a much closer social equivalent of the group who led the TPLF, than were the raw recruits to the ruling party of the 1990s. This may go some way to explaining the large vote which the HNDO gained in 2000. Since it suggests a fairly tenuous and speculative decision to favour the known names of the HNDO by the peasantry, it perhaps also suggests why that vote may have collapsed in 2001, in the face of what seems to have been considerable pressure from state and ruling party bodies in the intervening period (Pausewang (2001), Pausewang & Aalen (2002).

If here there is a parallel with 'revolutionary Tigray', Hadiya contrasts strongly with Tigray in respect of popular attitudes to indigenous language, as discussed above, and this undoubtedly also played to the advantage of the SEPDC/HNDO. Middle class attitudes to the adoption of indigenous language for education and administration have been overtly hostile in Hadiya. This ambivalence was seen early on amongst HNDO circles when, at a rally in Hosaina during the transitional period, the crowd called on speakers to drop Hadiyigna, and just use Amharic (Kjetil Tronvoll, personal communication, July 2001). The (EPRDF) explanation that this is because HNDO has support only in urban areas seems less tenable after the 2000 elections, and probably underestimates the strength of feeling building in the SNNPNRS on the language issue.

Questions about the scale of political conflict in Hadiya (and other areas), the number of deaths and casualties associated with it, and who bears responsibility for initiating, perpetrating, and allowing violence, are all highly contentious. ERPDF and opposition interlocutors give diametrically opposite analyses. In the wake of what little is known of the 2001 electoral experience, however, it seems increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that government and/or ruling party repression of the opposition has been deliberate, systematic, and comprehensive. In mid-2002 the

mood amongst those politically involved on either side in Hosaina remained tense and cautious, with security officers overtly watchful of outsiders attempting to investigate these issues.

Konso: the honeymoon and after

Konso has seen internal political conflict only relatively recently, and then not on as wide a scale as Hadiya. Watson describes a 'honeymoon period' in Konso in the early to mid-1990s, ascribing its subsequent waning to a number of factors, including the failure of local administrators to work with and through indigenous social institutions in shaping the Konso Special Wereda government (2002:198-218). That Konso did indeed enjoy a period of calm, in contrast with the rapid acrimony in other parts of the south, may reflect the unusual strategy adopted by the Konso opposition: essentially 'if you can't beat them, join them'. The Konso group set up at the outset of the TGE adopted a conciliatory attitude towards the ruling party, and soon became an EPRDF member, the Konso People's Democratic Organisation (KPDO). The older, educated elite, and the newly recruited EPRDF cadres worked together within the party for a relatively long time. Whether leading members of the former category finally resigned or were 'sacked following evaluation' from the KPDO is disputed. Crystal clear, meanwhile, is the bitterness and antagonism inherent in their experience of setting up the opposition KDP, which was finally registered with the NEB in 2000, winning 7 seats in the *wereda* assembly, and control of three *kebeles* in the 2001 elections[197].

The period of 5-6 years during which the individuals who are now antagonists worked together in the administration of Konso seems to have had a range of observable effects, some more positive than others. Although the KDP and its supporters seem to have faced difficulties and intimidation since the 2001 election, KDP officers were imprisoned 'partly because the government officials are slightly

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[197] The ruling KPDO and/or special wereda government since established a 'temporary administration' (*gizeyawi tsefet bet*) in each of the three kebeles, and KDP officials complain these have allowed their elected representatives no official recognition or services, but rather called kebele

afraid of them, since previously they have been with them in the party, and were powerful' (interviews, Karate, 19 June 2002). Other private interlocutors suggest that the situation is not as clear-cut, or indeed as acrimonious and dangerous as government and opposition politicians claim, since 'they all have some kin relation one with another'. The advantage of what seems still to be a marginally less conflictual situation than many elsewhere, may be that population and politicians alike speak with considerable openness (and cynicism) about the administration of the special wereda to date. This is almost certainly outweighed, however, by persistent and endemic corruption and croneyism amongst all of Konso's politicians, if widespread allegations are to be believed. Watson's concerns that, despite the evident advantages of ethnic federalism in principle, local administration remained in practice external (and oblivious) to the social traditions of the majority of the population of Konso (2002:209ff) are more than borne out by a series of interviews conducted locally in mid-2002. Interlocutors place the blame for an almost total dearth of the materials, running costs, and motivation with which good initiatives could have translated into socio-economic advantage in Konso, squarely on the shoulders of 'the politicians', seeing little to distinguish between them[198].

One size fits all: limitations on mobilisation 'from within'

> By no means does […] "objective" measuring of cultural similarities lend itself to direct political application. It always leads to etic interpretations, not to emic views of identity. If self-determination is to mean anything, definition of political identity should be left to the bearers of these identities. In view of actual political power games such a position may sound idealistic. (Schlee 1994:139)

If the claims to indigenousness and legitimacy of EPRDF organisations in the south are vitiated by the relatively lower class profiles of those they have recruited and by whom they are led, as well as by their non-indigenous connections, they are perhaps

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meetings in June 2002, apparently in an attempt to overturn their election (interviews, Karate, 19 June 2002).

[198] Although not discussed in Chapter VII, Konso is by no means immune to boundary disputes associated with ethnicity. The most serious of these concerns Teltele district, claimed since 1992 by Borana zone of Oromia NRS (Schröder (1998:24ff)). Another border dispute (Gato and Bayde Fuchucha) was under discussion between Konso and Derashe special wereda administrations in mid-2002, with a further claim for separation (Ale) referred to the NRS parliament for consideration.

further damaged by the often relatively superficial, cursory, and formulaic nature of the interventions which the fledgling PDOs have made in various localities.

Ethnographic depictions of remote groups have traditionally often been prefaced with the researcher's lamentations as to the ignorance of those who seek to govern their research subjects, and the crudity and folly of their attempts to interact with them. In the worst cases such accounts have combined a strong normative sense of the superiority of the researcher's knowledge as a basis for policy formulation, with a streak of irritation as to the likely 'sullying' effect of administrative interference upon the pristine culture of those studied.

Fortunately there is a strengthening body of ethnography, and 'ethnographic history' (Donham 1999) on southern Ethiopia, much of which employs a deconstructive analysis in order to consider the 'two main levels of discourse: that of the state and its political elite and administrative bureaucracy, but also that of the various 'native' groups.' (Abbink 1991:3) This corpus represents the view

> that the conventional approach to areas like the Ethiopian Southwest, until recently resulting in a series of classical monographs, should shift to a more regional-comparative view, emphasizing the historical links between the various ethnic formations and the processes conditioning them. (Abbink 1991:3)

Relations between ethnic groups and the state then become less disturbances vitiating research, than the focus of its interest. Sensitivity to the view and culture of ethnic groups, and their self-determination, is the explicit claim of the ruling party, and ethnography which sheds light on its success or failure takes on more than usual political interest and salience. This is true of commentary such as that of Abbink (1991, 2000), Schlee (1994 1989), Turton (1994, 1989) and (on the Dergue period) Donham (1999).

Limited local knowledge in Bench Maji

Abbink's account of the escalation of conflict, and erosion of conciliation capacity in Bench Maji zone (2000) gives a dramatically different picture of the way in which

the zone is governed from the account taken down in Mizan Teferi with which this section opened. The centrepiece of his article is a review of the meeting called by EPRDF cadres in 1991 to discuss the establishment of the zone government and call upon participants – particularly the Suri (or Surma)[199] - to give up their weapons. The meeting was

> a first effort at local translation of new (EPRDF) policy. The proceedings of the meeting reveal as much about Suri and Dizi attitudes as about those of the EPRDF people. (*ibid.*:540)

His conclusions are salutary and discomfiting, and illuminate the scale of problems associated with this act of 'translation', problems which in this case he associates with two related features of the attitudes of the incoming cadres: ignorance and disregard of local norms, and an assumption of superior understanding.

> […] the idea that a 'final settlement' of regional problems could be reached, on the basis of 'reasonable agreement' among the groups, proved to be too optimistic. […] the meeting was marked by misunderstandings and by underlying indifference among the participants. […] The EPRDF people perhaps thought it could work along the lines they knew from conciliation efforts in the communities in their own (Tigray) area, where there was an underlying linguistic and cultural homogeneity lacking among the Maji population […] Hence their cultural concepts of mediation and conciliation were shaped by a partly traditional northern Ethiopian ethic modified by secular and revolutionary-socialist thinking, which declared cultural differences and personal grievances (related to theft, loss of dignity, insult, etc.) relatively insignificant in view of the *collective* interest. Another underlying idea among the EPRDF people was that whatever the problems in the Maji area, one had to deal with the fact that the people there were illiterate, uneducated and just 'ignorant' of how to deal with problems of conflict and reconciliation; one therefore had to 'teach them' (*ibid.*:544)[200]

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[199] The latter is 'the name under which they are known to neighbouring groups and state officials; they themselves now reject the term, preferring 'Suri'' (2000:533n10). This is not the only instance where outsiders including the state and ruling party persist in referring to an ethnic group by a name that they reject; another is the Daro or Daro Konta of Simien Omo, who object to the commonly used name Kulo, or Kulo Konta having learned of its offensive connotations in Italian (interviews, civil servants and private sector officers, Ella Konta *wereda*, and Waka, Mareka Gena *wereda, Simien* Omo, 12 October 1999). By far the most notorious case of this kind, of course, was the formerly widespread use of the word 'Galla', 'a name applied by outsiders, by which the Oromo were known until recently [and] loaded with negative connotations. The Oromo do not call themselves Galla and they resist being so called' Mohammed Hassan (1990:xi).

[200] Cf. Donham's analysis of the operation of modernist discourse in rural Ethiopia (1999:26,126).

Taken out of context[201], the failure of EPRDF cadres to 'sacrifice oxen or carry out other ritual acts deemed necessary for a true reconciliation' (*ibid.*:545) may seem a trivial matter of ethnographic nicety. The virtue of Abbink's account, however, lies in his demonstration of the fact that it was much more than this: the crucial meeting failed in its objectives precisely because it 'ignored or bypassed cultural expectations among Dizi, Me'en and especially Suri of what a reconciliation meeting should be and how the participants should be treated' (*ibid.*:545). Essentially, here, the EPRDF cadres had failed to press home the advantages of the instrumental power of mobilising on the basis of ethnicity – precisely because they did not understand the conventions associated with the ethnicities in play in this instance. Rather they were operating on the basis of 'identikit' conceptions of ethnic identity, and of the proper dynamics of inter-group conciliation, developed and imported from elsewhere. The strategy did, of course, have some important benefits[202]. These (and their sustainability) were vastly reduced, however, because of the formulaic manner in which it was put into operation.

Discussion

Part of the explanation for EPRDF's failures of mobilisation lies in their misconception of the nature of ethnicity and ethnic identity, something which is borne out by important ethnographic work. The party (in common with many theorists of identity) has operated in the positivist (in this case additionally Leninist) tradition of an instrumental or materialist understanding of collective identity, according to which nations, nationalities, and peoples are the products (for primordialists additionally the 'natural' if not perennial products) of the operation of 'objective criteria' within 'the objective situation'. Thus the organisation has tended to disregard the continuous internal process of collective construction and reconstruction of group identity[203]. Rather it has been tempted to view the ethnic

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[201] Or with the reader's own modernist preconceptions.
[202] For instance, in creating a 'new local leadership stratum' (*ibid.*:545).
[203] Although, of course, given its material/instrumental slant, it is sometimes explicitly conscious of the possibilities of *external* (re)construction of group identity by means of socio-political 'engineering' (see Chapter VII below).

groups in question in terms of the 'objective' characteristics which it (or rather Stalin) has defined in advance, and been able to observe from the outside. In turn it has often unwittingly ridden roughshod over 'what the group knows' from the inside, the *emic* perspective (cf. Schlee 1994) which, I argue, in fact precisely constitutes its collective identity. EPRDF has been successful in its mobilisation efforts primarily where it has been seen 'genuinely' to have operated from *within* the relevant group and with a knowledge and understanding of its culture and interests. Attaining such a perspective has clearly depended upon a lot more than the ability of its cadres to speak the local language, and where cadres' efforts have come to a halt at this superficial level, they have met with correspondingly limited success.[204]

Fortunately for the government, those areas of the country where the local culture has been at furthest remove from the shared experience of its cadres have also been furthest from important centres of population, economic activity, and government control. Whilst some investment in learning about the linguistic and cultural concerns of several million Welaiyta or Sidama is likely to yield a valuable return even for a federal official, a similar approach to the problems of 3,258 distant Mursi[205] and their neighbours is less likely to be of interest to Ethiopia's politicians, be they in Addis Ababa, or the SNNPNRS capital Awassa. However, it is interesting that the 'authenticity' of EPRDF organisations has become a matter of widespread and explicit contention in those parts of the country where the organisation has faced strongest competition and resistance, and some of these are also large and central regions. This issue is explored in further detail with particular reference to Oromia NRS below.

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[204] In addition to the detrimental effect upon the party's own fortunes and capacity for effective mobilisation and action, more serious still is Abbink's suggestion that in Bench Maji 'the disregard of the EPRDF for local notions and symbols of peace-making' has contributed to the ''undoing of culture', i.e. of the ritual codes of mediation' and thus been implicated in 'the intensification of violence itself' (2000:547).

[205] One of the many groups living in Debub Omo zone, regarding whom vid. Turton's work going back to 1977. This population figure is from the 1994 census. Ironically the very obscurity of the Mursi makes them of disproportionate note at national level, as a result of significant tourist interest in their distinctive dress and appearance, notably clay lip and earlobe plates.

In concluding this review of EPRDF's attempts to redraw and dominate 'representation' in the SNNPNRS, however, it is perhaps important to counter what may be an overly negative focus upon problems and failures. For much of the 1990s it seems clear that the gamble of the EPRDF that the peasantry, and those who most closely influence it, would respond with enthusiasm to the chance of 'ethnic self-determination' seems to have paid a handsome return in the Southern Region. By the time of the establishment of the FDRE in 1995, it seems clear that the EPRDF was pleased with the rapid progress of the parties making up its Southern Front. Interviews conducted suggest that there are perhaps good reasons for this.

Rural informants in the southern region - including those who do not support the Front - remain remarkably enthusiastic about federalism and the 'gifts' that it has brought: local autonomy of a unit defined around their own group; linguistic freedom, and access to educational and judicial systems now administered in their own languages; local employment opportunities in the decentralised administration; the visibility of representatives from their own group at the federal level, and - perhaps more importantly than anything else - the allocation and visible expenditure of capital budget resources within each local area by local people, where this had not been the case in the past. The next chapter outlines the circumstances in which, whereas 'being able to use one's own language' is commonly the visible marker of a change of policy which has earned rapid support, it has often been the perception of the delivery of (control of) economic advantage which has emerged as the key to sustaining it or not. It is here that more visible problems have arisen.

If the consideration of the southern region given this chapter has suggested the problems associated with external and politically prescriptive classification of collective identity, that set out in the next chapter considers the internal adaptations and evolutions of identity, which have constituted collective responses to the new circumstances and opportunities that ethnic federalism has been seen to offer. In the SNNPNRS these have been significant.

Coalitions with clan leaders: shifting strategy

> Where we didn't succeed was in nomadic areas, and we didn't even try, because in these areas, clan realities are the key issue – not political issues. We didn't try to organise in these areas because we knew it wouldn't work. (Interview, then President of the TGE, Addis Ababa, August 1994)

> We were delighted. The training had gone very well with good discussions and active participation, and we felt that they really understood and accepted – even somehow 'owned' - the criteria for the distribution. So we were dismayed to find that as soon as the inputs had been dished out and we turned our backs, they completely redistributed everything according to what was 'right' in clan terms. It was quite a lesson. (Interview, international NGO officer, commenting on a rehabilitation project in Harerghe, Addis Ababa, September 1995)

This section briefly recounts the very different strategy pursued by EPRDF in pastoral areas including the Ogaden, Haud, and Awash, where their standard approach of deploying a network of indigenous cadres to mobilise the local communities 'from within' was modified in the face of a non-sedentary and clan-based population. In these areas, EPRDF – at least initially – pursued an exceptional policy of working through clan leaders as intermediary 'coalition partners', rather than attempting direct mobilisation.

Pastoralists and the state

Under most circumstances, as set out at the beginning of this chapter, EPRDF was reluctant to enter into alliances with 'elite groups', preferring to operate directly through its cadres to 'ally with the people' (interview, TGE President, Addis Ababa, August 1994). However in the case of Afar and Somali pastoralists they recognised early on that this would not work, and sought an alternative approach:

> You can't go beyond clan realities to the issues of land, language, culture, participation, power, and to mobilising the peasants, because they are nomads, so here you either have a clan leader or you don't. And in these instances we knew that the type of coalition that we needed to build was a coalition [with local leaders]. They are not EPRDF, but they are positively inclined towards EPRDF. (Interview, TGE president, Addis Ababa, August 1994)

It seems likely that, in addition to the centrality of the clan, 'cornerstone of Somali [and Afar] pastoralist society' (Markakis 1995[1993]:ix), EPRDF caution also took account of the well-documented hostility existing between nomads and the state[206]. This hostility is the result both of the brutal history of Abyssinian expansion and annexation of the neighbouring lowlands[207], and persisting Somali irredentism[208]. Additionally, pastoralists

> have a shallow commitment to the nationalist goal of founding a state. This seemingly fickle attitude reflects this group's lack of interest in the state, an institution for which the traditional pastoralist mode of production has no need. (Markakis 1987:274-5)

Thus,

> they tend to view government as alien and unrepresentative of their interests and concerns [… and] the mutual suspicion and lack of understanding between them is re-enforced. (Hogg 1997a:13-4)

> Pastoralist alienation in the Horn of Africa fuels violent political conflict and is one of the challenges faced by the post-colonial state in this region. The marginal position of pastoralists in the Horn ensures this challenge is not a serious threat to the state, unless it joins with political dissidence on the part of other social groups. (Markakis 1995[1993]:ix)

The widespread perception that 'loss of autonomy and incorporation […] set most pastoralist societies in the Horn of Africa on a path of irreversible decline' (Markakis 1993:3) has fed this disaffection[209]. It seems unlikely that even an ideal of 'self-determination' granted to Ethiopian Somalis and Afars within their own National Regional States would have been able to reverse this situation, given an overarching regional context of sovereign states whose international borders continue to criss-cross and interrupt migration routes, cutting off access to water and seasonal pasture. What eventuated was short of that ideal.

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[206] Observers draw a distinction between the violence of Somali (and Afar) relations with the state, and those of the southern Borana Oromo, paralleling other cultural distinctions (Helland 1997:76).
[207] Greenfield (1982) cites Foreign Office sources (Enclosure 173, Rodd to Salisbury, May 13 1897, PRO FO 403/255) and Kasete Gebrehiwet (1974) to suggest the abuses involved.
[208] Touval (1963), Markakis (1987), Laitin & Said Samatar (1987).

Candidates for coalition amongst the Somali…

EPRDF's coalition strategy meant that potential allies amongst Somali and Afar clan leaders were particularly valuable to the new regime in 1991, and it focused initially on those who had led resistance to the imperial and Dergue regimes. Markakis documents the 'considerable lengths' to which EPRDF went to ensure the participation of veteran Somali leaders in the events that launched the TGE:

> they asked for Sudanese help to locate representatives of the long moribund Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF). The Sudanese found them hiding in the midst of war-torn Mogadisho, fearing Hawiye revenge for their long association with Siad Barre's regime and the mindless violence sweeping the Somali capital. They were flown to Khartoum where they met with EPRDF representatives. […] (Markakis 1993b:2)

Whilst the WSLF[210] participated in the July Charter conference, and was subsequently given three seats in the HPR, the other long-standing Somali organisation, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)[211] hesitated, but was given the fourth Somali seat in the HPR when its leadership did gather in Addis Ababa towards the end of the year. The two organisations talked about operating under a united front, but only the ONLF went on to become active in the Somali NRS.

The WSLF and the ONLF represented the two versions of the secessionist agenda in the Somali region of the Ethiopian empire-state (Somali unification and Ogadeni independence) the influence of which the incoming regime in 1991 hoped to dissipate or subvert by granting self-determination within ethnic federalism. Critical

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[209] Some challenge the ''pastoralism is in decline' school of thought with its rather static interpretation of pastoralism as an unchanging mode of livelihood' (Hogg 1997a:2-3), arguing that pastoralist/state relations are 'a good deal more complex' than this (Hogg 1993:63).

[210] See Markakis (1987:223-234) on the establishment of the WSLF by the Somali regime in the run up to the Ethio-Somali war of 1976-8, seizing 'an historic opportunity to force the longstanding issue [of Somali unification]'.

[211] Initiated by WSLF members in August 1984, and made public in 1986 'initial ONLF policy defined the Ogaden as 'an oppressed nation colonized by Ethiopia', and pledged to establish 'an independent Ogaden state with full sovereignty in line with the aspirations of its people'. This was a departure from the irredentist aspirations of the WSLF, and for the next few years the ONLF struggled to get out of the shadow of the older movement' (Markakis 1993b:3).

impetus to the irredentist project had come, since independence in 1960, from the government in Mogadisho, and the implosion of the Republic of Somalia in early 1991 greatly reduced the obstacles to Ethiopian unity the EPRDF had to overcome: the Somali region effectively had 'nowhere else to go', and even establishing an independent Ogadeni state looked undesirably precarious under the circumstances. Once established as an administrative entity in its own right, however, 'Region 5' – later Somali NRS – was subject to all manner of new divisions and struggles.

As Markakis notes, initially:

> the Somali were left to their own political devices. They reacted characteristically by forming more than a dozen clan and lineage based groups to resist domination by the Ogadeni clan. Thirteen had been registered with the Electoral Commission by mid-1992, and some more appeared later[212]. (1993b:6)

Gradually the dynamics of the primary fissure began to emerge, with the larger Ogaden clan (represented primarily by the ONLF) on one side, and their smaller neighbours arraying themselves on the other in an uneasy alliance against Ogadeni dominance. Fear of this dominance, particularly as it would operate in an independent state, tended to carry the smaller clan groups closer to the EPRDF and the federalism it advocated. By contrast, 'the ONLF's commitment to the new order in Ethiopia was not solid' (Markakis 1997:567). The swing of the balance of power between the Ogadenis and the rest provided the basic impetus to political developments in the region through the 1990s, tempered as always by central Ethiopian interference, premised upon dislike and mistrust of centrifugal elements, and security concerns about this gaping, porous, and volatile border area.

The Ogaden clan emerged from regional elections in 1992 with a majority in the regional assembly and control of the regional government, a situation which 'united

[212] 'They included the Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front, the Horiyal Democratic Front, the Ethiopian Somali Democratic Movement which claims to represent the Ishaq living in the Haud, the Democratic United Party which claims to represent the Hawiye of the southern Ogaden, the Democratic Action League formed by Issa, a group representing the Rer Barre cultivators in Kelafo, and another representing the Shekash clan which is dispersed throughout the Ogaden' (Markakis 199b:6). See also Gilkes (1992).

all the other clans in opposition, and they set about to derail the newly established regional administration' (*ibid.*:567). A few months after the council's replacement in June 1993, it met under new ONLF leadership in Jigjiga[213], where 'in an outburst against the alleged interference of the central government in Somali regional affairs, it voted to exercise the right of self-determination' (*ibid.*:568). Again the regional leadership was replaced, and 'the opposition clans strove to forge a united front [...] encouraged by the central government's growing disenchantment with the ONLF' (*ibid.*:568).

