

# Contested Issues in Ethiopian Historiography



Edited by  
**Bahru Zewde**  
2025





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# Foreword

This volume appears at a critical moment in Ethiopia's ongoing journey toward national dialogue. It is the product of a unique collaboration between the Association of Ethiopian Historians and the Life & Peace Institute, envisioned as a scholarly and civic response to one of the most pressing issues facing the country today: the contested nature of its historical narratives. This book is an attempt to help fill an important knowledge gap. It does not claim to be exhaustive, nor does it cover every contentious historical dimension of the subject. Rather, it aims to provide a foundation for deeper inquiry and to stimulate further research by scholars and institutions interested in these issues.

Ethiopia stands at a crossroads. At the heart of its current socio-political challenges lies a deeper struggle over identity – over what it means to be Ethiopian, and what kind of future the nation should envision for itself. Central to this struggle is history: not merely as a record of the past, but as a dynamic, often disputed space where narratives are constructed, contested, and wielded in the service of political and cultural agendas.

In Ethiopia, as in many societies marked by deep historical complexities, history is neither a neutral nor a purely academic exercise. It is profoundly political. Competing interpretations of the past – shaped by memory, ethnicity, ideology, and power – have contributed to both understanding and division. At times, these historical narratives have reinforced exclusion and conflict rather than unity and healing.

This book brings together contributions from a dialogue among historians specifically designed to start to address these challenges. It seeks to shift the tone and tenor of our national historical discourse – from one characterised by hostility and polarisation, to one anchored on mutual respect, political civility, and inclusive dialogue. The discussions and papers presented here represent a deliberate attempt to reframe how we engage with our shared and divergent pasts. Our aim is not to prescribe a single, authoritative narrative of Ethiopian history, but rather to create space for a plurality of voices – voices that reflect the country's rich and complex tapestry of perspectives and lived experiences. We believe that acknowledging this complexity, including the difficult and often painful histories of suffering and injustice, is essential to forging a future rooted in reconciliation and a shared sense of purpose. What is needed now is a willingness to embrace, and even celebrate, the inherent “messiness” of our historical journey, which resists simplification and defies any singular story.

The ideas contained within these pages are born of the conviction that dialogue, even when difficult, is the only path to genuine understanding and sustainable peace. While disagreements are inevitable – and indeed necessary – they need not be destructive. When engaged constructively, such disagreements can catalyse transformation, healing, and the reimagining of a more just and inclusive Ethiopia.

It is our hope that this volume will contribute meaningfully to the national conversation, offering both critical insight and a hopeful vision. History, when approached with integrity and

empathy, can become a bridge rather than a battleground. It can serve not as a tool of division, but as a resource for building unity and justice.

We extend our gratitude to all those who participated in the dialogue and to the contributors whose work is presented here. May this book serve as a step forward in our collective effort to understand our past, shape our present, and imagine a future worthy of all Ethiopians.

Dr. Dereje Feyissa

Senior Research and Policy Advisor The Life & Peace Institute



# In Search of a Third Space

## Beyond Binaries: The Toxic Mix of History, Narrative, and Politics

*Shimelis Bonsa Gulema*

### **By Way of Introduction: Quo Vadis Ethiopia**

It has been fifty years since the outbreak of Ethiopia's consequential revolution. A lot has happened in the country in between. It is time for a reckoning, one that is critical, liberating and empowering. Accordingly, a few events were organised, some involving a year-long, multigenerational conversation among veterans and children of the revolution on the revolution's origins, legacies, and relevance. Some were commemorative while others sought to critically reflect and interrogate the revolution and its enduring, albeit deeply contested, legacies. The revolution's inheritance includes the restructuring of the Ethiopian state based on a new social contract but also the rise of new social and political forces that questioned the limits and failures of its radical promises – deepening poverty and inequality, shrinking civil liberties and political freedoms, and escalating conflict and violence. Notwithstanding its arguably transformative and emancipatory achievements, the revolution and Ethiopia's revolutionary experiments over the last fifty years have begun to unravel, especially in the last few years, raising fundamental questions about the state of the country, the future of the nation, and the condition of its people. Questions that were off limits to ask in the past, such as the potential splintering of Ethiopia, have now become the staple of Ethiopia's mainstream political and intellectual discourse.

Where Ethiopia is headed is what Ethiopians ponder, many with profound trepidation. One can argue that what Ethiopia is going through now – impressive progress side by side with abject poverty, optimism coupled with deep anxiety – is a testament to the limits and contradictions of the revolutionary experience. Fifty years later, the revolution is not yet over. Is it a case of one step forward, two steps backward, à la Lenin, which then demands a rethink, even overhaul, of the revolutionary experience? Is the country on a road to nowhere, on the precipice of disaster, as some would like us to believe, or to one of renaissance, on the threshold of prosperity, which has now become the preferred or officially sanctioned rallying cry for many?

Such deeply contested understandings and interpretations of the Ethiopian social experience in the last fifty years have generated equally polarised visions of the country's future. There is nothing abnormal or unhealthy about this political and discursive trajectory (at least) until it becomes pathological and toxic, when analysis turns out to be one dimensional, or doctrinaire, and narratives become populist or populist-nationalist. Such a mix is combustible and a recipe for catastrophe especially when charlatans take over the work of critical inquiry and the production of narratives.

There is no denying that we as a country are at a critical historical juncture. It is therefore incumbent on us, Ethiopians, to take a pause to critically examine the last fifty years, assess what we did right, what went wrong, and what the alternatives are to chart a better future, create a better country that is fair, free, just, and equal for all. Such a deep reckoning is a pathway to evaluate and redeem the past, confront the present, and make provisions for the future. My concern here is modest: it is to interrogate our intellectual crisis, which informs our contemporary politics, with a focus on framing and binarism, that is the ways in which history or historical questions are framed and reframed in the service of politics.

## **The Crisis of Analysis: In Search of a New Epistemic Structure**

The awakening that attended the arrival of a new group of leadership in the country in April 2018 has created a sense of optimism and a belief in the possibility of a turnaround. At the same time, the last six years, especially the crisis in the north, first in Tigray and now in Amhara, as well as in parts of Oromia, have once again laid bare Ethiopia's deep fissures and its complex challenges. Now is the right time to ask critical questions, examine Ethiopia's complicated experiences, confront its many inconvenient truths, and build on the cherished legacy of the fight for economic and social justice, freedom, and equality.

Ethiopia's current multifaceted crisis is not natural – it is created and has multiple genealogies, one of which goes back to the rise of modern Ethiopia. Charting the country's future, especially in the context of intensely polarised and polarising discourses and politics, therefore requires a critical interrogation of what was dreamt and achieved and what went wrong, at least in the last fifty or so years. One needs to re-examine the kind of questions that were asked, the interpretive frameworks, concepts, and discourses deployed, and whether they were grounded in a deeper understanding of Ethiopia's conditions – its complicated histories, its evolving traditions, and its varied experiences.

This call for a new epistemic engagement comes from the recognition that Ethiopia's ongoing crisis in part derives from the crisis of intellectual practice, which itself is largely rooted in its deep Eurocentric upbringing and reflected in its profoundly problematic interrogation of the Ethiopian condition. A case in point is the use of concepts, frameworks and discourses that are theoretically impoverished and politically constraining. What is needed, therefore, is no less than a fundamental rethink of how we know what we know about Ethiopia and its predicament. Such critical epistemic practice allows for a different and better intellectual and political imagination. I will present a critique of some of the analytical frameworks, or the theoretical

containers, used in the interrogation of the Ethiopian condition since the 1960s, with a focus on the debates and discourses related to contentious historical issues of the last three decades.

## Clearing the Conceptual Ground: On Framing and Binary Oppositions

Two concepts are particularly relevant to discussions about the crisis of intellectual and political practice in Ethiopia: one is framing while the other is binary opposition. One of the key legacies of the Ethiopian Student Movement and the revolution that followed is the transformation of intellectual and political discourse in the country. The content of these conversations changed with the rise of new kinds of questions and new ways of asking and knowing. Changes in the vocabulary and grammar of debates opened new possibilities for framing and reframing to simplify comprehension and interpretation of complex social realities.

Framing, which is a key concept in communication and media theory, is a practice of presenting complex and constantly evolving information in simplistic yet familiar formats and contexts<sup>1</sup>. This exercise, which is as much about meaning-making as agenda-setting, shapes how data are organized, interpreted, processed, and communicated and narratives are built over time and across space. According to framing theory, frames are mental abstractions that structure meaning or are designed to enhance understanding in deliberately crafted specific ways. This includes the ability to influence the choices people make about how to process information about complex and/or contentious issues. This involves telling the audience not just what to think about an issue but also how to think about it. The frame thus becomes the lens through which a world or an experience (from the simple to the complex) is comprehended and interpreted, in the process limiting the ability of the audience to critique the frame or think outside of it. Elites (cultural, political, intellectual) play a critical role in framing, as gatekeepers who mindfully collect, select, organise, and present data by constructing narratives to specific objectives.

Framing and its implications for discourse gets more complicated when it occurs within the framework of a binary system, which is built on the paradigm of difference. Binary opposition is an important concept of structuralism, a pillar of modernity's epistemology, and a central element in Western thought<sup>2</sup>. Binary framing views oppositions as fundamental to all language, thought, and discourse, or is viewed as a fundamental organiser of human philosophy, culture, and language. "It is a system of language and/or thought by which a pair of two theoretical opposites or mutually exclusive signifiers are strictly defined and set off against one another, representing categories which are opposed and together form a complete universe of discourse." In such oppositions, each concept implies its opposite, leaving no room for a middle ground.

1 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychology, Evolution, and Epistemology* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1972). See also E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); D. Weaver, "Thought on Agenda Setting, Framing and Priming," *Journal of Communication* (2007): 142-147

2 G. Smith, "Binary Opposition and Sexual Power in *Paradise Lost*," *Midwest Quarterly*, 27, 4 (1996); "Binary Opposition," in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, eds. Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, ed. Ian Buchanan, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Binarism is value-laden, hierarchical, and ethnocentric, privileging one of the two opposites as superior or having the force of truth while perpetuating negative stereotypes about the other (a classic case of logocentrism).

However, binary opposition was a subject of critique from post-structural, post-colonial and critical race theories, among others. Binarism could lead to oversimplification or a false dichotomy impoverishing critical inquiry while reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. The criticism was also directed at the assumptions and implications of the perceived binaries (for example, between woman and man, civilised and uncivilised, Europe and the rest) which includes perpetuating and legitimating unequal power structures. It involved a rejection of binarism but also its deconstruction in a way that creates new concepts and notions while marking the differences, tensions as well as entanglements between the oppositions<sup>3</sup>.

## **The Battle of Narratives: Binary Opposition as a Discursive Framework**

It can be argued that the quest for a new epistemic structure involves addressing an intellectual crisis of enduring ramifications that I discussed above, that is dualism and the homogenisation of discourses in which single narratives become hegemonic or totalising, assuming the force of truth while concealing other truths, memories, and histories. Discourse constructed as such, and likewise informing and legitimating political practice, is at the heart of Ethiopia's current predicament and the source of its vulnerability.

To dichotomise and homogenise is a deeply authoritarian political and intellectual endeavour, with a deeper pedigree in the country's political culture, especially after the 1960s. The rarity of a culture of tolerance and a reliance instead on zero-sum or winner-takes-all politics and discourse narrowed the space for compromise while impoverishing the quality of social inquiry and political discourse. One cannot disentangle the catastrophe of the 1970s from the intolerant political and intellectual culture of the country. Social science scholarship, including historical research, was not entirely immune to the calamity of intolerance. One can argue, at the risk of generalisation, that the contentious nature of Ethiopian history and memory is not just over what (actually) happened in the past but how that past is remembered, excavated, interpreted, and presented. The tragedy is particularly severe when history and conversations on historical matters, especially ones led by amateurs, are entangled with politics and increasingly so when fringe narratives become mainstream discourses. The key issue here is not so much about interrogating Ethiopia's past (and present), which is important as a crucial pathway to repair and heal the country, as it is about how that examining is organised, which is deeply problematic and can defeat the very objective of reckoning with the past.

The evidence is none other than Ethiopia's intensely polarised, and at times tortuous, discourse and politics. Ethiopia's history over the last fifty years is replete with instances in which intensely contentious issues such as memory, history, historiography, belonging, the nature of the state, and the content of the nation were debated one-dimensionally, often within a

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3 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

simplistic and totalising binary scheme. For example, the Ethiopian state was often presented as unitarist and absolutist, but was it really? Or was it always, considering its lack of material and infrastructural resources and therefore its instrumental application of compromise and negotiation? What history appears to tell us is a history of constantly evolving entanglements which contrasts with the narrative of a unitary state made up of disparate entities. Likewise, the annexation/reincorporation, inclusion/exclusion, minority/majority, and elite/people history oppositions represent the same simplistic binary scheme within which entangled historical processes and experiences are interpreted, often at the expense of nuance, dynamism, complexity, and connectivity.

Let's examine three pairs of binary oppositions that have shaped and distorted intellectual/scholarly practice and political discourse over the last fifty or so years: class vs. ethnicity, civic vs. ethnic nationalism, unitarism vs. federalism. Such binaries represent attempts to conceptualise, organise and comprehend a complex world through a simplistic prism into a monochrome of classes, races, ethnicities, nations, and nationalisms.

## The Class vs. Ethnicity Binary

Much of the intellectual and political debates of the 1960s and 1970s were organized and reproduced within the framework of the class-ethnicity binary.<sup>4</sup> Since 1991, ethnicity has been empowered as the single most important framework to order and legitimate Ethiopian politics and political participation. Representing complex and evolving struggles then and now in the singular and singularising language of class or ethnicity, or as a contest between the two, concealed internal dissents in each opposite while obscuring other forms of oppression and resistance structured along questions of gender, religion, and region.

The implications are colossal. For example, privileging ethnicity – specifically the ethnicity of the father – as the only marker of identity pivotal for citizenship and politics, entrenches patriarchy and marginalises other equally important frameworks and categories with which people define themselves and organise their social and political lives. Giving precedence to a primordial definition of ethnicity engenders a narrow understanding of ethnicity that ignores the social and historical constitution of identity and its unbounded, overlapping, and malleable nature. Such an objectivist conception of ethnic groups as fixed entities or primordial givens ignores the flux in ethnic identification.<sup>5</sup> The result is the erasure of people with mixed ethnic ancestry while imposing intra and inter-ethnic homogeneity at the expense of the rich multiplicity of social affinities and affiliations. The formation of ethnonational political entities – such as regional states and political parties – empowers, even invents, (primordial) ethnic identities while creating ethnic (and effectively citizenship) hierarchies in which some are considered natives and indispensable and others as immigrants and expendable.<sup>6</sup>

4 Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

5 Jack David Eller and Reed M. Coughlan, "The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, no. 2 (1993), 185–202; Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (New York: Sage Publications, 1997), 51.

6 The idea that the EPRDF-led government composes and/or imposes primordial ethnonational identities (through discourse and practice) should not conceal its simultaneous instrumentalist use of identity politics. Suffice it

The same argument – of homogenising, primordialising, and dichotomising – applies to other equally powerful categories of articulation, such as nation, nationalism, and the civic-ethnic variations of nationalism. More often, nation and nationalism are constructed as two distinct, bounded, and fixed categories organised around notions of organic and inorganic, liberal and illiberal, and civic and ethnic oppositions.<sup>7</sup>

In Ethiopia, the nation is rendered primordial, often using the language of immutability and timelessness, while ignoring the country's social and historical construction, its malleability, incoherence, and fluidity. Nation or “nationness”<sup>8</sup> is conceptualised as a fixed, bounded, real, substantial, and enduring entity, rather than a variable, constructed, contingent collectivity. It is composed of a civic that transcends and is privileged over all other affinities and affiliations. Conceived as such – a civic nation based on common citizenship – Ethiopia and its civic nationalism are seen as being endowed with liberal, voluntarist, universalist, and inclusive characteristics. On the contrary, ethnicity and ethnic nationalism are coupled with illiberalism, particularism, and exclusiveness. A question one may ask is how civic or pan-Ethiopian is Ethiopia's purportedly civic or pan-Ethiopian nationalism, especially considering its fundamentally provincial cultural origins and characteristics?

## The Civic vs. Ethnic Nationalism Opposition

At the risk of simplification, one can argue that political discourse in contemporary Ethiopia is organised along the binary of civic versus ethnic nationalisms, each representing two different forms of organisation. The former, a byword for pan-Ethiopian nationalism, is based on civic citizenship and the latter on ethnicity and, thus, they elicit contrastingly distinct, often mutually exclusive, interpretations and loyalties. Both nationalisms are constructed as internally coherent, homogenous, bounded, and fixed entities, although they intersect and overlap and are considerably varied and dynamic.

Currently mainstream, often uncritical, pan-Ethiopian and ethnic nationalisms shape the language and content of Ethiopia's public discourse. Pan-Ethiopian nationalism has gone through several permutations. One component is its progressive anti-establishment tradition, which was rooted in the radical student movement of the 1960s and tried, albeit in vain, to redefine the nation on republican ideas of equality, solidarity, justice, and freedom. It was, however, a weak counter to the nationalism that is older and deeply embedded in the structures, institutions, and discourses of the Ethiopian state. This is a nationalism whose logic is essentially provincial – a result of a specific historical and cultural experience – but that constructed all the principal signs and symbols of the nation with the connivance of nationalist intellectuals.

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to mention two examples to demonstrate this pragmatism, ambivalence, or evolution: the manipulation, even manufacturing, of ethnic identities and the invention of a region (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State, also referred to as SNNPRS) contrary to the principle of convergence or equivalence between ethnic group identity and polity.

7 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 133.

8 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.

Ethnonationalists, while claiming to present a counter-hegemonic narrative, often end up reproducing the tools and logic of the dominant nationalist discourse. Immensely successful in exposing the “civic-ness” of mainstream nationalism, ethno-nationalists engage in building intra-ethnic homogeneity, at times through violence, and making boundaries vis-à-vis others. One example is their claim of autochthony or historical precedence, reversing the dominant or state-supported nationalism’s assumptions. The tradition of the Habeshas, Ethiopia’s culturally dominant group, as indigenous to Ethiopia is now contested by an inversionary mythology that constructs non-Habeshas, the historically marginalised, as the natives. The latter draws on an anti-establishment historical scholarship that offers a rival, and deeply contested, account of the past<sup>9</sup>. The battle over Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital city, between mainly “pan-Ethiopian” and Oromo ethnonationalists, encapsulates current national conversations over identity politics and the totalising and essentialising impulses of the debates. It demonstrates how history or varying conceptions of it are implicated in the process, informing and being informed by current intellectual and political discourses. These competing nationalisms draw heavily on divergent historiographical traditions, reflecting what Triulzi (2002) describes as an ongoing struggle over the interpretation of Ethiopia’s past, including subaltern narratives advanced by scholars such as Jalata (1993)<sup>10</sup>.

## The Unitarist vs. Federalist Dichotomy

The unitary-federal dualism speaks to a larger debate about the limits of the post-revolution restructuring of the Ethiopian state. The debate was that although the state was reconfigured twice, in the 1970s and then 1990s, its fundamental ethos and structures remained intact. Notwithstanding the fact that the regions, known previously as the periphery, were granted considerable powers of self-government, especially in the last thirty years, centripetal or centralizing forces and impulses are said to have remained strong, or even on the rise. For some, this is a clear example of the centre striking back against the weakening of its deeply entrenched supremacy. For others, the resurgence of the centre is seen as the rebirth of the traditional, albeit reformed, Ethiopian state, a promise for a more secure and sustainable future and not a restoration of a reactionary past.

These contrasting positions that reflect the alignment of political forces in the country are presented within a unitary vs. federal opposition, one among many binaries that are shaping, but also disfiguring, intellectual and political discourse in the country. This binary opposition assumes that there exist two ideologically coherent groups, one of federalists (ፌዴራላዊያን) who share a unity of vision and strategy in defence of Ethiopia’s multinational federal system, and the other of unitarists (አፃዳዊያን), revanchists seeking to restore the “old assimilationist Ethiopia”. For many members of the political and intellectual class in and outside the country, the “federalist-unitarist” opposition has become a prism of choice – a privileged, albeit selective,

9 Some of the most prolific examples of an expanding subaltern scholarship are works by Oromo, Somali, and Sidama intellectuals. See, for example, Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 1993)

10 Alessandro Triulzi, “Battling the Past: New Fragments for Ethiopian Historiography,” in Wendy James et al, eds., *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialist and After* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), 286.

perspective to observe, define, classify, and interpret Ethiopia's complex ethnic and religious cartography and its entangled political and cultural struggles. This view of the current state of politics is at best reductionist and at worst intellectually dishonest. The federal/unitary binary is too static, restrictive, and simplistic to encapsulate the full spectrum of political positions or conceptions of what Ethiopia is or should be. The two categories are never monolithic and are constructed and articulated to serve political objectives, which is to unify groups by homogenizing different positions, at times using intimidation and violence.

The politics of making, marking, firming and affirming boundaries is served by other equally simplistic, albeit politically potent, binaries: extremists/moderates, oppressors (the north)/oppressed (the rest), civilized/backward, chauvinists (ትምክህተኞች)/narrow nationalists

(ጠባቦች), and natives (ካሮች)/settlers (ሰፋሪዎች). However, what binary framings are rooted in a reductionist understanding of the past and history, do is to impoverish political and intellectual discourse while concealing critical questions from being asked and to limit the ability to find creative solutions that enrich social and political life and liberate and empower everyone. They animate politics and political struggles and in extreme cases construct, legitimate, and perpetuate politics of nativism, discrimination, persecution, and at times ethnic cleansing. For example, the language of “minorities” (አናሳ/ህዳግን) and “majorities (ብዙሃን),” and native and immigrant, and the opposition and hierarchy it engenders, means empowerment and entitlement for one group and the lack thereof for the other, who is often otherised, at times animalized (using terms like dogs, hyenas, insects), and compelled to lead precarious lives as a result.<sup>11</sup>

A discussion about binarism and its implications, as discussed above, would not be complete without a brief interrogation of another important cultural-ideological category called exceptionalism and the binary opposition engendered. The notion of “exceptionalism” is given pride of place in the shaping of Ethiopia's imagination of itself, informing foreign perceptions of the country and organizing intellectual and political practice thereof. Ethiopia's claim to peculiarity, at least in Africa, has to do with its claim to “exceptional history” – as a country with a distinct historical experience, which partly stems from its location at the crossroads of multiple cultural influences, including those from the rest of Africa, Asia (the Middle East, India), and Europe.

However, Ethiopia's “exceptionalism claim” raises more questions than answers, yet a critique of its ideological and cultural premises and practices should not drain its epistemic possibilities, say, as a foundation for an alternative and counter-hegemonic narrative. One example is the Ethiopian critique of the West, its search for autonomous development or attempts to negotiate Europe's colonial/colonizing modernity. An early twentieth-century representative of this mode of thought is *Negadras* Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, who, despite his occasional yet dangerous Eurocentric slippages,<sup>12</sup> engaged in a critical inquiry into political economy, capitalism,

11 This classification also involves the making and unmaking of permanent minorities and majorities that are also minoritised and majoritised, depending on changing political dispensations. The danger is that this political process, and the “minority-majority” language and discourse, can, in time, become a political calculus for exclusion, expulsion, and eventually genocide.

12 Messay Kebede, “Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, Eurocentrism, and the Decentering of Ethiopia,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 6 (2006), 815–32.

dependency, coloniality, and modernity.<sup>13</sup> Another is the place of Ethiopia, and its narrative, in subaltern cultural and political imaginations and its role in global anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, both of which are partly rooted in the Ethiopian victory at the Battle of Adwa against Italy in 1896, a uniquely pivotal moment in African and Black history.

At the same time, Ethiopians need to examine the epistemic and embodied cost of the metanarrative of “exceptionalism,” especially considering that the notion of singularity often slips into ideas of manifest destiny and civilizing mission that were used to organize the unequal relationship between Ethiopian rulers and their subjects. A culturized political imagining and construction of Ethiopia, as the space “burdened with history,” with a singular focus on a Semitic, Judeo-Christian tradition, is implicated in otherising and concealing the rest of the country – their cultures, histories, traditions, and knowledge.<sup>14</sup> A cultural bifurcation<sup>15</sup> of Ethiopia into a civilized North and a backward South, organized the politics of the Ethiopian state when it comes to its relations with its subjects in the southern half of the country.<sup>16</sup> The cultural binary, between and within “North” and “South,” also informs and legitimates Ethiopia’s current politics of autochthony or indigeneity, in which people are divided into indigene or native (*näbar*) vs. strangers or settlers (*matté/säfari*). Interestingly, reverse discourses that claim to be counter-hegemonic use the same logic and language and reproduce the same binaries and exclusions.<sup>17</sup>

- 13 Gebrehiwot Baykedagn (*Negadras*), *Mengestena Ye-Hezb Astedader* (Government and Public Administration) (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press, 1953 E.C.); Gabrahiwot Baykadagn, *The State and Economy in Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia*, trans. Tenker Bongor (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995); Alemayehu Geda, “The Gebre-Hiwot Model: A Pioneer African (Ethiopian) Development Economist,” *Ethiopian Journal of Development Research* 24, no. 1 (2002), 1–28; Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002); Matteo Salvadore, “A Modern African Intellectual: Gabre-Heywat Baykadan’s Quest for Ethiopia’s Sovereign Modernity,” *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto italiano per L’Africa e L’Oriente*, 62, no. 4 (Dicembre 2007), 560–79; and Richard Caulk, “Dependency, Gebre Heywet Baykedagn, and the Birth of Ethiopian Reformism,” in Robert Hess, ed., *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1979), 569–81.
- 14 Czeslaw Jesman, *The Ethiopian Paradox* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); George W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1966); Adhana Haile Adhana, “Mutation of Statehood and Contemporary Politics,” in Abebe Zegeye and Siegfried Pausewang, eds., *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy* (London and New York: British Academic Press, 1994), 12–29.
- 15 However, while this “North-South” binary helps explain the broader organisation of power in the country, it should not imply that both regions were internally coherent or homogenous; rather, each had its own internal others who, excluded from the centre, had to survive on its periphery.
- 16 Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 17 Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*. This is a reference to the inversion of the logic of exclusion (reverse ethnocentrism or “anti-racist racism”), which involves using the same signs and symbols of the “oppressor” to fight it; these include defining, classifying, demonising, marginalising, and obliterating the “enemy.” Northerners or *Habeshas* (or speakers of Semiticized languages) are thus defined as “foreigners,” “immigrants,” and “settlers,” not just to southern Ethiopia but also to Ethiopia as a whole. The cultural and historical link with the Middle East (Israel or Arabia) that became the stuff of the “Great Tradition” to legitimate the North’s dominance and its claim to superiority is now inverted and used to otherise it, challenge its belonging, and demand its exclusion or expulsion. A case in point is the intense dispute, at times violent, over Addis Ababa, which is littered with tropes that tap into deeply contested memories, histories, and historiographies over who is the autochthon and who is the stranger, and who has the precedence to name and own the place. Social media abounds with polarised debates about the city, but I cite three extensive works on the subject: Amba Yatenat ena Mermer Ma’ekel (Amba Center for Study and Research), “Addis Ababa Barara Nat, Bararam Addis Ababa” (Addis Ababa is Barara, Barara is Addis Ababa), August 2017 (Nehase 2009 E.C.), [17](https://www.ambapu.org/articles/Berara%20(Barara)%20is%20Addis%20Ababa%20Addis%20Ababa%20is%20Barara%20(Berara);%20ሀብታሙ-መንግሥቱ ተገኝ, በፊሪኒ: ቀዳማዊ ኃይለ ሥላሴ (1400 - 1887 ዓ.ም.): አድጎት፡ ውድመት እና ዳግም ልዩት የልተነረው የኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ [Habtamu Mengstie Tegegne, Berara: Addis Ababa's Precursor (1407/08-1894/95): Foundation, Destruction, Rebirth: Ethiopia's Untold History] (Africa World Press and Red Sea Press, 2021); Tsegaye R. Ararsa, “The Special Interest: The Affirmation of Denial,” <i>Addis Standard</i>, January 18, 2016.</li>
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## In Search of an Alternative Pathway: Going Beyond Binary Opposition

As I argued earlier in the paper, confronting Ethiopia's current predicament needs to begin with recognizing that there is a deep intellectual crisis, typified by an intensely partisan scholarship and polarized narratives. For example, the binary framing of culture and politics in Ethiopia has proven to be detrimental to deep and sustained critical inquiry, civil discourse and political practice. It can be argued that it has become a causality of its own discursive dominance – an intellectual and rhetorical straitjacket that limits the ability to address the ever-evolving complexity of contemporary Ethiopian society. A discourse based on a stale binary opposition and the politics it has shaped over the last thirty or so years has impaired political and intellectual debate and practice, and confounded efforts aimed at conceiving alternative ways of knowing and organizing. The focus on cultural-identity politics has also helped to deny or conceal discussions about fundamental questions of political economy, poverty, and inequality, and the ravages of global capital. In short, the way history, culture, and politics are conceptualized and examined and politically empowered through legislative, administrative, and fiscal measures has proved to be theoretically impoverished and politically constraining.<sup>18</sup>

The task is no less than a reimagining of the inner workings of the richly complex multiethnic society we inhabit. This requires us to ask questions about what Ethiopia is, has been, what it wants to be, and what political future it seeks to forge. For instance, an alternative intellectual and political imagination needs to envision ethnicity (and the making of nation and national identity) as a process, practice, and cognition, and shift the emphasis from groups to group-making, identity to identification, class to classification, and gender to the process of gendering.<sup>19</sup> This understanding can serve as a basis for reimagining the nation, fashioning a new political future, and building a new political community beyond the categories of “natives,” “settlers,” “minorities,” and “majorities.”<sup>20</sup> Of crucial significance in this case is to probe the homogenizing and essentializing discourses and practices, confront misleading binaries and their analytical and normative ambiguities, discern the slippages that occur in the process, destabilize and transcend structures that are limiting, and formulate new and liberating conceptualizations. While asking questions that are truly important, Ethiopians need to develop discourses that show and celebrate the nuances, complexities, and entanglements of their social and political lives. Politics informed by these understandings and free from the limitations of simplistic binaries can show a pathway to a future of collective emancipation and empowerment.

The past can serve as a guide in this important endeavor, but the way it is interpreted and applied matters. Ethiopian historians have done a lot in generating critical historical knowledge

18 Here the issue is not so much about the reality of primordialism as it is about the analytical construction of primordialism by ethnic entrepreneurs and scholars. What needs to be interrogated is analytical primordialism, the discourse through which the primordialism of ethnicity, nation, and ethnic and national identities is created and legitimated.

19 Roger Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” *Archives européennes de sociologie*, 43, no. 2 (November 2002), 168; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 223–24.

20 Mahmood Mamdani's recently published monograph offers a radical argument to “rethink political violence and reimagine political community beyond majorities and minorities: Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

although its ability to shape public discourse on key historical questions has been limited. A reckoning with the historians' craft is therefore needed, which includes reorientating the focus of historical research to issues like human movements and the mobilities of identities that tease out the thicker realities of our contested and deeply entangled past and present.

As I wrote elsewhere, a radical reading of Ethiopia as a coherent entity risks the danger of flattening the nation's diverse histories and experiences.<sup>21</sup> An extreme interpretation of the notion of plurality, on the other hand, complicates the task of making sense of the nation. The challenge is what kind of history to write – one that subsumes complexity and heterogeneity under a single dominant “national” history or one that fragments a shared history into the experiences of bounded and separate groups? A way out would be to de-compartmentalize discussions of Ethiopia to show how its constituent parts are all tied in a complex web of interdependence and relationships. Such an undertaking valorizes the specificities of local experiences while constructing a composite, yet multivocal, nationalism, national identity, and history. A deep historical study should demonstrate the deeper nature of the Ethiopian experience, which is full of profound entanglements and interdependences, and constantly evolving affinities, affiliations, and alignments.

There is a need for, what Homi Bhabha calls, a “third space of enunciation” – contradictory and ambivalent, but also fundamentally inclusive, transcultural, and transcendental in nature – as a foundation for building a new nationalism and a new national history.<sup>22</sup> The history we need to write is not nationalist, but one that is national or “national, anti-nationalist.”<sup>23</sup>

However, writing a national history, especially in the context of a country that is polarized and born in contradiction, also requires a moral, human rights discourse.<sup>24</sup> Such an approach, which is missing in Ethiopian historiography, offers an alternative to an idealized or sanitized national history that erases or rationalizes human suffering as the collateral damage of the quest for progress or nation building. It can broaden our understanding of the past and give us the capacity to confront, redeem and transform it and make provision for the future. Bringing the

21 Shimelis Bonsa [Gulema], “The Historiography of Addis Ababa: A Critique and a Discussion of the ‘Ethiopian City,’” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 45 (2012), 15–52.

22 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37–38. Finding a “third space” in a world where binary narratives structure discourse and practice require the dismantling of their structural basis that gives them a level of coherence and a position of power and privilege. De-coupling such binary framings from politics and their power sources can open new avenues for more nuanced and impartial analysis.

23 Ibid.

24 Abena A. Asare, “The Ghanaian Reconciliation Commission: Reparation in a Global Age,” *The Global South*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 2008), 31–53; Robert Weyeneth, “The Power of Apology and the Process of Historical Reconciliation,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001), 9–38.

notions of morality and empathy in the writing of history will allow individuals and groups who suffered injustice to demand a place for their memories of violence and abuse within the national history. Whitewashing or obliterating histories of violence and human suffering while selectively monumentalizing certain battle sites, specific figures, and key events will impoverish us as a nation without giving us the opportunity for a moral reckoning. What we need is not simple remembrances but deep introspection, critical examination, self-reflexive understanding, and politics of compromise. All this requires a revolution of conscience, of intellectual and political will for a profound moral and political renewal. The objective of a national reckoning with the past and our present is not to settle scores or impose one's will but to create a country that is fair, free, just, secure, and equal for all its citizens.

# The Oromo in Ethiopian Historiography

## The Oromo in Selected Ge'ez Sources - Perspectives on Historiographical Inclusivity

*Awegichew Amare*

### **Introduction**

The academic and political discourses around the objectivity, relevance, inclusiveness, and reliability of Ge'ez sources of Ethiopian history appeared concomitant with the broader historiographical tensions between competing and contradicting historiographical traditions. The so-called “great tradition” and the “counter-histories” that have gained momentum since the 1960s were rooted in respective visions of Ethiopian history, mirroring deeper questions about sources and narratives. The long and short royal chronicles of Ethiopian emperors, hagiographies, manuscripts and other Ge'ez sources have since been subjected to multi-pronged investigations.<sup>1</sup> Their gradual translation into Amharic and other languages has enhanced access and ignited new waves of divergent interpretations and critique. Since the mid-twentieth century, three principal debates have dominated the evaluation of Ge'ez sources. For some, these texts are an epitome of truth and objectivity, portraying them as accurate accounts of historical actors, events, roles, and identities.<sup>2</sup>

The second group of scholars sought to give more empirical and theoretical footing to the centrality of Ge'ez sources. Aiming to establish a balanced appraisal, they have rigorously examined their strengths, while challenging uncritical arguments directed against these sources.<sup>3</sup> The third stance diverges sharply from the first by rejecting the credibility of Ge'ez

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1 Sara Marzagora, “History in Twentieth Century Ethiopia: The ‘Great Tradition’ and the Counter-histories of National Failure”, *The Journal of African History*, 58, 3 (2017), 425-444.

2 This perspective is evident in studies extensively drawing on church documents, such as those by Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Assessment of the author's treatment of Ge'ez sources can be found in James C. McCann's review of the book: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32, 1 (2001), 81-88.

3 James C. McCann, “The Ethiopian Chronicles: An African Documentary Tradition,” *Northeast African Studies*, 1 (1979), 48-51. Tadesse Tamrat's work provides an excellent example of a critical review of Ge'ez texts, which

sources outright and downplaying the methodological rigor exercised by the second group of scholars. Critics within this camp argue that these genres of sources are deeply flawed, unreliable in terms of their veracity, serving the interest of the dominant elite group that produced them. In short, they dismiss them as unrepresentative, exclusionary and biased.<sup>4</sup> Even though these debates do not exhibit absolute internal homogeneity, they collectively form a continuous intellectual-cum-political dialogue, making Ge'ez sources one of the enduring sources of contestations in Ethiopian historiography.

The engagement of scholars of an exclusive ethnic national orientation with Ge'ez sources is quite intriguing. A case in point is the critique by scholars active in Oromo studies, who argue that the Oromo have been subjected to historiographical marginalization within Ethiopian studies. One aspect of their criticism is the perceived exclusionary nature of the Ge'ez sources, which underpin much of the mainstream historiographical framework.<sup>5</sup> This critique is informed both by an academic interrogation of the limitation of these sources and by a politically and emotionally charged, and somewhat polemical, labeling that aligns with the broader discontent with mainstream Ethiopian historiography.

It should be noted here that ignoring or dismissing such critiques outright risks aggravating the polarizations. For one thing, it stifles meaningful academic dialogue, limits possibilities for addressing biases, overlooks the valuable insights of critical perspectives, and inhibits the potential for the adaptability of Ethiopian historiography in addressing Ethiopia's complex past. At a time when conducting constructive academic engagement on historiographical contested issues is more pressing than ever, deliberations should embrace pluralistic and inclusive frameworks of assessment.

## **Theories of Historiographical Representation and the Oromo Factor**

It is essential to critically examine factors affecting the inclusion or exclusion of the Oromo in selected Ge'ez sources. A theoretical review of the factors influencing historiographical inclusion and exclusion provides a framework for contextualizing the Oromo case. To begin with, scholarly literature underscores the interplay between power and knowledge production, revealing the complexities of representation within historical narratives<sup>6</sup>

Considering the power and knowledge nexus, the representation of the Oromo in Ge'ez sources can be analyzed through complex interrelated dimensions. One dimension is the lack of a positive relationship, wherein the possession of state power by non-Oromo actors paradoxically contributed to

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every historian should strive to apply when using them: Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

4 Representative picture of this argument occurs in Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mekuria Bulcha, *Contours of the Emergent and Ancient Oromo Nation*:

5 Mohammed Hassen, op.cit.; Asafa Jalata, *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1998).

6 On the role of social structures in shaping intellectual and cultural practices, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977).

the prominent presence of the Oromo in historical records. As is widely recognized by academic and semi-academic audiences, the Oromo are the only ethnic group extensively documented in a Ge'ez manuscript authored by Bahrey in the 1590s.<sup>7</sup> This ethno-history, the first of its kind in Ethiopian historical writing, with vital historical, anthropological, sociological and ideological insights, dedicated twenty chapters to the Oromo's socio-political organization, motive, and direction of their expansive movements during the sixteenth century. The significance of this document, apart from its relevance as a primary source of the period, was that it emerged against the background of a tradition that regarded writing in Ge'ez language as a sacred exercise. This "chronicle of the Oromo" breaks from the conventions of elitist history held in high regard among chroniclers and hagiographers, one that traditionally reserved historical attention for court and church figures. Consequently, Bahrey's text occupies a unique position in Ethiopian historiography, giving rise to polarized scholarly opinions and provoking as much demonization as reverence and "canonization."<sup>8</sup>

Another crucial dimension of the issue is the power-knowledge relationship embedded in Bahrey's text. Be it for praise or denunciation, a Ge'ez document as remarkable as Bahrey's must not be evaluated without a thorough and critical examination of both its context and content. While the author's ethnic and regional identity caught much scholarly attention, it is equally important to consider the broader context in which the first organized knowledge about the Oromo was produced. This concern was raised by Bahrey himself in the opening chapter of his manuscript, where he anticipates the skepticism of the audience at the royal court, who might view the writing of an ethno-history of the Oromo as an unusual and perhaps a dubious endeavor. He poses the question, "why has he written a history of bad people?"<sup>9</sup> He justifies his project by retorting that the history of people who are not Christians had also been written and that of the Oromo is no exception.<sup>10</sup> He had to convince the royal audience to secure approval for his project.

Bahrey situated his narrative in binary oppositions, blending truth with fantastic stories, oscillating between praise and polemics, shifting his tone both toward the Oromo and the Christian community, situating himself as both a victim of the Oromo raid and, later, a savior of the kingdom.<sup>11</sup> A sharp-witted writer, part of his expertise was to write a "usable past" for the royal court. This positioned him as one of the court notables, later earning the title of *azazh* (chief steward).<sup>12</sup> However, in their eagerness to engage with Bahrey's text, many have fallen

7 Baoray, "The History of the Galla" in C.F. Beckingham, G.W.B. Huntingford, eds./trans., *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646* (London, Hakluyt Society, 1954), 111-129.

8 Mohammed Hassen, "The Significance of Abba Bahrey in Oromo Studies: A Commentary on the Works of Abba Bahrey and Other Documents Concerning the Oromo," *Journal of Oromo Studies*, 14, 2 (2007), 43-64; Maimire Mennasemay, "Abba Bahrey's Zenahu LeGalla: Towards an Ethiopian Critical Theory," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 6, 1/2/ (2012).

9 Baoray, op.cit., 111.

10 *Ibid.*, 111.

11 *Ibid.*, 128-29.

12 Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos, rei de Ethiopia* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1892), 47.

into the trap of uncritically extracting selected phrases or passages from his account, often to either extol or vilify the Oromo, or to argue for or against their inclusion and representation in Ge'ez sources.

Another critical dimension in understanding the encounter between power and history re/writing lies in examining the emergence of Oromo political elites and land holding *balabats* who had been integrated into the broader Christian state. As discussed earlier, Ge'ez sources frequently referred to the Oromo when their socio-political influence was less pronounced. However, this picture exhibits a paradoxical shift in the fact that, after their ascent to control of political power and land, they did not engage substantially in the formal documentation of their histories. From the early sixteenth century onward, their intricate patterns of migration culminated in settlement on fertile lands, potentially marking the onset of a native-settler dynamic. These movements also fostered complex inter-ethnic interactions, allowing them to exert significant influence in regions such as Shewa, Wollo, Gojjam, and Gondar. This influence was manifested through the establishment of enclaves, assimilation into the cultural fabric of the societies they encountered, and their rise as dominant political and military elites.<sup>13</sup> A prominent example is the Warrasheh/Yajju dynasty, which, with a notable Oromo presence, played a pivotal role in Gondarine court politics, military affairs, and land administration from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Despite their political and social prominence, the dynasty notably did not initiate the production of written records or historical documentation.

The chronicles of the period in which the Yajju ruled from Debre Tabor are still known as the "royal chronicles".<sup>14</sup> The chronicle of Iyo'as, whose Oromo ancestry seems to have influenced aspects of his politics, conforms largely to the conventional narrative frameworks typical of royal historiography.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is not far-fetched to argue that possession of power did not necessarily contribute to the continuity of recording the Oromo, allowing Bahrey's text to possess unparalleled importance across centuries. It should be noted, however, that other complex factors, such as the intensification of political and religious factionalism, the ever-increasing threat of regional power centres to the monarchical authority, and the shift of the political epicenter away from the royal capital, should not be underestimated in understating the decline of historiography during this period of Oromo prominence.<sup>16</sup>

The availability or absence of written sources about a specific group offers another lens through which to examine the inclusion or exclusion of the Oromo in Ge'ez texts. An analysis of selected Ge'ez sources reveals that references to the Oromo gain prominence from the sixteenth century

13 Awegichew Amare, *The imperial tradition of the Ethiopian state and the Oromo factor, XIV- XVIII centuries*, PhD thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2021), 364.

14 Weld Blundell, *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia: 1769-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

15 Ignazio Guidi, ed./trans., *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as* (Paris: CSCO., Series Altera, VI, 1912).

16 To assess the historiography of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which monastic heritage has been preserved mainly through individual collections, such as those of *Dejazmach* Hailemikael Eshete, see Sevir Chernetsov, "The Crisis of Ethiopian Official Historiography and its Consequences in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century", in Bahru Zewde, R. Pankhurst, Taddese Beyene (eds.), *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. I (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1991), 87–101.

onwards. Mentions of what appear to be Oromo proper names in documents predating this period are few and often ambiguous. This reliance on the presence or absence of written documentation has, over time, been the linchpin of determining the presence or absence of the Oromo within Ethiopian historiography proper prior to their well-documented movements. However, it is essential to adhere to the principle that the absence of evidence does not signify evidence of absence. For any group to appear in historical records, it should attract the prying eye of the state – whether due to conflict, territorial encroachment, resource extraction, or other significant interactions.<sup>17</sup>

In any case, the earliest attempts to track the pre-sixteenth century Oromo outside the Ethiopian space have been called into question by emerging revisionist works over the decades.<sup>18</sup> Despite the limited empirical evidence available to support these theories, records from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and information provided by Ethiopian Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land provide intriguing clues that point to the possibility of tracing early Christian Oromo converts, groups that may have preceded the large-scale movements of the sixteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Such Ge'ez sources, despite their limitations, remain indispensable for reconstructing aspects of Oromo identity. Introducing a healthy dose of scepticism towards both the written and oral sources is far more constructive than the conventional tendency to dismiss certain categories of evidence.

Since the sixteenth century, the Oromo became a constant variable in the official Ethiopian court histories. The chronicle of Emperor Sarsa Dengil (r. 1563-1597), composed during a period of active Oromo movements, and arguably authored by Bahrey,<sup>20</sup> opens a new chapter in the documentation of the Oromo within royal chronicles.<sup>21</sup> The chronicle of Emperor Susenyos (r. 1607-1632),<sup>22</sup> the chronicles of the Gondarine monarchs (including Yohannes I, Iyasu I, Bakkafa,<sup>23</sup> Iyasu II and Iyo'as),<sup>24</sup> the Gondarine royal chronicle,<sup>25</sup> and the Amharic chronicles of Tewodros II, and Menelik II, dedicate several stories about different Oromo groups, who were either fighting, accommodating, negotiating, acculturating, or transforming. In general,

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- 17 Awegichew Amare, "Experiences of Peoples' Interactions and Interdependence in Ethiopia: Some Issues Concerning the Oromo People", in Bahru Zewde, ed., *Interdependence and Interactions in Ethiopian History* (Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023), 90.
- 18 Mohammed Hassen, "The pre-16th century Oromo Presence within the Medieval Christian Kingdom of Ethiop
- 19 Osvaldo Raineri, ed./trans., *Gli atti di Qawəstos martire etiopico (sec. XIV)* (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2004); P. Falchetta, *Fra Mauro's World Map: With a Commentary and Translations of the Inscriptions* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2006); Mäggabi Məstir H. Ermiyas, trans., *Gadla Qāwəstos: Gə'əzənnā Amharəñña* [A Hagiography of Qāwəstos: Gə'əz and Amharic] (Addis Ababa, Monastery of Etissa Däbrä Šəllaləš
- 20 Chernetsov argues that the monk Ba□r□y wrote the chronicle of Sarsa Dengil, in his "Who Wrote 'The History of King Sarsa Dengel'-Was it the Monk Bahrey?" in Tadesse Beyene, ed., *Proceedings of the VIII International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 1 (Addis Ababa, 1984), 131-136. James de Lorenzi corroborates that Ba□r□y completed the chronicle of Minas and authored the chronicle of Sarsa Dengil, *Guardians of the Tradition: Historians and Historical Writing in Ethiopia and Eritrea* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 20.
- 21 Carlo Conti Rossini, ed./trans., *Historia regis Sarša Dengel (Malak Sagad). Accedit historia gentis Galla, curante I. Guidi*, II vols., CSCO II ser., III (Paris, 1907), repr. as CSCO XX-XXI, SAe III-IV (Louvain, 1961-62).
- 22 Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos, rei de Ethiopia* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1892).
- 23 Ignazio Guidi, ed./trans., *Annales Iohannis I, Iyāsu I, Bakāffā. II*, II vols., CSCO, II ser., V (Paris, 1905), repr. as CSCO, XXIV-XXV, SAe VII-VIII (Louvain, 1961).
- 24 *Idem.*, 1912.
- 25 Weld Blundell, 1922.

these chronicles document the Oromo in various capacities, including their integration into or resistance against the Solomonid state, matrimonial alliances with the Solomonid royal family, military contributions, disruptions caused by active raiding groups, economic and social transformations, their evolution from an ethnic identity into a political force, the rise of regional Oromo dynasties vying for influence at court, and their pivotal role in shaping the modern Ethiopian state.

While it is acknowledged within academic circles that these sources have their limitations, the claim of Oromo exclusion in Ge'ez sources not only merits careful reconsideration of the underlying "assumptions" but also requires expanding its reading frontiers to the Ge'ez hagiographies which offer additional insights into Oromo history.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, due attention to these Ge'ez sources can help situate the Oromo in the pages of Ethiopian history.

The contention that Ge'ez sources primarily emphasize the lives and times of elites within the royal court and the church remains open to critical contestation. The critique of Ethiopian history as predominantly elitist has long been widely acknowledged among historians.<sup>27</sup> However, the hagiographies of prominent church figures and the chronicles of influential court figures represent universal historiographical traditions. Their focus on individual lives is seen as embodying broader societal, cultural, and religious ideals, much like modern historiography, which seeks to uncover patterns and structures through empirical analysis. The accounts of the Solomonids and the local saints as major subjects of history indirectly capture broader narratives by offering insights into the societies and the cultures in which these great men/women lived.

Ge'ez sources, particularly chronicles, have exhibited perceptible changes of subject and scope as they attempt to adapt to the evolving socio-cultural and ethnic map of Ethiopia. Chroniclers show a marked fascination with the incorporation of new ethnic groups into the royal court, offering detailed narratives about individuals from diverse backgrounds in the service of the state or the court.<sup>28</sup> Accounts of Ethiopian sovereigns became increasingly inclusive as they sought to address the dual opposing roles of the Oromo as both raiders and defenders of the kingdom. The disruption by militant waves of raiding groups, their conversion to Christianity,<sup>29</sup> the emergence of Oromo warriors of the Ethiopian state, matrimonial and political alliances involving the Oromo, Oromo partisanship in the theological controversies, to mention some of the key aspects of Oromo history which caught the attention of royal scribes, broaden the focus of the chronicles, shifting attention from the court to the regions, from a narrow elite circle to a broader social tapestry, and from political history to the exploration of social, religious, and psychological dimensions of Ethiopian life.

26 James C. McCann, "The Ethiopian Chronicles.", 1979.

27 See the introduction in Donald Donham and Wendy James, eds., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

28 The chronicler of Emperor Susenyos, Tino Feyissa, for instance, provides details about the ethnic background or regional origin of notable elites in the court, including Yolyos and Yona□el. Notably, he demonstrates a unique interest in highlighting his own Oromo heritage: F. M. E. Pereira, 1892, (text), 208.

29 The conversion of the Oromo is celebrated as a pivotal rite of passage, symbolising not only spiritual transformation but also their integration into the social and political fabric of the Ethiopian state. A meticulous description of the baptism of the Warantisha Oromo in Danqaz, the royal capital at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is a case in point: F. M. E. Pereira, 1892, (text), 214-215.

The chronicles' attempt to chronicle interactions with a diverse array of ethnic communities following the expansion of the state also finds expressions in hagiographies. The histories of prominent monastic holy men/women somehow underwent reconsideration of their scope as the church expanded its influence into newly annexed territories secured by imperial conquests, or as new demographic elements joined the fold with population movements, displacements, and raids, to mention only some of the factors. Hagiographies started to shed light on the church's adaptive strategies, including evangelization in local languages and an embrace of indigenous cultural practices.<sup>30</sup> The socio-cultural practices, spiritual identity, and subsequent conversion of several Oromo communities are well preserved in the hagiographies, including the encounter between the Orthodox monastic fathers and the Yaya and Galan, Oromo groups supposed to have predated the Oromo population movement of the sixteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

Ge'ez hagiographies stand as an exemplary source genre wherein oral traditions are meticulously preserved within written texts. Composed posthumously by authors, these texts frequently incorporate oral narratives and stories, extending the scope of the biography beyond the confines of the saint's life to engage with broader societal contexts.<sup>32</sup> The resistance to conversion is accorded as much great attention as the conversion itself, as it forms the tapestry to amplify the saint's accomplishment in converting the non-believers into the Christian faith. The accounts provided by the disciples of the saint or the monastic center are often richly imbued with oral traditions, underscoring the reality that even written sources frequently include oral narratives.

Despite their limitations, these hagiographies exhibit a clear effort to construct a more inclusive historical narrative, particularly through their accounts of evangelization among diverse ethnic groups, occasionally extending their focus to secular matters. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to argue that these texts have the potential to be considered as input towards inclusive history, as Mohammed Hassen, a renowned name in Oromo studies, has recently exercised.<sup>33</sup> In fact, academic historical research deploying these sources, filtering secular elements from an account of an elaborate spiritual journey, demands the discerning acuity of scholars like Taddesse Tamrat, Maire-Laure Derat, or Anaïs Woin.<sup>34</sup>

The extant literature on historiographical representation stresses the role of violence and conflict in exacerbating exclusion from the records.<sup>35</sup> A case in point for us is the Oromo population movement, which proceeded along dual trajectories of conflict and integration. Contrary to

30 Refer to the discussion on the monastic fathers' use of local languages in their preaching activities in Daniel Kibret, 2011 E.C.

31 About proper Oromo names in hagiographies, suggesting a possible Oromo presence in the Christian realm before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see Osvaldo Raineri, ed./trans, 2004.

32 Steven Kaplan, "Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia," *History in Africa*, 8 (1981), 107-123.

33 Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo and the Christian.....*, 2015. See also his previous engagement with the same contentious subject in his "The Pre-16<sup>th</sup> century Oromo Presence within the Medieval Christian Kingdom

34 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*; Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270-1527) Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris, 2003); Anaïs Woin, *Paradis pour une reine: Le monastere de Qoma Fasilädäs, Éthiopie, XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 2012).

35 About how dominant groups shape historical traditions and narratives, often marginalizing or excluding others through conflict and cultural suppression, a principal reading is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

theoretical assumptions, the Oromo penetrated the historical record much as they breached frontier defenses – through both military force and strategic diplomacy, including alliances and service to the state.<sup>36</sup> As discussed elsewhere in this article, their sixteenth century movement captured unprecedented attention from court scribes, Jesuit missionaries, and church officials. Notably, the Oromo entered European literature in the fifteenth century through Fra Mauro's world map,<sup>37</sup> while reports of their movements was felt in Iberia via a letter from Emperor Susenyos dated 26 June 1604.<sup>38</sup> Jesuit accounts further documented the incursions and the royal court's responses, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of the time.<sup>39</sup>

Even though the pace of these movements gradually subsided, compelling the sources to focus on transformative processes reshaping the Oromo's role and identity, they nonetheless opened a new chapter in the overall attention accorded to the Oromo, elevating their visibility in recorded history. Unlike other migratory movements – such as those of the Afar, Somali, Argobba<sup>40</sup> – the Oromo movement stands out for its enduring impact, shaping both contemporary documentation and the broader historical narrative of the region.

## What Does Genuine Inclusion Require? Uncovering the Forms of Injustice

One form of perceived injustice lending credence to the accusations of pan-Oromo writers against Ge'ez sources lies in the portrayal of the Oromo people within certain texts. This issue has two critical dimensions deserving closer scrutiny. One is the negative characterization of the Oromo, a subject that has drawn substantial attention from several Oromo scholars, including, paradoxically, those who claim that the Oromo are entirely absent from meaningful representation in Ge'ez records. Prominent examples frequently cited in this regard include Bahrey's depiction of the Oromo as "eager to shed human blood",<sup>41</sup> their portrayal as "troublemakers" in the letter of Susenyos,<sup>42</sup> and their consistent representation as adversaries in various passages of the sixteenth and seventeenth century chronicles.

Rather than merely denying the presence and relevance of such denigrating labels of the Oromo that persist in the records – an approach often taken by those defending the centrality of Ge'ez sources – one must offer context for the formulation of these characterizations. Central to this context is the population movement, which, while bringing the Oromo to the forefront of historical attention, also sparked an unusual wave of polemics against them, largely driven

36 Awegichew Amare, "Atse Sarsa Dengel and the Rival Great Powers at His Door Steps: Vagaries of Competition and War against the Ottoman Empire, 1563-1597", *Abyssinia Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 7, 2 (2022), 24-32.

37 See "Galla River" in P. Falchetta, *Fra Mauro's World Map* ....., 2006.

38 I. Boavida, H. Pennec and M. J. Ramos, eds., C. Tribe, trans., *Pedro Paez's History of Ethiopia, 1662*, vol. 2 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 2011), 172.

39 Beckingham and Huntingford, ed./trans., *Some Records of Ethiopia*; Manoel Barradas, *Tractatus Tres Historico-Geographici (1634): A Seventeenth-Century Historical Account of Tigray, Ethiopia*, edited by Richard Pankhurst, translated from Portuguese by Elizabeth Filleul (Aethiopistische Forschungen 43 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 50.

40 Merid Wolde Aregay, "Population Movements as a Possible Factor in the Christian-Muslim Conflict of Medieval Ethiopia," *Symposium Leo Frobenius: Perspectives of Contemporary African studies* (1974), 266-281.

41 Ba□r□y, 1954, 111.

42 I. Boavida, H. Pennec and M. J. Ramos, eds., 2011, vol. 2, 172.

by the panic that gripped the royal circle by their inability to thwart the movement. The fall of several territories to the expanding Oromo forced the royal circle to retreat to the Lake Tana region by the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Knowledge produced in this context should be approached by situating the information within the wider historical processes unfolding at the time.

As the movements lost their more destructive element due to gradual integration, the representation of the people in the literature underwent a drastic shift – one that many scholars have either overlooked or, more commonly, been reluctant to accept. Within less than fifty years after the Oromo left their homeland somewhere in southern Ethiopia,<sup>44</sup> they began to be portrayed in the chronicles as “defenders of the Ethiopian Christian kingdom”.<sup>45</sup> Oromo presence as military units in the court and provinces,<sup>46</sup> and Oromo loyalists of the royalty became accepted references in the literature, which, at the beginning, was hostile to anything Oromo.

The positive status of the Oromo, which had gained footing in the chronicles, showed signs of shifting back to a negative portrayal as the Oromo, after accepting or resisting integration, grew into a power to be reckoned with. Especially after the rise of influential Oromo landlords and warlords at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the political force that dominated knowledge production began to characterize the Oromo factions from Damot, Gojjam, and Wollo as adversaries, viewing their presence as a threat to the established order.<sup>47</sup>

A similar narrative was echoed in the 1770s by James Bruce, who provided a firsthand account of the Oromo presence in the Gondarine court.<sup>48</sup> The Scot, whose relation with Empress Mintewab seems to have elevated him to an advisory position within the court, was unable to digest the changing ethnic composition of political factions unfolding in the court. The emergence of multi-ethnic political elites was an aberration to the status quo; yet it had been fermenting in the provinces, where regional dynasties were consolidating their grip on power.<sup>49</sup> As such, the Oromo factions, being among the most powerful groups, were described by the royal elites as enemies in the royal chronicles and contemporary accounts. This sentiment appears to have persisted until the royal court fell into the hands of regional powers, at which point the

43 About the first royal seat in the region of Lake Tana, see the chronicle of Emperor Sarsa Dengil, Carlo Conti Rossini, ed./trans., 1962, 137.

44 Contestation on the origin of the movements appears concomitantly with the origin of the people, see Ferenc Aleksander, “Myths and Traditions Concerning the Origin of the Oromo people,” *Africana Bulletin*, 34 (1988), 59-65; Alessandro Triulzi, “Oromo Traditions of Origin,” in *Etudes ethiopiennes*, vol. 1: *Actes de la X conference internationale des etudes ethiopiennes*, Paris, 24–28 aout 1988, ed. Claude Lepage (Paris, 1994), 593–601.

45 The first use of this friendly description of the Oromo is in the chronicle of Emperor Sarsa Dengil: Carlo Conti Rossini, ed./trans., 1962, 129.

46 *Ibid.*, 69; Oromo squadrons of Susenyos are well described in his chronicle, Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira, trans., 1892 (text).