By early 1994, the central government's policy of 'forging coalitions' had involved them in

> the removal of three successive Somali regional presidents, none of whom stayed in office more than seven months. A number of regional officials and ONLF members were also imprisoned. All were charged with embezzlement of funds, abuse of authority and sundry other crimes. This effectively crippled the regional administration, alienated the Ogaden clansmen, and provoked sporadic clashes between government forces and members of the ONLF. Itihad, which was threatening insurrection, eagerly joined the hostilities (*ibid.*:568)

Now finally EPRDF set out to sponsor a political affiliate, and the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) was established at a meeting in Hurso, under the leadership of the two Somali members of the federal cabinet[214], and with strong pressure publicly applied by both Prime Minister and President[215]. The success of the ESDL during elections in 1995 was conveniently facilitated by a split in the ONLF, over whether or not to participate. After the elections, however, 'came the turn of the

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[213] When in 1995 the regional capital shifted from the remote Ogaden heartland of Gode to the highland periphery of Jigjiga, close to Ishaq territories, the move was initiated by the non-Ogadeni clans newly controlling the region, and was also clearly desirable from the Federal government's highland perspective, given the relative accessibility, stability and security of Jigjiga – as well as its more temperate climate. Somali regional politicians had been warned early on not to press their controversial claim to Dire Dawa.

[214] Abdul Mejid Hussein, an international civil servant and Federal Minister is an Ishaq, a clan long feuding with the Ogaden over the Haud; Samsudin Ahmed, a Gadabursi and vice-minister. Neither 'had previous connection with Somali nationalist and clan politics' (*ibid.*:568)

[215] Meles Zenawi warned Somali elders and politicians that the right to secession was to be exercised 'by the people and the nation, not a political party or a clan' (*Ethiopian Herald*, 11 February 1994), cited by Markakis (*ibid.*:569).

Ogaden to have a try at derailing a regional government controlled by other clans' (*ibid.*:569). As Markakis concluded in 1997

> The new political order in Ethiopia does not seem to have affected the categorical imperative of Somali political practice, which is clannishness. […] It was to be expected that having gained the upper hand, the ESDL itself would become the arena of clan rivalry. […] With its leadership in prison or abroad, the 'illegal' ONLF drifted on a collision course with the central government. In June 1996, an agreement was announced in London between this group and the [by then outlawed] Oromo Liberation Front. (*ibid.*:570)

Events in the Ogaden took a further turn for the worse with the outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean war in May 1998, with whatever priority had been accorded internal political reconciliation losing out to the imperative of security, in the face of cross-border destabilisation. Although the ONLF and the ESDL officially signed an agreement to merge in June 1998, if left some sections of the ONLF – along, of course, with Itihad, and an assorted cast of trans-border characters – outside the Ethiopian net. The Byzantine activities of both Ethiopia and Eritrea in mobilising allies amongst Somali and Afar clans in both countries, and in neighbouring Somalia, Somaliland, and Djibouti, are enumerated in Gilkes (2000). The result has been (further) increase in the availability of both small arms and heavy weapons, as well as a dramatic escalation of the presence of the Ethiopian Defence Forces throughout Somali NRS and, controversially, across the border.

…and amongst the Afar

EPRDF activities in the Afar NRS since the fall of the Dergue have been similar to those amongst the Somali, albeit reflecting a stronger tendency to 'interfere' from the beginning of the transition, given a history of closer proximity and collaboration between adjacent Tigrayan and Afar opposition movements during the Dergue period[216]. The ERPDF had, in the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), a pre-existing ally,

[216] During the imperial and Dergue periods, the escarpment down to the Danakil, and a part of the lowlands, were administered under Eastern Tigray. The TPLF administration of Tigray during the Dergue period was organised within three zones, with this area falling into the eastern one, and involving significant liaison with Afar groups.

which had been consistent in its opposition to the Dergue regime since its establishment in 1975 by the son of the Sultan of the Awsa Afar, Hanfare Ali Mirah.

With the nineteenth century expansion, the Awsa sultan, now an Ethiopian 'vassal'

> won recognition of his authority over his subjects, and this contributed to the consolidation of Afar ethnic identity' (Ali Said (1998:109-110).

Shoan pre-eminence and its 'close historical relationship with the Awsean Sultanate in the south made the southern Afar appear the leadership and representative of all the Afar.' (Maknun Gamaledin 1993:45). The sultanate was, however, slow to become a focus for Afar resentment towards the central state, despite large scale developments along the Awash River under Haile Selassie I in the 1960s, when 'large tracts of Afar dry-season grazing land were lost to commercial irrigation schemes run by foreign concessions, members of the royal family and Ethiopian entrepreneurs' (Ali Said 1998:110). The main reason for this was the enrichment of the Sultan and his entourage in the cotton plantations, and their close and prestigious relations with the Emperor[217]. An alternative outlet for opposition was established just before the end of the imperial regime, when a group of educated Afars studying overseas set up the Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM). Following the change of government, and the nationalization of land[218], however, it was not long, before the sultanate also became disillusioned with the Ethiopian state, and the ALF was established. 'The recognition of the sultan as a patriot by the ANLM marked the forging of a broader political forum for ethnic opposition'. (*ibid.*:111)

Whilst in ideological terms the ANLM was closer than the conservative ALF to the other liberation fronts, including the TPLF, which had emerged from the radical politics of the ESM, most of its members were won over by the Dergue's 1976 'National Democratic Revolution Programme', in which they saw the potential

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[217] These additionally 'helped Haile Selassie to check the early Eritrean rebels, and also influenced colonial politics in neighbouring Djibouti, where the Afar constitute a substantial proportion of the population' (*ibid.*:110)
[218] This 'not only led to the expropriation of the holdings of Ali Mirah, the Afar sultan, but also deprived the pastoralists of their large tracts of dry-season grazing land, which were turned into large government irrigation schemes and state farms' (*ibid.*:111)

‘realization of their demands for an autonomous Afar state’. ANLM’s reportedly heavy involvement with the Dergue sowed lasting distrust between it and the ERPDF, and this has cast a long shadow (Interviews, Mekelle, October 1998).

Neither, however, was EPRDF enthusiastic about its long time ally the ALF. Apart from the ideological chasm which separated the two organisations, particularly discomfiting to the ruling party were the ALF’s apparently lavish expenditure of the regional budget, its undisguised prioritisation of the economic development of the Awsa area, and the disparate, wayward, and opportunistic nature of the relations of various members of the Ali Mirah family with regional players[219]. Despite the EPRDF’s keenness to court the Sultan and his family in the early and unpredictable days of the transition, it could not long resist the temptation to foster a more congenial alternative.

> The Afar People’s Democratic Organisation (APDO) came into existence shortly after the fall of the military regime. This group is supposedly supported by Afar who were formerly part of Tigray province, and is an EPRDF affiliate. It claims to represent the interests of the cattle-keeping Afar, in contrast to the ALF which is associated with those of nomadic ancestry. Considering the close ties between APDO and EPRDF, it seems that the former largely represents the interests of the country’s ruling party, instead of the interests of the Afar. The APDO is gradually breaking ALF’s power monopoly, as is shown in the results of the recent elections, when it won a majority of the seats in the Afar Regional Council (twenty-three out of forty-eight) and (three out of eight seats) in the Council of People’s Representatives. (*ibid.*:113)

Discussion

The bulk of the complaints about EPRDF activities which have filtered out from Afar, and to some extent also Somali areas during the 1990s, have something in common with points discussed in the previous section regarding the SNNPNRS. Albeit responding differently to different patterns of social stratification, it seems that EPRDF has once again sought to mobilise amongst those who can be regarded as marginalized under previous socio-economic arrangements, similarly exploiting

[219] At the outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict it was reported that one of the sultan’s sons favoured the Eritreans, and another the Ethiopians. Rivalry amongst several of the siblings for control of the organisation, and its Gulf-sponsored purse strings, has long been rumoured.

their potential resentment to pinpoint them as a 'target group' for party membership. It has been observed of the APDO, for instance, that it has drawn members from amongst the young men whose social, political, and economic marginality had been further intensified by the impoverishment and breakdown of the pastoral economy. Placing these 'young upstarts', via APDO, as elected representatives, local executives, administrators and bureaucrats, has subverted the traditional authority of elder clan members, whose loyalty – whether to the sultanate or not – was woven into a conservative social structure over which EPRDF had little evident means of gaining control.

In some instances, this younger generation of pastoralists (unlike their counterparts in the SNNPNRS) has also represented the more educated stratum in Afar society[220]. However, its co-option into government has triggered similar anger at EPRDF 'manipulation of our autonomy', and 'disregard of our culture' (interview, Addis Ababa, April 1998), as was evident in the south.

The literature on peace building and conflict resolution in Somalia in the early 1990s suggests another area of concern as to EPRDF's approach in pastoral areas. Following the collapse of the Republic of Somalia in the early 1990s, Abdi Ismail Samatar criticised the anthropological 'traditionalist' literature on the region because (amongst other failings) it

> conflates kinship and current clanism; it accepts the ideology of clanism as a sufficient explanation of the on-going tragedy, without unearthing the social and the material basis of its constitution; [and that] it gives excessive weight to the causal power of clanism' (1992:629)

His suggestion is that 'the mesmerising power of Somali tradition' in its eloquent depiction in such works as Lewis (1961)[221], in fact seduced many of those intervening in Somalia into 'creating an equation with a single variable' – that of

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[220] It seems that the opposition ANDM has had more purchase amongst the educated elite, another apparent parallel with the SNNPNRS.

[221] Cf. also Ahmed Yusuf Farah & Lewis (1993), who fail to examine the mutual influence of traditional and modern socio-political structures and forms of activity, and simply present the two as alternatives. Abdi Ismail Samatar's 'transformationist' approach (1992), meanwhile, investigates these connections, in a manner reminiscent of that advocated by Abbink (1991) discussed above.

clan (Samatar 1992:628). Given the comments of the EPRDF leadership with which this section opened, it seems likely that this kind of reduction may also have coloured and marred the approaches to pastoral populations of the new government in Ethiopia in the early 1990s. EPRDF's perspective may have blinded them to the operation and emergence of relationships other than those between clan units. The categorisation of Ethiopia's populations under ethnic federalism may have exacerbated existing tendencies to

> view pastoralists and pastoralism in isolation. Instead of seeing pastoralism as the product of a dialectic between a variety of shaping forces – history as well as nature – [explanatory paradigms] seek single variable explanations. (Hogg 1997:2) Pastoralism and farming do not represent polar opposites but rather ideal types of economic activity along a continuum from 'pure' pastoralism to farming; most of Ethiopia's 'pastoral' societies pursue multi-resource economies in which the balance is constantly shifting in response to changing circumstances. (:5) New types of relationships begin to replace those based on kinship or common livestock interests. […] old relationships become reformulated for a modern political arena. (:7)

EPRDF involvement in Somali and Afar NRSs, seems, at best, to have had mixed results. Once again this may reflect superficial understanding of social dynamics in the regions in question, albeit in this case a lack of knowledge explicitly acknowledged, and attemptedly circumvented, by the 'coalition building' policy. In the late 1990s, the situation became so volatile that the Federal Government despatched technical advisers to shore up the administration in each of these areas[222].

> [C]orruption among local leaders, widespread embezzlement of public funds, inadequate development efforts by both central government and private sector, bitter power rivalry among different political groups and EPRDF manoeuvres to change the local power balance all tended to frustrate the democratisation process. This is a favourable ground for increased ethnic antagonism. The prevailing situation in the Afar region apparently endangers the peaceful and democratic resolution of the ethnic issue. (Ali Said 1998:114)

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[222] Nominally in response to simultaneous requests for such support from Somali, Afar, Gambella, and Benishangul Gumuz NRSs, in early 1998. The fact that these advisers are primarily Amharas and Tigrayans, and are regarded as EPRDF cadres, has done little to endear them (or the EPRDF) to the

Persuading the Somali to remain within the Ethiopian state, and the Afar to give up their dreams of a greater Afar nation was 'a conspicuous initial success' (Markakis 1997:567). The relatively small populations, and economic and geographical marginality of these pastoralist areas, however, mitigated the national significance of the relatively distant approach to political mobilisation adopted by the EPRDF government. This situation contrasts strongly with that in the largest, most populated, and most centrally located of the Federal Democratic Republic's regions, Oromia NRS.

Competition in Oromia

> 'The one who has left us and moves through the borderlands, let God make him return. Let the guests who came to our land return to their country in peace' (Tamene Bitima 1993), [part of a blessing] recorded in the Walliso area in 1992, during a meeting between representatives of the OPDO and the peasantry […] the guest i.e. the EPRDF is wished to return in peace to his country, either with the help of God or by an additional collective effort of the people. (Zitelmann 1996:104))
>
> The TPLF leaders lack the legitimacy to design and implement a federal system which works only when it is designed by the people and their representatives and implemented with their freely expressed consent. 'Federal principles grow out of the idea that free people can freely enter into lasting yet limited political associations to achieve common ends and protect certain rights while preserving their respective integrities' [Elazar (1987)] Today, the Oromo are not free people and therefore they can not freely enter into political association to establish a federal system. (Mohammed Hassan 1998:185)

The interpretation of events in Oromo areas since 1991 has been bitterly contested from the outset. Oromia comprised one of the four regions (plus Addis Ababa) the government of which EPRDF sought to win control during the transitional period. Between them these areas encompass over 48 million of a total national population of just under 53.5 million[223], i.e. more than 90% of the population. In Tigray, and Amhara EPRDF had established widespread control before the fall of the Dergue; in the South and Oromia they were effectively setting out to do so from scratch.

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people of the regional capitals (interviews, private sector and civil servants, Jigjiga, January 2000), and the policy was reportedly modified in 2002.

[223] 1994 census, *Results at Country Level, Volume I, Statistical Report*, p.14

In Oromia, as noted in Chapters I and V, EPRDF was confronted with a relatively widely known, widely established, and widely supported competitor in the longstanding nationalist Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the only other movement to control an extensive operational territory before 1991. This section attempts to consider the position of the EPRDF affiliate, the OPDO, operating, since the withdrawal of the OLF in 1992, in the context of what seems to be a higher degree of disaffection amongst opinion-leaders than in any other part of the country. In this violently contested terrain, the disputed question of the government's record in the delivery of socio-economic services emerges as a critical barometer of its support. Given the well-established and sophisticated history of Oromo nationalism, however, questions of convention and collective belief - about the ethnic 'authenticity' of the ruling party, and its 'legitimacy' to represent the Oromo cause and people - have again fundamentally shaped developments.

It was, then, after a long period of enmity, and with great misgivings that the EPRDF and OLF came together to form the core of the transitional government in 1991[224]. Both sides felt that their reservations had been justified when the competition between them, always bitter, rapidly escalated into bloodshed as the 1992 elections approached[225]. Frantic arrangements to attempt to separate and encamp the armed forces of the two parties collapsed, and the OLF withdrew four days before elections in June, rapidly followed by a majority of the other smaller parties opposed to EPRDF. The OLF's departure from the government, and return to armed struggle, and the relatively rapid neutralising of the bulk of its forces during the summer of 1992, left a situation in the region which interlocutors described as 'depressingly straightforward': OPDO has consistently swept the electoral board and administered

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[224] The history of mistrust set out in Chapter V had been exacerbated in 1990/1 by a series of military clashes and skirmishes as the EPRDF forces moved on Addis Ababa from the west, through areas of Wellega of which the OLF claimed control. The EPRDF campaign, named in Oromiffa 'Operation Peace and Democracy', was clearly designed to win support amongst the rural Oromo population, and infuriated the OLF.

[225] Reports of these events in English come from international election observers. See NIHR (1992), African American Institute for Democracy (1993).

the region with little or no opposition[226] and (in the view of many) equally little or no support; the 'best people' have refused to have anything to do with the government[227]; many are reported to have been detained; and the impression is that peasants and townspeople alike are significantly more fearful of discussing their situation than is the case in other parts of the country.

The threat (and implications) of being perceived as an OLF supporter are widely feared whatever the sympathies of those in question; in a number of cases this seems to have circumscribed initiative along with opposition (interviews, government and private sector officers, Jimma, Nekempte and Metu, October/November 1999), such that development is often perceived as a casualty as much as democracy. The following anecdote about NGO activities in Oromia NRS is not isolated.

> During a recent conference held to discuss women's issues, a problem arose when the issue of right of redress for women against their husbands was discussed. One participant said 'if there is a problem, we take it to the kebele, after the kebele to the wereda; after the wereda, however, there is only god'. We tried to correct this idea by explaining that she could also take her case to the zone, and region, the federal government, and so on. We were arrested after this on the basis that we had been 'giving away government secrets'. (interview, NGO officer, Addis Ababa, 24 September 1999)

The effects of what is perceived as government over-sensitivity are often criticised, and the following comments are widely echoed:

> In Amhara NRS, for instance, you can be committed to community development of your area, and disagree politically, and there is no problem: you are free to work, and to make your contribution. In Oromia NRS, however, you are labelled as a 'narrow nationalist', or as a 'feudal' or 'pan-Ethiopianist'. These allegations might come, for instance, if you were to listen to Oromiffa music. This is only being applied to Oromia NRS – you don't find this problem in other regions. This kind of policy is basically killing the nationalist momentum for development, which is

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[226] So, for instance: 'There are no political parties in this area now, other than OPDO. I can't say that all the population are with OPDO, but since there are no other organisations operating here now it is difficult to tell. There might be many other organisations that the population supports, but without any concrete result' (interview, zone government official Nekempte, Misrak Wellega zone, October 1999).

[227] 'people in this area tend not to work for the government if they are any good at all' (interview, private sector development officer, Metu, Illubabor zone, October 1999).

> the positive part of the federal system in other places. (Interview, academic, Addis Ababa, November 1999)

The impression that the EPRDF, in attempting to keep control of nationalist feeling in Oromia, has in fact throttled it, and driven its impetus outside the legal political framework, is widespread. If recruitment of educated and experienced personnel was regarded as a problem in SNNPNRS, it has been more of a crisis in Oromia. The OPDO has been plagued since its inception with corruption problems (with several subsequent 'cleaning up' sessions, resulting in massive expulsions), and a series of defections to the OLF, even at the highest level[228]. During 1991 and 1992 both sides accused the other of recruiting 'former Dergue party members and soldiers', and it seems clear that the large pool of demobilised soldiers from the army of the previous regime has provided a readily available resource for each.

In common with the situation in SNNPNRS, the upper stratum of the urban and rural intelligentsia, whose sympathies are quite clearly not with the government[229], have stayed well away from its structures and projects. Many have found refuge with non-governmental structures. In the western parts of Oromia including particularly Wellega and Illubabor, the long-established protestant churches offer alternative vehicles for resource delivery, conferring status, or establishing a career[230].

The views of the peasant majority are, as ever, less clear. There is however, some evidence that in certain parts of Oromia resistance to the government is compounded, rather than assuaged, by government economic policies and interventions, particularly in the agricultural sector. Oromia NRS contains a number of the country's grain surplus-producing areas, and many feel that they are disadvantaged by policies designed to promote national food production, and increase the security

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[228] Perhaps still the most significant defection to the nationalists was that of the head of Security and Justice in the region in January 2001, although the decimation of its leadership since the divisions within the ERPDF from February/March 2001, is remarkable.

[229] It is worth noting that many educated Oromos were also angered at the OLF's decision to withdraw from government – a disappointment which has left many feeling 'unrepresented' and 'excluded' (personal communication, 1992, 1995)

[230] The churches in the west have the added advantages of strong contacts and credibility amongst the international NGO, church, and donor communities. That the government had tended to regard these well-resourced organisations with resentment and suspicion is hardly surprising.

of food deficit areas in the north (particularly Tigray NRS, and parts of Amhara), to the detriment of producer incomes in the more fertile south. Whilst extension packages of credit, fertiliser, seeds, and tools, have been the main pillar of government development programming which seeks at once to benefit, to woo, and to tie farmers into the system[231], their formulaic application in some parts of Oromia has triggered crises in loan repayment.

> At the moment things are pretty much OK because food is flowing to the north and to Simien Omo where there is famine. As a result prices are pretty stable. But if production in the rest of the country develops, well it is clear that this area will have a lot of problems, and there will be a backlash against the extension programme[232] (interview, senior government official, Nekempte, Misrak Wellega zone, 4 October 1999).

Although this problem may affect only certain areas of the region, it further contributes to the sense of grievance that Oromia is having to put up with a system designed for the benefit of other parts of the country. Allegations of government incompetence, corruption, and policy weakness constitute one strand of nationalist discourse. Another, as indicated above, relates to legitimacy and questions of indigenousness.

A persistent allegation is that, because the party has faced such profound difficulties of recruitment

> There is a group of people who are moved around all over Oromia, from one place to the next, and simply appointed by the party. There is no attempt to get really local people or to have any continuity of administrative personnel (interview, NGO Officer, Addis Ababa, January 2000)

Although this allegation did not seem to be borne out by the evidence accumulated during fieldwork[233], nevertheless it forms part of a discourse which describes OPDO

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[231] There are persistent allegations that the provision of such inputs, and threat of their withdrawal, have been used as a stick with which to keep farmers 'in line' on political matter – often in relation to the election or recall of party candidates.
[232] These fears proved grounded after bumper harvests in 2000.
[233] Respondents in Jimma, Nekempte, Metu, all confirmed that 'zone executive members have to be from the zone, not just from somewhere in Oromia'. The only instance in which local executive and

members as ‘outsiders’, even, ‘not real Oromos’ (interviews, Addis Ababa, February 2000):

> The major problem is with the *neftegnas*. Many came to know the language and the culture and are now masquerading as Oromos when they are not at all. Most of those who are members of OPDO are *neftegnas*. This is where many of the problems arise with the relationship between the political organisation and the population. They don’t fully understand how the community works, and what it will respond to. (interview, private sector professional, Addis Ababa, September 1999)

As with most complaints, the symmetrical criticism is also made of the nationalist movement by party members. When questioned about why educated people were hostile to the OPDO, party members often retorted along the lines of the following respondent.

> Most are the children of landlords, and they want to get back their land. They know they will never get back their land whilst OPDO is in power, so they don’t support us – they promote negative impressions of the government and of course claim that it is for other reasons. (Interview, local government officer, Nekempte, Misrak Wellega zone, October 1999)

The nationalist version of the claim, however, carries an ethnic sting along with the class slur. In the SNNPNRS, as outlined above, EPRDF was often praised for introducing the benefits of ethnic federalism, but criticised for not really allowing the development of structures to support self-determination from within the ethnic groups in question. In Oromia NRS, by comparison, the critique of nationalist opponents is more fundamental, suggesting that the entire process of the establishment of ethnic federalism is fraudulent, implemented in Oromia by a ‘faked’ ethnic party, whose errors are based not on misunderstanding of the local cultures and conditions but on the wilful prioritisation of non-Oromo interests. In much of the

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party officials interviewed came from outside the zone where they were assigned was in Kemissie, capital of the Oromiffa-speaking Special Zone within Amhara NRS. Here, it was claimed, a history of extreme marginalisation precluded local recruitment of suitable people. One could speculate that nationalist criticism might have swung the other way, alternatively accusing the government of ‘dividing Oromos’ by giving emphasis to zone and local differentiation. Interviews suggested strongly that such localised affiliation remains important, thus, for instance: ‘People take steps on the basis of their sense of their own identity. For instance, I am from Wellega. If you mix me with the Borana, I

nationalist literature, the OPDO are equated with external forces, or described as their puppets. The comment 'behind every OPDO member stands a Tigrayan with a kalashnikov' has been commonplace through the early 1990s. Also persistent is the theme of the plunder of Oromo resources.