47 Ignazio Guidi, ed./trans., *Annales Regum Iyasu II*....., 1912.

48 James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773*, Vol. V (Edinburgh: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1792), 212-213.

49 A propos the triumph of region-based power over the monarchy that followed the assassination of Iyasu I in 1706, see Merid Wolde Aregay, “Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508- 1708, With Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences,” PhD Dissertation, (SOAS, University of London, 1971, 563-601.

writing of official court history weakened. Thus, any analysis of the portrayal of the Oromo in Ge'ez sources must consider the complex factors that influenced the writing of history, without resorting to undue moral judgment regarding the negative representation of the people in the sources.

Another dimension that deserves attention is the politics of exclusion, which systematically convinced the Oromo elite that they were excluded from the pages of history. This exclusion was perpetuated by Oromo intellectuals who do not share the broader historical narrative of the Oromo within the Ethiopian state, as well as by non-Oromo elites who support this narrative, often employing the dismissive rhetoric, "as you said correctly, you are not in the records". The criticism against the Ge'ez sources, which, as discussed, trace the Oromo presence as far back as the fifteenth century, is part of a larger political project focused on Oromo particularism. This approach ultimately undermines the Oromo's rightful place in the broader historical narrative, emphasizing a separatist view at the expense of integrating the Oromo into the shared history of Ethiopia.

The extensive body of literature by pan-Oromo scholars on the uniqueness of the Oromo identity and role has led many readers to believe that the Oromo were denied their rightful place in the historical records. By wrongly situating the Oromo in a historical vacuum of their own making, these scholars inadvertently severed the threads of connection the Oromo shared with broader historical narratives, thereby denying them a shared past. A nuanced analysis of historiographical marginalization and oppression was then superimposed onto an already constructed narrative of uniqueness. Given the considerable effort invested in this project, it is not surprising that stories of uniqueness have flourished, overshadowing narratives of a shared past, whether one marked by conflict or peace.

Just as the injustice perpetuated by Oromo ethno-nationalists has shaped the narrative, scholars from the non-Oromo camp also strip the Oromo of their place in the records through their politics of suppressing oral sources. Given the rich oral tradition the Oromo possess, this deliberate move was particularly damaging, especially when it came from groups that regard archival materials as sacred and more reliable, positioning themselves as the custodians of historical truth.

## **Towards a Genuine Historiographical Representation**

Any genuine attempt to reduce the historiographical contestations surrounding the sources of Ethiopian history must embrace a new integrative approach that includes various genres of sources. This approach may require so-called pan-Ethiopian writers to reconsider their dogmatic reliance solely on written sources and acknowledge the significance of oral traditions. Similarly, pan-Oromo scholars should not only abandon their unfounded criticism of Ge'ez sources but also recognize their value, alongside the oral sources they highly regard. Such a shift has the potential to pave the way for an alternative approach – one that integrates Ge'ez/Amharic sources with oral traditions, fostering professional efforts toward an inclusive

history. Attempts of applying Ge'ez sources in reconstructing Oromo history should be acknowledged.<sup>50</sup>

The discussion of source inclusivity naturally extends to a broader examination of narratives and historiographical perspectives. In this context, focusing on shared histories, interactions, and integrations will provide a pathway toward developing inclusive genres of sources. The complexity of human experiences in Ethiopian history demands that attention be given to diverse sources of information, reflecting the various methods by which people preserve their histories. Therefore, the effort to write a composite history – one that incorporates individual experiences and challenges the orthodoxies of a mechanically aggregated history – should be actively pursued.<sup>51</sup> This can be extended to a broader geographical context, such as the Horn of Africa, where population movements, interactions, and integration have consistently shaped the region's historical trajectory.<sup>52</sup>

Since such recommendations are complex and require further refinement for clarity, academic rigor in historical writing must be maintained to address and rectify existing biases, distortions, prejudices, fabrications, and contradictions in historical research. These issues often arise from the avoidance of pluralistic source genres and the multiplicity of interpretations that follow.

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50 Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom.....*, 2015; Awegichew Amare, *The Imperial Tradition.....*, 2023.

51 Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); Bahru Zewde, *Interdependence and Interactions*.

52 Christopher Clapham, "Rewriting Ethiopian History," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, XVIII (2002), 37-54.

# The Tulama Oromo in National and Oromo-Centric Discourses

*Tsegaye Zeleke Tuffa*

“We have not found an accurate recorded history, and whatever has been written is full of material that is not pertinent to the laws and customs of the Oromo.”<sup>1</sup>

## **An Overview of the Tulama Oromo**

In this paper, an attempt is made to explore how one of the major Oromo subgroups, known as the Tulama or Shawan Oromo, have been portrayed in national and Oromo-centric historiography.<sup>2</sup> The Tulama Oromo, along with the Macha, Gujji, and Southern Borana, constitute the Borana confederacy of the Oromo of Ethiopia. The Borana moiety is one of the two confederacies of the Oromo nation, with the second confederacy known as the Barentu. It is believed that the Borana are found in the western part of the areas settled by the Oromo, while the Barentu are said to have inhabited the eastern part of the Oromo territory.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, tradition indicates that the Tulama also constitute one of the five paired subgroups that make up the Oromo. These paired moieties are the Raayyaa/Azaboo, Macha/Tulama, Sabboo/Goonaa, Siikkoo/Mandoo, and Ituu/Humbaana.<sup>4</sup>

The Tulama, in turn, has been divided into three major sub-groups: Jiillee, Bacho, and Dachi. The Jiillee occupied the regions to the south around Lake Zway, the Maqi River,<sup>5</sup> and the Wanji

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1        Bairu Tafla, ed, *Asma Gyorgis and His Works: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Šawā* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden GMBH, 1987), 79.

2        The terms Tulama and Shawan Oromo are often used interchangeably, but the latter is broader and includes non-Tulama Oromo who are found in the western and southwestern part of the former province of Shawa

3        C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, eds and trans, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), 112; Bairu Tafla, *Asma Gyorgis and His works*, 137; Tesema Ta'a, “The Oromo of Wollega: A Historical Survey to 1910,” MA Thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 1980), 1-2; Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia, A History 1570-1860*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991m 18; Merid Wolde Aregay, “Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508-1708, With Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and Their Consequences,” PhD Dissertation (University of London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1971), 157-158. Negaso Gidada, *History of the Sayyoo Oromo of Southwestern Wallaga, Ethiopia from about 1730-1886* (Addis Ababa, 2001), ix. In Oromiffa, Borana is Borooa'naa and Barentu is Beriianaa, i.e. western and eastern Oromo respectively.

4        Desta Dessalegn, “Tulama Oromo Prose Narratives: Study in Functions,” *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Oromo studies* (Jimma, 21-22 May 2016), 175; Dessalegn Negeri, “Guddifacha Practice as Child Problem Intervention in Oromo society: The case of Ada'a Liban District,” MA Thesis (AAU, 2006), 10.

5        Bizuwork Zewde, “The Jiillee Community and the Wonji Sugar Factory”, BA thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 1985), iii, 1-2; Informants: Dumeecha Tulluu, Dame Gudata, Gada Tola and Mabrie Gofie.

area, as well as the northern parts of Yefat province.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this subgroup mainly inhabited the eastern section of Tulama's abode, which stretched from Lake Zway in the southeast to Yefat in the northeast, with some apparent discontinuities.<sup>7</sup>

Another major subgroup of the Tulama is known as Bachoo, which primarily settled in the western parts of the Tulama territory. This includes the eponymous district in southwestern Shawa, Meettaa in the center, and the Borana province of Wallo in the extreme north. In other words, the following current districts have been inhabited by the Bachoo subgroup of Tulama: Bachoo, Iluu, Dawoo, Dandii, Sabbataa, Hawaas, Meettaa, Ada'aa Bargaa, Jalduu, Gendabarat, Kuyyuu, Hidhabuu Abootee, Darraa, as well as the Borana sub-province of Wallo, which is further divided into Borana, Waggiddi, and Kalala.<sup>8</sup> However, we must bear in mind that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to clearly demarcate the boundaries of the Tulama (particularly the Bachoo group) and the Macha, as they have settled intermingling in districts like Dandi, Dawoo, Jalduu, and Gendabrat, among others. Yet, it is traditionally believed that the source of the Awash River, near the modern small town of Ginchi, is considered the place that divides the Tulama abode from their Macha brethren, who inhabited the area stretching west up to the Ethio-Sudanese border.<sup>9</sup>

The last major Tulama group is the Dachi, who were traditionally considered the rulers of Tulama. The Dachi settled in a vast territory that extends from Soddo in the south, where they mingled with the Bachoo, to Darraa and Boraana in the north. The Dachi bordered by the Bachoo in the west, and by the Jiillee, Arsii, and Karrayyuu in the east. Demarcating the boundary between the Shawan Amhara and the Tulama is challenging and is a conundrum that students of medieval and modern Ethiopian history should grapple with. The Oromo and Amhara lived side by side in northern Shawa, including the Shawan sub-province of Manz, as well as areas like Yifat, Tagulat, Bulga, Menjar, and Ensarro, among others.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding the etymological origin of the term "Tulama", Abba Bahrey, a sixteenth-century Ethiopian writer, confirms that the name Tulama was given to this Oromo subgroup because it has numerous *gosa*.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, oral tradition collected from Oromo elders indicates that the term Tulama is derived from the Oromo root word "tuulaa", which is almost equivalent to the

6 Ahmed Hassen Omer, "Aspects of the History of Efrata Jiillee Warada (Shoa Region) with Particular Reference to Twentieth century", BA thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 1987), 6-7.

7 Tsegaye Zeleke, "The Oromo of Salaalee, A History ca. 1840s-1936," MA Thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2002), 14.

8 Odd Eirik Arnesen "The Becoming of Place: A Tulama Oromo Region in North Shoa," in J. Hultin and Triulizi, eds., *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquires* (Uppsala, 1996), 218, 222-23; Wakene Frew, "The Family of Ras Darge and the Church in Salale 1870-1941," BA thesis (Haile Sellassie I University: Department of History, 1973), 23-24; Teferi Abate, "Land, Capital and Labour in the Social Organization of Peasants: A Study of Village Level Dynamics in South-Western Wallo, 1974-1993," MA thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of Social Anthropology, 1993), 21-22; Tsegaye "The Oromo of Salaalee," 14; Yemiamrew Jorgi, "Historical Ethnography of Wallo-Borena: Identity, Changes and Continuities" PhD dissertation (Addis Ababa University: Department of Social Anthropology, 2017), 3.

9 Tsegaye "The Oromo of Salaalee", 14.

10 Ibid., 15

11 Beckingham and Huntingford, 112.

English term “heap”. This further supports the idea of numerous *gosa* within this Oromo major subgroup.<sup>12</sup> This makes the Tulama arguably one of the most diverse subgroups of the Oromo.

## The Oromo in National Historiography

In recent decades, Ethiopian historiography has been marked by discordant narratives between national and ethno-nationalist historiography. Tim Carmichael aptly summarises this by stating that the situation has “reduced the study of Ethiopian history to simplistic binary analyses of nation building versus domination and repression.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, John Sorenson states that: “The Horn of Africa is the site for a clash of nationalist struggles that offer competing narratives of the past and of contemporary forms of identity, imaging Ethiopia in sharply contrasting ways.”<sup>14</sup>

Most of Ethiopia’s written history has focused on the national and imperial scale, with little attention given to the local level, where the social effects of historical change actually occur.<sup>15</sup> One of the pitfalls of the official version of history is the fact that it neglects the “collective history and memory from which a people find their stories and voices to tell who they are.”<sup>16</sup> Thus regional histories should be the building blocks of that master narrative. “The state’s history as a meta-narrative claims totality; and everything else is silently subsumed under its totalized discourse. It excludes marginalized populations, ethnic and religious polities,” writes Pietro Toggia. “As much as the state attempts to centralize every outlying domain around its power core, it simultaneously exteriorizes them through state discourses.”<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, one of the acclaimed scholars of Ethiopian politics, Christopher Clapham, corroborates that the conventional history of Ethiopia is far more than just the history of a state.

It is also the history of a “great tradition”, comparable to that of other ancient civilizations, such as Persia and China.<sup>18</sup>

Ethiopian history also suffers from another imbalance. Sorenson, for instance, writes:

Until recently, most European and North American historians, linguists and anthropologists who have studied Ethiopian society have focused on the highland regions, especially on the culture of the Amharas and the Tigrayans, and in doing so have relied on the available written sources produced by literate Ethiopians

12 Tsegaye “The Oromo of Salaalee, 9.

13 Tim Carmichael, “Approaching Ethiopian History: Addis Ababa and Local Governance in Harar, c. 1900-1950” PhD Dissertation (Michigan State University, 2001), 2.

14 John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 5.

15 James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 4.

16 Mai Palmberg, *National Identity and Democracy in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic African Institute, Human Sciences Research Council and Mayibuye Centre at the University of Western Cape, 1999), 30.

17 Pietro Toggia, “History writing as a state ideological project in Ethiopia”, *African Identities*, Vol. 6, Issue 4 (2008), 319-343.

18 Christopher Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History,” *Annales d’Ethiopie*, Vol. 18 (année 2002), 39.

while neglecting the oral traditions of groups such as the Oromo. This approach to Ethiopian history and culture has meant that Western scholarship accepted and embellished versions of the past and neglected others. Many Western scholars uncritically adopted the discursive constructions of local hegemonic forces, reproducing (and strengthening) a narrative that valorizes an ancient, centralized state that formed the basis of a Greater Ethiopia, under the leadership of the elites of northern highlands of Abyssinia, particularly those identified with the Amhara and the Tigrayan ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup>

Christopher Clapham maintains that the “Amharas and Tigrayans have a history, whereas other peoples have only anthropology, at best a kind of sub-national sub-history that eventually gets subsumed within the national epic.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly Mekuria Bulcha argues that one of the mistakes that the rulers of multinational states frequently make is espousing the history of the dominant group as the history of the nation and demeaning the subdued groups into history-less peoples.<sup>21</sup>

Bahru Zewde also shares the views held by the scholars, but he modified the above propositions by stating that, formerly, the non-literate societies of the southern half of the country were characterized as societies who did not have history because of the dearth of written sources. However, a critical use of oral information enabled scholars to reconstruct the history/ies of these communities and hence liberated Ethiopian historiography from being skewed towards the history of northern Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup>

Christopher Clapham has witnessed the unfolding of the counter-position to what he dubbed the “Great Tradition” in the shape of “Oromo Studies”, which was heralded by the publication of Mohammed Hassen’s *The Oromo of Ethiopia* in 1990 and further reinforced by the launch of the *Journal of Oromo Studies*, “dedicated to the idea of Oromo as something distinct from Ethiopia”. He further argues that these works focused on some Oromo subgroups and ignored others<sup>23</sup> and epitomized the project of national construction through selective use of history.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Clapham, Brian Yates indicates that both Semitists and Oromo-centric scholarship accentuated the difference between the Semitic-speaking Amhara and the Cushitic-speaking Oromo of Ethiopia and the Horn. He further argues that both camps agree on the fact that speakers of the Ethio-Semitic languages of the Horn originated from the Middle Eastern stock and secondly that the Amhara and the Oromo were perpetual rivals.<sup>25</sup>

19 John Sorenson, “Ethiopian Discourse and Oromo Nationalism,” in Asafa Jalata, ed., *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998), 230.

20 Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History”, 40.

21 Mekuria Bulcha, *Contours of the Emergent and Ancient Oromo Nation: Dilemmas in the Ethiopian Politics of State and Nation Building* (Cape Town: Centre for the Advanced Studies of African Society, 2011), 40.

22 Bahru Zewde, “A Century of Ethiopian Historiography”, *Society, State and History: Selected Essays* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2008), 26.

23 He indicates that Mohammed Hassen ignored the Shawan, Harar, Wollega and Wallo Oromo among others. He further reiterates that Baxter et al’s *Being and Becoming Oromo* on the other hand gave much emphasis to the Borana Oromo and ignored others.

24 Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History”, 43-44.

25 Brian J. Yates, “Invisible Actors: The Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia (1855-1913),” PhD Dissertation (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 8.

On the other hand, Ezekiel claims that Oromo-centric scholars persistently devoted their time and energy to uncover the condition of the Oromo under the Ethiopian Empire and produced a “new Oromo narrative and charted a new course for Oromo studies.” This led to what he calls an “intellectual break” that became their hallmark, characterizing “Menilek’s conquests of Oromo land as a process by which Ethiopia’s colonial order had been imposed on independent Oromo states and communities.” He further asserts that these scholars were “intellectual rebels, scholar activists, who were clearly well positioned to articulate the views of millions of Oromos in Ethiopia whose identity and voice were destroyed”.<sup>26</sup>

Yates states that both leading Semitist and Oromo-centric historiographies have overlooked the northern Oromo groups to which apparently the Tulama Oromo belong.<sup>27</sup> Tesema Ta’a agrees with Yates, stating that, although historians and anthropologists have made efforts to reconstruct the history of the Tulama Oromo, there are still unaddressed aspects.<sup>28</sup> Hence, one of the most important regions in modern Ethiopia whose history is by and large ignored or only referred to tangentially is the area inhabited by the Tulama Oromo which is the major concern of this paper.<sup>29</sup>

The Semitists, also known as Ethiopianists, have been oblivious to the roles and/or contributions of Oromo to the Ethiopian state. These meta-narratives are exclusively devoted to the history/ies of the Amhara, Tigre and Agaw. As Yates wrote, “these meta-narratives produced a lens that is blind to the contributions of non- Abyssinians to the Ethiopian State.”<sup>30</sup> No one is more articulate on this issue than Mohammed Hassen, one of the leading Oromo historians. He claims: “The history, way of life, political and religious institutions, and even the name of the Oromo is in large part ignored in Ethiopian historiography.”<sup>31</sup>

Like Sorenson’s exposition, Mohammed further explains that the pervasive disregard for Oromo history is partly due to the lack of written sources on the Oromo, as they were an oral society like most sub-Saharan African societies. As a result, scholars often relied solely on written records, which were the views of Christian monks and court chroniclers that lacked objectivity in most cases.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, Bairu Tafla points out that the fundamental reason Ethiopian writers chose to remain silent on the history of the Oromo was not due to lack of sources or ignorance

26 Ezekiel Gebissa, *Contested Terrain: Essays on Oromo Studies, Ethiopianist Discourse, and Politically Engaged Scholarship* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 2009), 7-8.

27 Ibid., ii, 8.

28 Tesema Ta’a, “The Place of the Oromo in Ethiopian History: 2003 OSA Conference Keynote Address,” *Journal of Oromo Studies*, vol. 11, Nos. 1 and 2, 4.

29 Yates, “Invisible Actors”, 2-14. Yates classifies these scholars as Semitist (Ethiopianist), Oromo-centred and Oromo-centric scholarship.

30 Brian J. Yates, *The Other Abyssinian: The Northern Oromo and the creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1913* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2020), 3.

31 Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia 1300-1700* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2015), 1.

32 Ibid.

about the events. He believes the problem lay in “intense prejudice deeply rooted in Amhara and Tigray society, a prejudice which, to the disadvantage of science and art, undermined the objective recording of the history of the antagonist, whoever he might be.”<sup>33</sup>

In this regard, Sandra Shell argues that Richard Pankhurst, whose knowledge of the written sources on Ethiopia is unparalleled and whose works remain indispensable sources for any study of Ethiopian history, largely bypassed the Oromo people.<sup>34</sup> Others portrayed the Oromo negatively and even asserted that the Oromo “brought the reign of darkness on the Christian Kingdom.” This, for instance, is the view of Edward Ullendorff, who explicitly stated that: “The Galla<sup>35</sup> [Oromo] had little to contribute to the Semitised civilization of Ethiopia.”<sup>36</sup> In his recently published monograph, Mekuria Bulcha contends that the salient feature of the Ethiopianist historical thesis about the Oromo is that they had overrun a civilized state and had wrecked and virtually destroyed it.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Markakis, in line with what is known as the “Great Tradition”, also depicted the sixteenth century Oromo expansion “as a cataclysmic event that blighted Abyssinian society and darkened its cultural horizon.”<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Mohammed Hassen indicates that this perspective portrays the Oromo as adversaries of both the Amhara and the Christian Kingdom. The antipathy between the Amhara and the Oromo has been exacerbated by religious and cultural differences, thus underlining the negative image of the Oromo in Ethiopian historiography. He summed up his argument by stating: “... since the sixteenth century, a fundamental theme in the literature of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia was the confrontation between the Amhara and the Oromo.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Richard Reid writes: “There can be few peoples in African history who have been as misunderstood, and indeed as misrepresented, as the Oromo. They have been, arguably, even more demonized by Ethiopian chroniclers of various hues and over a longer time frame than the Somali, historically the other great rival ‘bloc’ confronting the Amhara in northeast Africa.”<sup>40</sup>

What we have seen so far is reminiscent of Samuel Huntington’s famous phrase: “Two Worlds: Us and Them.” Huntington further contends that: The tendency to think in terms of two worlds recurs throughout human history. People are always tempted to divide people into us and them, the in-group and the other, our civilization and those barbarians. Scholars have analyzed the world in terms of the Orient and the Occident, North and South, center and periphery.<sup>41</sup>

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33 Bairu, *Asma Gyorgis and His Works*, 48.

34 Sandra Carolyn Teresa Rowoldt Shell, “From slavery to freedom: the Oromo slave children of Lovedale, Prosopography and profiles,” PhD Thesis (University of Cape Town: Historical Studies, 2013), 5.

35 In earlier literature, the Oromo were identified by the pejorative term “Galla”. This term is used by outsiders; as Mohammed Hassen explains, “the Oromo did not and do not call themselves ‘Galla’ and resist being so called.” See Mohammed, *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 2-4, for further information on this issue.

36 Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 31; See also W.C Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, Vol III (London: Longman, 1844), 72-73. He was among the first Europeans who portrayed the Oromo as the people who “brought darkness and ignorance in their train”.

37 Bulcha, *Contours of the Emergent and Ancient Oromo Nation*, 67-68.

38 Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Woodbridge: Jame Currey, 2011), 39.

39 Mohammed, *The Oromo & the Christian Kingdom*, 2.

40 Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since c.1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

41 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 32.

Perhaps the beginning of the identification of the Oromo as “uncivilized barbarians” by Ethiopian and European writers can be traced back to the time of the dramatic Oromo population movement. This view was first expressed by the illustrious sixteenth-century Ethiopian monk, Abba Bahrey, who explained why he wrote a history of the Oromo: “I have begun to write the history of the [Oromo] to make known the number of their tribes, their readiness to kill people, and the brutality of their manners.”<sup>42</sup> There is no doubt that Bahrey was hyperbolic about the number of Oromo subgroups and their ferocity, while also highlighting the weaknesses of the Christian kingdom in relation to the Oromo. According to Richard Reid, Bahrey’s words “created images that endured,”<sup>43</sup> leading Europeans, including Bahrey’s contemporaries, to characterize the Oromo in a similar manner.<sup>44</sup>

Among European writers, W.C. Harris, who headed the British diplomatic mission to Shawa in the first half of the nineteenth century, echoed the views of traditional Ethiopian writers and chroniclers. Harris compared the Oromo to the so-called “Barbaric Germanic tribes” who contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire. He writes: “Like the barbarous nations who were made the weapons of Divine chastisement upon the corrupted empire of Rome, they [the Oromo] also brought darkness and ignorance in their train.”<sup>45</sup>

However, the contemporary British traveler, C. T. Beke, offered a different perspective from Harris’s biased understanding of Oromo history. He writes,

A nation which is... found to occupy, even if not exclusively, regions extending sixteen degrees (about 1000 miles), must naturally be deserving of the consideration of scholars in numerous points of view. Yet little is known of the [Oromo] except their language, and even with this we have become acquainted only during the last few years through the labors of Dr. Krapf and Dr. Tutschek, of their origin and history we know really nothing positive. And unfortunately, the only sources we may hope to derive information on these subjects are the native and Abyssinian traditions.<sup>46</sup>

Although they did not denounce overtly the Oromo as barbarian who brought darkness and backwardness to the Christian kingdom, the first generation of professional Ethiopian historians who were based at the Department of History of Addis Ababa University, which has been dubbed as “...the institutional home of Ethiopian historiography”,<sup>47</sup> opted to remain silent about the history of the Oromo, with the exception of Merid Wolde Aregay.<sup>48</sup> Even in the case

42 Abba Bahrey, “History of the Galla” in Beckingham and Huntigford (trans and eds), *Some Records of Ethiopia*, 111; See also Getachew Haile, *Ya Abba Bahrey Dersetoch: Oromon kemimeleketu Leloch Senedoch Gara (Abba Bahrey’s Essays along with other Documents Related to the Oromo)* (Minnesota, 2002), 195; Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 234.

43 Reid, “Frontiers of Violence,” 31.

44 See M. de Almeida, “The History of High Ethiopia or Abbasia”, in Beckingham and Huntigford (trans & eds), *Some Records of Ethiopia*; James Bruce, *Travels to discover the source of the Nile, in the years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773* (Edinburgh: G.G.J and J. Robinson, 1790), vol. II, 19; vol. III (1805), 54, where he describes the Oromo as “a barbarous and stranger nation hostile to the Abyssinians”; See also Yates’ “Invisible Actors”, 40- 41

45 W.C. Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia* (London: Longman, 1844), vol.III, 72-73; See also Teshale Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1995),16-17, where he writes that the Oromo were the single most important group characterized as “pagan barbarian par excellence”; Yates, “Invisible Actors”, 1.

46 Charles T. Beke, “On the Origins of the Gallas” From the Report of the British Association for the Advancement of science and for 1847”, *Miscellanea I* (ADD 30255, Order 11123 British Museum Manuscript), 4.

47 Crummey, “Society, State and Nationality,” 105.

48 Merid, “Southern Ethiopia,” 2-3. Actually, we do have many BA and MA theses that were written by students of the Department under the supervision of these eminent scholars, even if most of these theses remain unpublished.

of Merid's thesis, the purpose was not to uncover the history of the Oromo. Rather, it was to explain how conflicts between the Christian monarch and the nobility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries impacted on the kingdom's political stability, making it vulnerable to the Oromo movement.<sup>49</sup>

Bahru Zewde, a prolific writer who is regarded as the doyen of Ethiopian historians, claims that senior members of the department had "invested so much on the study of the south." However, he also cautioned against the excesses committed in the name of rectifying past historiographical injustice. He concluded his critique of Oromo-centric historiography by writing: "In view of the fact that the same [Eritrean] line of inventing history is being followed by some members of the Oromo nationalist camp, it is I think incumbent on historians to set the record straight before another tragedy is unleashed in the name of history on this hapless country of ours."<sup>50</sup>

From Bahru's assertion, we may discern that Ethiopian scholars have not been able to produce scholarly work that refutes the claims of Oromo-centric scholars. Instead, they have continued to distance themselves from studying Oromo culture and history. This indicates that Ethiopian scholars are not yet prepared to confront the complete history of modern Ethiopia, despite accusing ethno-nationalist historians of selectively reconstructing the past. This is a significant omission on the part of Ethiopian scholars. It is the duty of professional historians to grapple equally with the negativities that took place in the past. Neglecting the past cannot be a solution since it still haunts us.

According to Richard Reid, the coming out of age of Oromo-centric scholarship which made the Oromo people the subject, rather than the object, of history, which began in earnest in the post-1991 period,<sup>51</sup> encountered challenges not only from the die-hard Semiticist scholars but also from moderate Ethiopianist scholars.<sup>52</sup> Ezekiel further reiterates that, according to the Ethiopianist scholars, conducting research on the history of the Oromo was tolerable only if it aligns with Ethiopian studies; otherwise it "was dismissed as intellectually deficient and scholars who dared to produce such a study were derided, besmirched, and ostracized."<sup>53</sup> Similarly Triulizi maintains that:

As the modern writing of the country's history was conducted at a time of intense state-building and nationalist convictions throughout the African

49 Merid, "Southern Ethiopia," 2-3; Donald Crummey, "Society, State and Nationality in the Recent Historiography of Ethiopia", *Journal of African History*, 31 (1990), 104.

50 Bahru, "*A Century of Ethiopian Historiography*", 34.

51 See Reid, "Frontiers of Violence," 18, where he maintains that the Oromo began to be studied after the coming to power of the EPRDF regime, what he calls the "Era of Ethnic Federalism". Some of the well-known works that were published in the 1990s are: Mohammed, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*; Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*; P. T.

52 See also Ezekiel, "Contested Terrain", 6.

53 Ibid, 5.

continent, the Ethiopian history which surfaced then was overall state-centered and institutional in character. It tended to extol the centralizing and unitary role of Ethiopian monarchs and concentrated on their innovative and modernizing role within Ethiopian Society.<sup>54</sup>

## The Tulama Oromo in Oromo-centric discourse

Like Ethiopianist historians, the first generation of Oromo professional historians did not give much emphasis to the history of the Tulama Oromo. However, what sets them apart from the former group is that, as one would expect from their name, they did not entirely overlook the reconstruction of Oromo history. Most of them dedicated their time to reconstructing the history of the Oromo, particularly the Macha Oromo. It is fascinating that almost all of them earned their terminal degrees in the history of the Macha Oromo.<sup>55</sup> In this regard, Tesema indicates that the history of the Macha Oromo is relatively well-studied compared to other Oromo subgroups.<sup>56</sup>

The history of the Tulama Oromo is not a popular subject among the Oromo-centric scholars for the following reasons. First, some of the first generation of Oromo historians have commenced conducting research on the history of Macha Oromo subgroups starting from their BA theses and they continued conducting research with the same geographical focus up to their terminal degrees, and even after for understandable reasons.<sup>57</sup> Most of these works are unpublished theses and also, they “share a common methodology of oral history which they deploy to the enrichment of Ethiopian historiography by extending it far beyond the Abyssinian core.”<sup>58</sup> Secondly, some Oromo scholars might have distanced themselves from reconstructing a history of the Tulama and/or the Shawan Oromo because they might have considered the Tulama as loyal servants of the Shawan Kingdom because individuals like *Ras Gobana Dachi*, the foremost general of Emperor Menilek II (1889-1913) and *Fitawrari Habte Gyoris Dinagdee*, minister of war from 1907-1926 and the leader of the conservative camp, and *Dajjazach Baalchaa Safoo* (Abbaa Nafsoo), who all played a prominent role in the creation of Modern Ethiopia, belong to the Tulama and/or the Shawan Oromo. Since some of them argue that, because of the Shawan kingdom’s territorial expansion, a “dependent colonial state” was created in Northeast Africa, they would not be inclined to treat the history of the people whose elite participated in that

54 Alessandro Triulzi “Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography” in Wendy James et al (eds), *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 277. The best examples for such kinds of works are Merid, “Southern Ethiopia,”; Sergrew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1972); Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527* (Oxford, 1972); Zewde Gebre Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Bairu Tafla, *A Chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889)*. (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1977).

55 Tesema Ta’a, “The Political Economy of Western Central Ethiopia: From the Mid-Sixteenth to Early Twentieth Century,” PhD Dissertation (Michigan State University, 1986); Mohammed Hassan, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*; Negasso Gidada, “History of the Sayyoo Oromo of South-Western Wallaga, Ethiopia from about 1730-1886,” PhD Dissertation (Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, 1984).

56 Tesema, “The Place of the Oromo in Ethiopian History,” 4.

57 The best examples are Tesema Ta’a, Negaso Gidada and Daniel Ayana, who extensively conducted their research on the history of the Macha Oromo in general and the Wallaga area in particular; Abas Haji on the history of Arsi Oromo; Mohammed Hassen, Guluma Gameda and Tekalign Woldemariam on the Gibe region.

58 Crummey, “Society, State,” 115.

process. That is why they opted to give little attention to the reconstruction of their history.<sup>59</sup> This issue has been clearly recognized by one of the Oromo-centric scholars, Mekuria Bulcha, who contends that: “Ironically, the Tulama are often seen by others as collaborators who helped Menilek in his conquest of the South.”<sup>60</sup>

Yet we do have certain scholarly works on the history of the Tulama Oromo, even if they are the exception rather than the rule. The first one worth mentioning in this regard is the recently completed PhD dissertation of Brian James Yates. He claims that what he attempted to do was to redress the imbalance in Oromo studies, and the dissertation is a comprehensive study of the role of key Oromo actors in the creation of modern Ethiopia.<sup>61</sup> Apparently, Yates’ dissertation mainly focuses on the roles of some Oromo notables or, to borrow his terms, “key Oromo actors” or “invisible actors” in the creation of modern Ethiopia.

Another exception is the book by Svein Ege on the sociopolitical history of the Kingdom of Shawa, focusing on the agrarian class relations around 1840 and in which he devoted a chapter to the socio-cultural history of the Oromo.<sup>62</sup> It is one of the most important and comprehensive treatment of the interaction between the Shawa kingdom and the Tulama.

Another scholarly work that deserves mentioning in this vein is Tekalign Wolde Mariam’s PhD dissertation, which meticulously uncovered a history of land tenure, agriculture and food supply to Addis Ababa by the Bachoo Oromo, one of the Tulama subgroups,<sup>63</sup> who inhabited the contemporary Bachoo district.<sup>64</sup> Another PhD thesis on the region under study is the one produced by Dechasa Abebe, who attempts to explore how the peasants of north Shawa have been steadily impoverished and the region transformed from the political power base of the Nagasi dynasty to the backwaters of modern Ethiopia.<sup>65</sup>

In his MA and PhD theses, Awigechew Amare meticulously documents the roles of the Oromo elites in general, and the northern Oromo in particular, in the Ethiopian empire during medieval times. He attempts to push back the presence of the Oromo within the boundaries of the Christian kingdom and their interaction and integration with the population of the Christian Kingdom beyond the eventful sixteenth century, which was previously considered to mark the beginning of interaction and integration between the Oromo and the people of the Christian kingdom, particularly the Amhara.<sup>66</sup>

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59 Yates, 8, similarly argues that Oromo-centric scholars sidelined the northern Oromo because the role they played in the creation of modern Ethiopia erases the immutable differences between Oromo and Amhara.

60 Mekuria, *Contours of the Emergent and Ancient Oromo Nation*, 327.

61 Brian Yates, “Invisible Actors.”

62 Svein Ege, *Class, State and Power in Africa: A Case of the Kingdom of Shawa (Ethiopia) about 1840* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996). Ege, for instance, states that there was no extensive study of the Oromo during the period under consideration, p. 66.

63 As indicated above, the Bachoo were one of the three subgroups of the Tulama Oromo, but Tekalign’s dissertation is based on the Bachoo Oromo who inhabited the eponymous district found in what is now called Southwest Shawa Zone. Hence most of the Bachoo Oromo were not included in the study.

64 Tekalign Wolde Mariam, “A City and its Hinterlands: The Political Economy of Land Tenure, Agriculture and Food Supply for Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 1887-1974,” Ph.D. dissertation (Boston University, 1995).

65 Dechasa Abebe, “A Socio-Economic History of North Shāwa, Ethiopia (1880s-1935),” D. Litt et. Phil (UNISA, 2015).

66 Awigechew Amare, “Oromo Elites in Post-Medieval Christian Kingdom, 1520- 1769,” MA thesis (Debre Berhan University, 2014); Idem, “The Imperial Tradition of the Ethiopian State and the Oromo Factor, XIV-XVIII Centuries,” PhD dissertation (AAU: Department of History, 2021).

We have some other enlightening MA and PhD theses focusing on the history of certain subgroups of the Tulama people, as well as the Tulama as a whole. Tsegaye Zeleke produced an MA thesis on the history of the Salale, and a PhD dissertation on the relationship between the Tulama and the Kingdom of Shawa. The latter delves into the dynamic and perplexing relations between the Kingdom of Shawa and the Tulama in central Ethiopia from ca. 1700 to the 1880s.<sup>67</sup>

Another thesis worth mentioning is Sisay Megersa's MA thesis, which examines the socio-economic and cultural interaction of the Amhara and Oromo in Salale from 1941 to 2000.<sup>68</sup> Biratu Kenei also produced an MA thesis, in which he attempts to unravel the history of the Oromo in and around Finfinnee (Addis Ababa).<sup>69</sup> He also produced a PhD dissertation on the military and political history of General Taddesse Birru, who played a crucial role in the Matcha-Tulama Self-Help Association. Taddesse is often regarded by Oromo nationalists as the antithesis of Ras Gobana Dache. In other words, Gobana has been criticized for his "collaboration" with the Shawan Kingdom, while Taddesse is praised for his defiance of the imperial and military regimes and is considered a martyr. Both belong to the Tulama Oromo and embody the roles that the Tulama Oromo have played in the creation of modern Ethiopia on the one hand, and the burgeoning Oromo nationalism on the other.<sup>70</sup>

Apart from scholarly works listed above, we have a large number of reports, diaries, journals, letters, published articles and books written by European travellers which in one way another touched upon certain aspects of the history of the Tulama.<sup>71</sup> These are very helpful in view of the fact that there is shortage of written material during the period they cover, especially about the Tulama. Simultaneously, these are the most difficult sources to use unless one critically evaluates them as they contain both fact and fiction.<sup>72</sup>

There are also works produced by traditional Ethiopian writers. The first major attempt to reconstruct a history of the Oromo in general and Tulama and Macha subgroups in particular was made by Abba Bahrey.<sup>73</sup> Abba Bahrey's otherwise invaluable work published in 1593 set the stage for the subsequent traditional Ethiopian historiography which magnified the purported brutality of the Oromo and depicted the Oromo as barbarians who contributed immensely to the decline and backwardness of Ethiopia.

67 Tsegaye Zeleke, "The Oromo of Salale"; "The Dynamics of Tulama Oromo in the History of Continuity and Change, Ca. 1700-1880s," PhD dissertation (UNISA, 2021).

68 Sisay Megersa, *Amhara-Oromo Ethnic Interaction in Salale, Ethiopia, from 1941-2000* (VDMVerlag Dr. Muller Aktiengesellschaft & co, 2009). The material is originally an MA thesis, subsequently published by the publisher.

69 Biratu Kenei, "A History of Oromo in and around Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) from ca. 1860s-1974," MA. thesis (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2010).

70 Biratu Kenei, "Brigadier General Taddasa Birru: A Military-Political Biography (1922-1975)," PhD Dissertation (Addis Ababa University: Department of History, 2021).

71 C.W. Isenberg, and J.L Krapf, *Journal of C.W. Isenberg and J.L. Krapf: Detailing Their Proceeding in the Kingdom of Shoa and Journey in Other Parts of Abyssinia in the years 1839, 1840, 1841 and 1842* (London, 1843); J.L. Krapf, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labour During an Eighteen years' Residence in Eastern Africa* (London, 1968); W.C. Harris, *The Highland of Ethiopia*, Vol. II and III (London, 1844); Walter Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country, With an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848* (London, 1868).

72 Ege, 9-17. Ege discusses these sources in detail. Most of them gave more emphasis to things around the court of Negus Sahla Sellase or to the topography of their route or something else which they found highly appealing.

73 Beckingham and Huntigford, eds and trans, *Some Records of Ethiopia*.

Several centuries elapsed after the work of Abba Bahrey until the emergence of works by Ethiopian writers. Some of these works were written in the early decades of the twentieth century by individuals closely associated with the Shawan Kingdom. These are very helpful sources, albeit marred by obvious methodological problems. The writers were also either high officials in the central government or functionaries of the provincial government like Asma Gyorgis, who was an official of the Harar government.<sup>74</sup> Their histories have an official character, and their purpose was mainly to enhance the legitimacy of the Shawan kingdom.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike the traditional Ethiopian writers, Asma Gyorgis's work, which was completed in the second decade of the twentieth century, was pioneering in its consideration of the Oromo as a central force in Ethiopian history, rather than a disruptive group of foreign raiders. In the words of Bairu Tafla: "Asma Gyorgis ventured into quite a different and untraditional field of history, namely the Oromo as a fully-fledged historical phenomenon. [He considered] the Oromo not as invaders, but as a society with its own social and political institutions, and not as marauders and murderers as they were usually viewed."<sup>76</sup>

In addition to establishing the Oromo as a people with history, Asma Gyorgis is unique among the traditional writers in his consideration of the Oromo and Amhara as groups experiencing constant interchange and mutual influence. The influence of the Amharic language, culture, and religion upon those Oromo who had settled in central Ethiopia, which of course include the Tulama, is firmly established. The counterinfluence of Oromo upon Shawan political and military ventures throughout four centuries is also highlighted. For instance, he explains that the Amhara and the Oromo intermingled through *mogassa*<sup>77</sup> and marriage.<sup>78</sup>

In recent years, two important monographs have been published on the biographies of Fitawrai Habte Gyorgis Dinagde and Ras Gobena, the foremost Shawan Oromo notables. Bahru Zewde<sup>79</sup> and Dechasa Abebe embarked on uncharted territory and meticulously documented the roles of these political and military statesmen in the creation of modern Ethiopia.<sup>80</sup>

In conclusion, an attempt has been made here to examine how the Tulama have been portrayed by Semiticists, Ethiopianists, and Oromo-centric historians. It is evident that a comprehensive study of the history of the Tulama remains a significant field of future research. This paper is written with the ambitious goal of challenging Oromo-centric, Ethiopianist, and Semiticist scholarship. The modern Ethiopian metanarrative, which excludes the Tulama, is incomplete.

74 See for Instance, Bairu, *Asma Gyorgis*; Gabra Sellase Walda Aragay (Tsehafe Tazaz), *Tarika Zaman Ze Daymawi Meniiek Nigusa Nagast Ze Ityophiya* (Addis Ababa, 1959 E.C); Taye Gabra Maryam. *Yaltyophiya Hizb Tark* (Addis Ababa, 1958 E.C)

75 Ege, 10.

76 Bairu, *Asma Gyorgis*, 61; see also Sidney R. Waldron, "Asma Gyorgis and His Works: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Sawa by Bairu Tafla," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* (Review), Vol. 22, No. 2 (1989), 363.

77 Mogassa is Afaan Oromo term for collective adoption.

78 Bairu, *Asma Gyorgis*, 429.

79 Bahru Zewde, *Habte Abba Mela: Ketor Merkognanet Eske Ager Merinet (Habte Abba Mela: From Prisoner- of-War to National Leader)* (Addis Ababa: Eclipse Printing Press, 2008 EC).

80 Dechasa Abebe, *Gobana: Watadarawina Poletikawi Hiwot (Gobena: Military and Political Life (1810-1881)* (Los Angeles: Tsehay Publishers, 2020).

The Tulama territory has been central to modern Ethiopia as the capital of modern Ethiopia is in the heartland of Tulama territory. Similarly, the hinterlands of the capital, inhabited by the Tulama, are the major bread baskets of Addis Ababa and other major towns like Adama, Jimma, Harar, and Dire Dawa. Additionally, the role of the Tulama Oromo and their elite in modern Ethiopia, from Ras Gobana to Abebe Bikila and Tirunesh Dibaba, is unquestionable. In the same vein, their role in Oromo nationalism is significant, and the Tulama elites played irreplaceable roles in the resurgence of Oromo nationalism. One may argue that the Tulama notables tried to reconcile Oromo nationalism with Ethiopian nationalism, and we have numerous examples for this. For instance, *Ras Abebe Aregay*, despite his Oromo background, heroically resisted Fascist Italians, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, *Ras Gobana*. His son, Daniel Abebe, on the other hand, was said to be member of the Macha-Tulama Self-Help Association, which arguably laid the foundation for Oromo nationalism.

We can also construe that if the Agaw, as argued by Taddesse Tamrat, were the “very basis on which the whole edifice of Aksumite Civilization was constructed,”<sup>81</sup> the same can be said about the Oromo in general and the Tulama in particular, who are arguably the basis on which the whole edifice of modern Ethiopia is built. Moreover, as McCann clearly argues, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the center of power had shifted from the north to the “more vibrant frontier society of Shawa”.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the Tulama have been the bridge between the southern Oromo and the Southern Nations and Nationalities on the one hand, and northern Ethiopia on the other. The interaction between the Tulama and the Kingdom of Shawa also foreshadowed the interaction between the people of the south and the modern Ethiopian Empire. The significance of the Tulema Oromo and their contribution to the making of the modern Ethiopian state lies precisely in what Shimelis Bonsa in this volume terms “the inconvenient truth.” Their historical role disrupts dominant narratives and unsettles neat binaries that have often framed Ethiopian political historiography. Far from being passive subjects or purely peripheral actors, the Tulema Oromo were central to state-making processes, military consolidation, and administrative development during key historical junctures. Recognising this complicates the simplistic centre–periphery dichotomy and challenges mono-ethnic origin stories of the Ethiopian state. In doing so, it brings to light a more complex and entangled political genealogy, one in which Oromo agency, internal diversity, and elite participation in imperial and post-imperial state structures are acknowledged rather than erased. This acknowledgement, however, remains discomforting for both traditionalist narratives of Ethiopian nationalism and certain ethnic-nationalist accounts, making it a politically and intellectually “inconvenient” truth.

81 Taddesse Tamrat, “Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of Gafat,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (1988), 7.

82 McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 19.

# Identity

## Multiple vs. Mono Identity in Ethiopia

*Bahru Zewde*

### **The Global Context**

Identity has universal resonance. There are few countries where the issue of identity is not a palpable reality. It inspired some of the most remarkable artistic and literary creations through the ages. Conversely, it provoked some of the deadly conflicts that have plagued the world. In the latter respect, one could cite the long standoff between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British government in the last decades of the twentieth century. Spain, too, has had to deal with separatist movements in its Basque and Catalan regions. Kashmir remains a combustible powder keg between India and Pakistan. One could also cite the tense confrontation between mainland China and Taiwan, or the issue of Quebecois identity that has tested the territorial integrity of Canada for so long. Arguably the most momentous development in this regard has been the breakup of the Soviet Union and two of its satellite republics in Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) and their replacement by smaller units deemed to be more authentic expressions of national and ethno-national identities.

Africa, too, has had its share of identity-based conflicts at both the intra-state and inter-state levels, particularly in the post-colonial era. Ironically, such conflicts proliferated side by side with the efforts of African leaders to forge supra-national unions at the regional and continental levels. These conflicts partly arose from the failure of the post-colonial state to establish a pluralist order that could accommodate multiple identities. One could cite as examples, the Nigerian Civil War of the 1960s provoked by the attempt of its southeastern region to secede under the name of Biafra, the thirty-year long struggle in Eritrea that culminated in its secession from Ethiopia, and the even longer Sudanese Civil War that only came to an end in 2005 with the conclusion of an agreement that paved the way for the birth of South Sudan in 2011. Nearly a million people perished in Rwanda in 1994 because they happened to carry the wrong ID card. In Côte d'Ivoire and Zambia, in the pursuit of ethnic purity, long established identities of political leaders as well as subjects have been questioned.

Yet, there have been some cases of successful blending of multiple identities. Perhaps the most illustrious example is the United States, a veritable “melting pot,” where people of varying backgrounds have been united under the common banner of American citizenship (2023: 23-

24). Switzerland represents another case where people of diverse ethnic backgrounds (German, Italian and French) have struck the perfect formula to accommodate their identities within the framework of Swiss citizenship.

Understandably, therefore, the issue of identity has generated a sizable literature. Often, the celebrated work of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, has set the tone (Anderson 1983). He deconstructed the concept of nationalism to underscore its relative novelty. The nation, he argued, is an imagined community and yet has the capacity to move its adherents into making “colossal sacrifices”. The perception of ethnicity, which is so often counterpoised to nationalism, has often been broadly categorized into two camps: the primordialist and the instrumentalist. The former, as propounded by its most articulate proponent, the American political scientist Walker Connor, recognize it as an inherent and immutable fact<sup>1</sup>. The instrumentalist antithesis is represented by, among others, Donald Horowitz, who underscores the role of elites in manipulating ethnicity and the capacity of ethnic sentiments to generate “outgroup antipathy” as much as they generate “ingroup solidarity”. The nexus between ethnic identity and violence is brought out even more forcefully in Amartya Sen’s book on the subject<sup>2</sup>, where he depicts graphically his own personal experience of ethnic conflict. The crux of the problem, he argued, was the conflation of multiple identities into a unique identity.

In the African context, the critique of ethnic identity has been pioneered by the late British historian Terence Ranger, who underscored the fateful intervention of colonialism in transforming the pre-colonial multiple identities into “tribal” silos<sup>3</sup>. Mahmood Mamdani expanded this argument in his seminal work, *Citizen and Subject*, arguing that not only did colonial rulers compartmentalise Africans into tribes but also went ahead with formulating the customary law that befitted the new arrangement<sup>4</sup>. In a subsequent article, he tackled the controversial issue of indigeneity, arguing that the accent should be placed on common residence rather than common descent. He drew on the example of the 1994 Ethiopian constitution, which inevitably created several minorities as it tried to sanctify the principle of ethnically defined regional states<sup>5</sup>.

What literature, as well as the lived-experience, underscores is the abiding challenge of accommodating multiple identities (in this case the ethnic and the national). The ultimate question, thus, remains: how does one reconcile the imperative of national citizenship with the strong sentiment of ethnic affiliation? What kind of mechanism could be instituted so that they would be complementary rather than contradictory? This forms the backdrop to the tension between multiple and mono identity that is the subject of this paper.

1 Connor, Walker. 1967. “Self-Determination: The New Phase”, *World Politics*. Vol. 20, No. 1.

2 Sen, Amartya. 2006. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

3 Ranger, Terence. 1983. “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa”, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.248

4 Mamdani 1996; cf. Cooper, Frederick. 1997. Review of Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject*, in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Vol. 52., p. 157

5 Mamdani, Mahmood. 2001. “Beyond settler and native as political identities: Overcoming the political legacy of colonialism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43, 651–664.

## The Grand Narrative

The grand narrative is predicated on the assumption that the Ethiopian state has demonstrated remarkable longevity and continuity. Even if one discounts the idea of tracing it to the famed union of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, the state has been around for about two millennia. The Aksumite Kingdom was its progenitor. The country's two enduring institutions, the monarchy and the church, as well as the Ge'ez script, the liturgy and the architecture, trace their origins to that kingdom. The state was tested and even disrupted more than once, but it was able to recover and forge ahead with remarkable resilience. The name Ethiopia, initially rather loosely used to describe sub-Saharan Africa, has been appropriated by the country since Aksumite times, even if foreigners have had the habit of calling it Abyssinia.

At the subsidiary level, Ethiopians have tried to define themselves by regional rather than ethnic identifiers. Thus, they would call themselves Gondaré, Gojjamé, Shawé or Wolloyé rather than Amhara. Indeed, all too often, they would even opt for even lower categories such as Manzé, Yefaté, Bulgé. Likewise, the Oromo more readily identified themselves as Borana, Karayyu, Leqa, etc., rather than the pan-Oromo identity that has gained wider currency in recent times. Even in Tigray, which showed relatively tighter regional identity, sub-regional identities like Agame, Enderta and Adwa held considerable sway and could be said to have formed the undercurrent of the tension that has manifested itself within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) since its inception and become more pronounced in recent times.

Moreover, there was historically considerable interaction and interdependence across ethnic categories. The recently published book by the Association of Ethiopian Historians has amply demonstrated the breadth and depth of these interactions<sup>6</sup>. Thus, there have been strong links between the Jimma Oromo and the neighbouring Yam, between the Oromo and the Somali in Bale, the Oromo and Amhara in northern Shawa, and the Gurage and the Oromo in northern Gurageland. Ethnic intermarriages have been common, at both the royal and plebeian levels, the former in a calculated manner with a view to cementing political power (Heran 2002)<sup>7</sup>, the latter much more spontaneously, very often as a concomitant development of growing urbanisation. Commercial centres like Shashamane, Bati and Sanbate emerged as both meeting points and melting pots. Nor has central political power been exclusively the monopoly of one ethnic group. Rather, it was exercised at various times by the Amhara, Tigrayans and Oromo, in descending order of potency and frequency.

This pan-Ethiopian identity became particularly pronounced in times of foreign threat or invasion. The supreme example of this is the way Ethiopians of all ethnic affiliations rallied to thwart Italian colonial ambitions at the Battle of Adwa in March 1896. The wedge that the Italians had tried to create between the Tigrayan nobility and Menilek collapsed when *Ras* Mangasha Yohannes, the hereditary ruler of Tigray, formally submitted to Menilek in 1894. No

6 Bahru Zewde, ed. 2023. *Interdependence and Interactions in Ethiopian History*. Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

7 Heran Sereke Berhan. "Building Bridges, Drying Bad Blood: Elite Marriages, Politics and Ethnicity in 19th and 20th Century Imperial Ethiopia." PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2002.

less significantly, two members of the Tigrayan nobility, *Ras* Sebhat Aregawi and *Dajjazmach* Hagos of Agame, defected from the Italian camp as the Italians advanced into Tigray and played a crucial role in their defeat by cutting communication lines and providing vital intelligence to the Ethiopian camp<sup>8</sup>. Even more strikingly, rulers of the newly incorporated provinces like Walayta, Jimma Abba Jifar, and Leqa Qellam rallied to the cause by guarding the rear.

Similarly, although there were cracks in the Ethiopian stance caused by the nascent absolutist rule of Emperor Haile Sellassie, which partly explains the initial victory of the Fascist Italian forces, the subsequent occupation (1936-1941) proved short-lived because it met stiff patriotic resistance in almost all corners of the country. Likewise, the Somali aggression of 1977 provoked massive nation-wide mobilisation which, with help from the Soviet Union and its allies, reversed the aggression in a decisive manner. The 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war was another example of pan-Ethiopian solidarity, with fighters from the marginalised areas like Benishangul, Gambella and the Somali Region often demonstrating exceptional feats of valour.

Indeed, Eritrea remains the ultimate paradox of the tension between pan-Ethiopian and regional identity. Before the Italians formally established their colony of Eritrea in 1890, what was hitherto known as *Marab Mellash*, was part of the Ethiopian polity. Eritrean disaffection had its roots in the incompleteness of the Adwa victory, which stopped short of liberating Eritrea. This disaffection was expressed bitterly by *Blatta* Gabra-Egziabher Gila Maryam, who castigated Emperor Menilek in rather vitriolic fashion for abandoning the Eritreans<sup>9</sup>. Yet, even under Italian colonial rule, many Eritreans continued to identify with Ethiopia and yearned for the day of eventual reunion. Emperor Haile Selassie gave young Eritreans the educational opportunity that their Italian rulers had denied them. A prominent example of this is Lorenzo Ta'ezaz, whose education in France was sponsored by *Ras* Tafari Makonen and who eventually rose to the post of foreign minister. Many Eritrean *askari* [guards] defected from the Italian camp and fought alongside Ethiopians during the Italian Occupation. The "green book" that the Ethiopian Government submitted to the United Nations (UN) to buttress its historic claims when the future fate of Eritrea was being deliberated at the UN after the expulsion of the Italians in 1941, had long lists of Eritreans who fought with Ethiopians as well as those who had risen to high positions in the Ethiopian military and civil service. General Aman Andom and *Blatten Geta* Lorenzo Ta'ezaz, respectively, were two outstanding examples in this regard (MOFA 1946).

A second phase of disenchantment (the failure to consummate the Adwa Victory being the first) was precipitated in 1962 by the breakup of the Federation, which had been designed by the UN as a compromise between the two antithetical positions of union and separation. That was the genesis of the Eritrean struggle for independence, which was concluded victoriously in 1991, very much in conjunction with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seizure of political power in Addis. The honeymoon between the two allies

8 Caulk, Richard. 2002. *"Between the Jaws of Hyenas": A Diplomatic History of Ethiopia (1876- 1896)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. P534

9 Bahru Zewde. 2002. *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*. Oxford: James Currey.

who toppled the Derg – EPLF and EPRDF – was short-lived, however. Eritreans cherished their independence but also wanted to partake in the rich resources of Ethiopia. This situation almost inexorably led to the bloody war of 1998-2000 and the stalemate that lasted nearly two decades. The change of government in 2018 ushered in a new rapprochement that was greeted with jubilation at both the official and public levels. But relations turned sour once again after the no less bloody war in northern Ethiopia – in which Eritrea fought alongside the federal government – was terminated by the conclusion of the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022. The Eritreans, who had no role in the agreement, felt sidelined.

The primacy of pan-Ethiopian over ethnic identity is manifest when we turn our attention to some of the country's national icons in almost all spheres. To start with, it is difficult to place these icons into ethnic categories for two reasons. First, they were so often of mixed parentage. Secondly, they saw themselves as Ethiopians rather than in any ethnic lens. This is the case with the pillar of early twentieth century Ethiopian politics, *Fitawrari* Habta-Giyorgis Dinagde; the country's most accomplished poet and playwright, Tsegaye Gebre Medhin; Abebe Bikila, who blazed the trail for a succession of Ethiopian athletes of varied ethnic affiliation; and Tilahun Gessesse, arguably the most iconic singer of the modern era.

Nor could Ethiopia's rulers or intellectual leaders be placed into ethnic pigeonholes. This applies equally to the "Amhara" Tewodros, Menilek and Haile Selassie and the Tigrayan Yohannes and Alula Abba Negga. The early twentieth century intellectuals who engaged my attention for so long, the "Pioneers of Change", came from varying ethnic backgrounds but were united by their passionate concern for Ethiopia's progress. An even more fascinating illustration of the fusion of ethnic identity into pan-Ethiopian identity is the way originally ethnic culinary specialties have come to be standard Ethiopian cuisine. This was the case with the Amhara *doro wat*, the Oromo *chachabsa*, the Gurage *kitfo* and the Tigrayan *ambasha*.

## The Counter-Narrative

The above almost blissful picture of pan-Ethiopian identity has begun to face serious challenge since the 1960s, although literary tremors of the counter-narrative had begun to be felt even earlier<sup>10</sup>. At the root of the counter-narrative was the way Emperor Menilek incorporated peoples and principalities of southern Ethiopia (in the broadest sense). Particularly in the areas that did not submit peacefully, the military campaigns of incorporation were attended by considerable carnage and subsequent economic exploitation and cultural degradation. This was the case, for instance, with Kafa, Walayta, Arsi and Harar. Even in the areas that were spared the depredations, the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity were imposed on the population. Even in northern Ethiopia, among the Tigrayans, who had been partners of the "Abyssinian" political order, there was a strong feeling of marginalisation after the death of Emperor Yohannes in 1889.

10 Marzagora, Sara. 2017. "History in Twentieth Century Ethiopia," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 58, No. 3.

And it was in Tigray that the first dissonant tone was struck in 1943 through what is known in history as the Wayane rebellion. While an amalgam of factors contributed to its eruption, the sense of marginalisation referred to above, and concern for the fate of its hereditary governor, *Ras* Seyoum Mengesha, who was detained in Addis Ababa, were two principal factors. In the early 1970s, this early manifestation of Tigrayan nationalism assumed a more radical form with the emergence of Tigrayan university student groupings who developed a distinctly regional agenda. These groupings eventually morphed into two Tigrayan liberation fronts, one of which, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), eventually became ascendant and seized central power in 1991. Its Tigrayan name evoked the name Wayane, suggesting that it was the logical successor to the first Wayane of the early 1940s<sup>11</sup>.

It was also in the 1960s that the Oromo began to assert their identity, albeit initially in a rather innocuous fashion. The Mecha Tulama Association was founded in 1963 with the modest aim of developing the Oromo region by building schools and clinics. It was not long, however, before the association assumed a strident posture that brought it on a collision course with the Government, leading to the execution of one of its militant members and the imprisonment of its president, Brigadier General Taddesse Birru. Concurrently, an uprising that brought both Oromo and Somali peasants together was raging in the Bale province and could not be completely subdued until 1974<sup>12</sup>.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which came into existence in 1976, was an amalgam of these two trends, the pacifist and the violent. Taking its cue from the Eritrean liberation fronts, the OLF argued for the creation of independent Oromia rather than addressing Oromo grievances within the Ethiopian state. Both fronts promoted the colonial thesis, arguing that their countries were colonised by Ethiopia and the only logical solution therefore was independence. A 1999 OLF tract delegitimised the Grand Narrative thus:

At no time before the conquest by Menelik was the present-day Ethiopia a single country. What existed were independent polities. The official Ethiopian history that presents Menelik's era as "the unification of Ethiopia" is a fabrication, pure and simple. As in the rest of colonial Africa, the Oromo and other southern peoples were subjugated, their peace, their cultural identities and human dignity deprived<sup>13</sup>.