> They said they would bring peace to the
> Oromo, but they never did. Instead they
> Settled among us, travelled everywhere
> And surveyed the resources of the
> Oromo
> (Jaarso Waaqo Qoot'o, translated by Abdullahi Shongolo (1996:276))

In sum then, the nationalist message is that EPRDF, from which OPDO has no independence, is designed solely to serve the interests of its home areas in Amhara and Tigray. Even, they claim, the form of the Abyssinian occupation of Oromia has barely changed under ethnic federalism. So, finally, the nationalist position remains clear-cut and simple: *a luta continua*[234].

Regional capitals and the 'young turks'

The EPRDF, with its explicit focus on peasant development, paid little attention to the middle classes during the 1990s. Its EPRDF amongst educated groups, however, has not been entirely negative. The establishment of regional and zone capitals – particularly the exponential growth of Mekelle (Tigray), Bahr Dar (Amhara), and Awassa (SNNPNRS) – gradually enabled the government to meet some of the requirements of a new generation of young civil servants and professionals. This has at least allowed EPRDF and the government to recruit some educated capacity to facilitate regional and local initiatives. The limited evidence regarding patterns of mobilisation and support in these towns is briefly reviewed here.

In some respects, the apparent success story is the development of Bahr Dar (slums notwithstanding) and the professionalisation of the regional bureaucracy in Amhara

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don't feel anything, even though we share something as important as the language' (interview, NRS Bureau Head, Addis Ababa, September 1999).
[234] Cf. Leencho Lata (1999).

NRS. From amongst all of the six non-federal units of government that the ERPDF controls directly (the four large regions, Addis Ababa, and the Provisional Administration of Dire Dawa), the executive and civil service which run Amhara NRS seem over recent years to have emerged as the most efficient and effective[235]. This success is of interest, given the great difficulties of recruitment the regional government faced at the beginning of the transitional period.

During 1991 and early 1992 the educated elites of Ethiopia's 'oppressed peoples' flocked to join Development Associations and political parties set up for the benefit of their ethnic groups. The regional bureaux, NGOs, and offices to be established in different parts of the country represented new opportunities for providing service to one's 'own people' in one's own home area. Many educated Amhara, however, saw the situation quite differently. An expansion of the regional civil service entailed a contraction of the federal civil service based in Addis Ababa, then dominated by Amharas and Amharic-speakers. Most were understandably unenthusiastic about the prospect of vacating the capital, and leaving the educational and other facilities it offered the middle-class. Unlike their peers in other ethnic groups, many educated Amharas saw in the changes a threat to the national influence they stood to lose, in the context of which whatever regional influence they might gain could never be seen as a gain.

Over and above the individual interests of established civil servants and their families, at a political level educated Amharas were often not supporters of ethnic federalism, tending to be pan-Ethiopian nationalists, even enthusiasts for the centralised state of the imperial period, forged 'in their own image' on the basis of common Orthodox Christianity and the Amharic *lingua franca*. Dispute raged as to whether 'there was any such thing as an Amhara'[236]; even elements within the EPDM seemed reluctant to see the organisation transformed into the nationalist ANDM; and, when the Amhara Development Association was set up, it proved

[235] Interestingly the ANDM also survived EPRDF party upheavals in early 2001 relatively unscathed.
[236] ETV debate between Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Meles Zenawi, broadcast August 1991.

difficult to recruit members, officers, and supporters. Attracting qualified individuals into the regional civil service proved even more problematic.

The establishment of Bahr Dar as the regional capital was itself controversial – both because of traditional rivalries between the Amhara provinces of Gojjam, Gondar, Shoa, and Wollo, and because of its malaria-prone position on the shores of Lake Tana. In 1991 Bahr Dar was little more than a muddy village, as advocates of the better-developed towns of Gondar and Dessie were quick to point out. Its transformation into a smart capital and lakeside resort, however, has mirrored the rise in the willingness of educated Amharas to move, work, and set up businesses there, and more general shifts of attitude:

> In 1996 students were highly sceptical of the ANDM government, frequently considered the party to be an instrument of the TPLF, saw little signs of development, were angered at what they considered the TPLF giving away Eritrea, and strongly opposed the EPRDF's ethnic division of the country. In 1998 the students were mildly supportive of the government, placed less emphasis on TPLF hegemony, considered ethnicity a viable basis on which to organize the country, were not unduly bothered at Eritrea's departure from Ethiopia, and pointed to the development and stability under the ANDM. A caveat here may be that the students were from Bahr Dar, which has seen higher levels of development than any of the other major towns of the region. (Foreign consultant's record of two sets of focus groups carried out amongst high school students in Bahr Dar in February 1996 and March 1998, personal communication, May 1998)

Such findings were supported by fieldwork, and the enthusiasm amongst regional civil servants for the regional leadership, and the 'culture of openness and professionalism' for which they were credited, was notable (interviews, NRS civil servants, Bahr Dar, May 1999, January 2000). Whilst tempered by concerns about corruption and relative inefficiency, a similar sense of pride can be felt amongst some civil servants in Awassa, which has also become a gleaming and impressive lakeside regional capital[237].

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[237] In Awassa the sense of 'collective endeavour' is apparently mitigated by the multi-ethnic nature of the administration, and recent controversy over the city's status (see Chapter VII).

The trajectory in Mekelle has been different, given that expectations riding on the 'liberation' in 1991 were much higher amongst many educated Tigrayans, and consequently much more difficult to fulfil. Young civil servants and graduates flocked to apply to work in their home region: to be closer to homes and families, from whom many had been separated by the war; to work and live in a Tigrigna-speaking environment; and to demonstrate their commitment to the development of Tigray, alongside their loyalty to the new ruling party and its nationalist project. Many were appalled by the physical conditions they encountered in Mekelle and, as rents leapt up to reflect the new demand, found it difficult to live on government salaries. Almost all of the new influx were young single men, who were soon complaining vociferously about the dearth of young single women. By the time this imbalance started to shift, a flourishing network of prostitution had re-established itself in the former garrison town.

A particular problem experienced in urban 'post-revolutionary Tigray' was the discrepancy in 'culture' between the TPLF and the incoming civil servants, where the 'assumptions of the bureaucracy frequently conflicted with procedures developed by the TPLF' (John Young 1997b:82).

> Often at the centre of debate over administrative reform is *gem gum*[238], which derives its origins from a number of sources, including Maoism and the traditional means of evaluation employed by Tigrayan elders. Developed during the revolution as a means to ensure accountability and democratic decision-making in the army as well as in the TPLF's mass associations, the introduction of this institution into state bureaucracies throughout Tigray […] initially met considerable resistance from bureaucrats unwilling to have their performance evaluated by fellow employees and the community, and still faces opposition. (*ibid.*:95)

In the recent period, the sense of disquiet amongst the middle class in Mekelle and the other towns of Tigray seems to have re-emerged. It seems likely that this is primarily a consequence of the profound impact of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict on the region, and, very recently, the upheavals and divisions within the party, some of which were fought out quite publicly in Mekelle itself.

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[238] Essentially a form of performance evaluation based around extended collective discussion, analysis, and eventual consensus, and incorporating sessions of criticism and self-criticism.

Once again, Oromia NRS has proved to be a significantly more difficult case than the other core regions. Considerable sensitivity attaches to the identification of a regional capital, because of the strength of Oromo nationalist determination (shared within OPDO) to lay claim to Finfinne (Addis Ababa) itself. The argument about the location of the Oromia NRS capital[239] clearly divides OPDO from the other component parts of EPRDF, which label it an example of the kind of 'narrow nationalism', which favours nationalist rhetoric and symbol above the interests of the people of the region. Throughout the 1990s Oromia Regional Bureaux remained in the capital alongside but separate from their federal counterparts. Whilst a number of Oromia's towns have seen some development, no one centre has emerged as a focus of development growth (and nationalist pride). On the contrary, many of Oromia's older towns, of which Jimma is the most obvious[240], have faced decline.

A second problem concerns civil service recruitment. At the end of the 1990s, federal civil service salary scales had been revised and increased, resulting in a mass exodus from the Oromia regional civil service where salary scales remained at the pre-existing lower rate. In some bureaux this had created staff shortages of dramatic proportions, with up to 50% of positions remaining unfilled[241]. In Ethiopia, the haemorrhaging of personnel from the public into the incomparably better-remunerated private, voluntary, and international sectors is a problem everywhere: in Addis Ababa where living costs are above the norm, and the competition immeasurably greater, it is a crisis. The current situation effectively places the Oromia NRS civil service is at the 'bottom of the heap'. This can hardly fail to perpetuate the problems of capacity and competence discussed above.

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[239] Likely at the time of writing to be resolved in favour of Adama (Nazareth).

[240] Jimma was an important administrative centre under Haile Selassie and the Dergue, and the economic hub of coffee trading for the entire area. Now that much of the coffee producing area (especially Kaffa Sheka zone) forms part of SNNPNRS, and Jimma's status has been reduced to that of zone capital, its Italianate buildings, wide avenues and markets are redundant and decaying.

[241] Information from interviews with 7 Oromia regional Bureaux Heads, and with the FCSC, December 1999.

This chapter has attempted to review the varying degrees of success, and different strategies, with which the EPRDF has attempted to mobilise amongst different ethnic groups, and different socio-economic strata. A recurrent theme of these accounts has been the relation between their success in mobilisation and the attention which has been paid both to the interests, but also to the collective self-perception, of the group in question. The words of a sympathetic voluntary sector professional perhaps provide an appropriate conclusion.

> There are some things which cannot be reduced to mere practicalities, and identity is one of them. This is a very delicate issue. The approach adopted by successive Ethiopian governments has always been to undermine the social dimension, and to make policy on the basis of very limited understanding. There are always far too many things which are invisible to us as outside actors. (interview, NGO officer, Addis Ababa, 26 September 1999)

Chapter VII. Reworking territory: languages, boundaries and budgets

> To draw a boundary is a cognitive act that lays down some premises; but it does not determine all the social forms that eventuate. The affordances of a boundary set the scene for social activities, and in that sense, yes, boundaries also connect. But the connections that emerge are the work of people who respond selectively and pragmatically to the affordances, spinning connections in forms that will be shaped by social and material processes, not by cognitive fiat as the drawing of the boundary was. The presence of the boundary sets the other processes in motion – with emergent results. (Barth 2000:30)

This chapter considers the relation between ethnic community acceptance, rejection, or manipulation of ethnically defined boundaries, and their collective perceptions of self-interest, expressed particularly clearly with reference to the resources (notably capital and recurrent government budgets) seen to be allocated to the administrative units constituted by the process of boundary-making.

Whereas the previous chapter concentrated upon the activities of the EPRDF and its member and affiliated organisations in approaching a range of different communities for the purpose of popular mobilisation, this chapter shifts to bring more clearly into focus the responses of actors amongst these different ethnic groups to the changed circumstances and opportunities brought about by ethnic federalism. Whilst this provides a useful distinction between chapters, it also risks setting up an artificial dichotomy: neither of the two interacting categories it posits ('government/EPRDF' and 'ethnic group/community') is either discrete in structure, or unitary in outlook. EPRDF members and government officials are also members of ethnic groups, and, as discussed in Chapter VI, ethnic federalism has done much to extend the reach of the former into the latter. Neither, as noted in the methodological discussion in Chapter III, are ethnic groups monolithic units of analysis. This should be kept in mind as the actions they or their leaders pursue (not least as members of the local structures of the ruling party) are traced in what follows.

The chapter is presented in two sections, each of which elaborates a group of cases. Of these, the first considers two instances in which an administrative and political

status, apparently disproportionate to the current numbers of the language group members in question, seems to have been granted early on by the TGE. In Harar NRS and Waag Himra 'special' zone, exceptionally, historical factors seem to have supplanted language as the primary criterion for political and administrative boundary making. The section explores the pro-active influence of group members in bringing this about, together with other considerations which may have influenced these decisions, including the characteristics and role of the collective identity in question in each of the two cases. The second and most extended set of case studies returns to the multi-ethnic SNNPNRS, seeking to identify patterns and variations amongst the multiple challenges which groups have posed to the boundary, language, and administrative arrangements of ethnic federalism during the 1990s.

Harar and Wag Himra: where history brought privilege

Harar and Wag Himra were in 1991-2 awarded the status of National Regional State and 'special' zone respectively. These two cases are bracketed together because they represent two instances where the EPRDF-led TGE relatively early on recognised and accommodated the claims of certain groups to special status, permitting the incorporation of large numbers of non-language-group members within the autonomous areas named for them, on the basis of other – primarily historical - factors. The instances are of interest because they are unusual: they should be considered in the context of the much wider range of cases where the Ethiopian government has been markedly less willing to accommodate appeals to past glory, and a historically wide-ranging territorial jurisdiction.

As noted in Chapter I, when ethnic federalism was first mooted, at least some members of almost all of Ethiopia's contemporary language groups expressed themselves keen to lay claim to the land – often also the ancestors – of their neighbours. In most instances, the TGE was dismissive of historical claims, preferring to deal in contemporary demography. The fact, therefore, that the instances dealt with in this section represent departures from an otherwise marked policy preference, suggests that there have been other considerations in play here.

Harar: the city state

> 'O child of Harar, come back to your city!' song popularised after the 1940-50s dispersal of Hararis. (Cohen & Waldron 1978)
>
> We are beholden to the EPRDF because they recognised the historicity of the Harari claim for self-determination (interview, then Harari National League (HNL) MP in the HPR, Addis Ababa, 11 January 1999)

Of all the national regional units established under ethnic federalism, the smallest, Harar NRS with its 'national' population of 9,374 Hararis[242] out of a total regional population of 131,139[243], is an undoubted constitutional oddity. Whilst the arrangements for its representation at federal level are the same as those relating to other federated states[244], Harar NRS is governed under a highly idiosyncratic internal arrangement, which artificially maintains a disproportionate 'balance of power' between the small Harari community, and the much larger Amhara and Oromo populations living outside the walled city but within the boundary of the state[245]. This arrangement, which effectively marks a departure from the principle of equal and universal suffrage in which Ethiopia's constitutional arrangements are otherwise embedded, is officially justified with reference to the unique historical and religious significance of the holy city of Harar, and, in the view of a Harari historian and linguist, the importance of the history, heritage, and 'cultural rights of minorities':

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[242] I use 'Harari' in preference to 'Aderi', which seems increasingly to be rejected by the indigenous population of the city. The majority of the Harari population lives outside Harar, and the total population in Ethiopia according to the 1994 census was 21,757, of whom 5,788 were in Addis Ababa, and 4,222 in Dire Dawa. These figures are further dwarfed by a large diaspora.

[243] Cf. 1994 census (Volume I, Country Level Statistical Report 1998:76). The total figure is made up as follows (groups listed in order of size): Oromo 68,564; Amhara 42,781; Harari 9,374; Gurage 4,140; Tigrayan 2,244; Somali 2,199; all other groups number fewer than 1,000.

[244] Namely, one MP in the HPR roughly per 100,000 constituents, plus an additional one of the twenty seats reserved for 'minorities'; one MP for each nationality group in the HoF, plus an additional representative for each million members of the group – thus just one for the Harari community.

[245] The establishment of the boundary of Harar NRS has itself caused considerable controversy, and also reflects the influence of history. In the words of a Harari nationalist and 'elder statesman': 'of course Harar as a walled city state is not viable – it always used to have an agricultural farming area, with the closer area predominantly horticulture and orchards, and the further area rain-fed cereal agriculture, and this area was regarded as 'rural Harar' or Harar-ghe. Through time, however, Hararis were disinherited of their land, and Oromos moved into these areas. As a result when we wanted to establish the federal state, we had to convince 17 Oromo peasant associations to join the city in order to create a socio-economically viable entity. There was a congress of 170 'founding fathers' of the Harari national state – 85 from urban areas and 85 from the rural areas.' (Interview, then HNL member of the HPR, Addis Ababa, February 1998)

> Large groups can always develop, but small ones need particular assistance – otherwise where is the democracy? We Hararis may be few in number, but our wishes are much bigger. Historically Harar was greater even than Tigray – we were many more in number. But because our people taught the Islamic religion, they spread their strength far and wide and were lost. There were many wars. Wherever they went they settled, and when the Oromo migration began there was a lot of conflict – until the wall was built. Those who were outside were swallowed up. The TGE recognised the historical sacrifices that this nation had made. Are Amhara or Oromia given a regional because they are large? No. Language is one factor, but so also are the psychological makeup and history of the people. All of the people who are settlers here are latecomers – and they have somewhere else to go. The Amharas have their own region, and so on. They also have other ways of getting good access to the state. For us Hararis, though we are few, this is our only place. (Interview, Chairman HNA Cultural Committee, Harar, January 2000)

The representative arrangements

The arrangement of the legislature in Harar NRS provides disproportionate representation of ethnic groups. It is, briefly, as follows. The highest political and law-making body of the State is the 36-member Council of the Harari Peoples (HPC), which is in turn constituted by the joint meeting of two chambers: the 14-member Harari National Assembly (HNA); and the 22-member People's Representative Assembly (PRA). The HNA is made up of Hararis resident in Harar, and elected only by members of the Harari community resident either in the region, in other parts of Ethiopia, or (in a departure from normal democratic and electoral practice) in the diaspora. The HNA's powers cover legislation over matters relating to Harari culture, language, and historical sites, and the nomination of the Regional State President and three members of the executive from amongst its number. Meanwhile the PRA's 22 members are composed of 4 members elected from the so-called *jogol* (the area within the walled city predominantly inhabited by Hararis) and 18 members from the rest of the region, i.e. the Amhara-dominated kebeles surrounding the *jogol*, and the Oromo-dominated rural Peasant Associations of Hunde wereda surrounding that[246]. Assuming that the Hararis could keep control of

[246] A major focus of the 18 months of negotiations, which preceded this arrangement, was the number of electoral districts from which representatives to the PRA would be drawn. Since the elections were

the election of the 4 members from the *jogol*, they and the remainder of the population would effectively control 18 seats each in the Joint HPC. Whilst the HPC remains the highest body, assuming all powers given by the Federal Constitution to NRS legislatures, the more equitably representative PRA retains significant powers to legislate on matters of economic and social development, drawing up budgets, agricultural taxation arrangements, and so on, for submission to the joint HPC[247].

The **realpolitikal** *rationale for 'positive discrimination'*

There are various explanations for the adoption of unusual arrangements which, exceptionally, offer positive discrimination to protect the rights and status of the tiny population regarded as 'indigenous' to (and concentrated within the walls of) the city. Most agree that central to it was some sharp negotiating, and elevated lobbying, by the cohesive, articulate, and wealthy Harari community, led by the Harari National League, HNL. Equally important, however, has been the weight of *realpolitik* behind various of the issues on the basis of which the HNL has lobbied. For instance, marked consideration has clearly (indeed explicitly) been given to the search for mechanisms likely to increase stability in an otherwise volatile and contested area of eastern Ethiopia. Common to both *realpolitik* and ethnic nationalism have been considerations of the past, and of ways of understanding and using it.

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based on a single slate of candidates per district, the Amhara community lobbied hard for three concentric districts, so that their separate representation would not be incorporated with that of the larger Oromo electorate. This option, which seemed to have been successfully pushed by committee chairman Kifle Wodajo (whose appointment was itself widely interpreted as intended to be reassuring to the Amhara community), was subsequently overturned in an agreement separately reached between Meles Zenawi, Hassan Ali (OPDO), Duri Mohammed, and Mohammed Sherifo (both HNL) (interviews, parties to the committee and discussions, Addis Ababa).

[247] Under these arrangements it was important that constitutional change and ratification of the nomination (by the HNA) of the NRS President required a two thirds majority of the HPC, thus forcing a high degree of consensus – and (as some Harari nationalists have complained) 'allowing the Oromos to veto the presidential nomination'. Mohammed Tewfik Ahmed (1998) notes that relatively lax quorum requirements have tended, meanwhile, to undermine the arrangements, allowing the HPC to take decisions without any of the HNA members being present – but not vice versa.

Harar has long been recognised as 'the natural strong point for control of all the neighbouring [Oromo] and Somali tribes' (Trimingham 1965:22). It is not surprising that HNL nationalist leaders have been forthcoming in their endorsement of this idea:

> If you applied 'one man one vote' in Harar, then the Oromos would take it over[248], there would be war with the Somalis, and the EPRDF would have to intervene to sort out the mess and keep the peace. (Interview, former HNL Harari NRS President, Harar, January 1999)
>
> Harar in the hands of Hararis is critical to the stability of eastern Ethiopia, because if you give it to one or another region you destabilise the whole because they will compete. This way Harar becomes a lynchpin of stability – in fact much as it was historically during the Adal Emirate. (Interview, then HNL member of the HPR, interviewed Addis Ababa, January 1998)

Evocation of the period of the Emirate serves a variety of powerful purposes in this context. For most highland Ethiopians it calls to mind the devastating invasion and conquest of Abyssinia by Ahmed 'Gragn' between 1526 and his death in 1542 (Trimingham 1965:84ff), a seminal episode which continues to haunt highland anxiety about encircling Islam. In this context, however, these historical references are designed not only to raise the spectre of Abyssinia's greatest fear, but also to be suggestive of the most effective safeguard against its resurgence: a strong and strongly integrated cosmopolitan centre in Harar. The Harari nationalist discourse with which TGE leaders were courted during the early 1990s, stressed (as had the historian Trimingham before them) the fact that it was 'internal weaknesses [in the] Adalite policy of equilibrium' which led to the *jihad* of Ahmed 'Gragn':

> [The] older generation living in settlements and towns [Harar foremost amongst them], interested in commerce, indifferent to religion, and ready to come to terms with Abyssinia, were opposed by newly converted Afar, and Somali tribes, moved by motives both religious and migrational, and led by warlike fanatical *amirs*. (Trimingham 1965:81,84)

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[248] The OLF position was that Hararis were 'urbanised Oromo', and that Harar formed a natural zone capital within Oromia NRS, with no reason to exist as a separate entity. Whilst the OLF formed part of the TGE, therefore, no agreement on the status of Harar was possible. Although OPDO have proved more amenable to Harari nationalist aspirations, tension remained and controversy focused on the unwillingness of the Oromia NRS zone administration of Eastern Harerghe to vacate government offices in the outer part of the city. HNL sources argued 'they must move, because Harar cannot have two husbands – wedded both to Hunde wereda and Harerghe zone' (interview, Harar, January 1999).

In parallel with stress on the civilising and pacifying influence of Harar, with its long-standing attachment to an urbane culture premised upon commerce, has been a strong emphasis in HNL rhetoric on the highly indigenised nature of the Islam practiced in Harar[249], and its distance from the more dangerous evangelising strains of 'foreign-influenced' fundamentalism at work in the region[250]. Rather the moderate Muslim leaders of Harar were keen to cast themselves as interlocutors likely to prove useful to Ethiopia in approaching the less tractable adherents of their faith[251]. Harar's efforts to present itself as a convenient and conciliatory bulwark against the incursion of radical Islam via Somalia were seized upon by the central government. The promise of utility was made concrete when (to the apparent surprise of federal EPRDF officials (interviewed, Addis Ababa, 1998)) the HNL proposed an Association of Eastern Ethiopian States in 1997, with representatives drawn from the body of federal MPs from Somali NRS, Afar NRS, Harar NRS, the eastern zones of Oromia NRS, and the Dire Dawa Provisional Administration[252].