The post-1991 political transformation brought other claimants for leadership of the Oromo movement with the birth and growth of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), a member of the ruling coalition, the EPRDF, and the opposition Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). These divergent claims to leadership remain unresolved even after the OPDO had displaced the TPLF in the EPRDF leadership in 2018.

The ideological underpinnings of the ethno-nationalist and regional liberation movements was provided by the Ethiopian Student Movement, which evoked what it called "the question

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11 Bahru Zewde. 2014. *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960-1974*. Woodbridge: James Currey

12 *ibid*

13 Quoted in Marzagora 2017: 439

of nationalities” as one of its rallying points. This was first heralded by what I have called the “Walleign Manifesto”<sup>14</sup>, a somewhat crude articulation of the question in the fall of 1969. It was given a more elaborate articulation a few months later by Tilahun Takele’s “The National Question (‘Regionalism’) in Ethiopia”. That fateful tract advanced the principle of “self-determination up to and including secession” to resolve the question of nationalities in Ethiopia (Tilahun 1970). The advocacy of such a radical recipe was based not so much on a scientific survey of Ethiopian history and ethnography as on the presumably flawless canons of Stalinist orthodoxy.

The principle was adopted by both major parties that emanated from the student movement, *Me'ison* and EPRP. In time, as they came to discern its potential abuse by what they termed “narrow nationalists”, the two multi-ethnic organisations began to distance themselves from it. The TPLF stuck to it because of its utility for its liberation struggle and eventual consolidation of power. As we all know that principle was subsequently enshrined in the 1995 constitution that established the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).

That constitution represented a major step forward in envisaging the pluralist society that had eluded Ethiopia for so long. Apart from the unfettered guaranteeing of civil liberties (even if, in practice, they have been honoured more by the breach than the observance), it guaranteed the languages and cultures of the various nationalities. But it has several anomalies and controversial points that have dominated political discourse to this day.

The problem starts with the preamble, which opens with the phrase: “We the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia” (hereafter referred to as NNP for convenience). I doubt if there is any constitution that starts with such an explicit denial of common citizenship. The standard opener is “We the People of ...”. This is the case in constitutions of countries that are as multi-ethnic as Ethiopia, if not more so, such as the United States, Nigeria or India. Based on that preamble, it has become common for officials to address Ethiopians as “peoples of Ethiopia”, again something that is unique to the Ethiopian situation. Article 8 reinforces the primacy of the NNP when it vests all sovereign power on them, and not the federal government. What is equally strange in this appellation is the fact that, although the different categories (nation, nationality and people) are presumed to denote different, presumably descending, levels of social organisation, it is not clear which applies to which ethno-linguistic group. Curiously enough, a sub-article of the controversial Article 39 gives a common definition for all three categories (FDRE Constitution 1995).

Undoubtedly the most controversial element of the constitution has been Article 39, which guarantees the unconditional right of the NNPs to “self-determination, including the right to secession.” In the discourse on the question of nationalities that antedated the formulation of the constitution, secession was recognised as an option of last resort, when the nationality concerned feels that its right to self-determination has been impinged upon or threatened. In the constitution, however, it is prioritised by being placed as the first sub-article. The general

drift of the article is separation rather than the interdependence and interaction among the various nationalities that has characterised Ethiopian history. The idea of fostering this interdependence is somewhat grudgingly and almost invisibly conceded in Article 88, which makes it incumbent on the Government “to strengthen ties of equality, unity and fraternity among them.”

The constitution was designed to give the NNPs unfettered autonomy and foster inter-ethnic harmony. In practice, neither objective has been fully met. The rhetoric has not been matched by reality on the ground. Regarding the former, what we have increasingly seen is central hegemonic control by other means. As for the latter, Ethiopia has witnessed unprecedented inter-ethnic conflict since the promulgation of the constitution, resulting in mass killings or eviction of people who were deemed alien to the specific region. Some of the regional constitutions, which deny minorities any rights, even if they were born and grew up in that region, have exacerbated the situation. In short, the constitution, which was trumpeted as a panacea to cure the country’s ills, has come to be described as “a medicine that kills,” or a suicide pact<sup>15</sup>.

## Towards Resolution

Both the public and the government have come to realise the disruptive effects of the constitution and taken what I prefer to call “palliatives” to remedy the situation. At the official level, there has been increasing emphasis on the importance of multi-ethnic unity or, in the more expressive Amharic lexicon, ጥብረ ብሔራዊ አንድነት, thereby giving prominence to the integrative potential of the elusive Article 88. The annual observance of the Ethiopian Flag Day can likewise be seen as an attempt to foster pan-Ethiopian identity. The government also gave special attention to the colourful celebration of the Ethiopian Millennium, seeing it perhaps as an opportune moment to nurture that identity. The high point of the celebration was reached on the eve of the Ethiopian New Year, when Prime Minister Meles Zenawi appeared in the dominant national dress. The pop star Teddy Afro also left his mark with an original rendition of the traditional girls’ New Year song, *Abebayehu wey*. While we are in the realm of songs, an interesting development has been the evolution and popularisation of syncretic songs, i.e. Amharic lyrics with Tigrayan or Oromo tunes or vice versa.

The advent of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, with his inspirational pan-Ethiopian rhetoric, appeared to open a final resolution of the tension between ethnic and pan-Ethiopian identity. Unfortunately, it did not take long before things turned sour. Indeed, the post-2018 era has witnessed some of the most virulent inter-ethnic conflicts the country has ever endured. This culminated in one of the bloodiest civil wars in the country’s history, the two-year long war in northern Ethiopia that pitted the TPLF against the federal government forces and its Eritrean allies. The prime minister’s Oromo identity notwithstanding, the armed wing of the OLF, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), has been waging an armed struggle for the past six years or so. On the more legal plane, the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), which has a sizable following in Oromia, has remained in opposition to Abiy and his Prosperity Party.

15 Adeno Addis. 2021. “The Making of Strangers: Reflections on the Ethiopian Constitution”, unpublished essay.

Persistent harassment and persecution have moved the Amhara, who were not historically known for pronounced ethnic identity, to struggle and fight under the ethnic banner. This started peacefully with the birth of the National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), which competed and won some seats in the last elections. Following the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022, which put an end to the state of war in northern Ethiopia, the Amhara Fano, who had played a pivotal role in the fight against the TPLF, felt sidelined by the agreement and, suspicious of the federal government's intentions when they were told to disarm, started an armed uprising in the Amhara Region that has made the region practically ungovernable. But the Fano movement is beset by lack of a political programme and a united command. It is divided into regional units (Gojjam, Gondar, Shawa, Wollo), in a manner that is somewhat reminiscent of the Patriotic Resistance to the Italian Occupation and underscoring the overriding importance of regional affiliations described at the beginning of this chapter.

Elsewhere, border conflicts between regions (such as between the Afar and Somali Regions) have become almost endemic. Particularly in the Southern Region, there has been a surge in demand for regional status, spearheaded by the Sidama. As a result, the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) have now been split into four regions: Sidama, Southern Region, Southwestern Region and Central Region. This trend is to be expected, as the Constitution is open-ended in this regard, giving every nationality the right to form its own region (Art. 47, sub-article 2). Indeed, some of the nationalities had been recognised as Regions in the Charter that preceded the constitution.

On the positive side, the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) holds some promise for the future. It has had its critics and sceptics, questioning the process of its composition and its time-consuming, if thorough, manner of canvassing of popular views and agenda. Others posit the danger of the whole process being hijacked by the ruling party. But all this notwithstanding, ENDC remains the only hope of addressing long-standing problems of the country, including the issue of identity that is the subject matter of this paper. And in a political culture that has privileged the elites at the expense of the masses, in whose name the former have ruled and killed, the bottom-up approach that the ENDC has followed can be regarded as a salutary corrective.

One could anticipate that the 1995 constitution is going to be at the centre of the national deliberations that are going to be held once the preparatory stage is completed. The fundamental question is whether it is going to continue to give precedence to ethnic identity or whether it is going to define it within the umbrella of pan-Ethiopian identity. The arguments on both sides tend to be almost uncompromising. To strike the formula that will bridge the yawning gap is going to be a major challenge. That challenge can only be overcome if a give- and-take spirit comes to prevail. From the outset, however, the idea that Article 39 should be struck out altogether should be scrapped. Not only is it bound to meet strong opposition from some quarters but the fixation on the sub-article guaranteeing the right of secession has made its critics oblivious to the other, more positive, sub-articles guaranteeing the principle of self-determination (such as the promotion of the language and culture of the nationalities) that are important to correct past injustices and are hence worth retaining.

The unfortunate lesson that we have learned from the post-1991 history of Ethiopia is that identity has been instrumentalized to establish and perpetuate political hegemony and reap the economic dividends that emanate from it. We have seen it under TPLF/EPRDF rule when stalwarts of the regime and their proxies exercised tight political control and amassed unimaginable fortune. That hegemony, which its architects had thought would last for decades, collapsed under dramatic circumstances. Sadly, however, the successor regime appears to have succumbed to the same temptation. In other words, identity has been used to secure and perpetuate political power and economic privilege. It has been a recurrent feature of recent Ethiopian history that regimes do not learn from the mistakes of their predecessors.

To extricate us from this vicious cycle, we must cultivate a new political culture that gives pride of place in political plurality rather than self-determination. The Ethiopian Student Movement, which held aloft the banner of self-determination with such tenacity, and with fateful consequences, was not as zealous in campaigning for democratic pluralism. And the country is paying the price for that delinquency. I think it is time to shift the narrative from self-determination and identity to genuine political pluralism. Only thus can we avert the perpetuation of ethnocracy or elitocracy or, even worse, the looming danger of autocracy.

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# The Challenge of Teaching History

## Nation Building, National Dialogue, and School History in a Multi-Cultural Context

### *Ethiopia's Enigma of Our Time*

*Girma Negash*

This contribution contributes to the historiographical contestations over Ethiopia's common past that has vitiated national consensus as well as the teaching of a common history. The controversy over historiography has continued to haunt Ethiopia's political landscape and academic discourse for over half a century. It has been even more exacerbated after the onset of federal dispensation in 1991. Since then, the profound articulation of the various diversities, historiographical contestations, truculent interpretations, claims and counterclaims has led to an increasingly contentious political atmosphere that induced the current regime to set up a National Dialogue Commission on 29 December 2021. This study assumes that nation-building needs to be shaped and reinforced by education, especially history teaching, and vice versa. However, practices in Africa and elsewhere show that teaching a shared past has continued to be challenging and complicated, even more so in a multinational or multiethnic setting such as Ethiopia.

By problematising the challenges of teaching a common past in a multicultural state with diversities of all kinds, this paper attempts to shed some light on the future direction of history teaching and production of curricular resources. It also suggests areas of soliciting a "usable past" from the *longue durée* of the country's history. I argue that multicultural nations such as Ethiopia, with legacies of internal conflict and still grappling with their very existence as a nation, better gaze at the "neo-institutional approach," which recommends a renegotiation of the more privileged space of the nation-state (the national) through espousing narratives of multiculturalism and global education.

The study is not only academically significant, but it is also vital for policy discourse. It enunciates some of the issues that underpin the profound divisions and contestations in Ethiopian historical narratives and approaches to history education, issues that resonate in many conflict-affected nations of Africa.

## Background

Ethiopia is one of the oldest countries, with thousands of years of statehood. It is a plural society composed of more than eighty ethnic groups. The Ethiopian state and society evolved through various historical processes and interactions to become a typical plural society aptly labelled by Conti Rossini as “Museo di Popoli” (Museum of Peoples).<sup>1</sup> Through time, the Ethiopian state experienced different forms of political arrangements from unitary/centralised (up to 1995) to federal (from 1995 on) in order to sustain its diverse but intermingled cultural communities.<sup>2</sup>

Like most African multicultural states, the Ethiopian state has been consistently struggling to maintain its legitimacy in the face of the “challenges of diversity”, which ostensibly has not yet been properly managed despite some attempts. It was hoped that federalism would address the so-called “nationalities question” that had lingered since the days of the Ethiopian Student Movement of the 1960s. According to the Federal Constitution of 1995, Ethiopia was divided into nine ethno-linguistic regions or *kelel*, as they are known in Amharic.<sup>3</sup> Article 39 recognises the right of the various ethno-linguistic groups to self-determination, including the right of secession. The contemporary reality in Ethiopia, according to one observer, is that “Ethiopia is now the only country in the world that allows the self determination of ethnic regions up to the right to secession from the Federation.”<sup>4</sup>

Long before the turn of the new century, Ethiopia’s socio-political landscape became increasingly volatile, haunted by divergent views about a common past, estrangements, and resentment of one another. In consequence, as it stands today, the hope for a united and inclusive Ethiopian state is in jeopardy.<sup>5</sup> The historiographical landscape is equally beset with controversies and contestations, progressively imbued with dissent from and narratives counter to what some writers call the “Great Tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Since the early 2020s, the mushrooming regional conflicts and the growing demands for *kelel* status have aggravated the situation, resulting even in numerous casualties.

Driven by the desire to ease the continued political tension and the legacy of conflict, the Ethiopian parliament established the National Dialogue Commission on 29 December 2021. This was subsequently made into law by Proclamation No.1265/2014. The objective of the

1 Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); Christopher Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History” *Annales d’Ethiopie*, Volume 18, (2002), 37-54; Sara Vaughan, “Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia”, PhD Dissertation (The University of Edinburgh, 2003).

2 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (London: James Currey, 2011); Christophe Van der Beken, “Ethiopia: Constitutional Protection of Ethnic Minorities at the Regional Level”, *Afrika Focus*, 20, nos.1-2 (2007), 105-151.

3 The latest administrative reorganisation in Ethiopia has introduced three new regional states (*kelel*). Currently the total number of regional states is 13, along with the two chartered cities, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

4 Yirga Gelaw, *Native Colonialism: Education and the Economy of Violence against Traditions in Ethiopia* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2017), 154.

5 Christopher Clapham, “Ethiopia and the Challenge of Diversity”, *Africa Insight*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2004); Merera Gudina, “Contradictory Interpretation of Ethiopian History”, in David Turton, ed., *Ethnic Federalism: the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006); መረረ ጉዳና, የኢትዮጵያ የታሪክ ፈተናዎችና የሚጋጩ ሕልሞች (in Amharic) (Addis Ababa: Graphic Printers, 2008).

6 Sara Marzagora, “History in Twentieth Century Ethiopia: The ‘Great Tradition’ and the Counter Histories of National Failure,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 58 (3), 2017; Jon Abbink, “History Education in Ethiopia Post-1991: Rethinking the Nation’s History in the Context of ‘Decolonization’ Debates” (Draft for “Africa Knows” Conference, Dec. 2020-Febr. 2021, African Studies Centre, Leiden, <https://www.ascleiden.nl/news/africa-2020-conference-africa-knows>).

Commission is to initiate a broad-based inclusive public dialogue that engenders national consensus. After a lengthy and complex process, 42 nominees were ultimately selected out of a pool of 632 individuals. Finally, a Commission comprising of eleven commissioners was officially set up by the House of Peoples' Representatives in its special session held on February 21, 2022.

Apart from the political landscape, teaching a shared common past has become practically challenging in a multinational or multiethnic setting such as Ethiopia. The challenge for educators and textbook writers in poly-ethnic states has always been the extent to which themes and contents are shared by all groups. Against this background and amidst the competing views about who "we" are and what is "ours", what history is to be taught to the youth has remained a thorny conundrum perturbing, and at times dividing, educators and historians of Ethiopia, even more so in recent years. Two illustrative cases demonstrate how historiographical contestations and divergent interpretations affect the teaching of national history. These are: the "module controversy," and the "aborted textbook project of 2009," both of which will be discussed at length in the analysis section.<sup>7</sup>

By way of clarification, history education or school history in this paper refers to the secondary school level. At this juncture, a brief description of the secondary school system functional in present-day Ethiopia is pertinent. Up to very recently, secondary education in the Ethiopian school system was divided into two cycles: Upper Secondary and Lower Secondary. In 2018, the new "Ethiopian Education Development Road Map of 2018-30" recommended the restoration of the 6-2-4 system, which means that students have to pass through eight years of primary and four years of secondary education.<sup>8</sup> The curriculum for high school history in Ethiopia is centralised. Likewise, textbooks for teaching history in all secondary schools are prepared at the centre, one for each grade level from grades 9-12.

## History Education and Nation Building: Review of the Literature

To start with, it is pertinent that the reader be clear about how nation-building should be understood in this work. There is a distinction between the two intertwined processes of state building and nation building, although there is a tendency to use them interchangeably. The former refers to the practical tasks of creating and strengthening governance systems and institutions, while the latter, which is what concerns us here, refers to the creation of common values and a shared sense of political community, or what might be called shared citizenship.<sup>9</sup>

7 A module in this context is the teaching material prepared to serve as a textbook for the Freshman course "History of Ethiopia and the Horn." The "module" was finally released in 2022 after a two-year standoff. New textbooks for secondary school history teaching were likewise published after a prolonged delay only in 2023, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade textbook being the first, problematic in recent times. A closer observation of the situation that surrounds the attempt to write history textbooks over the last twenty years warrants the conclusion that there is a tension that traces its roots to the historiographical anomalies embedded in the country's past. Research endeavours attempting to address these issues have been far below what one expects; and this is a major gap that this study hopes to fill at least in part.

8 Ministry of Education (MoE), *Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap 2018-30* (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education, 2019).

9 Tewodros Haile Mariam, "Nation Building in Ethiopia: Past to the Future," in *Nation Building in Ethiopia: Quest of an Enduring Direction* (Bishoftu, Ethiopia : Symposium Papers, 2018), 116-132; Medhane Tadesse, "Competing

The role of schools as training grounds for the youth to take up future responsibilities is conventional wisdom. No less axiomatic is the role of schools as agents of collective experience, promoting interaction and cultural integration. Schools, especially in multicultural states, epitomise the nation-in-miniature.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have invariably attested to this ideological role of education, set to achieve ideological goals. Tekeste Negash underscores “the role of education as primarily ideological, that is, the reproduction of nationalism, patriotism and the perpetuation of classes... .”<sup>11</sup> Julia Lerch complements the above statement, writing: “education has played multiple roles in modelling national societies: as an agency of socialization for the young, a mechanism of stratification and a tool for turning masses into citizens.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, the instrumentality of education in national identity construction and forging a sense of nationhood and citizenship is beyond dispute.

Like all other school subjects, history is important in cultivating the minds of the youth. History, however, is an older discipline, and states have also put greater confidence in history teaching as a very useful vehicle to transmit essential values for nation-building.<sup>13</sup> History education has continued to render the service of transmitting core values useful for nation building, cultivating a sense of nationhood among the youth, and even promoting peace within a nation and without. A prominent educator underlines this mission of history teaching when she writes: “As far as the teaching of history is concerned, there is no doubt that in most countries and most regimes, the main aim has always been to pass on a common culture and inheritance and, more specifically, to construct or consolidate ‘*une conscience nationale*’ [a national consciousness].”<sup>14</sup>

History and memory are important for a person to live an intelligent and productive life in society; according to the British historian Arthur Marwick, it is a necessity: “History is a necessity. Individuals, communities, societies could scarcely exist if all knowledge of the past was wiped out. As memory is to the individual, so is history to the community or society.”<sup>15</sup>

That said, the issue of which history is commonly shared and hence which history to teach remains very contentious issues, especially in multicultural contexts.

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Narratives and Nation Building in Ethiopia”, in *Nation Building in Ethiopia: Quest of an Enduring Direction* (Bishoftu, Ethiopia: Symposium Papers, 2018), 85-91; Dinnen Sinclair, “The Twin Processes of Nation-Building and State-Building,” *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia*, Briefing Note I, 2007.

10 Thomas J. Davis and Azubike Kalu-Nwiwu, “Education, Ethnicity and National Integration in the History of Nigeria: Continuing Problems of Africa’s Colonial Legacy,” *Journal of Negro History*, 86, no.1 (2001), 1-11; F. A. Adeyoyin, “The Role of the School as a Politicizing Agent through Citizenship Education,” *International Journal of Political Education*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (1979), 161-68.

11 Tekeste Negash, *The Crisis of Ethiopian Education* (Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute, 1995), ix.

12 Julia C. Lerch, “Embracing Diversity? Textbook Narratives in Countries with a Legacy of Internal Armed Conflict, 1950 to 2011,” in Denis Bontrovato, Karina V Korostolina and Martina Schulze, eds., *History Can Bite: History Education in Divided and Postwar Societies* (Gottingen: V&Runipress, 2016), 31.

13 Chrissie Monagha & Elisabeth King, “Civics and Ethical Education for Peace Building in Ethiopia: Results and Lessons Learned,” United Nations Children’s Fund Peace building Education and Advocacy Program (Nairobi, 2015); Koren Snježana, “Croatia,” in Luigi Cajani, Simone Lässig & Maria Repoussi, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Conflict and History Education in the Post-Cold War Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 189-204; Ayaz Naseem, “Pakistan,” in Luigi Cajani et al, eds, 447-456.

14 Yveline Fumat, “History, Civics and National Consciousness,” in *Children’s Social and Economic Education*, Vol. 2, no. 3 (1997), 158.

15 Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1989), 14.

The challenge for educators and textbook writers in poly-ethnic states has been what themes and contents are shared by the “others”, who consider themselves out of the orbit of the dominant narrative. Writing history textbooks for schools is more sensitive, especially in countries with legacies of internal conflicts and unequal relations. Writers of textbooks could not be heedless of the existing tension in the historiography of a country where such reality prevails. Dea Marić aptly warns: “History textbooks are always created in the context of the historiography and context of the country in which they are written. Therefore, they are the reflection of that historiography and social norms prevailing in that society.”<sup>16</sup>

Theoretically, multiculturalism and diversity are viewed as positive elements for harmonious interaction and coexistence. In 2001, the General Conference of UNESCO asserted that “...cultural diversity is necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature....Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, it is not to be denied that cultural and linguistic differences have remained a breeding ground for rivalries, contestations and conflicts, and, in some cases, for bloody civil wars.

Diversity-related tension is said to have been triggered and intensified, especially in the post-Cold War era, by significant global, social, cultural and political transformations as well. They are further accentuated by the re-emergence of ethnic nationalism and the digital revolution that has pervaded the world, including the developing nations. Some of the tensions and conflicts that debilitate such nations have to do with history and interpretations of the past, which in turn are closely related to what and how we teach history in schools.<sup>18</sup> Ethiopia is one of such countries with immense diversities in terms of culture, language, tradition, and religion, and hence vulnerable to those strains.

## Methodological Issues

This study follows the canons of Reflective Practice, or Reflexive Methodology, which draws on past experiences and assesses individual and collective actions to generate new insights useful to improve practice. This methodology is a recent and progressively evolving research technique which is broadly defined as “... intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation.”<sup>19</sup> The primary tenet of the Reflective Practice is largely learning from past experiences, assessing the causes and effects of setbacks encountered, and generating insights to facilitate new

16 Dea Marić, “The Homeland War in Croatian History: Education Between ‘Real Truth’ and Innovative History Teaching,” in Denis Bontrovato et al, 85-110.

17 UNESCO, Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. Adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 31<sup>st</sup> Session, Paris, November 2, 2001.

18 Luigi Cajani et al, “Introduction: History Education Conflicts Around the World - Backgrounds, Settings, Foci,” in Luigi Cajani et al, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Conflict and History Education*, 1-54; Falk Pingel, in *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris/Braunschweig: UNESCO & GEI, 2010).

19 David Boud, Rosemary Keogh and David Walker, *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (London: Routledge Falmer, 1985), 19.

possibilities of learning.<sup>20</sup> Although there are various alternative ways of doing the Reflective Practice, such as reflection-in-action, the reflection-on-action and the reflection- about-action, the latter sounds a more plausible technique worth applying in this study.<sup>21</sup> The author explored experience, actions and behaviour to understand, evaluate and interpret events and experiences in which he had been involved. Stimulating insights have also been drawn from personal reflections and the author's engagement in textbook writing, textbook research and many years of experience around history education. Most relevant and valuable inputs for reflexive activities such as this one are the author's own recollections from years of experience as secondary school teacher, teacher educator, textbook writer and editor. Moreover, the article is also based on some documentary evidence.

## Antecedents and Precedents: Historiographical Influences and Current Trends

A very common challenge facing plural societies in contemporary Africa has remained “weak” national identity, which is largely a legacy of the colonial experience that invented “territorialised administrative units” with artificial boundaries. Colonialism, for its own administrative convenience, had brought together African communities and groups with regional disparities in terms of culture, language and local traditions. This continued to be the case in the post-colonial period where conscientious nation building, through schooling or other means, was not pursued the way it should have been. This created a fertile ground for ethno- nationalist elites to mobilise African communities around ethnic allegiances, rather than the bigger national allegiance.<sup>22</sup>

Ethiopia's historical experience is a bit different in that, as a non-colonized African state, the success or failure of the nation building process has little to do with the post-colonial state. Yet, as a multicultural state with all kinds of diversities and identity issues, claims for representation and recognition in the national narrative have progressively permeated the political landscape.<sup>23</sup> One of the roots of identity-related issues and historiographical contestations is embedded in Ethiopia's distinct historical experience, namely the expansion of the imperial state by Emperor Menilek II (1889 -1913) in the late nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Dissenting voices against the centralist narrative of the nation's past got a fertile breeding ground with the rise of the Ethiopian Student Movement from about the mid-1960s onwards.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, by the early

20 Donald A. Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987); Killion Joellen and Guy R. Tondem, “A Process for Personal Theory Building,” *Educational Leadership*, 48, no. 6 (1991), 4-17.

21 Joellen and Tondem, 221-233.

22 Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 18-19; Domionika Koter, “Accidental nation-building in Africa,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 27, no. 3 (2021), 862-879; Denise Bentravato & Merethe Skårås, “Ruptured Imaginings amid Emerging Nationhood: The Unsettled Narrative of ‘Unity in Resistance’ in South Sudanese History Textbooks,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 29 (2023), 1041- 1056.

23 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); Pietro Toggia, “History Writing as a State Ideological Project in Ethiopia,” *African Identities*, 6, no.4 (2008), 319-343.

24 Alessandro Triulzi, “Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography,” in Wendy James et al, eds., *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 276-88; Christopher Clapham, “The Challenges of Diversity”; Sara Marzagora, “History in Twentieth Century Ethiopia”, 425-444.

25 Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c.1960-1974* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2014); Randi Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to a Revolution*,

1970s, identity issues gained ascendancy. Contestations, historiographical or otherwise, have become a fact of life in contemporary Ethiopia triggering violent conflicts, ironically with even greater vigour following the onset of federalism in 1995.<sup>26</sup>

A sense of history among Ethiopian rulers of the imperial period, chiefly Menilek II and Haile Selassie I, could be reasonably adduced to mean that some degree of attention was given to the values of history and history teaching. Pietro Toggia writes: In March 1905, Emperor Menelik commissioned *Aleqa* Taye to go to Germany to undertake historical research ... Haile Selassie was not only fully supportive of Ethiopian historians; he was by far a unique ruler with an exceptional “sense of history” who surrounded himself with senior government appointees who were also history writers. The two noted historians – Tekle Tsadik Mekuria and Hiruy Welde-Selassie – were his senior government officials with ministerial portfolios. Three other senior officials – Kebede Tesema, Yilma Deressa, and Hadis Alemayehu – had written history books and memoirs.<sup>27</sup>

History education during the Derg period (1974-1991) was demonstrably an instrument of the self-proclaimed socialist state, and history textbooks were suffocated with contents of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Besides, the Derg regime was well known for its patriotic pedigree and its desire to perpetuate the “Great Tradition”. One could see this from the contents of the contemporary history textbooks for grades eleven and twelve.<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding this, however, groups in different parts of the country, disgruntled by what they claim is national oppression and exclusion, had already started an armed struggle to do away with the system that espoused the “Greater Ethiopia” tradition. The salience of historiographical contestations over a shared past have gained a new momentum after the EPRDF seized power in 1991. Not only have counter-histories to the “Great tradition” have permeated the political and public discourse, but also numerous academic works with deconstructivist tone have been produced. One such critique of the “Pan-Ethiopian” ideology is the ethno-nationalist narrative that portrays the Ethiopian state as a colonial construct, and the southern expansion of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a colonial conquest.<sup>29</sup> Such are the signals indicating the onset of differing interpretations of Ethiopia’s past.

The curriculum and textbooks of secondary school history during the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) period (1991-2018) were not as such created with the motive of ethnic-federalist policies later stubbornly advanced by the EPRDF-led government. The Education and Training Policy (ETP) of that government, issued in 1994,

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1952-1974 (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2005); Abbink, “History Education in Ethiopia post-1991”

26 Asnake Kefale, “Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study of Somali and Beni Shangul Gumuz Regions,” PhD Dissertation (University of Leiden, 2009); Merera Gudina, “Contradictory Interpretations of Ethiopian History.

27 Toggia, “History Writing,” 324.

28 Girma Negash, “Adwa in Ethiopia’s High School History Curriculum: The Interface among History, Pedagogy, Ideology and Nation Building,” *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 18, no.1 (2022), 95-119; Tekeste Negash, *The Crisis of Ethiopian Education*.

29 Bonnie K. Holcomb & Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990); John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethno national Conflict, 1868-1992* (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993); Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History”.

stipulated the diffusion of science and technology, the cultivation of the productive potential of the youth and the development of the problem-solving capacity of individuals. Yerga Gelaw, in his recent book *Native Colonialism*, concludes that the ETP of 1994 does not show a clear purpose or intent to use the country's history for nation building.<sup>30</sup>

Combined with multiple other factors, the tense ethnicised politics led to a change of regime in 2018 that brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power. But historiographical arguments and counter-arguments continued with new vigor among the elites, educators, politicians and activists. Competing views and contestations about who “we” are, what is “ours”, to be taught to the youth, continued to evoke endless debates, arguments and counter-arguments.<sup>31</sup> The state of history education and the challenges of teaching a common past are demonstrated by the lingering project of writing history textbooks (2009- 2018) for Ethiopian secondary schools and what I have dubbed the “module crisis”.