This structure marked a coincidence of various interests. The HNL was anxious to use it as yet another means to minimise the risk of Harar being swallowed up by the 'Oromo sea' that surrounds the city[253], and the central government keen to foster the emergence of a new and stable regional equilibrium: preferably one institutionalised by formal state-level interaction, and accessible to representatives loyal to itself. The difficulties EPRDF encountered in working in pastoral regions (explored in Chapter VI above), rendered the Ethiopianised Harari intellectual and mercantile elites all the more valuable.

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[249] 'The process of Islamisation was not accompanied by a parallel process of arabisation […] there was no genuine fanatical fervour […]' (Trimingham 1965:139,97).
[250] Since 1991 Ethiopia has frequently alleged Iranian or Sudanese influence amongst fundamentalist groups in the lowland periphery of the Horn. The activities of Al Itihad Al Islaamiya, along with radical radio broadcasting reckoned to have Iranian backing, raised concern in the mid-1990s.
[251] Hararis were amongst the first to warn the church-dominated NGO community in Addis Ababa in 1991 of the dangers of failing to involve Islamic welfare organisations in co-ordination networks (Jalal Abdel Latif, presentation to a meeting of the Emergency Relief Desk, Addis Ababa, November 1991).
[252] Under this structure, co-ordinating committees were established to deal with issues of common concern to the regions in question, relating to culture, socio-economic development, and security matters. This last became particularly interesting when the outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict in May 1998 demonstrated anew the vulnerability of Ethiopia's long border with Somalia.
[253] the composition of the council of the Association is finely balanced such that the Oromo members are evenly matched by their non-Oromo counterparts, and cannot dominate the organisation.

The symbolic value of a prominent Harar

In turn, the EPRDF and the TGE's willingness to grant a highly visible autonomy and prominence at the federal level to the holy Muslim city of Harar was at least partly influenced by the desire to be seen to counteract and reverse a history of equally visible, and bitterly resented, Christian and military domination of the city, which had begun with Menelik II's occupation of it after the exceptionally bloody battle at Chalenqo in early 1887[254]. The Abyssinian conquest of this area saw a dramatic influx of Amhara soldiers and settlers[255], and it was at this time that the outer city (beyond the *jogol*) was constructed and settled by the predominantly Amhara population still present in significant numbers today. These dramatic demographic and economic[256] shifts were further compounded when the efforts of Franco-Ethiopian engineers to construct the Ethio-Djiboutian railway along the mountain spine to Harar were abandoned, and Dire Dawa was built on its revised lowland route in 1907. At this point 'the mercantile activities of the city of Harar declined drastically', and 'perhaps 25% of the [Harari] population of the city emigrated to different areas of the country' (Cohen and Waldron 1978:50). Like the urbanised middle-class Ethiopian Somali community of Dire Dawa, the Harari population was further scattered (often overseas) as a result of hardened Ethiopian state policies and reprisals in the wake of the Italian occupation in the 1940s, and again in the late 1970s after the Somali incursions during the Ethio-Somali War.

Complications posed by Harar's multi-ethnic profile

Harar's establishment as a full and federated National Regional State was intended to symbolise the reversal of a history of poor relations with the Ethiopian state. Whilst

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[254] Twin symbols of this were the imposing Medhane Alem church built by Ras Mekonnen, father of Haile Selassie, on the site of the principal mosque, and the Harar military academy, which occupied a large area just outside the walls of the city. Neither has been removed or replaced.
[255] Caulk cites contemporary estimates that 'as many as 12,000 newcomers, including 4,000 men with firearms had crowded into Harar town' (1971a:3n14).
[256] As elsewhere, the arrival of the settlers and the church was accompanied by widespread appropriation of land in this fertile and temperate area.

some of the symbols of highland imperial domination have been relatively easy for the EPRDF-led government to undermine, counteract, or eschew, its demographic legacy has perhaps presented as many difficulties in this area as anywhere else in Ethiopia. The juxtaposition of three language groups was undoubtedly a primary to complication of negotiations over the city's administration and status. Whilst the 'ethnic cleansing' of so-called *neftegna* populations which threatened to escalate in 1991 did not develop on any scale[257], feelings and grievances continue to run high amongst both Harari and Amhara communities. The former frequently complain of continued Amhara domination of the regional civil service; the latter, unsurprisingly, that constitutional rights are infringed by what they consider to be the inequitable arrangements under which the region is now governed. If the pendulum of influence and access to the Ethiopian state has swung in favour of the constitutional 'rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples', it is particularly clear in Harar that it has also swung away from the predominantly Amhara settler population living in the outer suburbs of the city.

This account has tried to suggest that there are, from the central government's point of view, good geopolitical reasons why it has responded positively to the HNL's proposals to privilege history over census results in planning the administration of the area. The enthusiastic endorsement of these arrangements by Harari nationalists, as in the following comments, has hardly served to quell the resentment and frustration of other communities:

> Affirmative action must be recognized [as being] in line with the struggle on the elimination of discrimination. Whenever states […] adopt special measures aimed at protecting minority rights [they] shall not be considered as discriminatory. (Mohamed Tewfik Ahmed 1998:65)

This section has considered the coincidence of interest between the Harari nationalist lobby and the ERPDF-led TGE in institutionalising a dramatic and high profile degree of autonomy to Harar and its indigenous population, as well as the ongoing

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[257] Action directed against Amharas in this area in 1991 and 1992 was associated at the time with Oromo rather than Harari resentment. Whilst both OLF and OPDO indulged in strong Oromo nationalist rhetoric at the time, both officially eschewed responsibility for these attacks, and attribution of responsibility remains inflammatory and contested.

reservations and resentment the policy have engendered. It concludes with a brief consideration of how conventions and markers attaching to ethnicity may have influenced the dynamics in play.

The dynamics of ethnicity in Harar

Ethnicity can be argued to have operated differently in Harar than was the case in other instances in Ethiopia, and it is tempting to speculate that this not only is the result of the geopolitical interests at play in the area, but also has to do with the nature of the identity, the 'groupness', generated in this case.

The Harari ethnic community is a highly bounded one, in a number of interconnected and crucial respects. Firstly, and most literally and visibly, Hararis are bounded by the city wall, which they 'owe to the wisdom of Amir Nur who was awake to the seriousness of the [Oromo] migrations' (Trimingham 1965:205). Whilst those Hararis who travelled outside the wall to disseminate Islam, over the years dispersed and assimilated in the shifting ethnic tides of the surrounding populations[258], the wall ensured that the identity of those within remained sharply distinguished from neighbouring groups. Features of these distinctions included lineage claims, and language (Harari is a member of the Ethio-Semitic language group, although Harar is surrounded by cushitic languages), as well as idiosyncratic norms of dress, architecture, food, music, and rituals of hospitality. All of these features have been bolstered over the centuries by relatively strong persisting sanctions on exogamy. Whilst Harar NRS is constructed to include non-Harari populations, there is no expectation that these will assimilate. The constitutional arrangements adopted reflect this assumption.

It is important to note that the maintenance of these differences is striking and unusual, given the high degree of historical interaction experienced by a mercantile and (in earlier periods) proselytising community. It seems that the walls of Harar city

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[258] On the basis of linguistic evidence, 'there must have been a territorial continuity between Harari and East Gurage, later disrupted by wars and population movements' (Bender 1976:30).

have acted as a trigger and marker of a circular pattern of difference exacerbating difference, to the point at which endogamy became something of a cult in the Harari population, even amongst the large contemporary diaspora. As Harar's walls marked a community relatively wealthier and more educated and urbane than those surrounding it, in-group dynamics strengthened.

When ethnic federalism was introduced in 1991, all ethnicities were not equal. Those of Harari identity enjoyed certain advantages as compared, for instance, with the Majangir population whose case is discussed below. One set of advantages was, of course, the relatively good socio-economic circumstances enjoyed by many of this small ethnic group. Also of great benefit, however, was the fact that the conventional profile of Harari identity coincided closely with the criteria identified by Stalin for 'nationhood', qualifying it as well if not better than any other language group in Ethiopia. Members and outsiders agree that Hararis share distinctive and defined language, culture, territory, history, and economic life (1973[1913]:57-61): if any group in Ethiopia was to qualify as a 'nation', rather than just a 'nationality' or 'people', it was surely the miniscule population of Harar. Given the ideological approach of those constructing the federal project, failure to incorporate into the federal design such an unambiguous case would have been unthinkable.

This constellation is highly unusual in Ethiopia, and cannot be said to apply to any of its other language groups in quite the same way. The artifice of the wall has, literally, marked out a situation far from norms applying in other parts of the country. Contemporary Harar NRS is not premised on any drive to further assimilation, but institutionalises difference in its constitutional and legislative arrangements. Here the appeals to historic importance were designed to counterbalance the small contemporary size of the Harari population living in Harar, with many now scattered from what is nevertheless their clear place of origin. These appeals were not needed as a means of distinguishing what is evidently a separate ethnic group.

Waag Himra: rewarding the faithful, or fighting famine?

> There is an element of identity crisis in Waag (interview, private setor professional, Addis Ababa, 3 July 1999)

A very different ethnographic situation from that of Harar applies in the case of the Agaw/Kamyr 'national' population of Waag Himra zone. Where Hararis represented a sharply 'bounded' urban body, with a large and prosperous diaspora, the Agaw/Kamyr number amongst Ethiopia's most impoverished, food insecure, and remote agriculturalists (Holt & Lawrence 1993). There is little in terms of culture, dress, history, or economy to differentiate them from their Tigrigna and Amharic-speaking neighbours, and the three language populations live relatively intermixed.

The construction of both Harari and Agew identity incorporates the notion of high levels of past assimilation, of powerful civilisations and great cultures now diminished. Harari identity became 'marked' by the establishment of the city, which has acted as a bulwark against full and final assimilation as discussed above. Agew identity by contrast, enjoyed no such artificial boundary, and is thought about in terms of past *and continuing* processes of assimilation. The ethnic 'special' zone of Waag Himra has been established on the premise of reversing an ongoing process, and it incorporates non-Himtanga-speaking populations, with the official intention of disseminating the language back through those populations which are thought to 'have lost' this ability. Although there is no explicit expectation that 'non Agew/Kamyr' populations will learn a language that is not theirs, there is here a different sense of the possibilities of assimilation from that at work in Harar, precisely because of the permeability of boundaries. Since there is little overt difference in culture between the groups, there are, on the face of it, relatively few barriers to overcome in order for the population of the zone to think of itself as 'one group' in due course.

The 'Special' Zone

Waag Himra is situated adjacent to Amhara NRS's northern border with Tigray, between North Gondar and North Wello (see maps 9 and 10b). It has a population of just over 275,000 (1994 census) and is established as one of three 'special zones' in

Amhara NRS, designed to preserve the rights to separate administration and autonomy of various non-Amhara ethnic enclaves living within the regional state's borders, in this case the Agew/Kamyr[259]. 'Special' zones differ from other zones in the region, which – at least formally - function only as an administrative link between *wereda* and region[260]. By contrast, 'special' zones are 'self-determining units', and incorporate an additional tier of elected legislature and executive which reflect and embody the rights of self-determination granted to the populations in question, on the basis of their distinct ethnicity[261]. The zone, which initially formed part of *Simien* Wollo (although it shows up as a separate unit on the early TGE Boundary Commission Map 8), was established as an autonomous unit following a conference of interested parties, held in Sekota in 1994.

The case of Waag Himra demonstrates the advantages of 'special' zone status, and thus provides a useful preface to the consideration of cases in the SNNPNRS where populations have raised claims for similarly separate and autonomous zones. In 1998/99 the zone had a capital budget of 7,974,000 EB and recurrent budget of 18,278,000, in respect of a population projected to be around 316,500 at the time[262]. Resulting *per capita* budget figures are significantly higher than those applying in other areas. In particular, the capital budget, which has funded the extensive construction of zone office buildings, a large hospital, and highly visible housing for civil servants, has fuelled a dramatic growth in Sekota town during the 1990s. In addition to the generous allocation of resources to the 'special' zone by the Amhara

[259] The other two special zones are Agew Awi (or Agew Midir) Zone, encompassing the other Agew population of Agew/Awingi, and Oromiya Zone, the majority of whose population are Oromiffa-speaking Oromo. This last seems to have been established later than the other two, probably in response to pressure from the OLF, which seems to have been active in agitating for autonomy amongst Oromiffa-speaking populations during late 1991 and early 1992 (interviews, local government officers, Kemissie, Oromiya special zone, May 1999). As noted in Chapter I, the OLF claimed large areas of what became Amhara NRS for Oromia, on the basis that in significant areas populations were Amharised Oromos. The claim foundered amidst a complexity of counter claims all based on such appeals to history.

[260] Throughout the 1990s zones constituted in practice a politically important unit and locus of control: zone administrators in Amhara NRS tended to be drawn from amongst the most senior of the ANDM leadership. Amidst reforms undertaken in 2001, however, zone offices in most regions other than SNNPNRS became mere 'branch offices' of the regional government.

[261] In this sense their structure is identical to those of the ethnic-based zones, and special weredas, established under the constitution of the SNNPNRS, described below.

[262] 1998 projected figure from the 1994 census.

NRS government, formerly inaccessible Waag has benefited from a resource intensive federal programme of road construction, which has connected Sekota to North, South, and East[263].

The advantages seen to be enjoyed in this case have been widely accorded a political interpretation, as resulting from the well-known links between the Waag area and the EPDM, forerunner of the ruling ANDM. When it first embarked upon armed opposition to the *Dergue* regime after reconstituting itself in 1982, the EPDM selected the inaccessible mountains around the remote town of Sekota as its operational 'base area', and recruited large numbers of Agew and Amhara from the vicinity, thus forging the close and emotive bonds of kin membership and shared history with the populations of the area, many of whom, at the time of research, spoke of the ANDM as 'our children', or 'our organisation' in the same manner that rural populations in many parts of Tigray were wont to speak of the TPLF in the late 1980s and 1990s[264]. One result of this mutually advantageous symbiosis, is that the respective views of the ethnic community and ruling party or government cannot often or easily be disaggregated.

Conflicting bases of Waag Himra's legitimacy

The autonomous status accorded to Waag Himra, and the basis upon which it has been justified and constructed as a legitimate separate entity, is also interesting in terms of the illumination it offers of the contradictory notions at work in the idea, and in the act, of 'granting ethnic self-determination'. For here, perhaps more visibly than anywhere else in Ethiopia in the 1990s, the government has been simultaneously engaged in the processes both of recognising a pre-existing language group, and of seeking to strengthen, extend, and re-create a distinct ethnic group capable of

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[263] It is not only its status as an autonomous unit which has provided a basis for drawing resources into the Waag area. The TGE also adopted a policy of prioritising the socio-economic development of war-affected areas in the early period of the 1990s. Waag's status as 'special' zone, however, provided a mechanism for pumping in development resources.

[264] The fact that, as a result of the organisation's long association with this area, a large proportion of the ANDM leadership are either themselves members, or are married to members, of the Agew/Kamyr group inspired the joke (effective in Amharic as in English) that 'ANDM really stands for the *Agew* National Democratic Movement'.

sustaining a viable self-administration[265]. In a second departure (like that of Harar) from usual practice, here too the borders demarcated to bound the self-determining group have been drawn not only to enclose the contemporary members of a dwindling language group, but also to include those who can somehow historically be associated with it. In this case the special zone also encompasses those others who fit a conception of the population of a Waag understood with reference to *historical* factors and features. Whereas in the case of Harar NRS, its non-Harari inhabitants are treated as such, in this instance even those who are non-Himtanga-speakers are construed as somehow historically 'of Waag', and the 'ethnicising' or assimilationist pressure is quite different.

There are two strands influencing the understanding of identity in the Sekota area, which overlap, intersect, and compete with one another to influence current events[266]. One stresses the importance of Waag as an historical entity, advocating the establishment of a successor drawn along lines which reflect this glorious (if, arguably, 'feudal') past. The second stresses the rights of the population to live in accordance with their own culture and – most especially – to use their own language; it advocates an administrative entity predicated upon the different ethnic profile of the population of this area, upon the preservation of the Agew enclave, whose language and way of life were threatened with inundation from the two dominant surrounding groups. The dual rationale comes together in the name given the zone, which fuses the historical geo-political name (Waag) with the ethnonym (Himra).

What is interesting about these two accounts is that each neither is convincing without pilfering the resources of the other. Thus for instance the historical account needs the vitality of ethnic identity to add life to its otherwise rather colourless evocation of a past long disappeared. Given that ethnicity provides the prism through

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[265] Another instance of the ruling party seeking to mould ethnicity was its attempt to unify the groups of Simien Omo zone, discussed in the following section.

[266] In the course of fieldwork I came to associate them respectively with the pole personae of Teferi Wossen, son of Waagshum Wossen, and latest generation of the old Waag aristocracy, and – representative of its new elite - Tadesse Kassa, politburo member of ANDM, representative for the Waag area, chairman of Amhara's Credit and Savings Institute, and, since the latest government reshuffle in October 2001, vice-President of Amhara NRS.

which separate administration is considered in the current Ethiopian climate, its relevance cannot be expunged from any attempt at autonomy. Meanwhile, however, the ethnic account, as a rationale for the zone as established, cannot stand upon markers of difference alone, since the population within its border incorporates many who have greater similarities with their cross-border neighbours. Language is not a reliable marker, with only a minority of the population of the zone speaking Himtagna, and other populations being incorporated here. It is not clear that there are other salient markers of difference, with even 'nationalist' respondents confirming that there is little to distinguish Agew, Amhara, and Tigrayans living adjacent to one another.

Thus historical markers – the significance of both Waag and the Waagshum[267] – have been invoked to bolster a dubious claim to ethnic identity. This invocation in turn itself demonstrates the threadbare nature of these ethnic claims, since it seems likely that the historical area (or areas, since it shifted) of Waag – incorporating Ashenge, Korem, and Alamata as it often did – was essentially trilingual (interview, private sector professional Addis Ababa, 3 July 1999); and that the adjacent area of Lasta, where Himtanga is not now spoken, was historically as much associated with Agew identity as Waag itself. Although it is clear that the language had been dying out rapidly in the period up to 1991, it is less than clear that Waag ever 'used to be' a separate language unit.

Language and ethnicity in Waag

In Waag Himra itself, it is officially asserted that significant populations which 'used to speak' the Agew language Himtanga (i.e. whose parents or forebears spoke that language) have been incorporated within the zone, on the basis that 'even the population which speaks Amharic is originally Agew' (interview, Zone Economic and Social Sector Head, Sekota, Waag Himra special zone, 15 May 1999). This demarcation has been decided upon in the context of a deliberate attempt to reverse

[267] The hereditary ruler of the area up to 1974.

the disappearance of a language whose mother-tongue speakers now number fewer than 150,000[268]. The policy is one of overt social engineering:

> For the time being Amharic is the official language of the zone, but this is just a temporary strategy, and we expect to use Himtanga in due course. […] We are trying to encourage the use of Himtanga and there are evening classes for government workers who do not speak it yet, perhaps because they have only one Himtanga-speaking parent, or have been away from the area. There is a certificate issued at the end of the course in order to emphasise the development of the language, its use and dissemination. (Interview, Economic and Social Sector Head, Sekota, 15 May 1999)

By 1999 educational materials in Himtanga had been developed for school grades 1 to 4, and the following year it was introduced in grade 5 (interviews, zone officers, January 2000)[269]. Members of the zone administration felt that 'pupils were keen to learn in their own language, and the government has also set this as a policy objective so we are following it' (interview, Head of Zone Education Bureau, Sekota 16 May 1999). Government and party respondents repeatedly stressed the 'urgency' of the situation, commenting on the increasingly prevalent situation where young and middle-aged adults now only spoke Amharic, where their parents had been fluent in Himtanga (interviews, civil servants, Sekota town, and Tsitska, Zuqualla *wereda*, May 1999 and January 2000). Any suggestion that the expense and complexity of intervening thus artificially to nurture and re-develop the failing language might be avoided by simply allowing it to wither, was, however, greeted with uniform incomprehension.

The reaction seems to represent something more than an unthinking adherence to a government-sponsored policy direction. It seems that language competence is increasingly seen in Waag Himra as a means to bound and protect the autonomy of the 'self' to which 'self-determination' has been granted, as the following comments suggest:

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[268] 143,369 for the country as a whole of whom 130,000 are within Amhara NRS (*1994 Population and Housing Census, Country Level results, Volume I*, pp.79, 81.)

[269] The translation and transcription teams which prepared these materials were led by the high-profile Agew nationalist, author and historian. High priority was accorded to the facilitation of their frenetic activities.

> We have got the right of nationalities but basically we still haven't really used it in practice because we are still using Amharic. Maybe this will change when we change the official language because then it won't be so easy for people to come from outside to work in the area. (Interview, Zone Bureau Head, Sekota, 16 May 1999)

The set of ideas here seems to be roughly as follows: (i) we have been given the right of self-determination, which we are pleased about; but (ii) we have to be sure that it is really we ourselves (and not some outside impostors) who are 'self-determining' (i.e. to determine that it is indeed *self*-determination and not outside imposition which is involved); thus (iii) we have to 'create' ourselves as a viable, coherent, and *identifiably bounded* collective 'self' in order to be able to make full use of the right of self-determination. Acquisition of a notoriously difficult, despised, and otherwise unusable language, seems intended to operate here as a passport, regulating and restricting access to those with a demonstrable commitment to (and membership of) this highly successful collective[270]. This situation stands in marked contrast with the ambivalent or negative attitudes towards the acquisition of minority languages observed in the SNNPNRS, which were discussed in Chapter VI, and are further explored in the following sections.

The difference seems to lie critically in the collective consciousness of the relative advantages of being seen as ethnically different from the surrounding nationalities, possibly enhanced in this instance by the high-level political links Agew/Kamyr are known to enjoy. Another critical difference is undoubtedly the continuing proximity of the national language, Amharic, which will continue to be relatively easy for new generations to acquire, even as their initial language of instruction shifts to Himtanga.

Another interesting feature of the operation of language and language policy in this area, also relevant elsewhere, is that it demonstrates the powerfully performative impact of the declaration of ethnic federalism in 1991. Having been categorised as

Agew, elements of the population have effectively set out to become what they have been declared to be, by acquiring missing characteristics and competences of membership in an ethnicity. It is true that aspirant members do not typically innovate 'from scratch' (the category Agew/Kamyr is not *un*determined): they tend to have some claim to Agew parentage or ancestry sufficient to satisfy the (new) conventions of the collective.

It is important to note however, that this re-invention of 'Agew-ness' does not extend to the whole population of the zone, and is primarily associated with the younger educated generation of party members wishing to return to their home area as public servants. Whatever may have been the case in the past[271], it is significant that the 1994 census records only a marginally larger contemporary population claiming Agew/Kamyr ethnicity, than claims mother-tongue in Himtanga[272]. Just under half of the population of the zone (47.18%) describe themselves as Amhara. As far as this research was in a position to establish[273], they do not seem to regard themselves as 'assimilated Agew' or 'former Agew', but as, simply, coming from Amhara 'stock' (there are even Amharic-speaking *kebeles* on the North Gondar side of the Tekezze river who have successfully petitioned to join Waag Himra zone[274]). At this point it emerges again that the invocation of history in the design of Waag Himra 'special' zone has more than one referent. The new zone is premised not only on what 'used to be' Agew/Kamyr populations, but also on what 'used to be' the historical geopolitical entity, Waag.