Ethiopian secondary schools continued for long to use history textbooks written in 2005 and 2006, without bothering to make any revisions. A project to prepare history textbooks for secondary schools was launched in 2009. However, the project was interrupted on several occasions and failed to deliver the textbooks in the end. After the lapse of more than eight years, there was no new textbook when the project was finally terminated in 2018. It was unofficially rumoured that authorities in the Ministry of Education were under pressure not to push the project to its desired completion. Reportedly, some complaints from groups who claim to have vested interest in the project complained that they are not sufficiently represented in the group of historians set up to write those textbooks.<sup>32</sup>

With regard to the module, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, heeding the years of yearnings for the restoration of the common course given for freshmen of higher education (defunct since 2002), started a project in 2018 to prepare a teaching material, “module”, to be used by all the country's universities. This again was halted in the middle because of differences on some historiographical issues that arose among writers and reviewers involved in the project. This appeared to have been resolved, and it was announced at an official validation workshop held on 20 February 2020, that the “module” was ready for use. However, the course was not delivered the following academic year, even after students were registered for it.<sup>33</sup> There was no news of the module until September 2022, when instruction was given by the Ministry of Education, after consultation with the Association of Ethiopian Historians, to start teaching the course using a slightly modified version of it. The course, History of Ethiopia and the Horn, which earlier had the Course Code Hist 102, was now renumbered Hist. 1012. The apparent reason for the two-year delay was historiographical dispute over the imperial expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially around what is known as the “Anole Incident.”<sup>34</sup>

30 Yirga Gelaw, *Native Colonialism*.

31 Jon Abbink, “History Education in Ethiopia post-1991”; Triulzi, “Battling with the Past.”

32 Source: my own notebook and first-hand observation.

33 As Chairman of the Department of History (AAU), I remember assigning some 37 instructors for 66 sections in all campuses under Addis Ababa University during the second semester of the 2020/21 academic year.

34 I had the opportunity to make a presentation about our (myself and colleagues in the Department of History) assessment of the module and I have since remained a keen observer of the disputations from close range.

Interestingly, the module controversy does not seem to have subsided completely during the three years since the course started to be taught. Applications and written complaints kept on flowing to the Ministry of Education and the Association of Ethiopian Historians, pointing out some contentious issues that the module still needs to address.

Such pressures from different directions and demands for revision of the module later resulted in the revision of the module after serving for only two academic years, whereas the standard time for revising a teaching material or textbooks is between 3-5 years after publication. Earlier, under the auspices of the Association of Ethiopian Historians, instructors involved in teaching the course using the said module had met under different clusters to evaluate the module. Several concerns were raised at those meetings, the issue of inclusivity and the length of the module being the more prominent ones. It was based on the reports of these clusters that the Ministry of Education and the Association of Ethiopian Historians commissioned three original panel of authors of the module and one additional member to revise the module.

## Findings and Recommendations

The major thrust of this paper is how Ethiopia and other multi-cultural states could manage differences and maintain internal cohesion, and how they could deploy history teaching to that end. Globalisation has provided a profound stimulus for the rise and expansion of global discourse in all aspects of human activity, calling for more global educational systems going beyond the nation state. However, developing nations of the global south are still grappling with the challenges of diversity and engrossed in the issue of national unity. The cultural, religious and linguistic heterogeneity of these nations, not to mention their economic underdevelopment, have posed serious challenges to their shared civic identity. Owing to these political realities, a globalized education does not seem to be effective to address the challenges of diversity in Africa. That is why I concur with Julia Lerch's "neo-institutional approach" for Ethiopia and other nations still trying to renegotiate the more privileged space of the nation-state (the national), by espousing narratives of multiculturalism.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, focusing on the Ethiopian context, the most important lesson to be drawn from this study is that history education could be, and should be, reframed according to present needs, with due consideration to the major shifts in the globalised world, integrating differences as well as aiming at conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding. History teaching, production of history textbooks for common use and history-related discussions (such as dialogue for national consensus), need to be placed within the wider framework of peace-oriented education, reconciliation, national unity, coexistence, common future and community cohesion.

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35 Julia Lerch, "Embracing Diversity?" 31- 43.

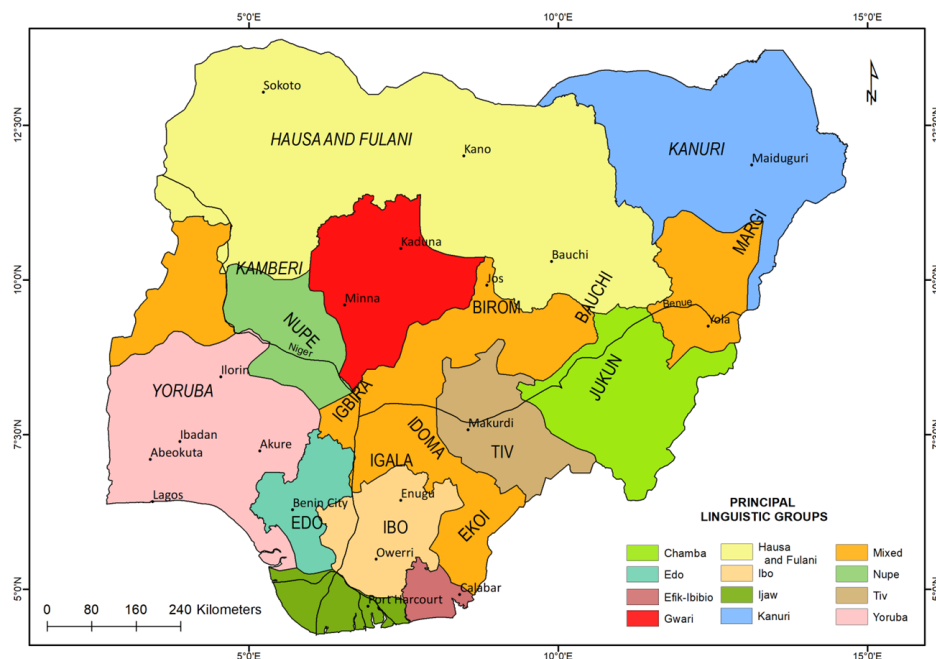
# Contested Borders and Boundaries

## States Creation, Boundary Adjustments and Nation Building in Nigeria

*R. T. Akinyele*

### **Introduction: Pluralism and Administrative Units of the Colonial Period**

Nigeria has an area of 923,769 square kilometres with an estimated population of 230 million.<sup>36</sup> Each of the 374 ethnic groups believes it has to struggle for its own share of the national resources.<sup>37</sup>



*Ethnographic Map of Nigeria. Source: Dept. of Geography, University of Lagos (2026).*

<sup>36</sup> Nigeria lies between latitudes 4°N and 14°N. It is the most populated black country in the world.

<sup>37</sup> Some of the modern ethnic identities were products of communal fusion and expansion during the colonial era: R. Melson and H. Wolpe, eds., *Nigeria: Modernisation and Politics of Communalism* (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 1971), 22.

The multi-ethnic composition of the country informed the different proposals advanced by British opinion leaders to divide the country into administrative units.

In 1911, Edward D Morel, editor of the British *African Mail*, recommended the division of the country into four provinces: Northern or Sudan province with headquarters at Kano, the Central Province administered from Zungeru, the Western Province with its headquarters at Osogbo and the Eastern Province administered from Calabar.<sup>38</sup>

In 1913, C L. Temple, the Lt Governor of Northern Nigeria, added administrative convenience to the principle of ethnicity and suggested the following six administrative units with their headquarters, shown here in parentheses: Hausa States (Kano), Chad Territories(Maiduguri), Benue (Lokoja), Western provinces (Lagos), Central Provinces (Asaba), and Eastern province (Enugu).<sup>39</sup>

Frederick Lugard, the first Governor General of Nigeria after the amalgamation of 1914, administered Northern and Southern Nigeria as two parallel administrative units based on their perceived religious and cultural differences.<sup>40</sup> In 1939, Sir Arthur Richard divided the country into three administrative units – North, East and West – in the belief that the people of those regions “differ widely in race, customs, outlook and administrative systems.”<sup>41</sup> The three administrative units were converted into political units or regions at the constitutional conference of 1950 at Ibadan.<sup>42</sup> This tripartite division of the country introduced the North/South dichotomy into the political equation of the country and created the perennial fear of ethnic domination of the country by the three most populous groups – Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. In Nigeria, an ethnic group was traditionally understood to denote people who were related by blood or primordial ties. The process of inter-group relations during the colonial period resulted in the expansion and fusion of communal groups. This instrumental ethnicity produced the new identities of race and nation, which have become the currency of ethnic bargaining and separatist agitations in the country. However, only the concept of ethnic group is recognised in official documents.

38 E.D. Morel, *Nigeria: Its Peoples and Its Problems* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 201-210.

39 Richard A. Olaniyan, “The Amalgamation, Colonial Politics and Nationalism”, in Richard Olaniyan, ed., *The Amalgamation and its Enemies* (Ile Ife: University of Ife Press, 2003), 4-5.

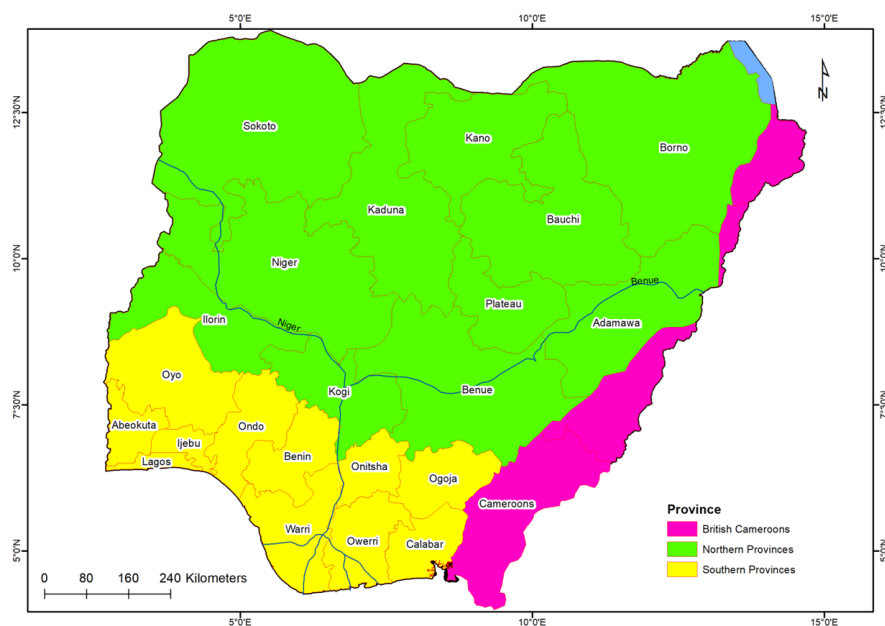
40 A.H. Kirk-Green, *Lugard and the Amalgamation of Nigeria: A Documentary Sourcebook, 1966-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 12.

41 Nigeria Proposals for Revision of the Constitution of Nigeria, Cmnd. 65999 (1945), 5-6.

42 R.T. Akinyele, *Nigeria: Contesting for Space, Identity and Security* (Ibadan: Cornel Publication, 2014), 116.

Moreover, the Northern Region was larger than the Eastern and Western Regions combined in size and population. Each of the regions also had a majority ethnic group which controlled the major political party in the region. The political implication of the structural imbalance became increasingly clear after the regionalisation of the sources of wealth and power in 1954 with the adoption of the Lyttleton Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

Although the British divided the regions into provinces, divisions and districts, none of them corresponded with the empires, kingdoms and communities of the precolonial period.<sup>2</sup> In 1900, Nigeria was divided into 11 provinces, which had become 14 in 1926 and 25 by 1945. The provincial system was scrapped and replaced with the state structure in 1967.



*Source: Dept. of Geography, University of Lagos (2026)*

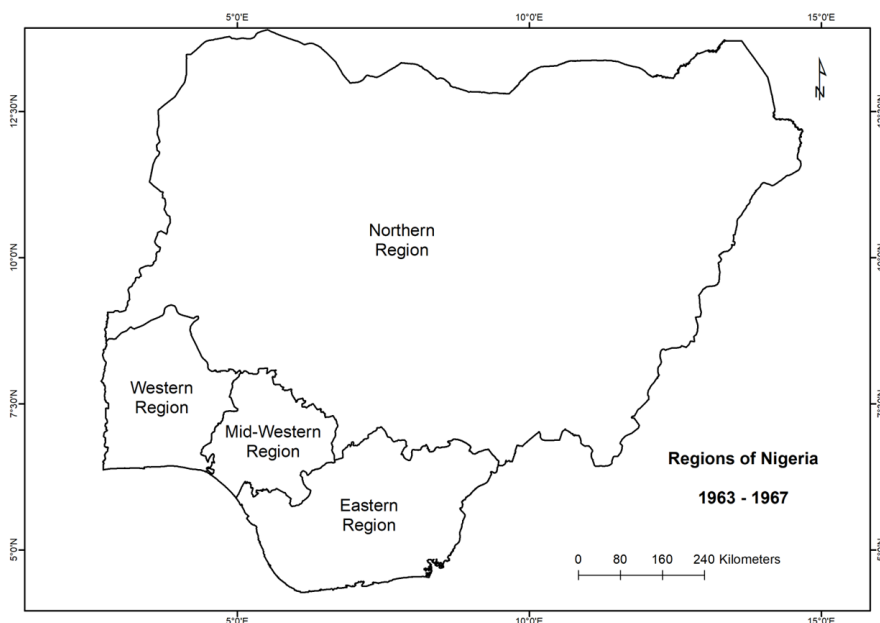
The adoption of the Indirect Rule System underscored the importance of ethnicity in the configuration of the administrative units. The localised effect of the administrative boundaries produced the fear of ethnic domination among the communities that were grouped or administered outside the political or administrative units created for their kinsmen. This development produced the first wave of separatist agitations in Nigeria, especially at the grassroots level. Some of the communities wrote protest petitions to the colonial masters, others embarked on protest migrations while a few engaged solicitors to argue their case for a reunion with their kith and kin.<sup>3</sup> Even if the British had wished to realign the ethnic frontiers with the political boundaries, it would have been practically impossible to achieve. The frontiers of the precolonial kingdoms and empires were fluid, expanding and contracting depending on the dynamics of inter-group relations such as war, peace and trade. This was the case of Oyo and Benin Empires. For many of the communities, particularly the states of the Niger

1 R.T. Akinyele, "Line and Space in Human Affairs: Minorities and Marginals", University of Lagos Inaugural Lecture Series (2013), 23-27.

2 Obaro Ikime, "In Search of Nigeria: Changing Patterns of Inter-Group Relations in an Evolving Nation-State", Presidential Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the 30<sup>th</sup> Congress of Historical Society of Nigeria, University of Nsukka, 1 May 1985.

3 R.T. Akinyele, cited above in note 8.

Delta, the settlements and cultures overlapped to the extent that there was no boundary to draw.<sup>4</sup> The problem ascended to the centre stage of the political process as Nigeria moved closer to independence in the late 1950s. As Donald Rotschild rightly observed, “the federal arrangement may have been a reflection of the power relation among the three major ethnic groups, the regional structure jeopardized the interest of the ethnic minorities”.<sup>5</sup>



*Map of the Regional Structure. Source: Dept. of Geography, University of Lagos (2026).*

In the context of the ethnic or majoritarian politics of the period, it was almost impossible for ethnic minorities to occupy important political positions. Consequently, the ethnic minorities began to agitate for the redrawing of the political map of the country to shield them from the influence of their dominant neighbours. The agitations influenced the government to appoint a special commission, headed by Sir Henry Willink QC, to ascertain the fears of the ethnic minorities and recommend the means of allaying them.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, all the groups that appeared before the commission wanted the creation of their own states and rejected the suggestion of constitutional safeguards. The rationale, as one of them graphically presented it, was that there is no better way to safeguard the lamb that finds itself in a zoo with a lion than the iron curtain.<sup>7</sup> Since a boundary marks the limit of political and administrative jurisdiction, it was only the redrawing of the map that could extinguish their minority status, they argued. However, the commission rejected all the state proposals – Ondo, Yoruba Central, Mid-West and Lagos Colony from the West; Ogoja, Cross Rivers and Rivers from the East; and a Middle Belt State from the North – either because the proposals did not represent any discernible minority interest or failed the economic viability test or would have evoked new minority

4 A. I. Asiwaju, “African States”, *Presence Africaine*, 127/128 (1982), 43–49.

5 D.S. Rothschild, *Racial Bargaining in Independent Kenya: A Study in Decolonisation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 19.

6 “Nigeria: Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Fears of Minorities and the Means of Allaying them (Willink Report)”, Cmnd. 569 (1958), A2.

7 “Memo of Evidence of Biase and Aro Districts and Neighbouring Clans of Ito/Iwerre and Ikpanja to Minorities Commission”, in NAF/CA/1/2 in CE/WZF6.

fear.<sup>8</sup> The wrangling over the subject made the British to give the nationalist leaders the option between independence in 1960 or at a later date when the state agitations would have been satisfactorily settled. The delegates to the Resumed Constitutional Conference in London in 1959 chose the former, hoping to reopen the state creation business after independence.<sup>9</sup>

## Discussion of the Six States Creation Exercises since Independence

The politics of identity and exclusion were carried into the post-independence era. The regional minorities became relevant in the hegemonic competition of the three majority ethnic groups for the control of the federal centre. The governments in power in the Northern and Eastern regions successfully supported the creation of the Mid-West Region on 9 August 1963 to weaken the West by reducing its population. Although the creation of the Mid-West Region encouraged the state movements to intensify their campaigns, no other state was created until 27 May 1967, when the regional structure was replaced with the twelve-state structure.<sup>10</sup>

The circumstance surrounding the creation of the twelve states was not unconnected with the structural imbalance of the country and the degree of threat each of the powerful regions posed to the country's corporate existence. The ethnic politics of the period eventually led to the fall of the First Republic and the civil war of 1967-1970. The states were created by Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, the new Head of State, on the eve of the civil war to discourage Lt Col Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Governor of Eastern Region, from proclaiming the region's independence. Experts in the field of identity discourse have argued that public space can be manipulated to foster territorial identities that could weaken primordial loyalties (cultural identities) and promote national unity.<sup>11</sup> This was the goal of the twelve states structure. In that state creation exercise, the North was partitioned into six states to end the fear of northern domination. The minorities of Southeastern Nigeria – Calabar, Ogoja, Rivers Provinces – were constituted into a Southeastern State to shield them from the influence of the Igbo.

The middle belters got a state of their dream in a separate Benue-Plateau State. Lagos State was carved out of the Western Region to deny the Yoruba exclusive control over the Federal Capital Territory.<sup>12</sup>

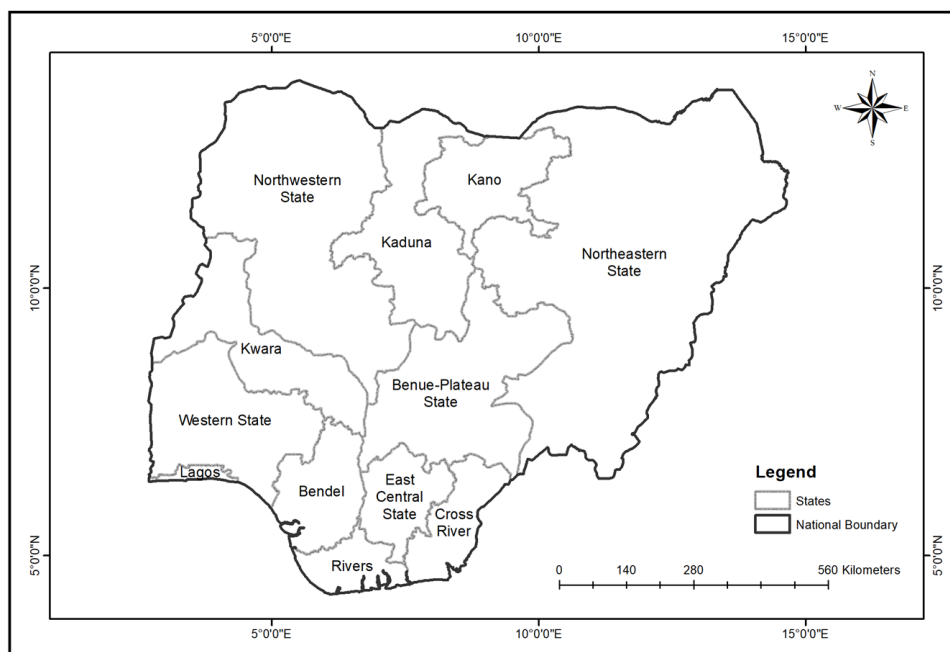
8 Phillip Mason, *West Africa Magazine*, 22 November 1958, 115.

9 The delegates to the London Conference of 1959 adopted the political philosophy of the late President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana that stated: "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all things shall be added unto you."

10 M.J. Dent, ("Tarka and the Tiv: A Perspective on Nigeria Federation," in Melson and Wolpe, eds., *Nigeria: Modernisation and the Politics of Comunalism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1971), 458) argued that Lt Colonel Yakubu Gowon successfully replaced the regional structure with the twelve state structure because of his own minority origin and the minority alliance that dominated the army and the bureaucracy at the time.

11 Philippe Garvais-Lambony, "Space and Identity: Thinking Through some South African Examples", in Simon Bekkers and Anne Leilde, eds., *Reflections and Identity in four African Cities*, South Africa, Africa Minds 2006, 53-55.

12 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Nigeria 12 State Structure: The only Way Out*, Lagos Government Printers, 1967, 10-12.



*Map of the 12 States. Source: Dept. of Geography, University of Lagos (2026)*

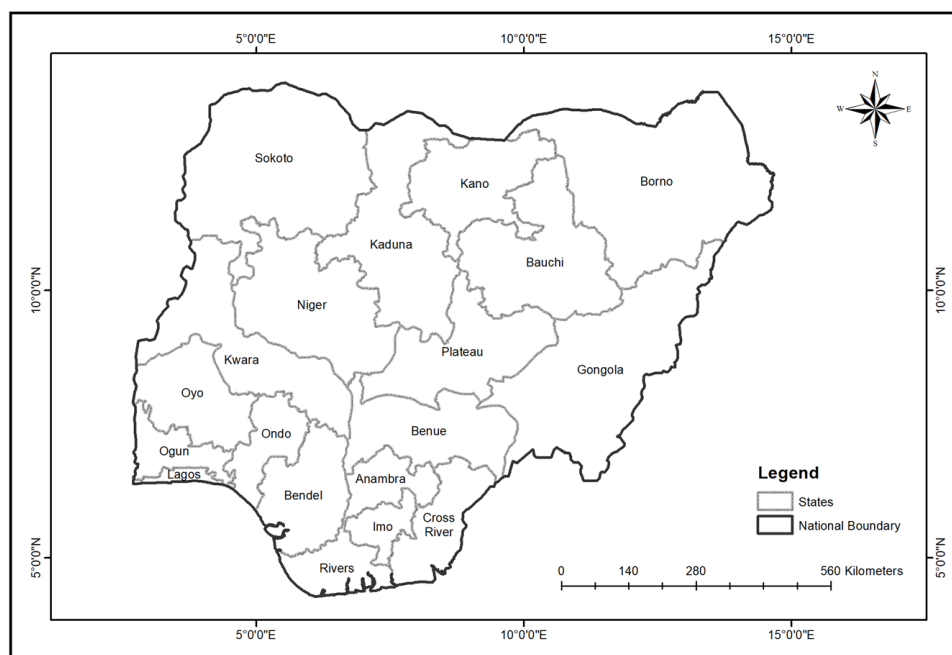
The calculation was that new loyalties would be built around the newly created internal boundaries that would destroy the old regional identities and loyalty. Although the State creation exercise was hailed as far afield as London as the solution to the ethnic problem of Nigeria,<sup>13</sup> the new boundaries merely created new identities that formed concentric rings around the old identities, each of which would be activated depending on the circumstance. Besides, the new states created new centres of power that reproduced the “we” vs “they” dichotomy. The wave of agitation for the creation of new states pushed General Yakubu Gowon to impose a moratorium of four years on states creation in 1970.<sup>14</sup>

By the time General Yakubu Gowon was overthrown in 1975, the four years moratorium had expired and his successor, General Murtala Mohammed, appointed the Irikefe Panel to review the state creation business. The panel expanded the goals of states creation to include the objectives of bringing government closer to the people and promoting accelerated and even development.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The 12-State Structure was widely believed to be what Nigeria needed to put an end to minority problems.

<sup>14</sup> *Nigeria Chronicle*, 12 January 1975, 3.

<sup>15</sup> “Nigeria: Report of the Panel Appointed by the Federal Military Government to Investigate the Creation of More States and Boundary Adjustments in Nigeria (Irikefe Panel)” (Lagos: Federal Government Press), 1975.



*Map of the 19 States of Nigeria. Source: Dept. of Geography, University of Lagos (2026)*

Thus, if the goal of states' creation up to 1975 was to address the challenges of state-building and national unity, that of the latter period focused more on the challenges of participation and distribution. In 1976, seven more states were created, bringing the total to nineteen. Most of them were co-terminus with the provinces of the colonial period. Because of the exercise, most of the sizeable ethnic groups had been constituted into separate states such that it became increasingly difficult to justify the demands for new states in terms of the fear of ethnic domination. Gradually, Nigeria moved from the era of Minorities into the era of Marginals. The latter can be defined as a collection of communities, which is not necessarily different from the others in the same state in matters of language and culture, but which nevertheless desires a state of its own to ensure rapid material development.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the Ekiti, who constituted 52% of the population of Ondo State and controlled 12 of the 22 local government councils, demanded a separate Ekiti State because they were marginalised in the distribution of industries.<sup>17</sup> The request for the creation of Osun State out of Oyo State, like many of the agitations in Igboland, involved the partition of monoculture areas.

The Babangida Administration that succeeded the Murtala/Obasanjo Military Regime first created two additional states in 1987, bringing the number to 21, then added nine new states on 27 August 1991, thus transforming Nigeria into a federation of 30 states. The Government chose rural settlements, notably Dutse and Damaturu, as the capitals of some of the new states in the hope that this would attract development to the areas. Each of the newly created state was given a take-off grant of 30 million Naira.<sup>18</sup> Many Nigerians criticised the high number of the new states, but the Head of State justified it by saying that "there is no scientific way of determining the appropriate number of states in a federation since it is always a reflection

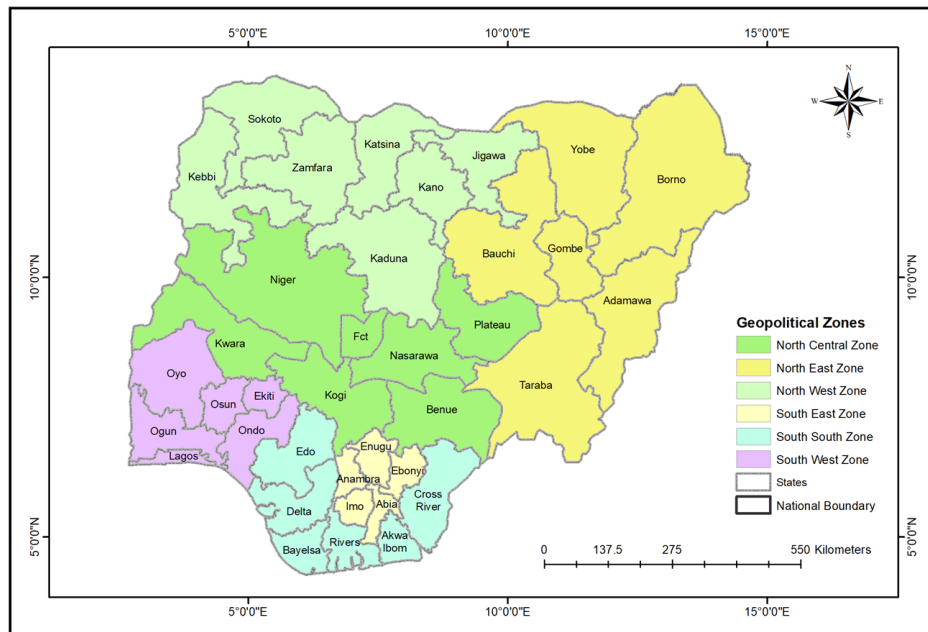
16 R.T. Akinyele, "Growth Pole Theory, Marginals and Minorities: States Creation in Nigeria in a Period of Military Transition", *Asian and African Studies*, 27, 3 (1993).

17 Ibid, 301.

18 *Nigerian Tribune*, 3 September 1991, 1; *African Guardian*, 23 September 1991, 12-18.

of the political and social forces at play.”<sup>19</sup> Evidently, some of the states were created to buy support for a military regime in view of the growing demand for participatory democracy.

The present thirty-six states emerged from the restructuring programme of General Sanni Abacha in 1996. General Abacha received a total of fifty-five state proposals which his government could not completely ignore. The government also noted that many of the existing states were not economically viable. To achieve the dual objectives of creating new states and strengthening them at the same time, General Abacha divided the country into six geopolitical zones and created one state in each of them.