Agew history and identity in Waag and Lasta

> A serious threat to the Aksumite Empire is believe to have developed towards the end of the tenth century when the Agao tribe rebelled. […] It

[270] This is a passport required by candidates for elected office throughout Ethiopia: it is no longer adequate to be a long-term resident or born in a particular area: one has to demonstrate fluency in one of the indigenous languages of the constituency.
[271] There is significant evidence that formerly widespread pagan Agew populations, occupying a wide area of the highlands, were gradually assimilated amongst their Christian Amhara and Tigrayan neighbours. On this see particularly Tadesse Tamrat (1988)
[272] the figures are 158,231 nationally and 143,241 within the region (1994 Census, Vol.II pp.66,69.)
[273] This point was not fully explored, researched, and tested, and the conclusion remains tentative.
[274] Interview, *wereda* Education Officer, Zuqualla *wereda*, January 2000

> is generally agreed that the rebellion was begun by an Agao princess […] Gudit or Yodit [whose] husband is supposed to have been the governor of the district of Bugna in Lasta. (Richard Pankhurst 1961:59-60)

Yodit's period is to this day widely recalled with horror by Orthodox Christian Tigrayans, and she is reputed to have 'overthrown the Christian faith' with a destructive ferocity second only to that of Ahmed 'Gragn', replacing the Solomonic dynasty of Axum with the Zagwe line seated at Roha (later Lalibella) in Lasta. Whilst there is little agreement as to whether the Agew dynasty was (initially) pagan or Jewish[275], it is clear that Agew identity – like that of Harar – is evocative of a historical period of significant challenge to the Orthodox Christian Abyssinian polity. It seems likely that a conscious desire to emphasise this plural history was again in play when the architects of ethnic federalism incorporated Waag Himra 'special' zone into the design of the 'new Ethiopia'.

The problem facing these architects is that Waag (and Lasta) have been slippery constructs whose location (even existence) has shifted with each political tide (this can swiftly be established even for the recent period, by comparing the maps appended). Whilst Waag had been

> a region in its own right like Gondar, in 1950 they put it under Wollo (there was even talk of putting it under Tigray) and Waagshum Wossen became answerable to the Crown Prince. Under Menelik II the Waagshum would wash his hands from the same bowl as the king, to give the impression that the Zagwe handing back to the Solomonic line was a peaceful process, and that the Solomonids respected the Waagshum as a king without power. After all that, the reduction to *wereda* status was a terrible blow. (interview, private sector professional, Addis Ababa, 3 July 1999)

The town of Sekota itself had long been a significant market centre, straddling an important cross-roads, but had seen its importance decline under successive governments. The best-known reference to Sekota's historical importance is Plowden's (1868:130):

[275] By the time of Lalibella, who constructed the famous rock-hewn churches in the town named after him, it was Christian.

> Persons with the rank of *nagadras* were found only in the more important commercial centres, Plowden reporting that there were only six such officials in the north, viz, at Ayjubay, Derita, Gondar, Sokota, Dabareq, and Adowa' (Richard Pankhurst 1968:520).

During the Italian occupation, over 40,000 troops had been garrisoned in the town, and the older generation continue to speak Italian.

In planning the establishment of the autonomous zone, its relatively prestigious history was contrasted with a dismal economic present, in an attempt to encourage local organisation for development. A slogan of the 1994 conference was that 'Waag without the ERPDF is nothing: we must build something from within which can't be taken away by the central government'. A drive began to bring back educated personnel with local origins, and to build up the Development Association which had, for forty years, sought to rebuilt the route from Sekota to the main north-south road at Korem. Despite all this, reservations regarding the limits of separate Agew/Kamyr identity may have remained amongst the political class. The Agew (Kamyr and Awingi) are the only ethnic group with their own autonomous administrative entity who have not also been organised under a separate political party within EPRDF. Agew members of the ANDM have a vested interest in remaining an influential core of the larger organisation and continuing to play on that larger stage. Waag Himra has flourished under current political and administrative arrangements, and has clearly felt no need of separate representation.

If this chapter has so far considered cases where the Federal government or TGE seem to have been relatively generous in granting a higher status within the federation than the small groups in question might have expected on the basis of demography alone, the remainder of it deals with a range of attempts of ethnic groups to wrest additional status, resources, or territory from a government (and often also from neighbours) reluctant to give more away.

'Repacking Pandora's box' in the Southern Region

> Decentralisation is an accomplished project (then President of the SNNPNRS, interviewed January 1998, quoted in Young (1998a))

Fieldwork suggests that between the mid-1990s and the end of that decade, there was an observable and orchestrated move by the EPRDF in the Southern Region, SNNPNRS, to claw back control over what some have described as the 'ethnic free-for-all' in political and administrative organisation, which had applied over its first few years. During the initial part of the transitional period, groups of all sizes, claims, and credibility had been encouraged by the party to organise and mobilise their populations for self-determination. After several years, however, the government started to argue that, for reasons of budgetary efficiency, it made sense to consolidate the myriad zones, regions, and political parties which had emerged in response. A precursor to this process was the amalgamation in 1992 of the series of smaller, initially federated units clustered in the south, to form the Southern Region (or SNNPNRS). Government integrationist rhetoric turned abruptly to concrete measures when, in 1997, the 21 EPRDF political parties which had proliferated in the Region were 'consolidated' into almost half that number (Young 1998a), and a number of separate 'non-viable' zones were unceremoniously stuck back together. Finally, and most controversially of all, a series of claims for the recognition of separate status for ethnic or language groups and sub-groups were either rejected or deferred through the late 1990s. There is clear evidence that an integrating impetus characterised government policy during the five year period of the first government of the Federal Democratic Republic (1995-2000).

Those who always feared that ethnic federalism would inevitably lead to the balkanisation of the Ethiopian empire state have felt that the government was, in this period, attempting something akin to repacking Pandora's box. Many felt vindicated when unremitting popular hostility finally won a number of concessions from the government, in the period from 2000, and three zones were sub-divided to create a raft of additional zone and special *wereda* units. The following account documents each of these three cases, namely: *Simien* Omo and the Welaiyta claim for autonomy; the controversy regarding Silte status vis-à-vis the Gurage; and ethnic and minority relations in Kaffa Sheka. I suggest that the dynamics of resistance to often heavy-handed government moves illuminate recursive ongoing processes of construction and reconstruction of groups and their interests. I argue that they have as much to do

with the ongoing logic of localised struggles over resources, and control over their allocation – and with the local invention and deployment of ‘ethnicity’ as best suits these other purposes, in the perception of the groups in question, and context of the day - as with pre-existing perceptions of ethnic or other collective identities.

These cases are not ‘ethnic conflicts’ in the sense that ethnicity explains or furnishes the cause of them. Their dynamics have, however, been seminally influenced by shifts in the salience of ethnicity under current political arrangements. As suggested by the case of Waag Himra, under ethnic federalism, ethnic zones have enjoyed relatively high inputs of capital and recurrent government expenditure. The benefits of recognition as a separate units, therefore, are not insignificant.

To summarise, informants in those towns which had, for instance, lost their status as zone capitals, often wrung their hands not over the disgrace to their ethnic group but over the fact that 'the hospitals will all go to our neighbours now'; more surprisingly, those who fought to avoid the 'pollution' of their languages with 'degenerate' neighbouring dialects simultaneously observed that 'the language issue is just a show which gets attention: what we really want is our own zone with our own budgets'. Cynical commentators have even suggested that some strands of conflict emerged only with the fall from grace of politically prominent individuals, whose presence had been seen as somehow securing the interests of their group at a higher level of the federation.

Whatever the combination of ‘issues’ and ‘interests’, they have in a number of instances generated sufficient popular hostility to force some faltering government steps back from its clear-cut integrationist position, in the period since 2000. In addition to the creation of new zone and special *wereda* units, there is evidence that the government has recently sat back to reconsider means of removing incentives from those seeking separate new units, in a more fundamental attempt to reduce the ‘disintegrationist’ trend.

Simien *Omo, Welaiyta, and the WeGaGoDa concoction*

The case of *Simien* Omo is interesting because it represents one of only a few instances in which there is evidence that the EPRDF had adopted a political strategy premised not primarily on the notion of pre-existing 'natural' ethnic units, but on the possibility of actively 'remoulding' or 'melding' an existing set of ethnic identities; it is also an instance in which the ruling party was eventually forced to abandon that strategy in response to the violent antagonism it generated.

A choice of inherited boundaries

The major boundaries of what was, from 1991 to 2000, *Simien* (or North) Omo zone were established along with the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in 1987 by the *Dergue* regime[276]. The unit had been created by taking elements from each of the three imperial *teklai gezat*, Gamo Goffa, Sidamo, and Kaffa, which had up to that point been retained by the *Dergue*, and was subsequently known (somewhat confusingly) as Gamo Goffa *kifle hager*[277]. The zone population was reported in 1994 to comprise the following ethnic groups (in order of size): Welaiyta 44.17%, Gamo (including Dorze) 26.79%, Goffa (including Oyda) 9.12%, Daro (listed as Kulo) 10.15%, Basketo 1.87%, and Konta 1.86%, plus a few smaller minorities[278].

The series of boundary changes made by the *Dergue* in 1987, drew on the work of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities, and in a number of instances reflected its researches into the location, distribution, and inter-relation of ethnic groups, often drawing heavily on the views – and maps – of language distribution set out in Bender *et al.* (1976). The establishment of the new Gamo Goffa *kifle hager* was one of these instances, and reflected the authors' assertion that

> [v]arious Ometo languages run from 50 percent to 90 percent [shared terms and forms] when compared with each other. […] Within the Ometo

[276] The only adjustments made by the TGE to the *Simien* Omo zone they inherited were the removal of Konso, and addition of Basketo.
[277] Compare the maps given in appendix for the periods 1956-1987 and 1987-1991.
[278] 1994 Census, SNNPR Results, Vol.2, Table 2.14, p38.

> cluster, the family-tree model is unclear because each dialect seems to merge into the next one in any direction. (1976:51)

Bender *et al.* posit the category 'Welamo dialect cluster', listing its members as 'Dorze, Gemu-Gofa, Kulo-Konta [Daro], Malo, Oyda, Welamo [Welaiyta]' (1976:15, Table 1). In so doing, the book's authors introduced (perhaps even 'invented') what became the legitimating basis for ISEN and the *Dergue*'s delineation of a map 'correctly' reflecting the 'sensible' administration within a single unit of this cluster of groups, now understood to be separated only by variation of dialect.[279]

Although they may have made sense on grounds of linguistic categorisation, the 1987 boundary changes undermined long-standing administrative demarcations, which had resulted in developmental patterns dividing, rather than uniting the Daro, Gamo, and Gofa, particularly from the Welaiyta. Most strikingly they reversed Welaiyta's incorporation with the relatively wealthy Sidamo *teklai gezat*, a connection still held by Welaiyta to have brought about the relatively high levels of socio-economic development the area enjoyed during the imperial period (interviews, elder generation, Sodo, *Simien* Omo zone, October 1999, Welaiyta zone, June 2002)[280]. The old *teklai gezat* of Gamo Gofa, meanwhile, had developed markedly different connotations, as the favoured imperial destination for those punished with internal exile to the peripheries, following political disgrace or disloyalty[281].

Welaiyta recalcitrance rallies…

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[279] More than one interview on *Simien* Omo provided evidence of the pervasive authority of Bender *et al.* (1976). The statistics it offers for dialect shared forms are precisely and widely cited. A second influential source has been Cotterell (1973), extensively quoted, for instance, in *The Reporter* 9 February 2000, 'Myopic "Centralisation"', pp.7 & 10 (John W:2000).

[280] That the large Welaiyta population long-settled in Awassa town is further testimony to the strength of this connection was stressed by a number of respondents, including the Welaiyta zone Administrator, interviewed Welaiyta Sodo, June 2002.

[281] Amongst others, the leader of the first *weyane* in Tigray, *Blatta* Haile Mariam Redda, was subsequently confined there.

In this way the change institutionalised competing criteria of 'affinity' – language and administrative history - which won differential support amongst the groups now lumped together. Whilst the largely under-developed Daro (formerly part of Kaffa *teklai gezat*), Gamo, and Goffa groups seem to have seen some advantage in their new links with the seven *weredas* surrounding the well-developed centre of Welaiyta Sodo, and its relatively highly educated population[282], educated Welaiyta openly declare themselves to have been appalled at their perceived relegation amongst 'peripheral and backward populations' (interviews, civil servants, Welaiyta Sodo, October 1999).

Such sentiments, compounded by a fierce pride in the extremes of valour with which the Welaiyta King T'ona had withstood the advance of Menelik II's troops in 'one of the bloodiest campaigns of the whole process of expansion'[283], won the Welaiyta a reputation for ethnic chauvinism. This, together with the presence of a significant number of Welaiyta cadres in the *Dergue*'s WPE, did little to endear them to the EPRDF, who came to power in 1991 entrenched in the view that it was only lack of vision, and the arrogance of the Welaiyta, that militated against the unity of *Simien* Omo's peoples:

> If only *Simien* Omo had benefited from the enlightened political leadership we have enjoyed in Tigray, the Welaiyta *weredas* would by now regard themselves as much part of the wider zone and its people, as the Welkaiyt area now does part of Tigray. (Interview, then member of the TGE Boundary Commission, Addis Ababa, December 1991)

This comment – very much in the Marxist-Leninist tradition – offers an illuminating combination of the notion that identity is open to influence, manipulation and change, and the idea that there is a 'correct' and an 'incorrect' allocation of

[282] 'at least the *Dergue* brought us all together: we must thank them for that' (interview, civil servant, Mareka Gena *wereda,* Daro area, 12 October 1999)

[283] Bahru Zewdie (1991:64). 'When Menelik tried to invade this area, we resisted for 7 years. 118,000 Welaiyta, and 90,000 of Menelik's troops died in the fighting before we were conquered' (interview, Welaiyta elder, and descendant of the royal family, Welaiyta Sodo, 13 October 1999). Less commonly stressed, although perhaps equally significant in this context, is the fact that Welaiyta subsequently became Menelik's auxiliaries in the subjugation of populations further south and west.

populations to ethnic groups or nationalities which can be determined by actors other than (indeed external to) those populations[284].

EPRDF's determination to preserve the *Dergue*'s borders faced little initial opposition from a Welaiyta elite mollified by the area's original status as one of the 14 federated units (commonly referred to simply as 'Welaiyta'), and by the prominence of several of its number in federal and regional government positions. In the mid-to-late 1990s this changed, as a number of factors began to unravel Welaiyta (and indeed Gamo, Gofa, and Daro) confidence that *Simien* Omo zone adequately served their interests.

A significant trigger of Welaiyta insecurity was the dismissal and imprisonment in 1998 on corruption charges of Tefera Meskele, the powerful Chairman of both the Welaiyta ruling party and the SEPDF, and a former *Dergue* solider and TPLF POW. During Tefera's prominent reign as SNNPNRS Secretary, Welaiyta had rested secure in the knowledge that their interests were more than well represented[285]. After his departure, calls escalated for the establishment of a separate zone, through which representatives of the large Welaiyta population[286] could be sure to get a slice of the National Regional State pie. The 'parlous' economic state of once-prosperous Sodo town became a focus of grievance. As Awassa prospered and grew exponentially as NRS capital, Welaiyta reflected with resentment that Sidama used to come to Sodo's high school for education; as new *Simien* Omo zone government office blocks sprang up in Arba Minch, bitter reminiscence focused on the imperial 'golden era' of American mission-fostered development in Sodo[287], and fed calls for a separate zone.

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[284] It also probably gives an overly rosy picture of levels of Tigrayan integration.

[285] 'Tefera Meskele even changed the route of a planned road, just because he was in power. There was a kind of arrogance.' (interview, Welaiyta Zone Administrator, Welaiyta Sodo, 22 June 2002)

[286] 1,269,216 across the country as a whole, according to the 1994 census (Country Level Results, Vol.1, table 2.14, p.66)

[287] The imperial coup-leader, Germame Neway, is thought to have developed an understanding of the iniquity of norms of imperial administration, and made attempts to reverse them, during an early posting in Welaiyta (Bahru Zewdie 1991:213). His period is remembered locally with enthusiasm (interview Welaiyta zone Chairman, Sodo, 22 June 2002), as is that of the 'developmentally committed' *Dejazmatch* Wolde Semait (interview, private sector officer, Kindo Koisha *wereda*, 22 June 2002).

These demands fell on unsympathetic government ears. With the establishment of the FDRE government in mid-1995, EPRDF rhetoric increasingly turned, as mentioned above, from talk of the liberation and self-determination of oppressed groups (all were now, after all, emancipated under the federal constitution) to emphasise the co-ordination, amalgamation, and unification of the smaller ethnic units in the interests of the 'efficient use of scarce government resources'. Efficiency through co-ordination became something of a slogan over the next few years, and in concrete terms, the EPRDF leadership engineered and presided over a process of amalgamation of its member and satellite parties, now allowing only one EPRDF organisation in each self-determining administrative unit, which, in the SNNPNRS, meant at zone and special *wereda* levels. In tandem with similar processes all over the country, the series of 3 EPRDF-member parties which had represented *Simien* Omo's various communities, were rapidly melded into the composite Wegagoda[288] Peoples' Democratic Organisation.

Centralisation of the ruling political party of the zone was a matter of relatively limited popular interest[289], with most shrugging it off as a matter for its members[290]. Of much wider concern was the extension of this 'centralisation' drive into the sphere of zone government policy-making; specifically to the development and imposition of a unified language, concocted out of the four major branches of the 'Welamo dialect cluster', and (in a spectacular demonstration of political shortsightedness) given the same name as the new EPRDF party – Wegagoda. The hostile reaction to the distribution of Wegagoda textbooks to the zone's schools in 1998 was rapid, widespread, and extreme. In failing to secure the support for its introduction even of the teachers who were responsible to inculcate the new language, the zone government had created a highly effective vehicle for the communication of discontent throughout both urban and rural areas of the zone. If

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[288] Amharic syllabic acronym for Welaiyta, Gamo, Goffa, and Daro.

[289] On the basis of interviews conducted in January 1998, Young (1998a) reports that elders were involved in the discussions which prefaced the establishment of the Wegagoda party.

[290] Many of them were already unhappy with events.

teachers across the zone were unhappy[291], those in Welaiyta Sodo town and its environs were furious. A number refused to use the new books, publicly burning them instead. Disturbances in the town resulted in the deaths of at least three people, apparently shot by security forces, and several hundred protesters, mostly but not exclusively Welaiyta, were imprisoned by the zone government. Although pro-government media attempted to blame agitation by political opponents[292], a substantial proportion of those detained were civil servants and EPRDF members, infuriated by what they regarded as the unilateral actions taken in Arba Minch[293].

… with language a catalyst

Given already existing sensibilities, the inflammatory impact of the introduction of Wegagoda should have surprised no-one. Since a first meeting of elders and language experts in 1992, language and language-policy formulation had been matters of increasing sensitivity in *Simien* Omo. Failure to agree on the common language desired by the central government meant that different languages had been used as the media of administration and of instruction in school grades 1-5, in different parts of the zone: Daro Kontigna, Gamogna, Goffigna, and Welaiytigna, according to the group in question. In 1996, still without agreement amongst the experts assigned to the issue, and reluctant to inflame it further, the Ministry of Education released a budget for the production of two sets of schoolbooks in Daro/Gamo/Goffa (Degago) on the one hand, and Welaiytigna on the other. As a result, when Wegagoda texts were introduced two years later, no group saw them as anything but a retrogressive step *away* from an established form of their own language, which was being diluted with alien variants. Given Welaiyta perceptions of

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[291] 'We don't like this language. It is not easy to teach. It causes problems with the students because it is not their language, and it is not what they were using before. Also for teachers it is very difficult.' (Interview, school teacher, Ella Konta *wereda*, Daro area, 12 October 1999)

[292] *Efoiyta* for instance, blamed an article by Assefa Chebo widely cited in the private media. The article's author had been one of the original Welaiyta representatives at the 1991 Charter conference and in the TGE, before fleeing the country as the SPO threatened to detain him in connection with alleged *Dergue*-era human rights crimes.

[293] Interviews, Welaiyta Sodo, 12-14 October 1999, and 22 June 2002. By the time of my second visit to the town, a number of those who had been arrested because of their strong views on this issue, were back in their old political and administrative positions, cheerfully showing off the ICRC ID cards with which they had been issued during their detention.

their neighbours, and the fact that written Welaiytigna had a well-developed history, they saw them as *inferior* alien variants on an established literary standard.

Written Welaiytigna was first developed by the Sudan Interior Mission in the early twentieth century, with the production of a bible in the language by the Wycliffe Bible Society, and its dissemination amongst growing numbers of Kale Hiwot believers[294]. Its 'legitimacy' was further institutionalised, and its use standardised, as a result of its early inclusion amongst the Ethiopian languages selected by the *Dergue* for the literacy campaign that ran from 1979 and 1991[295]. The literature on the literacy campaign suggests that the 'problems of [...] different language names for extremely similar languages (e.g. the Wollayta-Kullo cluster)' elicited 'complaints' about literacy in Welaiytigna during the 1980s (Susan Hoben (1994:186-7) citing Mammo Kebede (1988)), and that 'adults whose dialects [were] not used as the major medium of literacy instruction, resented the other group to the extent that they resisted literacy instruction' (Tilahun Sinehaw 1994:230). The language used by the literacy campaign in *Simien* Omo seems to have been based relatively closely on Welaiytigna, with glossaries indicating variations found in other dialect forms. When Wegagoda's editors attempted in the late 1990s to develop a more 'representative' version of the language, using Latin script, their propensity for indicating 'alternative' variants alongside the 'orthodoxy' they advocated, only heaped insult on injury.

> The problem was that when they printed the booklets they put the Welaiyta form in brackets, so for instance 'water' was printed '*hasa (hata)*'. People immediately asked 'why? Who is lesser than whom? Why are *we* put under the brackets?' (Interview, private sector officer, *wereda* centre, Welaiyta zone, 22 June 2002)

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[294] SIM and the Baptist Kale Hiwot church started activities in this area in 1925 with few members. When SIM returned to Ethiopia after the World War II in 1947 the movement had grown exponentially amongst Welaiyta and Kambatta. The Kale Hiwot Church is now reckoned to have up to half a million members amongst 1.2 million Welaiyta.

[295] Welaiytigna and Somali were added to Amharic, Oromiffa, and Tigrigna in the first phase of the campaign in 1979, whilst other southern languages were added only in 1981 and 1982. The 15 languages finally used, all in Ethiopic script, were estimated by the campaign's organisers to cover more than 90% of Ethiopia's population (Tilahun Sinehaw 1994:230).

The language issue then, had a controversial history in the *Simien* Omo area. It now became a trigger and powerfully exacerbating catalyst of conflict, as well as a vehicle for its dissemination, through the network of primary schools, to the rural population. It does not seem, however, to have been of itself either cause or object of the violent campaign that ensued. At the peak of what even the pro-government *Efoiyta* newspaper called 'high fever', shortly after riots had taken place in Welaiyta Sodo town, urban respondents interviewed agreed without exception that 'of course the core issue is not the language, but the question of jobs, budgets, and increased authority': 'what we really want is our own zone'. Research conducted in *Simien* Omo, Awassa, and Addis Ababa in 1999, 2000, and 2002 uncovered a surprisingly uniform consensus amongst participants and observers suggesting that whilst the language issue may have constituted a marker, or form, of the conflict, it was never its substance[296]. Had the language debate proved separable from the question of the benefits of a zone, a plurality of views might have attracted more dispassionate discussion[297]. In the event, what the polemicised language factor (performatively) came to represent, effectively widened support for the Welaiyta cause it helped 'mark', of which the primary goal remained the establishment of a zone.