*Geopolitical Zones of Nigeria*

*Source: Dept. of Geography, University of Lagos (2026)*

19 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Federal Government Views on the Report of the Panel on Creation of States* (Lagos, Government Printer, 1976), 12

The six zones, with the number of states and local government units are as indicated below:

| Zone                      | No. of States | No. of Local Government Councils |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|
| South-East                | 5             | 95                               |
| South-West                | 6             | 137                              |
| South-South               | 6             | 122                              |
| North-West                | 7             | 186                              |
| North-East                | 6             | 112                              |
| North-Central             | 6             | 121                              |
| Federal Capital Territory |               | 1                                |
| TOTAL                     | 36            | 774                              |

**The Unending Business:** As at November 2024, report indicates that there were twenty state proposals before the National Assembly.<sup>20</sup> At least seven of the bills have passed the first reading.<sup>21</sup> The number of states requests have been increasing since 1979, when the Obasanjo regime introduced the principles of Federal Character and the Distributive Pool Revenue Allocation under which the national revenue and political appointments are shared on equal basis among the states. Under this sharing formula, ethnic groups of the defunct regions that have more states attract more government funds and political appointments. This explains the persistent request of the Igbo for one additional state in the South East to level up with the other two majority ethnic groups and to bring the Nigerian civil war to a close.<sup>22</sup> The current president, Asiwaju Ahmed Tinubu, has been urged to create additional states to “correct historical injustice”, write his name in gold and brighten his chance for re-election as president in 2027.<sup>23</sup>

A few of the state demands will be highlighted to illustrate the rationale and the contentious issues associated with them. For instance, the advocates of the creation of Oke Ogun State from the present Oyo State have consistently anchored their demand on the perennial neglect of the area because of its location at the border between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin.<sup>24</sup> The agitation for an Ijebu State from the present Ogun State is intended, in part, to resolve the unending rivalry between the Ijebu and Egba, the two major Yoruba groups in the state. However, while the Ijebus are unanimous in their request for the creation of the proposal state,

20 Sodiq Oyeleke, “Full list: Senate gives condition for creation of 20 new states”, Punch online, 8 August 2021: <https://punchng.com/full-list-senate-gives-condition-for-creation-of-20-new-states>, accessed 19 November 2024.

21 Godfrey Ofurum, “How agitation for more state creation breeds rancor in Nigeria”, <https://business-day.ng/politics/articles/how-agitation-for-more-state-creation-breeds-rancor-in-nigeria>, accessed 19 November 2024.

22 *The Guardian*, 7 August 1996, 26.

23 This view was forcefully canvassed by Barrister Osita Ogada, an advocate of Anioma State on TVC News, 9 July 2024.

24 Oke Ogun includes the historically important settlements of Shaki, Iganna, Okeho and Isheyin, widely recognized as the food basket of Oyo State but with little “government presence” or establishment.

the choice of the state capital has engendered enmity between Ijebu Ode and Ijebu Ife.<sup>25</sup>

Altogether, there are four state requests from Igboland in the Southeast zone. These are: the proposed Etiti State that will be formed by combining some local governments from all the existing five existing Igbo States; Orashi from Imo and Anambra States; Njaba from the present Imo State and the excision of Aba State from Abia State.<sup>26</sup> While the mainland Igbo, those who reside east of River Niger in the South-East geopolitical zone, are advocating for the creation of the new state in the South East Zone, their kinsmen located west of River Niger, collectively known as Niger Delta Igbo, are insisting that the new state should be carved out of the present Delta State in the South South Zone and known as Anioma. For them, the government should be thinking of addressing the historic injustice to the “Igbo nation” and not balancing the number of states among the geopolitical zones.<sup>27</sup>

## Shifting Internal Boundaries and Challenge of Nation Building

The creation of States was originally meant to allay the fears of ethnic minorities and promote national integration. States creation and boundary adjustments have had negative effects on state building and nation building in Nigeria. While state building focuses on creation or strengthening of state institutions to render effective services, nation building entails the process of forging a national identity such that the frame of reference of the constituent units ceases to be their local or primordial groups but the nation.<sup>28</sup> Even after sixty years of independence, Nigeria remains a “nation space” rather than a nation state.<sup>29</sup> The process of evolution of the administrative boundaries has contributed to the problem.

Research findings from the six state creation exercises in Nigeria since independence show that the creation of states has not eliminated minority problems in the country. Instead, each state creation exercise has produced new minorities. The shifting of the boundary has merely reproduced the dominant/minority dichotomy. Consequently, more minorities now exist in Nigeria than in 1960. For this reason, the goal of nation building has become more difficult to achieve.

Secondly, each state agitation has fueled communal crisis as neighbouring communities jostle for inclusion or exclusion from the proposed state or compete for the state capital or local government headquarters. The protest that accompanied the 1996 state creation exercise made the federal military government ban all protests and threatened protesters.<sup>30</sup>

Thirdly, since the state agitators had to prove that they were (are) culturally and linguistically

25 Adeola Balogun, “My ultimate dream is to have an Ijebu State for my people – Awujale”, *Punch*, 26 June 2021, 6.

26 Sodiq Oyeleke, cited above in note 27.

27 Barrister Osita Ogada argued that there is no reference to the zones in the 1999 Nigeria Constitution and should therefore not be used as a basis for state creation.

28 Obi Iwuagwu, “Nation Building and Its Implications”, in Obi Iwuagwu, ed., *Nation Building in Africa: Issues, Challenges and Emerging Trends* (Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 2021), 3-5.

29 For this nuanced distinction between nation state and nation space by the Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka, see *This Day*, 9 March 2009, 20.

30 Two people died in the riot over the non-creation of Zamfara State in Gusau and youths in Hadeja vandalized government buildings in reaction to the selection of Dutse as capital of Jigawa State: *The Guardian*, 7 September 1991, 9; *Vanguard*, 30 August 1991, 1.

different from the rest of the people in the same administrative units to qualify for a separate State, this requirement has encouraged revisionist history and separatist demands that have complicated the task of nation-building. For instance, the Ibibio and Annang, who once claimed to belong to the same Efik group in their agitation for the creation of a Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State in the 1950s, denied such relationship soon after the creation of the Southeastern state that brought them together in 1967. During the agitation for the creation of the Mid-West Region, some Edo intelligentsia deliberately falsified the traditional account of the relationship between Benin and the Yoruba. They denied that the Oba of Benin was one of the seven children of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba race, and argued that the Benin Empire was older than Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba race. Recently, the Oba of Benin sanctioned some of his chiefs who travelled to Ile-Ife to pay homage to the Ooni (ruler) of Ife.<sup>31</sup> This shows how history can become a dangerous tool in the hands of those who wish to overthrow the established order. Revisionist history obscures proper historical understanding essential for political stability in any society.

Fourthly, the proliferation of states has increased the number of boundary disputes in the country. The situation is understandable since each state creation was accompanied by the creation of local government units and the adjustment of boundaries. Many of the state proposals overlapped, while others involved the fragmentation of existing states. Some boundary disputes have resulted in communal violence in which graves were desecrated and corpses exhumed by those claiming to be the owners of the disputed territory.<sup>32</sup> The causes of the boundary disputes include disagreement over the location of the common boundary, fight over farmlands, controversial ownership claim of cross-boundary resources and disagreement over the jurisdiction of traditional rulers under the new dispensation. The growing dimension of boundary problems in the country, both from within and the neighbouring countries, compelled the federal government to establish the National Boundary Commission by Decree No 38 of 17 December 1987. The Commission was formally inaugurated on 20 July 1988. The terms of reference of the Commission, which is under the control of the Vice-President, are to deal with, determine and intervene in any boundary dispute that may arise between Nigeria and any other neighbours, or between any two states of the federation with a view to settling such disputes.

- a) to advise the federal government on issues affecting Nigeria's borders with neighbouring countries.
- b) to entertain recommendations from committees set up by the Commission and advise the federal government on such recommendations; and
- c) to do such other things connected with boundary matters as the president may, from time to time, direct.

31 The Oba of Benin, Ewuare II, suspended six of the traditional chiefs for paying allegiance to Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Oguwusi: *PM News*, 29 April 2024 (<https://pmnewsnigeria.com>)

32 Abednego Ekoko, "Boundaries and National Security", 6<sup>th</sup> Inaugural Lecture, Delta State University, Abraka, 25 March 2004, 25-26.

The Commission operates through two major organs, namely the Inter-State Boundary Technical Committee and the International Boundary Technical Committee, each of which is headed by a commissioner.<sup>33</sup>

Fifth, the creation of States creation has also created the problem of asset sharing, which is always difficult to resolve. Oftentimes, indigenes of the newly created states are evicted from the civil service and top positions of the government they had served for many years. This “war of brothers against brothers” has not only damaged the cordial relationship that ought to exist between and among the states but exacerbated the indigene/settler dichotomy that has made it difficult to produce Nigerian citizens.<sup>34</sup> Admittedly, Nigeria adopted ethnicised federalism in 1954 to promote Unity in Diversity and the emergence of universal Nigerian citizenship. However, the competitive logic of ethnic conflict and sometimes cooperation has produced subsidiary concepts of citizenship or indigeneship.

The Historical Society of Nigeria has lent its voice to the discourse on nation building. In February 1986, the Society organised a National Conference at the University of Lagos on “Writing Nigerian History from a National Perspective”. In August 1986, a “National Conference on the National Question” was similarly organised in Abuja, the federal capital. The history syllabus at college and university levels is structured in a way to accommodate the competing, but not necessarily conflicting, interpretations of Nigerian history. The emergence of the Nigerian State and the histories and cultures of the different groups are adequately covered without necessarily adopting any of the perspectives as the official version of the national history. Emphasis has always been on the commonalities than on the divisive issues.

The government has also exercised caution in selecting national symbols. This explains the use of natural colours on the national flag, and those of Rivers, Niger and Benue, and Eagles on the Coat of Arms. Airports and other institutions are named after deserving individuals in their states of origin or in Lagos and Abuja, where ethnic origin would not matter. The gains from these efforts have been compromised by the state of origin syndrome and the quota system that steer the country towards differentiated or diverse citizenship and grants certain groups or citizens opportunities or rights that are not available to other Nigerians.

Sixth, the proliferation of administrative units has diverted attention from real growth and development to duplication of offices and political appointments which many falsely equate with development. More states can only mean higher wage bills and concentration of the national resources in the hands of the political elite. The explanation that most of the existing states are not economically viable has not deterred those pushing for the creation of new states. The counterargument is that if Nigeria as a country is viable, then the constituent states should be regarded as viable. The non-viability of most of the existing states has deepened

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33 Anthony I. Asiwaju, *Bridging African Boundaries: Crosss-Border Areas and Regional Integration in Comparative History and Advocacy* (Austin Texas: Pan African University Press, 2021), 762-765.

34 Olasupo Akano, “Asset Sharing and Inter-State Relations in Nigeria,” in R.T. Akinyele, ed., *Contemporary Issues in Boundaries and Governance in Nigeria* (Lagos: Fredrick Ebert Foundation, 2005), 122-143.

their dependence on the centre, thus impeding the practice of fiscal federalism in the country. Still worse, the local government units, which the constitution classifies as the third tier of government because of their closeness to the people at the grassroots, have been denied autonomy by the state governments and can therefore not bring government nearer to the people as constitutionally envisaged.

## Conclusion

This essay has shown that states creation in Nigeria was traditionally conceived as a tool for addressing the problems of ethnic minorities. The territorial approach to minority problems has helped, in certain situations, to defuse tension but has not eliminated the practice of looking at Nigeria through the prism of the North, the West and East. The fragmentation of the three majority ethnic groups into five or more states has not diminished their influence in national politics. Each of them has established a pan-cultural platform to maintain the group solidarity and articulate its interest: Ohanaeze, Afenifere and Arewa Consultative Forum for the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani, respectively. On different occasions, each of them has expressed a desire to opt out of the Nigerian federation through a referendum to prevent the recurrence of the tragedy of the Biafran civil war. What, then, is the way forward?

The methods that can be adopted to deal with multiculturalism include the territorial approach that we have discussed. Others are assimilation, genocide, ethnocide and constitutional safeguards.

Assimilation is the process of absorbing one group into another. The French practiced it in their colonies. It is also embedded in the concept of the melting pot in the United States. The policy allows minorities to adopt the language and values of the dominant groups at their own pace. However, the approach has its own limitations. Today, there are more hyphenated Americans than in the 1960s. Hence the argument that the melting pot has been replaced with a salad bowl. Genocide involves the physical elimination of one group to create space for another. The ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Kosovo are examples. Ethnocide, on the other hand, is the destruction of the cultural identities of minority groups in the process of nation building, as was exemplified in the Russification of non-Russians in Tzarist Russia. These two related policies are universally condemned and will create more problems than solutions.

Constitutional safeguards, as a policy, recognise the disadvantages and fears of minorities and attempt to safeguard their interests through protective clauses inserted into the constitution. For instance, the Indian and Chinese constitutions acknowledge the cultural and educational rights of ethnic minorities. However, the protective clauses could be difficult to interpret or enforce. There could be disagreement on whether the equality guaranteed under the protective clauses should embrace affirmative action in favour of minorities, and how to prevent this from becoming a rigid quota system like the Federal Character Principle in Nigeria. The ideal solution, therefore, is a combination of measures that has good governance at its foundation, a constitution that promotes unity in diversity and allows affirmative action to overcome entrenched historic discrimination. The administrative structure should not be one that creates boxes in which ethnic or linguistic groups must fit themselves.

The example of the Ekiti people in Kwara State in Northern Nigeria, which presents an exception to the general pattern in Nigeria, merits a closer examination. This group rejected the invitation to join their kinsmen in the newly created Ekiti State in Southern Nigeria in 1996 because of their favoured treatment in Kwara State. Today, they still dominate the top positions of the civil service in Kwara State on account of the level of their western education. Their cultural identity as an Ekiti group is affirmed through the name of their local council: Ekiti Local Council of Kwara State. This shows that minority agitation is influenced not only by the force produced within a minority group but also by the treatment received from the dominant neighbour.

# Administrative Boundary Disputes in Ethiopia: Causes, consequences and policy recommendations<sup>35</sup>

*Tegegne Gebre-Egziabher, Zemelak Aytenew, Aklilu Amsalu, Ahmed Hassen*

## **Introduction**

There are few geographical issues that evoke emotions as boundaries, since boundaries are signifiers of identity and power, both of which are historically and geographically constituted. For instance, the apartheid spatial formation in South Africa resulted in the designation of spaces for specific ethnic groups creating racial homogeneity and leading to societal fragmentation along racial lines.<sup>36</sup> According to Grigg (1998), boundaries matter because they create the territorial space in which we live, distribute power to people who influence our lives, determine where we vote, create tax bases, construct regional identities, facilitate or impede easy transport, determine access to public services and become blueprints for development planning.

Quite often, however, there are disagreements about where the boundaries should be, and this in turn gives rise to boundary or border disputes. Literature classifies border disputes into three categories: territorial, positional and functional.<sup>37</sup> Territorial border disputes arise for several reasons. Territories have intrinsic value that people perceive to be worth fighting for.

Controlling territory means gaining control over important resources, populations or markets, even if these commodities are only imagined or have potential value.<sup>38</sup> Territory can also be contentious if it promotes access to some other place that is useful for attacking or for defending a homeland area or trade route.<sup>39</sup> The overlap between territory and nationalism, i.e., when people's group identity overlaps with territorial boundaries, suggests that defending the collectivity amounts to defending the precise location and boundaries of a territory.<sup>40</sup> Positional border disputes occur when two or more states agree on a border but cannot agree precisely on the delineation (in a treaty and on a map) and the demarcation (on the ground) or the

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35 The authors acknowledge the Boundary and Identity and Self-Administration Commission (BISC) which was established in 2019 under Proclamation 1101/2019 for sponsoring and funding the study, and the current Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), the successor of the BISC, for permission to publish this summary of the synthesis of the study.

36 Narsiah, S. 2019. "The politics of boundaries in South Africa: the case of Matatiele," *South African Geographical Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03736245.2019.1601591>

37 Brunet-Jailly, E. 2015. *Border disputes: A global encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO.

38 Rasler, K.A., and Thompson, W.R. 2006. "Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1.

39 Rasler, K.A., and Thompson, W.R. 2006. "Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1.

40 Rasler, K.A., and Thompson, W.R. 2006. "Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1.

delimitation (at sea) of the boundary line.<sup>41</sup> Functional border disputes refer to the different meaning of borders as frontiers or areas of transition that hold together land and people. The dispute arises when enforcing state functions at the boundary line or when a resource straddling the border is being developed and states compete for the administration of that resource.<sup>42</sup>

Ethiopia is a country with a long history and a rich culture. Throughout its many years of existence, the country has experienced the making and remaking of internal boundaries, often aligning with regime changes and shifts in regional administration systems that were erected using different criteria.

According to Mulatu (2017), the Derg period formed a departure in the history of Ethiopia's restructuring of administrative units. This is due to the formal introduction of ethnic politics into the Ethiopian political discourse. The 1987 Constitution established five autonomous regions and 26 administrative regions (Appendix 1). Prior to the Derg period, the restructurings and rearrangements of internal boundaries were mainly focused on bringing about administrative efficiency or accommodating feudal rulers' interest to expand one's region. Asmelash noted that, during the Haile Selassie period, efficiency, reducing distance, managing administrative size, ease of tax collection, climatic similarity, and ease of control through *balabats*, were some of the criteria used in restructuring or delineating the different administrative units.<sup>43</sup> Boundaries were also manipulated by aristocrats to weaken rivals and expand one's sphere of influence.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime introduced ethnic federalism, with ethnic boundaries defining the constituent units (Appendix 2). Ethnic boundaries by nature are fluid and contested and create fertile ground for boundary disputes.<sup>44</sup> As a result, administrative boundary disputes occurred in Ethiopia on several occasions. It was to resolve these disputes that the federal government established the Boundary and Identity and Self-Administration Commission in 2019 under Proclamation 1101/2019. The Commission contracted Addis Ababa University to undertake several studies, one of which was a study on administrative boundary<sup>45</sup>.

This paper provides a summary of the synthesis of the study on causes and consequences of internal boundary disputes in Ethiopia and highlights policy recommendations.<sup>46</sup> The study used qualitative and quantitative primary data collected from zones and special *woredas* selected through a combination of purposive and random sampling techniques. A multistage sampling procedure was employed in the study. In the first stage, zones and special *woredas* in which all nationalities zones and special *woredas* were included were purposively selected.<sup>47</sup> In addition, all the zones found between two regions were selected purposively since all boundary

41 Brunet-Jailly, E. 2015. *Border disputes: A global encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO.

42 Brunet-Jailly, E. 2015. *Border disputes: A global encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO.

43 Bamlaku Tadesse Mengistu, Fekadu Beyene, Workneh Kassa, and Richard Wentzell. 2015. "The Dynamics of (Agro) Pastoral Conflicts in Eastern Ethiopia: the case of the Afar, Ittu- Oromo and Issa-Somali ethnic groups"

44 *Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. XI, No. 1.

45 The study was conducted by a consortium in which many regional universities participated. The authors acknowledge the contribution of the consortium members.

46 The study was conducted in all regions of the country except Tigray; nor does it cover Welkait.

47 Nationality zones and special *woredas* are ethnically organised sub-regional (local) units.

disputes occur in the zones bordering regions. The remaining zones are administrative zones and, among them, 50% were randomly selected from each region. In total, 60 zones and special *woredas* were included in the study (see Map 1). In the second stage, within each selected zone, two *woredas* with a prevalence of boundary conflicts were purposively selected in consultation with local officials. In the third stage, within each selected *woreda*, two *kebeles* (one rural and one urban) were purposively selected based on the prevalence of conflicts. In the last stage, 50 households per *kebele* or 100 households per *woreda* were selected using a random sampling technique. This led to the sampling of a total of 10,330 households for the quantitative analysis. A structured survey questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data.

Qualitative data was collected from key informants in the selected zones and special *woredas*. These informants were drawn from government bodies, non-government bodies, political parties, and other stakeholders who represented the local population, such as religious leaders, community elders, the youth, and women. Five informants from each category, or a total of 20 key informants, were selected representing administrators, security officers, political party leaders, youth associations, teachers, farmers, women's associations, religious leaders, elders, etc. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data focusing on the causes and consequences of boundary disputes and conflicts. In addition, in each selected rural and urban *kebele*, one focus group discussion (FGD) was carried out using a checklist to guide the discussion.

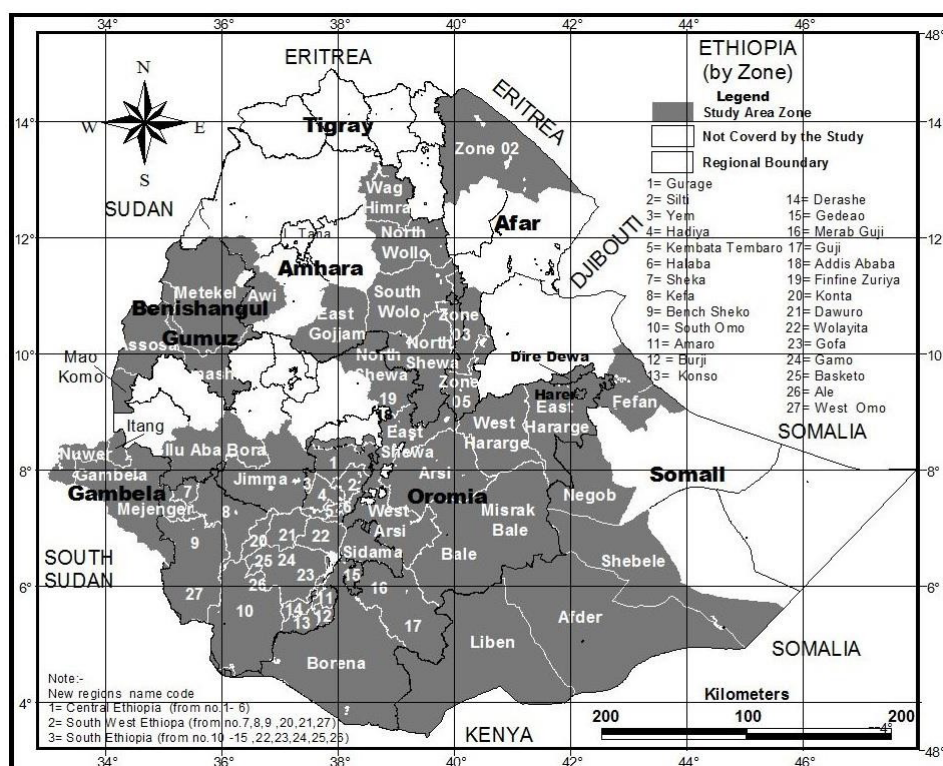


Figure 1: Study zones and special *woredas*

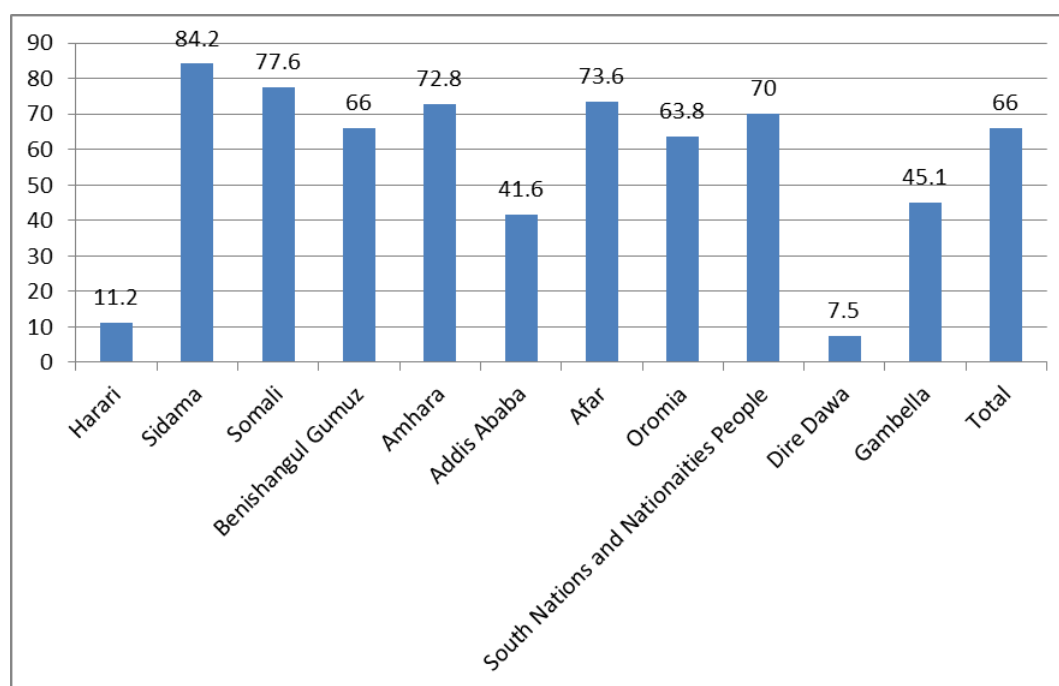
The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides some points on the prevalence of boundary disputes; Section 3 discusses the causes; Section 4 highlights the consequences of boundary disputes; Section 5 provides a general perspective on boundary disputes, and section; and Section 6 provides concluding remarks and major policy recommendations.

## Prevalence of boundary disputes

Among the study participants, 66% (or two thirds) reported the presence of conflicts in the *kebeles* and *woredas* where they reside (Figure 2). This indicates that border conflicts are a widespread phenomenon. This is also true at regional levels. Except for Harari (11.2%) and Dire Dawa (7.5%), a very high proportion of participants across all regions reported the presence of border conflicts. In some regions, boundary disputes were described as very significant. For instance, border disputes were reported as highly significant in Sidama (84.2%), Somali (84.2%), Amhara (72.8%), and Afar (73.6%). The qualitative data also confirmed that conflicts have been prevalent in all the study areas. It was also indicated that the disputes were between *woredas* and *kebeles* found along the borders of neighbouring regions. In Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) Region, however, intra- regional conflicts between different zones and *woredas* have been mentioned.

The data also showed that the nature of the boundary disputes and questions raised were varied. They include ownership claim of a territory or boundary, competition over natural resource, territorial expansion, absence of a demarcated boundary and others.

Figure 2: Prevalence of boundary disputes in different regions



Source: Field data

The quantitative information revealed that the main form of boundary dispute is boundary and territorial claim (39.8%) followed by land grabbing and land expansion (36.3%) (Table 1). The two combined formed nearly 75% of the responses.

## Causes of boundary disputes

### *Territorial claim based on historical evidence, geography, and place names*

Table 1: Forms of boundary disputes (Source: Field data)

|                   |      |      |      |      |      |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Harari            | 13.6 | 27.3 | 50   | 4.5  | 4.5  |
| Sidama            | 58.2 | 1.8  | 28.2 | 11.2 | 0.6  |
| Somali            | 69.8 | 6.5  | 19.7 | 3.9  | 0.1  |
| Benishangul-Gumuz | 57.4 | 1.5  | 26   | 14.2 | 1    |
| Amhara            | 35.1 | 4.1  | 37.1 | 19.2 | 4.6  |
| Addis Ababa       | 4.8  | 11.9 | 38.1 | 28.6 | 16.7 |
| Afar              | 29.2 | 5    | 61.3 | 2.5  | 1.9  |
| Oromia            | 26   | 7.2  | 54.5 | 11.3 | 0.9  |
| South             | 46   | 16   | 18.2 | 13.9 | 5.9  |
| Diredawa          | 0    | 20   | 53.3 | 0    | 26.7 |
| Gambella          | 30.7 | 7.1  | 50.4 | 10.9 | 0.8  |
| Total             | 39.8 | 8.8  | 36.3 | 12.1 | 3.1  |

The Constitution stipulates that administrative boundaries between regions or within regions should be delineated mainly based on the settlement of nations and nationalities. This principle is also reflected in the regional constitution of multi-ethnic regions such as SNNP, Amhara, Benishangul, Gambella. This means that boundary demarcation considers the de facto settlement patterns of nations and nationalities without considering historical evidence. However, in many areas where boundary disputes occur, territorial claims based on historical evidence are raised. Different groups extend claims over a particular place based on historical evidence, place names and others. These types of conflicts are observed in Amhara, Oromia, SNNP, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. The following illustrations are examples of some of these disputes.

#### Illustrations

**Yem and Sekoru:** There are contested territories between Yem (in the former SNNP) and Sekoru (Oromia) *woredas*. Informants from the Oromia side mentioned that, historically, Sekoru *Woreda* was one of the oldest *woredas* during the Haile Selassie period. During the Derg period, Sekoru and present day Yem were under Gibe *Awraja* with Sekoru town as the seat of the *awraja*. A boundary dispute arose during the EPRDF period. A committee entirely formed from the Yem community was established, and this committee expanded and delineated the Yem Special *Woreda* up to Bulbula River, which included six *kebeles* from Sekoru *Woreda*. These

*kebeles* are Ashe, Asher, Koner, Saja, Laften and Tiger. There is a claim that these *kebeles* were previously under Sekoru *Woreda* and that the inhabitants are Afaan Oromo speakers.

The counterclaim from Yem informants indicated that, prior to 1931, the Yem people were living in the Greater Gibe Valley with their own king. During the period 1931-1939, Yem bordered Gojjeb River, Keffa and Illubaor in the west, Wellega in the north, Gibe River and Gurage and Hadiya in the east, and Kembata, Dawro and Konta in the southeast. During the Haile Selassie period, the Yem people were administered under Kaffa province, Jimma *Awraja* and Sekoru *Woreda*. They were found scattered in four *woredas*, namely Janjaro, Tiro Afeta, Omo Nada and Sekoru. Yem, Sekoru and Tiro Afeta *woredas* were under Gibe *Awraja*. During the EPRDF period, Yem *Woreda* was delineated under Kilel 7 while Tiro Afeta and Sekoru *woredas* were delineated under Kilel 4 or Oromia.

**Welaita and Sidama:** The boundary delimitation between Welaita and Sidama has historical roots. Informants from Welaita trace the boundary demarcation between the two to the period of Emperor Menilek. They add that *Fitawrari* Shasho was responsible for delineating the boundary which was set to be at “Warancha Mato, Malae Kikiya, Paja Laleta”, and a map was drawn to show these places. The informants further mentioned that the Sidama did not abide by this established boundary and crossed the boundary, which provoked disagreements. More specifically, they mentioned that the boundary between Welaita and Sidama is the place beyond Bilate River, which included Warancha Mato. Places to the east of Warancha Mato belong to Sidama while those to the west belong to Welaita.

However, pastoralists from Sidama and farmers from Welaita were living together in the neighbouring areas of Warancha Mato, which belongs to Welaita. The informants further mentioned that the pastoralists from Sidama had inhabited this place for many years and used to pay taxes for Humbo *Woreda*, which is now in Welaita Zone. The former Humbo *Woreda* administrator indicated that, since the area was suitable for agriculture and has water, the government in 1961 started the Abaya Bilate agricultural project. This attracted over 10 different groups who settled there for farming. The areas surrounding Bilate River attracted many such groups due to the availability of water. The boundary between Welaita and Sidama, however, was mapped, and it was clear during the Haile Selassie and the Derg times.