Dominance of urban over rural interests

The desire to swap administration as part of *Simien* Omo zone, for the establishment of a Welaiyta zone centred on Sodo, in practice reflected the interests only of the Welaiyta elite, the urban, educated, middle-class who could expect to run the new unit, or benefit from the injection of government resources to the new capital that it would engender. The demand for a zone was not accompanied by a call for any change to the federal system or policies of government, but only for the addition of a further unit, and a corresponding adjustment in the division of resources. As such, the Welaiyta cause seems to have been of only indirect or marginal interest to the majority of its peasant farming population. Indeed one can make the case that, had

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[296] This is surprising, in view of the popularity of perceptions that the Welaiyta conflict was 'about' or 'because of' language (cf. Ayele Gebre Mariam & Getachew Kassa 2001).

the cause been designed in the service of the 'real' interests of this majority, it might in fact have favoured their continued administration as part of a larger unit.

The defining socio-economic constraint in the Welaiyta highlands is land scarcity (Helen Pankhurst 1993:27, Dessalegn Rahmato 1992:17), and the area now regularly appears as an isolated southern pocket of food insecurity on maps of vulnerability to famine. The densely populated Welaiyta *weredas* have a long history of outward migration, as a primary means of easing pressure on land and supplementing incomes through remittances. One observer described the Welaiyta population in the mid-1990s as 'salivating' at the prospect of the construction of a bridge over the River Omo, 'because of the potential for migration onto the lowlands on the south-west side of the river' beyond the formerly impassable natural southern boundary (interview, Arba Minch, 13 October 1999)[298]. One would not normally expect a population concerned to maximise its opportunities for outward migration to support the drawing of administrative boundaries likely to have the effect of confining it more closely within its own 'homeland'.

The fact that they did so, apparently in spite of apparently good reason to the contrary, is suggestive of the importance of distinguishing between what outsiders may consider to be their 'real' interests, and the 'collectively known' interests of the group, those that are perceived to be such by the collective in question. The fact that the emotive language issue seems to have been widely discussed throughout the countryside, thanks to the pivotal role in it performed by rural schools and school teachers, may have influenced the rural Welaiyta population to support – or at least not oppose – a development potentially likely to curtail their room for manoeuvre amongst neighbours. If, in the future, constraints on population mobility come to be seen a having more of an impact on the rural economy than the socio-economic benefits promised by advocates of the new zone, the views of this population may

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[297] A number of those interviewed in October 1999 also privately noted the potentially desirable implications of standardising and unifying the 'Welamo cluster', including the prospect of TV and radio programming in what would become the fourth most widely spoken Ethiopian language.
[298] It is worth also recording the caveat that 'there appears to be little permanent move away from the highlands and down to the lowlands. If anything, the pattern might be in the other direction'. (Helen Pankhurst 1993:27),

shift. Were this to happen (or indeed in a range of other potential circumstances[299]), there are plenty of factors (cross-cutting clans, mutual intelligibility of language, etc.) which could in principle be 'selected back in' performatively to re-categorise, mark, and unite the wider *Simien* Omo constituency as a 'natural' group.

Finally, then, in 2000 the government allowed the division of *Simien* Omo into five units: three zones (Daro, Gamo-Goffa, and Welaiyta) and two special *weredas* (Basketo, and Konta). After a struggle, which dated back to the initial failure to agree on a common language in 1992, the division was swift, straightforward, and effected without recourse to referendum.

> The political leadership [in *Simien* Omo] all agreed, so we were united in presenting the idea to the party. There was strong opposition, particularly from the TPLF, and it was taken as Welaiyta chauvinism. In the end, however, the Wegagoda CC presented the case to the government several months before the zone was dissolved. The zone council decided on this course by extraordinary session. We were also helped by the absence of boundary disputes, since we were basically following the previously established borders of the imperial period. (interview, Zone chairman, Welaiyta Sodo, 22 June 2002)

Research suggests, however, that this may not be the end of the story. A formal request from Goffa weredas of the new Gamo-Goffa zone has been presented to the Regional Government for their separation and establishment as a separate zone[300]. Within Goffa areas, an Oyda population recorded as numbering 14,075 in the 1994 census, has forwarded its demand for a special *wereda* (interviews, NRS cabinet member, Awassa 10 June 2002, ruling and opposition party members, Sawla 23 June 2002). Resolution of the *Simien* Omo case by lopping off its most prominent hydra heads, has had the none-too-mythical multiplying effect in the short term. The prolonged period of conflict over the fate of *Simien* Omo has left a legacy of suspicion and competitive tension amongst the zone's members.

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[299] any future move to sub-divide the SNNPNRS, for instance, could be expected to generate educated Welaiyta enthusiasm for co-opting its neighbours into a unit large enough to be federated, and small enough to be dominated.

[300] The inability of successive governments to construct a road linking Arba Minch and Sawla, and the resulting drive of several hundred kilometres between the two, via Sodo, seems to have served as a reinforcing marker in the case of this claim.

Silte: peeling off the Gurage label.

The second important instance in which a group which had been included as part of a larger 'ethnic' composite in transitional (as earlier) mapmaking finally won separate recognition at the end of the decade is that of the Silte[301]. Here however the dynamics of the story are rather different from that just described. Unlike the Welaiyta / *Simien* Omo case, the differences between Silte and Gurage were pronounced, particularly in terms of key (and relatively easily visible and verifiable) indicators, namely language and religion. Also unlike the Welaiyta, however, Silte were a relatively poor, under-developed and uneducated group vis-à-vis their Gurage neighbours. And, a final difference, they had for a century unhesitatingly been categorised as Gurage by all outsiders, including many others of those so categorised.

Identity differences masked under 'Gurage ethnicity'

Within the category 'Gurage', three distinct formulations of identity coexisted, each responding to a different 'poitical ecology' of identity:

> Among the western Gurage, the clan (*bet*) provides the main basis of identity. Earlier, there were five clans in this area […] to which two more were added recently and [they] are now known as *sabat bet* (seven clans) […] Territoriality is more important for social and political organisation among the Soddo in the north, whose region is divided into *ager* (clusters of hamlets) that provide the foundation of local identity formation. […] By contrast religion [Islam] is the cornerstone of identity among the Silte-speakers in the east. They comprise the third cluster of the Gurage linguistic family, representing five dialects, all quite different from the Soddo and *sabat bet* tongues. […] Within Gurageland, no people identified themselves as Gurage, because that identity had no meaning in that context. (Markakis 1998:131-2)

The account quoted offers a series of reasons why, despite such diversity, Gurage came, in the process of Ethiopian imperial subjugation, to seem to fit the 'familiar

[301] Ethnonyms are complicated even in this relatively simple case: Silte is the name of the population and the new zone which represents them; Silti is the name of one of the weredas in the area.

image of the ethnic group [… with] clear cut boundaries, cultural uniformity and political solidarity'. The period of imperial subjugation between 1875 and 1885 reduced the Gurage to near serfdom, with the heavy expropriation by northern landlords both of *enset* (false banana, the local staple) and of a tithe paid either in a range of grains not locally produced (which had to be bought), or in coin. The economic need for increased income, and specifically for money, drove many to Addis Ababa, the new capital. They went in large numbers both because it was not far, and because the occasional nature of the labour required for *enset* production made seasonal migration a viable option (*ibid.*:132)

On arrival in Addis Ababa, they excelled in fostering economic co-operation and social solidarity, new migrants often finding employment with ethnic kinsmen, and piloting communal credit and informal co-operative associations. A developing reputation for ethnic cohesion was enhanced by the formation of the Gurage Road Construction Association in 1961, and compounded with the publication in 1966 of Shack's seminal ethnography *The Gurage: People of the Enset Culture*, which was actually written only about the *sabat bet* Gurage. Despite its inaccuracies, the various Gurage in Addis Ababa had reason to leave the perception of a single Gurage identity unchallenged. It was in the migrants' interest to 'expand the social circle on which they could rely for support in the alien urban context'. Furthermore, the image of a large, unified ethnic group was useful to those amongst them dealing with the imperial authorities (*ibid.*:133-4).

The impact of ethnic federalism

This situation remained little changed until, with the TGE, the reform of the state administrative structure to represent ethnic divisions 'had the effect of blurring the Gurage ethnic identity' (*ibid.*:140). Although a first Gurage organisation, the Gurage People's Democratic Front (GPDF) had sought to incorporate representatives of all groups, and the EPRDF member Gurage People's Revolutionary Democratic Movement (GPRDM) took the same monolithic approach, splits began to appear within months. Under the influence of the Soddo Jida Democratic Action Group,

which had the support of the OLF, IFLO and OPDO, a group of kebeles in Soddo chose through referendum to unite with Oromia, leading an angry Soddo population to set up its own opposition organisation.

The complex proliferation of organisations which announced the call for a Silte schism in the early 1990s, and the controversy attached to it, is detailed in Markakis (1998:141ff)[302]. An important marker of difference seems to have originated two decades earlier, and it is one familiar from the *Simien* Omo case. The Silte language was introduced in eastern Gurage areas (whilst Amharic was used in the rest of Gurageland) under the seventh round of the literacy campaign of the *Dergue* in 1982 (Tilahun Sinehaw 1994:230). The introduction of Silte language reflected certain already existing differences amongst 'Gurage' at that time. Silte people had been the last to migrate to Addis Ababa, and remained longer as manual labourers, entering only later into trade. As Muslims, they kept their children from state schools, so that there were few Silte amongst the prominent Gurage personalities of the time.

Esmonde (1994) documents the increase in isolation as one moves from the Gurage highlands into eastern Dalocha in particular:

> With rainfull higher in the west, land was under greater population pressure. Farms were smaller and people have long tended to migrate – not so much permanently but to establish a base in a major town, while keeping that in the countryside, and trading between the two. In the east, on the other hand, land was relatively plentiful, and there were adequate returns on cereals and livestock [and presumably more work locally]. So there was little incentive for people to look beyond their own area. (Esmonde 1994:151)

Given the Silte area's relative underdevelopment, inaccessibility, and lack of Amharic, the introduction of the Silte language for literacy made good political sense in 1981. Twenty years later, in the TGE context of ethnic ferment and political expectation, the assertion of Silte as a separate ethnic identity – on all the same grounds - suddenly also made very good political sense.

This was particularly the case since, after 1991, a number of factors conjoined to make the relatively better-off Silte of Silti wereda feel that they (and their poorer Silte brethren to the east) were benefiting less from ethnic federalism than the 'verdant and entrepreneurial former Chebo na Gurage Province to the north west', whose members now dominated the Gurage zone:

> After the introduction of the ethnic policy of the present government, the eastern Silt[e] have found their position unstable. Their area has been facing periods of conflict and displacement since 1991. In the western areas […] life has been much less open to disruption than in the Silte area directly affected by the major boundary between Oromiya Region and the [SNNPNRS]. So business in the west has been free to thrive. The further one passes eastwards towards Lanforo, the more the ethnic tension becomes apparent. (Esmonde 1994:152)[303]

The contrast between the situations to the west of them and to the east, must have appeared quite stark to those relatively wealthy Silte living and trading along the main Addis Ababa Hosaina road in Silti and western Dalocha *weredas*.

Protracted wrangling

The split was, however, vigorously opposed by the ruling GPRDM, and by many representatives of the other Gurage communities. As one Silte respondent complained:

> Silte were only ever involved in business, not politics. Gurages meanwhile tended to get involved with both, since they were Orthodox Christians and had access. As a result they were the ones who were able to go to Addis Ababa and convince everyone that we were Gurages. (Interview, former SPDP member, now Cabinet Member, Dalocha, Silte zone, 25 June 2002)

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[302] Parties included the Silte Gogot Democratic Party, and Silte People's Democratic Unity Party, both of which favoured Silte independence, and the anti-separatist Silte Gurage People's Democratic Movement.

[303] The eastern areas were particularly affected by looting in mid-1991 by officials of the previous regime who 'had become used to "running the show" for their own interests, and also realised they would have no further opportunity "to get their share". So they wanted both to loot and to create events that would cover up their activities' (*ibid.*:154).

After a brief foray up as far as the House of the Federation, the issue was referred back to the SNNPNRS government, and a complex procedure implemented to select representatives for a conference in Butajira in August 1997, to debate and make a decision on the issue. Following elaborate preparation by the ruling party, the 'infamous' Butajira conference declared that Silte were Gurage, a decision which horrified many:

> It is not clear if that was the stand of the EPRDF but there was a lot of weeping in the rural areas after the decision. After Butajira the Silte party reconsidered its tactics and through contacts started to put pressure at the international level, in an attempt to get the federal government to pressure the region. (Interview zone cabinet member, Dalocha, 25 June 2002)

The tactics seemed to work, and in April 2000 the Federal House finally agreed to reconsider the case. Eventually it was agreed that the issue be resolved by referendum of the Silte weredas. The vote, held between 18 and 26 April 2001, was overwhelmingly for Silte autonomous administrative status. The zone was set up forthwith, and within a year, EPRDF had published in English a lengthy *mea culpa*, for the way in which it had attempted to frustrate the 'will of the Silte people', in its new magazine *Tehadso*.

The immediate rationale for the establishment of a separate Silte zone had been the allegation that the wider Gurage zonal administration was neglecting the development of this already disadvantaged area. As a result, the rhetoric of the new zone's administrators is resolutely, and energetically focused on socio-economic development. Many were members of the Silte independence parties, but are now members of a Silte EPRDF member organisation alongside those who opposed them.

The Silte cause, like all others in this discussion, has been defined, shaped, and led by educated (and in this case also wealthy) elites, in the service primarily of their own interests. It is interesting that in this instance, unusually, the upgrading of a particular urban centre has not been an important focus of the nationalist campaign. Here an explanation may be that the more typical situation is distorted by the influence on the Silte autonomy campaign of the large Silte mercantile community in

Addis Ababa. This influential constituency has been less interested in the establishment of an urban centre in Silte area from which it could operate (since it is already effectively established in trading networks in the capital, and throughout the country), than in securing a separate allocation of government budgetary resources for its own ethnic zone.

Kaffa-Sheka: fragmentation and mixed populations

> It would be impossible to count the number of ethnic groups in this area: there are so many of them! (Interview, businessman, Tepi, then Kaffa-Sheka zone, 8 October 1999)

> It was originally 4 or 5 Shekecho families who came to this area a long time ago. The boundary between Sheko and Shekecho is the Bako River. There was traditionally a landowner who became a chieftain or a king. After that, the Sheko people came here, because their own land was impossible to farm. Therefore they gave six oxen for some land around Tepi. The land got its name because it was sold by a man called Tebe, which is a Majangir name. (interview, Shekecho school teacher, Tepi, 8 October 1999)

The areas along the borders of what are currently Kaffa, Sheka, and Bench-Maji zones of SNNPNRS, and Gambella and Oromia NRSs - areas administered immediately after Menelik's conquest, by *Ras* Tesema and *Ras* Weldegiorgis, and commonly known as Illubabor and Kaffa - have seen repeated boundary shifts over the last 100 years, with the historical ethnonyms marking a fluctuating series of territorial incarnations (see the series of maps in appendix). The area is home to amongst the most diverse and inter-mixed of Ethiopia's ethnic populations, as the quotations above suggest. In addition to a mixture of relatively 'local' or 'indigenous' ethnic groups, the area has significant populations of more recent immigrants.

The 1994 census records an Amhara population in Kaffa/Sheka zone of just under 50,000 or 6.86% of the population, living in rural and urban areas. Local people identify three phases of their in-migration. As elsewhere, initial groups followed Menelik's conquest of the area in 1897. A second influx took place during the Italian

occupation, when many of Imperial Regent Ras Imru's followers ('swelled to almost unmanageable proportions through the addition of the wives and children of Amhara officials and retired soldiers long settled in the Jimma region' (Greenfield 1969[1965]:233)) seem to have remained in Kaffa after his capture in 1936[304]. A third and more substantial rural Amhara population resulted from *Dergue*-era resettlement schemes, under which Amharas from Wello were given land, most visibly in the northwest area of Kaffa, adjacent to the Gojeb River. More controversially, there are persistent claims that Welleye numbers have increased during the 1990s, as existing settlers seek to bolster their numbers by bringing additional family members from the north 'for security' in the context of ethnic federalism.[305]

Much of the area produces coffee, a factor which has attracted relatively large numbers of traders and investors from outside the region to its multi-ethnic towns, particularly the economically important location of Tepi[306]. Rural areas are populated by a range of groups speaking various branch languages of Omotic, Cushitic, and Nilo-Saharan language-families (Bender *et al.* 1976), with markedly different historical experiences of, and contemporary attitudes to political, economic, and territorial organisation. Some, but not all, elements of this mixture are marked by readily apparent differences in dress and hairstyles, physiognomy, and skin colour between groups.

This area has, since 1991, thrown up some of the country's most intractable, if relatively small-scale, conflicts, many being (re)constituted in response to the new salience of ethnicity, under the federal project of the government. Conflict in the area has multiple layers, and it is often difficult to disentangle its various strands. At least three seem to relate to attempts to shift the territorial basis of representation and

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[304] No figures are available for the number who may have stayed in the area. Greenfield indicates that Ras Imru's followers numbered more than 30,000 when he decided to march to Bonga.
[305] It was not possible to ascertain the validity of these reports in the course of fieldwork in October 1999 and June 2002. The apparently widespread credibility they enjoyed in the region on both occasions is sufficient to render them politically significant.
[306] Stauder notes that 'since the 1950s, with the introduction of coffee as a large-scale cash crop near Teppi, some Majangir in this area have been dispossessed of their lands by Amhara, Galla and other highland peoples operating behind the authority of the Ethiopian government' (1971:2).

administration better to serve the perceived interests of particular groups in the context of federalism. One is the dispute over the 'appropriate' relation between 'Kaffa' and 'Sheka' areas, and their respective majority Kefficho and Shekecho populations, a problem which spawned Shekecho calls for the restoration of their separate zone, as well as irredentist claims on neighbouring *weredas* outside the Kaffa/Sheka zone. Secondly, representatives of the minority Majangir and Sheko populations have made persistent, and sporadically violent, calls for the establishment of a new zone for their people, to be carved out from areas of various of the zones and regions around Sheko and Yeki *weredas*[307]. Thirdly, the occupational minority Manja 'clan', living amongst the Kefficho in Kaffa zone, has been agitating for most of the last decade for special proportional representation within the zone. This section briefly details each of these cases (which by no means exhaust the 'ethnic' or 'political' claims current in the area) before attempting to draw some conclusions regarding commonalities and divergence amongst factors at work here.

Reinstating Mocha **awraja***: Shekecho irredentism*

The first case is relatively straightforward, and is an instance typical of the way in which urban educated ethnic elites all over the SNNPNRS have commonly acted to defend their perceived interests under ethnic federal arrangements, by calling for the establishment (in this case the re-establishment) of their own zone, the jobs, budget, and resources of which they can expect to control.

With the unification of the SNNPNRS in the early period of the TGE, the 10 ethnic groups listed under the former Region 11, 'Kaffa', were divided amongst four zones:

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[307] Clarity in this case is not helped by some confusing ethnonyms. Sheka is the name given to the current SNNPNRS zone comprising Yeki, Gecha and Masha *weredas*, which is dominated by the majority Shekecho population. Both the Sheka area, and the Shekecho ethnic group are also referred to as 'Mocha', as in the 1994 census. A minority ethnic group living to the south-west of the area in Yeki *wereda* of Sheka zone, Sheko *wereda* of Bench Maji zone, and also across the NRS border in Dima Special zone of Gambella, is variously referred to as either Sheko or Sheka. Sheko is used here throughout, to distinguish the ethnic group from the zone, at risk of confusing it with the *wereda*. Majangir (sing. Majang) (Stauder (1971), Sato (2002)) is also used in preference to the older Masengo

Kaffa, Sheka, Bench, and Maji. In 1996-7, as part of the ruling party's drive to amalgamate smaller units in the name of efficiency (described above), they were melded back into two zones, Kaffa-Sheka, and Bench-Maji. In each case the zone capital moved to the town in the area dominated by the new 'majority' group: Mizan Teferi amongst the Bench, and Bonga in Kefficho territory. The Shekecho population, whose former zone capital, Masha, was now a mere *wereda* centre like any other in the new Kaffa-Sheka zone, reacted with increasing resentment, anxious that

> all the budget and resources of the two zones are going to Bonga. If you go there you can see a teacher-training institute, hospital… many new things. Even the road to Masha has not been fixed properly, and yet everything goes to Bonga rather than here. (Interview, private businessman, Tepi, 8 October 1999)[308]

Resentment during the late 1990s focused on the abrupt and non-consultative manner in which the decision to amalgamate the zones had been forced on representatives of the Shekecho, who claimed they had 'suddenly' been called to a meeting in Awassa[309] where they were simply informed of the decision:

> 'Zeleke the Sheka zone vice-chairman was told that it was to be amalgamated with Kaffa. When he refused to accept this, they kept him in Awassa in prison for a year. There was a big demonstration here, and the known persons from the society and the population collected money in order to send an 11-man delegation to Addis Ababa to petition Meles Zenawi. They stayed for 2 months, but they were never able to see even [PMO Regional Affairs Head] Berhanu Jembere.' (interview, schoolteacher, Tepi 8 October 1999)

The Shekecho claim – not only for separation from the dominant Kaffa, but also for expansion of their own ethnic zone - was, as so often, bolstered with the legitimacy to be derived from a historical marker, to which many referred at the time:

(Bender *et al.* (1976), Evans-Pritchard (1940)) Masongo (Cerulli 1956), and Ujang (*Sudan Notes and Records* 1922).

[308] Interviews with zone officials in Bonga, 28-30 June 2002 of course put the opposite view that 'the budget was allocated fairly, but many people said many things'.

[309] Shekecho perception that Bitew Belay, the TPLF 'advisor' to the SNNPNRS government, had been pivotally involved in the decision did little to assuage local anger.

> During the *Dergue*, the Shekecho people were in one *awraja* of Illubabor province, called Mocha. This is still the name which is often used for the Shekecho people, but it is in fact the name of the geographical area. It had 6 *weredas*. Two [Nono and Sele] are now part of Oromia because there are Oromos mixed up with the Shekecho living there; one [Meti] is now part of Gambella, although 40,000 Shekecho live there; so now our numbers are underrepresented because they only count the Shekecho from the remaining three weredas [Yeki, Gecha, and Masha] which are part of Kaffa/Sheka zone. (interview, Shekecho private businessman, Tepi 8 October 1999)

The question of population numbers had become a sensitive one amongst the Shekecho at this time, because of the widespread impression that the SNNPNRS government was starting to apply a system of numerical thresholds for ethnic populations to qualify for consideration for their own zones or special *weredas*. The irredentist elements in the Shekecho claim seem also to have been fed by another local feature of contemporary government policy-making, namely the decision in 1996 to adjust the boundary between SNNPNRS and Gambella NRS, moving parts of Sheko *wereda* into the new Dima special *wereda* in Gambella. As so often, one modification of a contested boundary encouraged local populations to forward other petitions, in the hope they might win similar approval.

Liberally mixed into the Shekecho campaign – albeit not its primary ingredient - was the issue of language. Language difference provided a slender basis on which to separate Shekecho and Kefficho populations, with benchmark sources such as Bender *et al.* (1976) not even differentiating the two language groups, but referring to both as 'Kefa-Mocha'.[310] In relation to the return of areas of historical Mocha now 'lost' to Gambella and Oromia, however, language provided a more effective marker. Activists insisted that the substantial Shekecho diaspora in each region would be disadvantaged by the need to speak and write Anuak or Oromiffa in order to participate in the activities and services of 'alien' regional governments, and that this represented a failure of application of central constitutional principles. Given the government's insistence that this kind of agitation was the work of its political

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[310] It did not, however, prevent activists from attempting it: 'they say that the languages of kafecho and shekecho are 85% mutually intelligible, but this is an overestimate. In fact they are barely 45% mutually intelligible' (interview, Shekecho private trader, Tepi 8 October 1999).

opponents, it is interesting to note that there is evidence as to the core involvement of EPRDF cadres, as follows.

> We know that this is an issue in Gambella because there are some EPRDF cadres from Masha area who are assigned to certain *kebeles* in Meti *wereda* of Gambella (Kabo, Bumare, Tiliku Meti) and the people told them they wanted to join with the rest of Shekecho. Also in Sele and Nono the Oromo cadres agreed with the Southern Region, because that area is so far from their administrative centre in Metu, that they said it should be transferred to us (interview, then Chairman, Yeki *wereda*, Tepi, 8 October 1999).

The claim also won support of the opposition, including diaspora-based groups such as the Shekecho People's Support Group and the Southern Ethiopian People's Action Group (Achame Shana undated:11). It was finally agreed, and the two previously existing zones were re-established towards the end of 2000 [Hidar 1993EC], whilst the additional *wereda*s Shekecho nationalists had claimed remained in the adjacent Regional States. Whilst some shortage of civil servants was reported – even on the Kaffa side - after the separation (civil servant, interviewed in Bonga, 29 June 2002), it seems to have gone ahead relatively smoothly. Sheka zone uses only Amharic both for administration, and as the language of instruction in its schools (interview, zone official, Masha, Sheka zone, 1 July 2002).

Whilst resolving one problem, the boundary change once again provided evidence that the government was susceptible to carefully applied pressure, and fed other claims in the area. Most vigorous of the hydra heads which reared up came from Sheko and Majangir groups.

'keyi ena tikur'*: skin colour, immigration, and the Sheko-Majangir claim*

> Yeki *wereda* is always going to be at the centre of problems because it is so mixed. (interview, *wereda* official, Tepi, 8 October 1999)
>
> We have quotas for members of Yeki *wereda* Executive Committee, and its zone representatives, balancing Shekecho, Kaffecho, Amhara, Majangir, Sheko, Oromo, Bench, and Manja groups. (interview, Sheka zone official, Masha, 1 July 2002)

On 14 March 2002 the pro-government Walta Information Centre reported that, 3 days previously, 15 people had been killed, and more than 11 wounded when forces associated with the Sheko-Majangir Democratic Unity Organisation attacked Tepi town[311]. Those killed initially were mostly police and local government officials, apparently targeted by a substantial force, frustrated at the rejection of their demand that the Sheko-Majangir party be allowed to run the *wereda* after a November 2001 election victory they claimed had been stolen from it by the NEB and local EPRDF party. The violence represented only the most recent instance of an ongoing conflict, which had already seen a violent Majangir takeover of Tepi, and other towns, in 1993 (interviews, Tepi 8 October 1999; Sato (2002:185)). The bones of it were evident to Ren'ya Sato, an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in the area in the period up to 1999.

> The Majangir are regarded as one of the 'representative ethnic groups' of Gambela Region, where they are the third group in numerical terms next to the Anywaa and Nuer. The problem is, however, that their habitat actually extends over the boundaries of three Regions: Gambela, Southern Region and Oromiya. There have been a series of disputes concerning regional boundaries around Tepi and Bebeka, the Majang insisting that they be included in Gambella, though they are ultimately striving to establish a Majangir Zone. (Sato 2002:192)

Sato goes on to identify three factors which had operated to increase Majang suspicion of their neighbours in the area around Tepi: their conviction that Tepi had traditionally been Majangirland; secondly, the fact that Shekecho and Majangir had long been on bad terms; and thirdly the fact that Majang leaders had been in contact with the SPLA. On the basis of research conducted in the area during June and July 2002, it seems clear that each of these three issues was clearly still in play in the run up to the outbreak of violence in March 2002.

The question of territorial rights in the Yeki area is complicated by the coexistence of differing norms regarding access and ownership of land amongst the different ethnic

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[311] Numbers killed remain unclear, and are rumoured to have escalated during subsequent operations of the security forces. The Regional President, interviewed in July 2002 reported 'about 50 deaths' in the initial attack. (WIC, 19 July 2002). This contrasts with the incomparably higher figures for deaths and displaced claimed by the SEPDC (interview, SEPDC Chairman, Addis Ababa, April 2002).

groups which populate it. Stauder's seminal ethnography of the Majangir emphasises that as land was not (either traditionally or at the time of his study) under pressure 'they have never organised to defend their territories' (1971:2), and '[were] not united by political organisation' (:5). Rather their 'settlement and the neighbourhood are transient in location and composition; the community and usually the neighbourhood are not defined as discrete blocks' (:157). The norms regarding land rights and access to which the Majangir have traditionally adhered, render its 'ownership' significantly less externally tangible, and robustly defensible, than do those of many of the groups around them. Stauder's commentary on the period of the 1960s is also repeatedly suggestive of a socio-economic situation beginning to shift in response to the influence of state and other outsider actors[312].

Change, and the erosion of the 'ecological niche' the Majangir occupied in the 1960s, have been dramatic, and provide a background to contemporary struggles. Sato identifies the influence of Protestant missionaries preaching equality before god, and the dramatic impact of *Dergue*-era villagisation on a fluid traditional lifestyle, as key factors in this process. Both seem to have increased the cohesion and assertiveness with which Majangir entered the ethnic federal period, in contrast to what appears to have been their relative equanimity in the face of previous encroachment on 'Majangirland'. The Majangir can perhaps be seen as relatively late entrants in the competitive process of territorially defining one's homelands, initially disadvantaged by a traditional culture premised on fluid group relations with land.

The process of categorisation inherent in ethnic federalism seems further to have exacerbated Majangir determination to become a 'nation, nationality or people' suitable to attract the benefits which now accrue to such groups, thus compounding the effects of other modernising processes of the last several decades. This highlights the extent to which the ethnic federal policy has helped to bring about the ethnic entities it posits: groups marked by common history, language, culture, economy, and – the missing component here – territory. Whilst Stauder's account of Majangir

[312] Hence Sato's apposite description of this period as a 'prelude to Majangir modern history' (2002:187)

in the 1960s already demonstrates the importance of problematising 'groupness' when considering an ethnographic 'unit' whose interaction was remarkably limited and non-cohesive, the considerable changes which have taken place in the area in the intervening period confirm the importance of analysing both the levels and nature of social cohesion, and their susceptibility to modification.

Majangir may have been late into the ethnic territorial game, but since 1991 they have evidently felt the need for some 'catching up' with their more successful neighbours, and have employed violent means to attempt this. After years of explosive but directionless agitation[313], in 2000 the campaign to unite three *weredas* in a new Sheko-Majangir 'ethnic zone' saw the establishment of the Sheko-Majangir Democratic Unity Party, committed to this end[314]. As ever, the political organisation required to pursue such a project has not been initiated or led by mere cultivators. In this case it has reportedly been orchestrated by a group of former soldiers, who gained invaluable experience of organisation in both the *Dergue* army, and the EPRDF administration[315], with the collaboration of a slightly more educated group from the intermingled minority Sheko people[316].

> One can see a number of parallels between Tepi and the Silte case: within the Majangir and Sheko nationalist party some had been removed from EPRDF and along with disgruntled civil servants took over the cause: their claim was that Shekecho and Bench were benefiting off their backs (interview, SEPDF CC member, Addis Ababa, April 2002)

[313] According to opposition sources they first forwarded a claim for their own ethnic unit to the TGE Boundary Commission in 1992.
[314] The campaign seeks the politico-administrative unification of Godere *wereda* from Gambella NRS, Sheko *wereda* from Bench-Maji zone, and Yeki *wereda* from Sheka zone.
[315] 'Berhanu Haile Mikhael was arrested in Mizan Teferi after the disturbances this year; Berhanu Gebo was killed. The latter was trained as a cadre with EPRDF but later they expelled him, so he took a gun from the health centre guard and went to the bush. Berhanu Haile Mikhael followed him after 4-5 months, and they were a band of 7 or so, stealing from travellers along the road, all of them ex-soldiers.' (Interview private businessman, Masha, 1 July 2002)
[316] 'The Sheko are a bit better off than the Majangir. I think they assume that if they come to power they will be the ones to get their hands on the money.' (Interview, zone official, Masha, 1 July 2002)

A number of urban interlocutors from the area expressed surprise at the collaboration between what they saw as the 'primitive, black, shifting' Majangir and the 'red[317], agriculturalist' Sheko, who are regarded as having entirely different cultures. Whilst in fact there seem to be good political reasons for the elites of these two populations to collaborate in attempting to secure their own zone, this reaction of observers is in line with the widespread urban perception that the problem in the area is caused by 'the blacks', perceived as a 'vast' population now threatening to engulf the scattered frontier centres of light-skinned 'civilisation'[318]. Given the all-too visible phenotypic differences between the people of the area, their apparent adoption as markers of political conflict can be expected to entrench division, making it intractable by rendering it salient.

The Sheko-Majangir Democratic Unity Party was established in response to initial encouragement from the ruling party, who sought to contain the call for a new ethnic zone within the legal political framework, encouraging its advocates to work 'peacefully and democratically'. The newly established party, however, rapidly gained a reputation for racialised rhetoric sufficiently incendiary to discourage both the EPRDF and the Southern Coalition from association with it[319]. In elections at the end of 2001, the party won control of a majority of *kebeles* in Sheko *wereda* in Bench Maji, and claimed control also of Yeki *wereda* in Sheka zone. As they moved to disarm *kebele* militias in those areas where EPRDF and the NEB claimed they had not won elections, they met with resistance. After several months of frustration, the Majangir moved *en masse* on Tepi, which, much to the horror of the mixed ethnic

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[317] *Keyi* in this context also means 'bright' or 'lighter skinned', as opposed to *tikur*, 'black' or 'darker skinned'.

[318] A number of interlocutors in Tepi, for instance, claimed that 'the SPLA was well known to be attempting to establish a string of 'black towns' within Ethiopia, as a buffer against Ethiopian encroachment. The implication that the Ethiopian authorities share this racialised view of events is apparent in allegations that in subsequent operations security forces in the area 'went looking for the blacks' (interviews, Tepi, 30 June 2002).

[319] Interviews in March/April 2002 with senior SEPDF and SEPDC officials indicated that both organisations had early on sought to distance themselves from the overtures each had received from the new organisation, because of concerns about the inflammatory nature of its political strategy. Although each side sought to blame the 'involvement' of the other for encouraging or facilitating the formation of what both now agree is an undesirable force, there is no evidence that the organisation was aligned with either ruling or opposition party.

urban population of traders and civil servants, they saw as the natural capital of a future ethnic enclave[320].

Sheko-Majangir resentment seems to have focused both on the relative dominance by other indigenous groups of the two SNNPNRS zones they inhabit (Sheka by Shekecho, and Bench-Maji by Bench), and also on the influx – and relative wealth - of outsiders in local urban and rural areas. This instance of conflict, like others, almost certainly had a copycat element, encouraged by the visible success of neighbouring groups in winning territory for themselves. It is, however, the perception of many in the area that it also enjoyed more concrete sources of support: co-ordinated political assistance from armed opponents of the Ethiopian government. Whilst Sato cites SPLA contacts, local interlocutors interviewed in June and July 2002 were unanimous in their agreement as to the support and influence of the OLF and its allies. The fact that further violence broke out in neighbouring Kaffa zone only two or three days after the Majangir attack on Tepi, convinced many that both groups enjoy support from a common source.

Kafecho-Manja antagonism: 'minorities' under ethnic federalism

> The Manja have started to do terrible things – everyone knows it. Obuaymed, king of the Shoto tribe around Bita Gena *wereda*, Washaro *kebele*, was known for oppressing the Manja. So a few months ago they ambushed and killed him, and then ate him. When the police caught them, they still had his flesh in a sack. (interview, Tepi, 30 June 2002)

Several days after the outbreak of violence in Tepi, tension which had been simmering between the majority Kafecho, and the despised minority Manja (or Manjo) hunter population, erupted into violence, particularly in the northwest parts of Kaffa zone, in Tinishu Gesha, Bitu Gena, and Gimbo *weredas*. Quite what happened is difficult to ascertain, and in mid-2002 the area was awash with lurid

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[320] Although Tepi had under ethnic federalism lost out to Bonga and Masha, it had long been a relatively highly developed and prosperous centre of the lucrative coffee trade, enjoying since imperial times a direct air link with the capital. In June 2002, it was reported that several storey commercial buildings which had exchanged hands for more than 50,000 EB were now 'unsellable' at only 2,000 EB

tales, such as that recorded above, which reflect the deep-seated social taboos and discrimination on which Kafecho-Manja relations are premised. Although Manja have a clear political claim (for separate or proportional political representation which they cannot attain in a first past the post system), their objectives also extend to the transformation of discriminatory social relations in the area[321], according to which they are regarded as 'fertile polluters':

> The groups in this category are stereotyped by their farmer neighbours as being lawless, uncivilised people associated with the wild bush rather than the domesticated village. (Freeman 2001:308-10)

> Manja is a tribe or clan, culturally and historically different from the rest of the Kaffa. In the past they did something which was not accepted – perhaps eating dead animals. It is said that they used to be the leaders in this area, but now they are marginalized, in fact not really considered as human. (Civil Servant, intereviewed in Bonga, 29 June 2002)

Attempts to change the extremes of social, economic, and political discrimination which characterise Kafecho/Manja relations have met with little success.

> During the *Derg* period, the Manjo were allowed to join burial associations with other Kafecho. Thus, the Kafecho reluctantly started to carry and bury corpses of the Manjo […] With the fall of the *Derg*, however, this practice fell into disuse and the Kafecho today do not accept Manjo participation in social and cultural activities. The efforts of the *Derg* did not bring about any fundamental change in their social status since the initiatives were imposed and directed from above. […] Kafecho consider the Manjo to be 'unclean' and 'stinking'. (Gezahegn Petros 2001)

EPRDF administrators advocate a much more cautious approach to changing social norms than did their predecessors. This approach, in combination with the devolved ethnic administration established under federalism, results in a situation where local administrators, civil servants, judges, and police officers originate locally, share local prejudices, and experience little sanction from either government or ruling party

[321] They are widely accused of having initiated a campaign of systematic rape of Kafecho women as part of an attempt to change current social relations by force. Whether such events have resulted from the profundity of discrimination in the area, or have been invented as part of the means of justifying its perpetuation, is difficult to ascertain in the course of the kind of research on which this thesis draws.

organs of views whose extreme intolerance may conflict with the constitutional protection of the constituents they are elected or recruited to serve[322]. The failure of forcible attempts at progressive social change during the previous regime may well have increased the frustration of marginalized communities by raising expectations, now disappointed by state ambivalence. Such ambivalence seems to have been a problematic feature also of the activities of the catholic and protestant evangelists in this area. Whilst there are suggestions that such missionaries have (as in the case of the Majangir) raised the socio-political self-esteem of some Manja[323], there are also reports that the discriminatory attitudes of individual missionaries have further inflamed the situation[324].

In the wake of the disturbances, at the time of research in mid-2002 Kafecho-Manja relations throughout Kaffa zone, were extremely tense, with around 150 Manja in prison in Bonga. Manja men no longer came into the town to trade, with only a few women continuing to bring in charcoal, and Kafecho women reportedly going only with armed male escorts to wash at rivers away from settlements. A three-day government-convened 'conference' at the end of *Sene* had done little to calm the situation, and a number of observers agreed that a more radical approach to the causes of the conflict than any so far evinced under ethnic federalism would be required to resolve it.

Commentators have argued that occupational minorities[325] have become the new marginalized communities as the Ethiopian state perspective has swapped the lenses of class for those of ethnicity (cf., for instance, Tronvoll 2000). Pankhurst & Freeman, for instance, observe:

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[322] Comparable points are made by Tsehai Berhane-Selassie who suggests that ethnic federalism has seen an increase in gendered negative traditional practices, such as child marriage and abduction, as well as of forms of female genital mutilation (1998:31).
[323] Cf. Pankhurst & Freeman 2001:335
[324] 'They teach us in their churches, but won't visit us at home' (Interview, Bonga area, 29 June 2002).
[325] Sometimes referred to as 'castes', although Freeman and Alula Pankhurst have set out persuasive ideological, genetic, and structural objections to the use of the term in the Ethiopian context (2001:10-15)

> Although both the Federal and the Southern Region Constitutions contain provisions against discrimination on the basis of social background, the current emphasis on ethnic identity has seemingly led to a cultural revivalism in which previous values and hierarchies are being reasserted […] since most of the marginalized minorities are dispersed social categories rather than localised ethnic groups, their concerns have hardly been considered in the new 'ethnic' politics. (2001:336).

Alula Pankhurst (2001), in the introduction to Freeman & Pankhurst's edited collection, sets out objections to each of the major paradigms and perspectives on marginalized minorities (including ethnicity along with class and caste, as well as culture area and symbolic approaches), in favour of an analysis premised on the self-perceptions of the groups in question. The collection illuminates quite how far these indigenous perspectives remain from being 'legible' to the state (Scott 1998), even a state committed to self-determination, where such groups do not constitute recognised or legitimate self-determining units.

It is relatively clear that such occupational minorities as the Manja have either lost out, or at least gained less than other groups which can be defined as 'ethnicities', under federal arrangements[326]. Pankhurst & Freeman however, conclude their analysis on the relatively optimistic note that 'by the end of the twentieth century social interaction between the dominant minority and most of the marginalized minorities has become less constrained' (2001:336). It seems therefore, important to trace the specific factors that have meant that this is not the case in this instance. Many of them relate to the relatively militant political organisation in which the Manja have engaged, and the sense of threat with which the majority community have responded.

Manja political organisation has been more assertive than might have been expected of a peripheral and economically vulnerable group, and there is evidence that this reflects the complexities of their group profile, in the context of a range of interactive experiences in this ethnically mixed area.

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[326] Government respondents note in their defence that Manja are included amongst those selected for education in boarding schools in Awassa established to 'fast track' the development of marginal communities (interview, SEPDF official, Addis Ababa, March 2002).

Interviews rapidly established that Manja communities in the north-west of Kaffa zone, and into Sheka are markedly wealthier and better integrated than in other parts of the region[327], and that this may well be related to the greater social acceptance, and economic freedom they experience when trading and living amongst non-Kaffa. In areas such as Washero *kebele*, which has a Manja vice-chairman of the local *kebele* council, Manja are involved in administration, and enjoy positions of influence. Manja are apparently able to trade forest products (honey, cardamon, and coffee) relatively freely with the Amharas and others in the mixed population of Tepi town, and thus prosper in a way which is not open to them amongst the Kaffa in Bonga. The differential treatment they have received in the two towns seems likely to have provided a visible marker of discrimination to those Manja in positions of relative mobility[328].

One group of Manja falling into this category are those who were conscripted into the army during the *Dergue* period, an experience which 'gave those who returned greater confidence and self-assurance, leading them to resist their social exclusion in more aggressive and creative ways' (Pankhurst & Freeman 2001:336)[329]. As was the case amongst the Majangir, the Manja also seem to have been led by ex-soldiers, Alemayehu Ambo and Alemayehu Raggo, who campaigned for political representation in a context where the Manja did not satisfy ruling 'criteria' for such separate organisation[330]. The fact that the Manja struggle was led from areas adjacent to the Majangir, was similarly led by former soldiers, and erupted within days of the attack mounted by the Majangir on Tepi[331], has led many to believe that there was

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[327] Several Manja traders were reported to be sufficiently wealthy to own vehicles. It should be noted that research did not include independent verification of these facts, but relied primarily on the testimony of non-Manja and those who work with Manja communities.

[328] It is also possible that the period during which the two zones were amalgamated sharpened awareness of the different attitudes towards Manja.

[329] The same source suggests that the sons of occupational minorities were disproportionately conscripted by peasant associations 'instead of farmers' sons'.

[330] This is terminology used by more than one EPRDF administrator interviewed in June 2002 in Bonga, and Mizan Teferi.

[331] Although it is reported to have roots of disgruntlement going back some time: Bonga administrators claimed that Manja had not paid taxes for more than two years. This accusation is now widely used against any and all elements of whom the EPRDF/government disapproves in the SNNPNRS, and it was impossible to assess its veracity in this instance.

not only interaction between the two groups, but that they shared 'support from a common source'.

Social issues are clearly intermixed with economic ones in the Manja construction of collective interest vis-à-vis the outside world. It is noteworthy that Tinishu Gesha, the centre of recent mobilisation and disturbances, is also an area facing serious constraints on access to land and resources. Given that Manja (in common with other minorities) do not usually in practice seem to enjoy rights to agricultural land[332], collective attitudes towards the legitimacy or otherwise of their forest-based economic activities have an enormous impact on their level of prosperity. Thus, in Kaffa where their activities are 'stereotyped [as] lawless and uncivilised' (Freeman 2001:309), Manja are regularly arrested for 'illegal' plundering of Kafecho forest resources; meanwhile in areas towards Tepi, dominated by trading groups of many ethnicities, they have found a prosperous niche as the 'legitimate' indigenous purveyors of forest products. Ironically, there also seems to be evidence that as they prosper, their demands for the right to land may strengthen. A number of observers interviewed locally anticipate that conflict with the Amhara settler population, many of whom currently enjoy relatively large allocations of land which they have cleared, is likely to erupt as this situation intensifies.

This review of relations between Manja, Kafecho and surrounding ethnic groups, lends support to the 'interactive' approach suggested by Pankhurst and Freeman, according to which

> the status of the Ethiopian minorities is not a static structural feature, but a process contingent on broader political and economic factors. (Freeman 2001:329)

I suggest that their approach could in fact be sharpened by a closer consideration of the *different* kinds of interaction experienced by the same minority group with a range of different ethnic 'host' communities. The considerable ethnic mixing of the

[332] Pankhurst and Freeman observe that in a number of instances, minorities have since 1991 been forced to give back land they were distributed under *Dergue* land reform in 1975 (2001:336).

Kaffa-Sheka area, where the position of a single minority is constructed differently in two different urban centres, makes it an area of particular interest.

Conclusions

This thesis has described developments in the politicisation of ethnicity in Ethiopia before and after the institution of a system of ethnic federalism beginning in 1991. It has explored the legacies, resources, precedents and causes provided by historical events, and traced experiences of the way constellations of power and ethnicity have been remapped under the federal arrangement. Chapter IV considered the historical processes and events that led up to and fed the emergence of political ethnicity in the mid-1970s. Chapter V traced the evolution of the two ethno-nationalist movements against continuing state centralism, the architects of ethnic federalism, the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF. In turning to the events which flowed from 1991, Chapter VI explored the means by which the ruling party sought under federalism to redraw and dominate political representation along the lines of the country's ethnic, or language, groups. Chapter VII considered some of the responses this elicited, charting a number of instances in which language groups and their elites sought to renegotiate the ethnic territorial demarcation hastily drawn up in 1991.

Ethiopia's modern history can be viewed as an ongoing struggle between centralising and centrifugal forces. The Abyssinian core had, in the period before the nineteenth century accession of a series of centralising emperors, disintegrated into a series of fiefdoms, over which no overall 'king of kings' was able to hold sway. The power of these fiefdoms persisted under the centralising efforts of three Emperors, and their elites benefited from expansionary conquest, in the wake of which they moved south. Menelik II's rule established an Abyssinian (or assimilated) elite throughout the Ethiopian empire state, as a result of which many regional powers in the newly incorporated areas had closer links with the imperial centre than with the populations they ruled. They retained substantial control of their own military forces, however, and with it a large measure of autonomy. It was left to Haile Selassie I to curb this centrifugal capacity, something he had achieved, by skilled balancing and shuffling of interest, and selective confrontation, in all areas other than Tigray in the period up to the Italian invasion of the mid 1930s.

Italian occupation brought an abrupt hiatus in half a century of Abyssinian imperial centralisation, transforming the culture and structure by which Ethiopia was ruled. Fascist rule integrated the empire state with the rest of Imperial Italian East Africa, bisecting it according to the logic of ethnicity, and carving out large Tigrigna- and Somali-speaking areas for amalgamation with adjacent Italian colonies. For many of Ethiopia's subject peoples, particularly in Muslim areas, and in parts of Tigray, the restoration of the Shoan monarchy ended a period of relative economic development, and of freedom from Christian Amhara rule. The complications of the disposal of fascist Italy's colonial possessions provided opportunities for the elites of a number of these areas to formulate and articulate centrifugal demands for protectorate status pending independence. These were collective experiences still widely remembered in the last decades of the twentieth century: conventional collective knowledge ripe for reinvention and reconstruction by new generations of ethno-nationalists.

The restoration of Haile Selassie erased all evidence of Italian administration, except the roads built and memories left. It wiped out as well the last vestiges of traditional regional autonomy in Tigray. A reinvigorated drive to centralise was now coupled with modernising plans to bureaucratise the state, and educate a new class of civil servants. Bureaucratisation brought jobs, open to Amharic-speaking graduates of the new university. The university brought students together from all over the empire, and sent them out to its other corners on programmes of service; these experiences were juxtaposed in a radicalising political climate where questioning the enforced 'Amharisation' of the state and of those associated with it became a new student convention.

Chapter IV, then, provided an account of the historical resources and recollections freely utilised by the protagonists of the subsequent chapters in consciously elaborating or unconsciously re-enacting a range of conventional narratives, creating shared knowledge about the relationship between ethnicity and power in Ethiopia. Imperial Shoan mythmaking had forged Solomonic history, Orthodox religion, Amharic language, and Abyssinian culture into an all-encompassing rationale of empire; the regime had invented and enforced the resulting synthesis with equal

determination, deploying its performative power, as the elements fused to form widely known convention, to masterly effect.

During the period of the *Dergue* regime from 1974 to 1991, new experiences and interaction were shared and discussed, new categories learned, and new conventions constructed. In response to what Ethiopians learned, new traditions emerged, with new orderings of well-known resources. Centrifugal elements which had challenged the imperial regime in its final days sought new strategies. Armed with a Marxist understanding of the National Question, ethno-nationalists now retreated into rural areas, organised their opposition, and set about the elaboration and mobilisation of collective histories, collective voices, and collective demands. The same processes (based on different individual experiences) of social interaction, and the collective construction and categorisation of knowledge, underpinned the interest, motivation, and actions of all parties, whether they were consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or accidentally contributing to the collective experience and re-enactment of convention.

Neither Oromo nor Tigrayan nationalists had any shortage of historical materials from which to work their counter-narratives of oppression and resistance. The processes and events involved in each case were explored in Chapter V, which also suggested how the conventions they constructed set the two movements on a collision course. Conventionality is a feature not only of the content of narratives of identity but also of the markers and boundaries which delimit them, and this fact goes a long way to account for the differential levels of success which the two movements enjoyed. The TPLF operated amongst people who shared a strongly bounded sense of identity, with relatively high levels of resistance to assimilation to or from other groups south of the Mereb. In this situation, their highly focused ethnic mobilisation, based on a depth of interaction and knowledge shared with their constituents, proved almost too successful, generating difficulties and resistance when its proponents wanted to harness it for collaboration in other parts of Ethiopia. On top of a shared construction of identity, the forging of a collective sense of

interest was also relatively straightforward in this relatively compact, homogenous, and uniformly marginalised area.

In Oromia, meanwhile, the ethno-nationalists were confronted with a large, disparate, and widely scattered population which had intermarried and assimilated widely and over a long period with a variety of neighbouring or interspersed religious, cultural, and language groups. Influenced by these circumstances, Oromo conventional beliefs relating to identity, and the interactive experiences which daily informed them, remained loose and multiple, a shared core secured by a common language notwithstanding. The nationalists found in this cultural core powerful motifs of unity, recognisable, evocative, and resonant amongst most if not all Oromo populations. Less clear, however, was the extent to which these 'national' materials were able to underpin a politically robust sense of 'us' amongst groups who interacted on a daily basis with ethnic 'others'. Most problematic of all, however, was the construction of a collective sense of shared interest throughout this enormous territory. Whilst educated Oromo undoubtedly shared common experiences of linguistic and cultural discrimination at the hands of the imperial state, even these were likely to be understood and categorised differently by Muslim and Christian, sedentary and pastoral communities.

The discussion of Oromo nationalism in Chapters V and VI, then, remained particularly inconclusive, for the simple reason that the views, aspirations, and self-perceptions of the majority of the collective(s) – the Oromo nation, or Oromiffa-speaking population(s) - remain more than usually hidden. The problem is well put (and with impressive honesty) by the leading Oromo scholar, the historian Mohammed Hassan:

> what is not easy to express is the strength and extent of the Oromo national consciousness. There is a lack of data which reflects the depth of Oromo national feeling in different parts of Oromia, and in the absence of reliable data, it is difficult to know the depth of Oromo national consciousness. (1998:192)

Different patterns of shared knowledge seem, however, to have translated into different patterns of solidarity, support, organisation, and political success. Chapter

VI also explored the processes by which after 1991 the EPRDF exported the efficacy of its mobilisation in the north to ethnic enclaves of the south of Ethiopia. Contradictory tendencies were at work in the ideological approach of EPRDF to ethnic mobilisation, as the determination of a modernist vanguard to provide a prescriptive definition and delimitation of ethnic groups 'from above' fought with the familiar advantages of ethnic mobilisation 'from within'. The implications of these tensions emerged in Chapter VI, as a top-down approach to the mobilisation of groups often failed to take account of their shared conventions beyond a formulaic use of local mother tongue. The ruling party frequently failed to problematise and investigate the nature of the local (often ethnic) conventions pertaining to a range of issues: the nature and boundaries of group solidarity; the legitimacy accorded to traditional and modern elites; the status accorded to mother tongue and national languages; and the processes of inter-group relations and conflict reduction. As a result, it failed to reproduce the successes of a policy of painstaking internal mobilisation in the north. Only in Somali and Afar regions did EPRDF policy makers recognise the different character of pastoralist beliefs about social structure and solidarity, since in these cases the differences impinged directly to preclude the viability of mobilisation by a system of political cadres and cells.

The extent of EPRDF's success throughout much of the south was not so much a measure of the organisation's capacity to operate within the terms of the knowledge system (the shared conventions) of Ethiopia's ethnic groups, but of their skill in manipulating existing social cleavages to co-opt a section of the rural intelligentsia of the south to share, or at least conform with their own objectives, perspectives, and 'system of knowledge'. Chapter VI noted that already during the *Dergue* regime the relationships between the Ethiopian state and its ethnic populations were undergoing profound transformations associated with modernisation (Abbink 1991), and the position of many of those brought into local government in EPRDF PDOs is a further reflection of these processes. With some education, and already harbouring aspirations linked to the state (rather than to the status of their co-ethnics in rural areas), they proved enthusiastic if not always competent recruits. Their co-option and elevation quickly brought a measure of order, and seemed to short-circuit the need to

engage in the laborious processes of learning about the mindset of rural populations which had been prerequisites of *internal* mobilisation.

In short, Chapter VI, Reworking Representation, described how EPRDF collected members of the lower strata of the rural intelligentsia of each ethnic group to join the ruling parties with promises of elevation through party ranks. It explains how these processes created an influential sub-class in each ethnic group, with a clearly recognised interest vested in EPRDF rule; and how the party – with the consummate performativity of experienced propagandists – declared Ethiopia's ethnic groups to be the right and proper constituent units of the state. The ruling party secured support for this arrangement by pumping the resources of the state through a budgetary system restructured to feed its constituent (ethnic) administrative units.

The emergence of a class of EPRDF cadres in each ethnic group, however, generated some unexpected consequences at the interfaces between the state and ruling party, the new ethnic elites, and the wider ethnic populations they represented. As they became accustomed to the responsibilities and privileges of office, their social status as 'members of ethnic groups' became intercut with new statuses: loyal party cadre, efficient administrator, family patron. Chapter VII traced a range of cases in which the ethnic elite were instrumental in the collective reworking of conventions about identity – even of the shape of the collective itself – in ways which could be expected to benefit them under the new circumstances of ethnic federalism. Some of these processes of recategorisation may also have brought benefits to the ethnic populations in question. Others, unquestionably, have brought violence and bloodshed.

The discussion traced the ways in which well-placed elites sought to utilise the dynamics of *realpolitik* to win unusual or disproportionate advantages for small or marginal populations. Thus Harar traded potentially valuable political loyalty to the centre for special status for its tiny, but otherwise influential indigenous population. Meanwhile in Waag Himra, a politically well-connected, but multi-lingual (even perhaps multi-ethnic) population won special status and generous budgets from its

NRS government, before setting out to refashion the group as a viable, coherent, and *identifiably bounded* collective ethnic 'self' in order to be able to make full use of the rights – and evident benefits - of self-determination. Here, the acquisition of an obscure language operated as useful passport to this unusually successful collective, a situation which stands in marked contrast with the ambivalent or negative attitudes towards the acquisition of minority languages observed in the SNNPNRS.

Chapter VII, Reworking Territory, documented the common pattern by which ethnic groups in the SNNPNRS, faced with the new carrots offered by ethnic federalism, began increasingly to forward demands for self-determination and their own separate unit of administration. Although discouraged by the ruling party at the centre, these petitions were often sponsored by the new local party elites, and reflected their burgeoning interest in securing control over an allocation of the federal budget subsidy exclusive to their own ethnic group. Since the recognised interest of this stratum lay in monopolising the resources of the state, allocated on the basis of ethnicity, it commonly became instrumental in the reformulation and re-presentation of its own ethnic category, mustering such indigenous support as would prove sufficient to convince the government. Agitated ethnic populations, excited about inflammatory and externally intelligible differences such as language and religion, were clearly useful to this end. Even here, where one seemed close to a materialist reading of interest, and action (driven by circumstance, rather than by shared convention), there was evidence to support a constructivist analysis, as rural populations lent their support to campaigns evidently likely to disadvantage them.

Chapter VII accumulated a variety of evidence of the contemporary (re)construction of ethnic identity formations in response to the experienced constraints and opportunities of ethnic federalism. Investigation of the kinds of markers of identity employed and deployed by ethnic groups demonstrated that these processes of construction utilised the resources of already existing bodies of conventional knowledge: groups did not innovate from scratch. Problems emerged, when a shift of perceived interest under ethnic federalism prompted a shift of relevant categorisation such as to foster that interest. In a context where ethnic categories were rendered

salient, it was often ethnic categories that were redrawn. The account suggested the underdetermination of the link between interest and categorisation, and the fact that both are contingent upon collective convention. Relevant interest was not *objective* but *collectively known* interest; and markers of ethnicity were restricted to the 'known' emblems of which the group was conscious, rather than the objective features potentially evident to the analyst.

* * *

In Section Two of this thesis (Chapters IV and V), ethno-nationalist activity did not emerge immediately from local, if widespread resentment at the iniquity of nineteenth century imperial expansion. Its emergence was contingent not upon an aggregate of individual resentments of objective circumstance, but on the emergence of a *shared conviction* that the situation *should be categorised as iniquitous* and could and should therefore be resisted: such a conviction could emerge only from collective interaction in addition to individual experience. Thus, in symmetrical fashion, ethnic federalism *per se* did not trigger new categorisations of ethnicity: each group, and indeed sections of each group, responded in different ways and at different times on the basis of their knowledge, that is, their conventional categorisation of their circumstances and interests.

I suggested in Chapter II that much can be gained from adopting a position of cognitive relativism which, far from denying the impact of the 'real world', or 'the effect of the facts', nevertheless refocuses our quest for explanation away from reality onto belief/knowledge: specifically onto the attempt to identify *all* factors which may be involved in accounting *both* for beliefs which we may believe to be false *and* for those which we may believe to be true.

It is important to stress the primacy of group beliefs, whether true or false, (the *emic* perspective) in accounting for group constructions of identity and action based on that (construction of) identity, and to prioritise 'awareness' above 'visibility' in terms of what makes 'cultural similarity or difference useful as an "identity marker"' (Schlee 1994). Given the prevalence of ethnographic studies of the 'content' of group

identity, ethnicity, or culture, it is perhaps important to stress that *emic* and *etic* categories are useful only if we insist upon their use 'relative to' particular categories and perspectives. Making this point is not to contribute to 'the impossible task of sustaining members' accounts of their own practices as the only acceptable ones' (Barnes 2000:78n7): to put it as a truism members' beliefs (accessed *primarily* through their accounts) must only be privileged when what we want to get at is what members believe. It is simply to reiterate that we should not encourage a hierarchical approach to external and internal perspectives – both in the sense of one being better than the other (more 'successful' in coping with (and corresponding to) 'reality'), and in terms of one being more extensive and encompassing the other.

Donham's groundbreaking 'ethnographic history' (1999) has explored the interface between modernity and tradition as embodied and experienced by the cadres of the Marxist government of the 1980s, and those they worked amongst and administered in remote rural areas of *Debub* Omo. The problem of differences of understanding, outlook, or worldview is clearly apparent as a factor in relation to the operation of notions about ethnicity, identity, nations, nationalities, and peoples under ethnic federalism. The TPLF has laid great stress on the way in which it 'learned from the peasants' (i.e. developed an *emic* perspective) whilst trying to establish itself in Tigray. Young's seminal study of the movement (1996) has documented a number of respects in which the organisation may have been successful because it learned – with relative sophistication – to approach differences of interest from premises which could largely be shared or at least understood by the peasantry. The protracted emergence of a relatively *emic* understanding on the part of the political leadership in Tigray vis-à-vis sections of the population of their constituents, and of a somehow 'collaborative' approach to the political objectives of the party and interests of the (majority of the) people of Tigray contrasts significantly which what can be documented of the establishment of EPRDF-affiliated organisations in other parts of the country. It required a long and intensive process of living and working together.

When the TGE devised the new ethnic map of the country, it was essentially draw up on the basis of 'expert' opinion, rather than the views of the relevant populations.

The process did have some redeeming features. In its favour, the TGE did not define very clearly what they meant by nations nationalities and peoples; they did try to get some self-definition in the early days by encouraging people to mobilise as they wished (and for this were roundly criticised for ethnicising politics and stirring up hatreds); and the government has - belatedly - been relatively flexible in considering demands for changes in the system (and probably thereby effectively encouraged other divisions on the ground).

On the other hand, it is relatively clear that the party did have a strong sense of what it meant by a nation, nationality, or people, and went a long way to impose its understanding in drafting the arrangements. Here it was fortunate (in its own terms) in having a number of willing allies – some of whom shared the ideological understanding of their generation, and others of whom went along with the idea for other reasons. As good Marxists, EPRDF believed that the nationality issue was a transient one. They understood that ethnic identity was malleable, open to manipulation, and likely to dissolve in the face of economic integration, or because of political mobilisation. On the other hand, in order to administer the country on the basis of it, they needed a convincingly 'objective' marker to determine how to divide the country up. Language emerged as the only suitable and desirable criterion (for both objectives), and the mixed experiences of the strategy were explored in Section Three.

At this point a brief return to the ideas of Scott mentioned in Chapter I, is relevant. The introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia might well have presented an opportunity for a move away from the high modernism of the recent past, in favour of something akin to what Scott calls *mētis* (1998). *Mētis* seem to be a product of locally rooted conventional knowledge, taking account of local circumstances and local experiences and understandings of them. Much of the evidence of Section Three of the thesis (Chapters VI and VII) suggests that in implementing ethnic federalism, the regime took shortcuts, incorporating and adopting the perspectives of elite ethnic interlocutors, and imposing standard ethnic categories on the basis of a

checklist of Stalinist criteria, rather than taking on the arduous task of investigating patterns of local knowledge.

* * *

At the beginning of Chapter II I set out three sets of poles between which the literature on ethnicity has oscilated: between intrumentalism and primordialism; between culture and boundary; and between individual and society. In concluding this thesis, I propose briefly to revisit them in the light of the theoretical and empirical discussions that followed.

I have suggested that one may plausibly reject both ‘true’ primordialism and ‘extreme’ instrumentalism – both of which give (determinist) accounts in which human action is a mere automatic reaction to some aspect of ‘reality’, in the sense of ‘the physical world’ - either to a set of primordial givens, or to the circumstances which determine the material interest of the individual. I have suggested that the problem here, perhaps, is not so much the determinism, but the direct causal power attributed to ‘reality’ on which both accounts rely. There is a wealth of empirical evidence to support the claim that it is not ‘reality’ that straightforwardly ‘causes’ action, but what the actors believe about that reality. Reality and actors’ experience of reality is of course part of what influences the beliefs that individuals form, but, I have argued, it is not the only nor, indeed, the most significant influence: if two observers of an identical reality believe two different things about it, the ‘reality’ itself ‘drops out of the story’, in the sense that – whatever role it may have in prompting both understandings, their differences must be otherwise explained. There is obviously something other than ‘the effect of the facts’ involved.

Instrumentalism and primordialism both, then, need revising in the light of this discussion. How we perceive our individual and collective interests, and how we perceive our individual and collective identities will undoubtedly both condition our individual and collective calculations and action. Both are premised on collective convention, and are functions of the systems of knowledge and interaction in play.

As such they cannot be fully separated out, but should both be explored within the terms of each collective. Neither ‘objective’ circumstances nor ‘real’ ethnic ‘nature’ accounts for the emergence of specific conventions about interest and identity, but the fact that we (and the groups in question) think they do remains relevant to the efficacy the conventions share. It is the conflation of status and state, of ‘convention’ and ‘real world’, which accounts also for the enduring appeal of instrumental and primordial accounts, along with our attachment to the idea of the enduring appeal of ethnic formation. Whether or not such formations do endure is always a matter of contingent – albeit potentially strongly normative - convention. It may also be a feature of the ways in which they are marked.

The literature discussed in Chapter II above often makes a sharp distinction between the cultural content, and the boundaries of ethnicity, between the salience and persona of the ethnic identity in question. On the approach I have set out, culture becomes relevant not so much as the persona of ethnic state, but as the set of markers which may label an ethnic status, since it is the status rather than the state, as we have seen, that is relevant to action. On this approach it becomes clearer how the nature of the markers selected in turn influences the nature of the status marked, rendering it, for instance, more or less permeable to outsiders, according to the degree to which these markers can be ‘adopted’ rather than ‘inherited’. This is the ‘effect of ‘the facts’’. Alternatively, in the terms more widely familiar, content affects boundaries and vice versa: it matters what the indicia, criteria, and markers are, but how it matters (what results from a particular selection) is underdetermined by the nature of the selection: it is a matter of convention, based on judgements of similarity. The possibility that the next judgement assigning status will be the exception which significantly changes the category, is always there.

If we think in terms of distribution of knowledge, and the way in which one system of knowledge shades into another, the reification of either ethnic boundaries or ethnic contents needs to be avoided. This suggests a (potential) solubility of ethnic and other categories, likely to cause all sorts of difficulties for empirical research. It also suggests the importance of recognising the conventional nature of the concept of the

boundary we apply as analysts. Barth's conclusions to his recent reconsideration of the 'analytical concept of boundaries' are relevant here.

> The evidence for the fundamental role in human thought of fuzzy categories, the preconceptual experiential sources for conceptual structures, and the role of analogy, metaphor, metonymy and mental imagery, the raises some difficult conundrums. It may hold a promise of access to other human conceptual worlds; but it seems to place us in a hall of mirrors when trying to represent categories and concepts different from our own by means of our own language and concepts. (Barth 2000:34)

Ethnicity needs to be disaggregated in terms of ethnic state and ethnic status. Individual ethnic state does not cause, influence, or affect action. It is only the social status of ethnicity that is directly relevant to calculations determining action.

Barnes (1983) gives an account which stresses the significance of the pronounced physical features of a landscape in 'damping the oscillation' inherent in establishing how others may behave. To make the point about the essentially social nature of ethnicity, one could consider a case in which an individual is trying to establish whether another, whom s/he happens upon but does not know, is a co-member of her/his ethnic group (say, a friend) or not (a foe). In the case where there is little to distinguish the two groups, neither individual can know until, perhaps, it is too late: there is nothing to tell whether the other is a friend or foe until they have spoken. So if the two groups to which the individuals belonged looked visibly different, *and these differences were regarded by both as salient* the encounter might be likely to be different, as the relevant knowledge of each would relate to observable markers, by means of which each might be able to establish to which group the other belonged, and very quickly. This is 'the effect of the facts' – the significance of the markers. One the other hand, this effect is contingent upon the conventions in play. The two might look entirely different but, if this fact did not constitute part of what marked the statuses in question, it would not influence their attribution.

This example of individuals removed from their collective environment, raises questions akin to those involved in the debate about private language. In the same

way, for instance, that meaning is meaningless and inaccessible in a private language, ethnicity is meaningless and inaccessible to a single individual marooned alone on a desert island: it is an inherently social status. One may then wish to consider whether, how, and why an individual could remain a member of an ethnic group when on her or his own. There is a sense in which 's/he is if s/he thinks s/he is' – i.e. if s/he knows that there is a collective of which s/he is a member, and which regards her/him as a member. Yet delusion is not enough to make her/him a member of an ethnic group: the knowledge about knowledge is not arbitrary in the sense of 'fully up to the individual' (although it always remains *partly* up to the individual), as it must be shared by the collectivity. Ethnicity, then, is not a property of individuals *qua* individual.

Having problematised the three dichotomies in terms of which ethnicity has been discussed, in favour of an emphasis on distributions of conventional knowledge, it is perhaps appropriate to return to the neglected fourth of Banks' oscillations, between ethnicity as an all inclusive theory, and ethnicity as a limited approach to particular problems. Working with a general theory of social order and the conventional social basis of knowledge, I have suggested that the elaboration of ethnic statuses such as may inform action, are contingent contemporary processes of local, self-referential knowledge construction. Ethnicity as a status is a social kind, and as such it (its referent) is exhausted by self-reference. It is a product of local patterns of interaction, and in consequence it might be more appropriate to talk in terms of ethnicities rather than ethnicity. On this basis, *pace* Horowitz (1985), we should perhaps continue to prioritise empirical research, to extend understanding of the knowledge bases and variation of specific, local conventions of ethnicity, over further theorising.

Map 1: Internal Administrative Units 1913
Map 2: Provinces 1935
Map 3: New Internal Administrative Divisions 1935
Map 4: Provinces of Italian East Africa 1940
Map 5: Provinces and Federated Eritrea 1952
Map 6: Internal Administrative Units 1963-1987
Map 7: PDRE Administrative & Autonomous Units 1987-1991
Map 8: TGE Boundary Commission Map 1991-1992
Map 9: FDRE Regions, Zones, and Special *weredas*, 1999
Maps 10a-e: EPRDF Administered FDRE Regions
Map 10a: Region One, Tigray NRS
Map 10b: Region Three, Amhara NRS
Map 10c: Region Four, Oromia NRS (North West Oromia)
Map 10d: Region Four, Oromia NRS (South East Oromia)
Map 10e: Regions 7-11, SNNPNRS

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