Informants from Sidama present counterclaims. They said that in the past, including during the Haile Selassie period, the mountains Merera and Daisha served as the boundary. But after the 2002 conflict, the Bilate River was recognised as the boundary between Welaita and Sidama. Since the border area was suitable for agriculture, farmland was given to Denize, a French investor, by taking land from Oloncho village in Sidama. All the agricultural land belonged to Sidama and all place names in the area were in Sidamigna. The names include Shima Wacho, Lowo Wacho, Oloncho, Madicho, Demoye, Dibe, Kone, Odahe, Konfa. The farm was transferred to the government during the Derg period and was administered by the Awasa Agricultural Development Enterprise. When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seized power, the farm was transferred to North Omo Agricultural Development

Enterprise. The farm, however, was declining and, during this time, the Welaita claimed that the land belonged to them and brought many settlers from Welaita. This was opposed by the Sidama and a conflict erupted in 2002.

The regional government, to resolve the problem, commissioned a study and decided that Bilate River would be the boundary between the two zones. The Welaita appealed to the House of Federation, which endorsed the regional government's decision. However, since the decision was not implemented, the Welaita kept coming and farming the land.

## **Identity-based boundary conflict**

According to the Constitution, regional boundaries are delineated based on the settlement of nations and nationalities settlement, language and identity. There are, however, claims that people's identity was not respected in creating regions and administrative entities, or they were forced into regions that were not of their choice. As a result, people demand to be included in regions where they claim to belong. These types of conflicts are common between Amhara (North Wello) and Tigray regions, between Oromia and Benishangul, between Amhara and Oromia and between SNNP and Oromia. The following cases illustrate this point.

### *North Wello and Wag Himra Zones*

According to key informants from North Wello zone, the residents of Raya, Alamata, Azebo, and Waja belong to the Amhara ethnic group, speak Amharic language and have similar culture with the people of North Wello. However, these people were separated forcefully from the Amhara Region and included in the Tigray Region, disregarding and undermining their identity. The people raised identity and boundary issues during the Tigray war, and the area has since been incorporated into the Amhara Region. In a similar manner, FGD members from Wag Himra Zone indicated that Ofla, Korem and Zata *woredas* were forcibly delineated within Tigray region. The counterclaim for this narrative was not obtained since, as mentioned above, the study did not include the Tigray Region.

### *Meskan and Mareko Woredas*

Both Meskan and Mareko *woredas* were ordinary *woredas* in Gurage Zone. There are, however, border disputes between the two based on the issue of identity. Informants from Mareko *Woreda* claim that nine *kebeles* found in Meskan *Woreda* belonged to them historically and the inhabitants have Mareko identity and demand that they should not be included in Eastern Meskan. Informants from Meskan *Woreda* on the other hand claim that there are many people with Meskan identity in 11 *kebeles* found in Mareko. These, they argued, need to be part of the Eastern Meskan area.

### *Boundary conflict based on natural resource competition*

Most boundary conflicts are driven by competition over resources such as agricultural land, grazing land and water. For instance, about 45% of the participants mentioned that most land

expansion conflicts are due to the desire to acquire agricultural and grazing land. The following cases illustrate conflict due to resource competition.

**North Shewa:** The conflict between Kewet *Woreda* in North Shewa and Zone 3 Semu Robi Gelehalo *Woreda* in Afar is due to ownership claim over a vast agricultural land called Dahuda which is found in Wesiso Gote. Similarly, there is ownership claim of agricultural and grazing land found in Hagere Selam *Kebele* of Ankober *Woreda*, both by the locals and the Afar living in the surrounding *woredas*. This has resulted in repeated conflict.

**East Shewa:** In East Shewa, there is a conflict between the Kereyyu and the Ittu Oromo. The Kereyyu are pastoralist but are gradually resorting to cultivation and thus requiring agricultural land leading to conflict with the Ittu. Conflict also arose over grazing land, particularly during the rainy season.

## **Unclear and inappropriate boundary demarcation**

About 33.6% of the participants indicated that unclear and inappropriate boundary demarcation has caused conflicts. The following are some illustrations.

**Arsi Zone:** In Arsi Zone, Tiyo *Woreda*, there is a mix of rural and urban land use due to unclear boundary demarcation. The rural land in Gora Silinga Rural *Kebele* is increasingly incorporated into Assela town. In the face of land shortage and urban expansion, the lack of clear delineation is causing conflict.

**Bale Zone:** Following the ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia, the former Bale administrative region was split into Oromia and Somali regions. But there has never been a clear and transparent boundary delineation between the two. As a result, pastoralist communities from both sides frequently engage in conflict.

## ***Incongruency between administrative boundary and the communities' lifestyle***

The main criterion for boundary demarcation, i.e., the settlement of nations and nationalities, is incongruent with the lifestyle of some communities, particularly the pastoral ones. Pastoralists who move from place to place in search of water and pasture face challenges as their way of life is not factored in the boundary demarcation. As a result, conflicts arise when pastoralists move into neighbouring regions or territories. Similarly, upon returning to their original homes, the pastoralists find their house demolished and their land cultivated by others, thus leading to further disputes and conflicts. This type of conflict is common in borders shared by farmers and pastoralists, or two pastoral communities. Places inhabited and bordered by Erbore and Hamer, Afar and Amhara, Kereyyu Oromo and Amhara, Nuer and Anywaa, Hadiya and Yem, are good examples of this phenomenon.

## Illustrations

### *Anywaa and Nuer in Gambella*

The Anywaa are primarily agriculturalists, while the Nuer practice pastoralism and agropastoralism. The Nuer live in densely populated. Due to the Nuer's seasonal movements in search of pasture and water, their paths sometimes overlap on Anywaa agricultural land, which can lead to conflicts over boundaries.

### *Erbore and Hamer in South Omo Zone*

The conflict between the Hamer and Erbore in South Omo Zone has a long history and is related to the communities' lifestyle and resource competition. Both communities are pastoralist and the conflict arose due to movements for water and pasture. The conflict has been exacerbated as it involves livestock and arms theft as well as acts of murder. According to informants, the Hamer go to places occupied by Erbore in search of water and pasture for their animals. This can lead to conflict as the Erbore resist the movement. Informants from the Hamer mentioned that there is a shortage of water and pasture in the area and people should be allowed to use the resources since land belongs to the government.

## Urban expansion

Boundary disputes in places where urban and rural *kebeles* share a boundary are mainly due to urban expansion. Cities expand horizontally and encroach into fertile agricultural land, causing conflict and disputes. When the expansion is unplanned and spontaneous, it will be resisted by rural inhabitants, and this creates fertile ground for conflict.

## Illustrations

**Dire Dawa:** The expansion of the city underlies the conflict between Dire Dawa City Administration and the Somali Region. Boundary disputes between Mermersa rural *kebele* in Shenele *Woreda* and Sabian 2 urban *kebele* are due to the territorial claim of the expansion by the inhabitants of the rural *kebele*. Similarly, the inhabitants of Shinele *Woreda*, who have legal land title, but who are incorporated into Dire Dawa city, could not get lasting solution regarding their status and this has instigated conflicts and disputes.

**Harari:** There is a boundary dispute between the urban Abader *Woreda* and the rural Sofi *Woreda*. This is due to the expansion of Harar city in this area. The dispute was exacerbated when Harar city decided to settle traders from the city trade centre who were displaced due to a fire incident in 2013. In addition to this, the establishment of a residential area in the periphery of the city along the road that leads to Jigjiga, has also been another cause of conflict and dispute.

## Contested administrative boundary referendum

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has conducted referendum in some areas to solve boundary issues. Some of these referendums have brought lasting solutions. A case in point is the referendum on Konta-Selam, which used to be administered under Dedo *Woreda* of Jimma Zone. Following the referendum, Konta-Selam was included under Konta Special *Woreda*. But other referendums, however, have limitations and have emerged as a cause of dispute and conflict. The reason is that most referendums are requested and supported by people who think they can benefit from it, pushing the other group not to accept the result. The process and level of transparency are also usually put into question. The following are some illustrations.

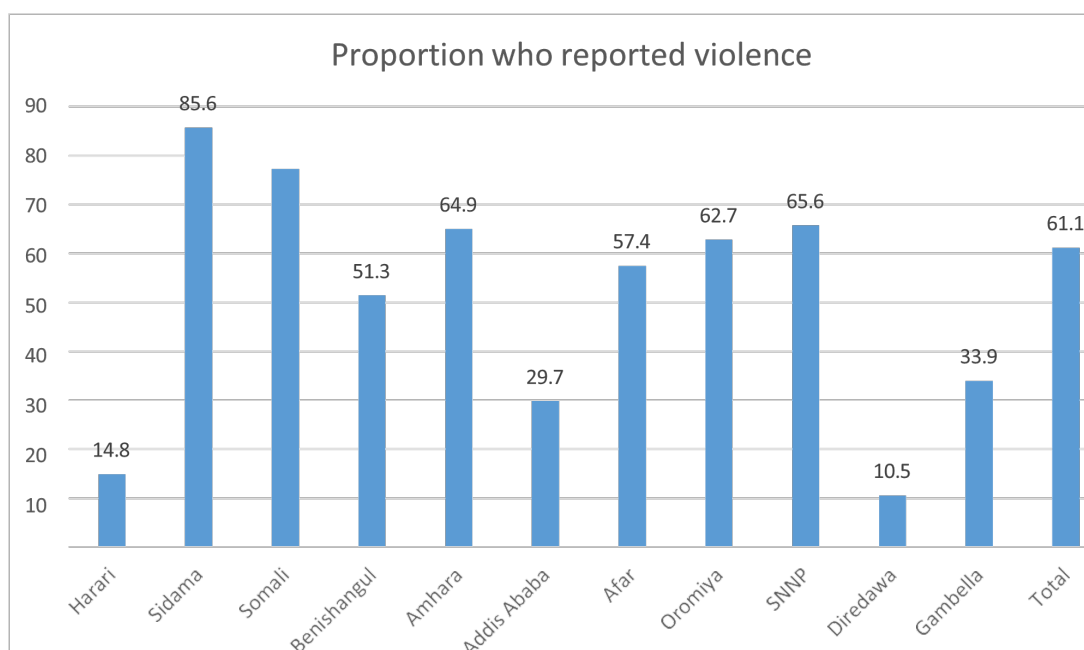
**Bale Zone:** Informants from Oromia Region complain about the referendum carried out in 2004 in Gura Damole *Woreda* of Bale Zone, both about the way it was administered and the result. They pointed out that the referendum was administered about 35 kilometres away from the residential area, the correct time was not properly communicated and people from other areas were transported to influence the result.

**Jimma Zone:** There is a complaint about the referendum carried in Ashe Kebele in Sekoru *Woreda*. According to the informants from Oromia Region, it was indicated that though the *kebele* consists of three zones, the referendum was carried only in one zone and those who participated in it decided to be included in Oromia Region. People who were living in the other two zones were not consulted and did not get a chance to choose to join the Oromia Region and were thus forced to stay in Yem *Woreda*, contrary to their preference.

## Consequences of boundary disputes

In Ethiopia, the administrative boundary disputes have often been violent. For instance, nearly 61% of the participants mentioned that the disputes were violent (Figure 3). In some regions like Sidama (85.6%) and Somali (77.1%), the proportion of people who reported administrative boundary disputes to be violent is much higher. The main reasons given for this were attempts to resolve issues violently (18.6%), to counter violent attacks from the contending group (19.6%), and the failure of the government to resolve the issues (31.9%). Administrative boundary disputes have resulted in the loss of human life and have brought economic and social damage.

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents who report violent conflicts



### Loss of human life

Loss of human life loss reported in different regions. For instance, the conflict between Meskan and Mareko led to the death of more than 100 people. The conflict between Welaita and Sidama resulted in the death of more than 150 people. The conflict between Burji and Guji resulted in the death of 28 people from Burji and Bule Hora in less than 2 years, while another 48 people were injured during the conflict.

### Economic costs

The economic cost of the conflict has several dimensions. These include the disruption of economic activities, destruction of assets (agricultural goods, retail goods, vehicles), the death of animals, house burning and looting, and burning of crop harvests and animal feeds.

Regarding the disruption of economic activities, markets were disrupted due to conflict between the Ittu and Kereyyu, and farming was disrupted due to the conflict between Kamashi Zone and Oromia bordering areas. In bordering rural *kebeles*, the conflict resulted in the destruction of agricultural crops. The conflict between Sidama and Welaita led to the death of over 1000 domestic animals and the burning of 500 houses. The conflict between Burji and Guji resulted in the burning of 23 houses and the looting of 203 houses. Programmes were also scrapped due to conflict. A case in point is the employment creation programme due to be implemented in Akaki Sub-City, which was cancelled owing to land claim disputes between the Oromia Region and the sub-city. The consequence was the closing down of quarry sites which used to employ more than 600 jobs.

The conflict between the Amhara and Afar left huge tracts of agricultural land in the bordering regions, such as those known as Dahuda and Asakuma (Koren), uncultivated. This resulted not only in the loss of agricultural output but also in large-scale unemployment which in turn

contributed to youth migration. Similarly, the conflict between Bati *Woreda* in the Oromo Zone of the Amhara Region and the Afar resulted in the destruction of 700 hectares of agricultural land, the burning of 11 neighbourhoods (*gots*) and the forced migration of inhabitants.

### *Social harm*

Administrative boundary conflicts have also harmed social relations. One of the effects of the conflict is the deterioration of social assets that were the foundation of social life. In areas where there are conflicts, there is less willingness to comply with traditional mediation practices of the elders. Communities which were related through intermarriages and other social relations tend to discontinue such engagements. For instance, in the Somali Region, the Weite and Yerer Yesuf tribes used to intermarry, but due to frequent conflicts such social relations have tended to be discontinued.

The other social effect of administrative boundary disputes is displacement. The conflict between Burji and Guji resulted in the displacement of 1000 people from Bule Hora town. Similarly, according to a study done by Meda Welabu University, about 1704 people were displaced from Gura Damole Woreda in Bale Zone.

## **General perspective on administrative boundary disputes**

### *The federal system and border conflicts*

The previous discussion revealed that border conflicts in Ethiopia were not new. Conflict over competing territorial claims between two groups or within the same group were not unknown in Ethiopian history, though they were not based on identity. They were largely linked to competition for agricultural and grazing land.

In the last three decades, however, border disputes assumed complicated political dimensions. In this regard, the new phenomenon or factor which has direct relation with border conflict is the federal system that the country instituted after 1991.

The Ethiopian federal system is based on recognising the right to self-determination of nations and nationalities. As a result, nations and nationalities could establish their own government and administer themselves in the geographical area in which they have settled. This implies that there is a defined geographical boundary for nations to exercise control over their political, social and economic affairs. This transformed traditional boundaries that defined grazing and agricultural areas into constitutionally entrenched political boundaries. In addition, conflicts also assumed violent political underpinnings. The implication is that boundary conflict started to get political support and leverage.

Furthermore, the Constitution has granted a right for every zone and special *woreda* to evolve into an autonomous region and any regional government thus constitutes to succeed and become an independent state. This encourages every zonal and regional government to strategically think about possessing as much as possible a wider geographical area and larger population in the event of the future change of its present status and has led boundary conflicts to acquire political dimension.

The foregoing does not imply that there will be no border conflict in the absence of a federal system; nor does it imply that the federal system is not appropriate. Rather, it raises the question of how we can minimise the negative effects of the federal system on border dispute and instead maximise the values of a federal system.

### *The role of resource competition*

The study revealed that competition over agricultural land, grazing land and water is the major cause of conflict in the majority of the study areas. This is because the majority of the Ethiopian people live in rural areas and make their living from natural resources. In addition, climate change and land degradation have exacerbated resource scarcity, creating a fertile ground for conflict. The previous discussion noted different manifestations of resource competition: resource utilisation by people coming from other areas, ownership claim of resources in border areas, urban expansion to fertile areas.

A main cause and manifestation, however, is the desire for resource ownership by including resource areas in one's jurisdiction. People use ethnicity, religion, family ties, etc., to exclude others and claim sole ownership. This forces resource competition to change its nature and become ethnic conflict.

### *The role of conflict actors*

Though conflict is carried between groups of people, conflict actors also play significant roles. The study found out that different actors have interests and roles in the conflict. The actors are political leaders, opposition parties, ethnic or clan leaders, armed forces and unemployed youth.

The political leaders at zonal, *woreda* and *kebele* level often engage in worsening conflict instead of resolving the issues peacefully. In some cases, the conflict could be backed by the regional power structure, implying that there is an interest in the territorial expansion of one's region, zone or *woreda*. The involvement of political leaders at lower levels (zones, *woreda*, *kebele*) is higher in conflicts that arise within the region.

In pastoral areas, ethnic or clan leaders support their own community and even provide financial and material support that can exacerbate the conflict. In some places, opposition leaders use conflict among different groups as instruments to serve their purpose.

Armed groups found in different places tend to exacerbate conflicts between communities, thereby precluding conflict resolution processes. For instance, though a joint committee has been set up between Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz for that purpose, armed groups operating in the area prevent the committee from meeting from time to time by blocking roads. In other places, armed groups directly attacked elders, security forces and people who were in the process of resolving conflict. This type of incident occurred in Amaro *Woreda* in October 2023.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

Internal boundaries in Ethiopia have evolved and changed over time. Different motives and criteria were used to adjust and readjust boundaries. The Derg period marked a watershed in bringing the ethnic factor into boundary delimitation<sup>1</sup>. The EPRDF period implemented an ethnic federal system based on ethnic composition and settlement patterns.

Boundary disputes, particularly those based on resource competition, have a long history in Ethiopia. Since the enacting of the ethnic federal system, however, boundary disputes have become more prevalent, violent, complicated and resulted in huge losses. People invoke different causes such as history, identity, resources, unclear demarcation, city expansion, and poorly organised referendums, as possible causes for disputes. These disputes are frequently violent, leading to loss of life as well as bringing economic and social harm. It is therefore important to devise ways to resolve the issue and avoid the negative consequences.

In the short term it is imperative to control boundary disputes wherever they arise. This is essential to avoid the damage before they create a rift between people that may be difficult to heal in the long run. The short-term measures could include:

- Strengthening indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms

The use of elders for conflict resolution is common in Ethiopia. It is, however, important to ensure their acceptability by ensuring that elders or religious leaders are considered “neutral” or impartial, and acceptable to all sides. It is also important to minimise government influence in the elders’ decision in conflict resolution while giving them budgetary and strategic support.

- Public consultation and peace conferences

Neighbouring communities should enter continuous consultation and dialogue regarding border conflict and their resolution. This fosters solidarity and mutual understanding between neighbours and precludes border conflict from taking political dimensions.

- Resolving conflict in a sustained way

In the long run, however, it is important to identify the root causes of the problem and address them to resolve conflicts in a sustained way. Some pointers towards this end could be:

- Implementing transparent and participatory border demarcation

The study revealed that the absence of a clear and transparent boundary lies behind border disputes in some places. The government should strive to institute clear boundary demarcation in such places in a manner that is inclusive of all parties concerned and has clear criteria of border demarcation.

- Implement and expand development projects that integrate neighbouring peoples

Economic integration could be an important instrument of sustainable border conflict resolution. Economic integration ensures mutual benefits and reduces disputes. In addition, economic integration can also lay the foundation for political integration. Roads that connect neighbouring people and investment projects from which neighbouring people can benefit could be some examples of development projects that bring about economic integration.

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1 Mulatu Wubneh. 2017. “Ethnic Identity Politics and the Restructuring of Administrative Units in Ethiopia,” *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 & 2, Special Issue, 105-138.

- Joint use of resources

Resource competition in bordering areas is the major cause of conflict. The conflict mainly arises due to ownership claim. Resources, however, do not respect political boundaries and transcend borders. This means that resolving resource conflict of this character requires reducing ownership claims and emphasising common access and use of resources. In addition, it is important to encourage partnership and coordination in resource use between neighbouring communities. This must be supported with policy and legal frameworks that promote shared usage of resources.

- Promotion of rural-urban linkages

The border conflict caused by urban expansion could be resolved by strengthening rural urban linkages and interdependence. Rural urban interdependence should be strengthened in road construction, job creation, service provision, market development, and raw material and food supply. Such interdependence allows both rural and urban people to accept planned urban expansion and may also forge consensus and negotiation around urban expansion.

- Implement pre-conflict measures and early warning

The government should take pre-conflict and early warning measures to curb their potential causes. This requires understanding potential causes of conflict and addressing them. For instance, in rural areas where there is a huge youth population, the main issue might be the acquisition of agricultural land. Addressing such requests in a timely manner will avoid conflict that may arise due to land grabbing and expansion. The government should also install pre-emptive measures to tackle conflict when and if they arise.

- Establish a permanent boundary commission

Administrative boundary issues including boundary demarcation, prevention, and resolution of boundary conflicts need to be carried out professionally by a well-organised and independent boundary commission. The boundary commission should have a constitutional backing so that it has legitimacy and is acceptable to the Ethiopian people. Such boundary commissions are established and are generally successful in other countries such as South Africa, India, Lesotho, and Nigeria., although they too face political challenges, accusations of bias, and local conflicts mean that boundary decisions are often contested, especially in ethnicity or politically polarised regions.

- Revising the existing regionalisation scheme

The existing identity-based regionalisation scheme has created an overlap between identity and territory. This gives an incentive for nations and nationalities to engage in expansive activity and enter into conflict. In addition, identity-based regionalisation compromises administrative efficiency. It may then be worthwhile considering a revision of the existing regionalisation scheme. Some issues that need to be resolved in a revision exercise could be setting the regionalisation objective in a clear and unambiguous manner that can embrace different purposes, such as fostering economic and political integration in the country and utilising multiple criteria for regionalisation.

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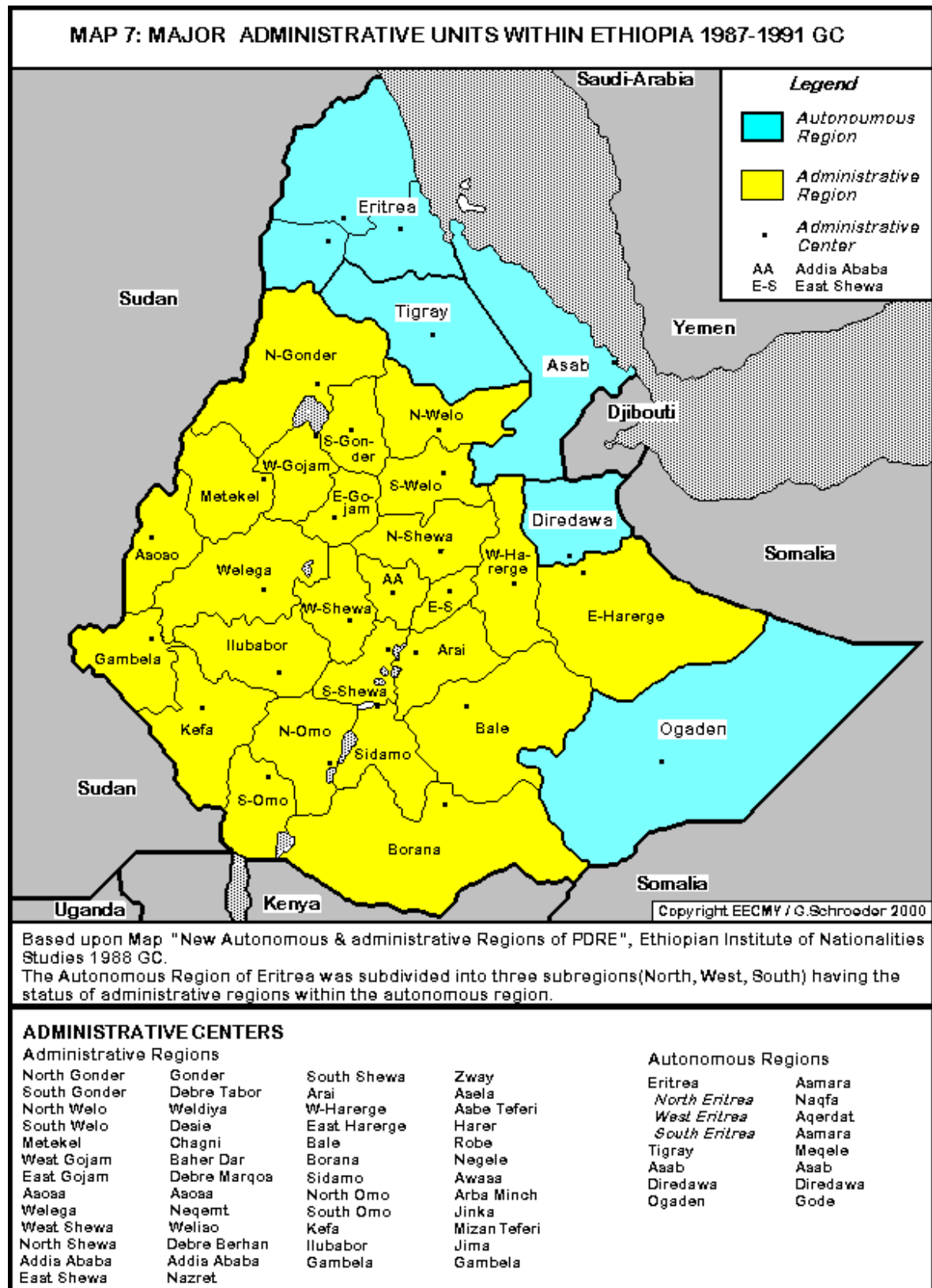
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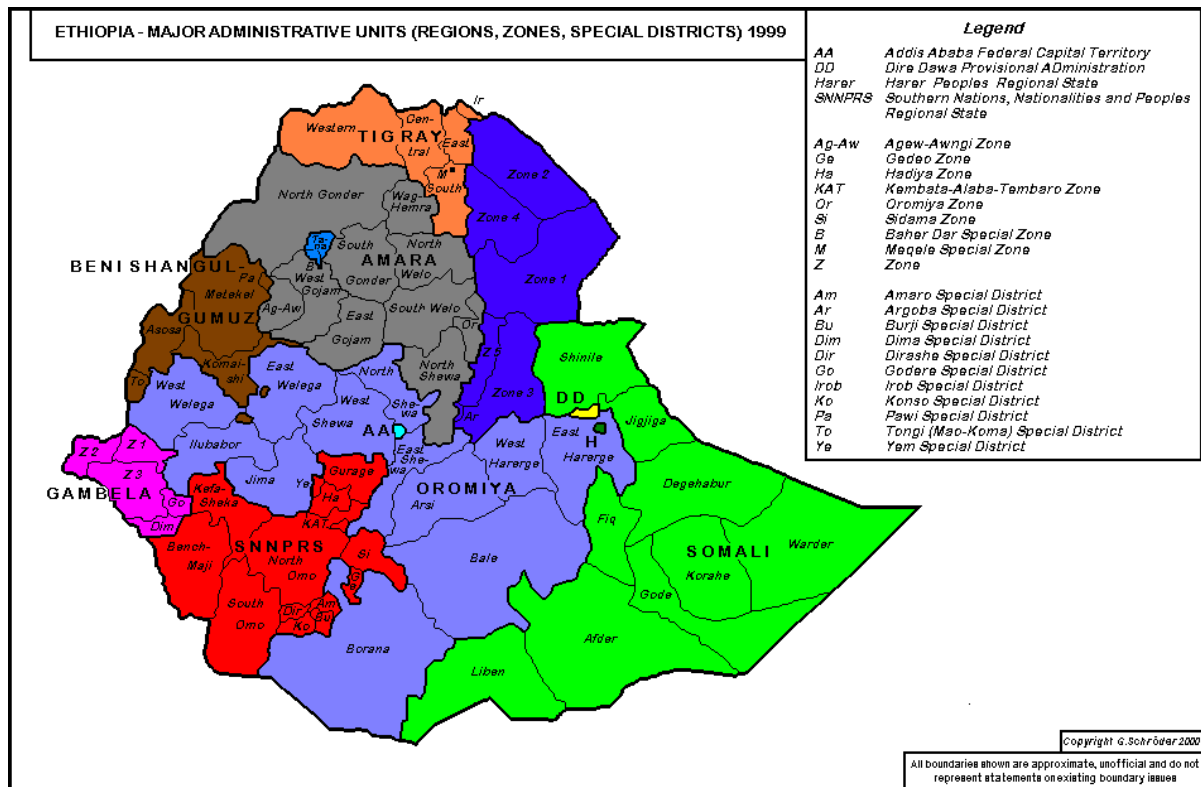
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## Appendix 1:



## Appendix 2



# Notes on Contributors

**Dr. Ahmed Hassen** obtained his first and second degrees from Addis Ababa University's Department of History, and doctoral degree from Université Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne in France. His research focuses on social, environmental, and economic history and he has published several articles and one book. He has also served Addis Ababa University in various administrative positions – Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Office of Change Management, and Head of External Relations.

**Dr Aklilu Amsalu** is Associate Professor of Environmental Geography at Addis Ababa University. His expertise is on climate change impacts, adaptation responses, and natural resources management with emphasis on vulnerability assessment, effectiveness of adaptation measures, and the integration of climate finance and policy into sustainable development. He also investigates energy security and green transitions, examining their implications for economic growth, environmental sustainability, and climate resilience. Dr Aklilu has been involved in numerous research and evaluation projects.

**Professor Rufus Akinyele** is a product of the University of Lagos, where he currently serves as professor of African History. He is also Vice Chancellor of Maranatha University in Lagos. His research interests include African history, inter-group relations and [border studies](#). He has published numerous articles in several peer-reviewed journals in these areas. He has also earned recognition as one of the leading authorities on ethnic [militia](#) across the world. Professor Akinyele is the convener of the International Multidisciplinary Conference on “Land and Development” at the University of Lagos.

**Dr. Awegichew Amare** is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Gondar. He earned his BA degree in History from Debre Berhan University and his MA degree in History from the Zarayaiqob Centre of Medieval Studies, a postgraduate school in Debre Berhan University, which was run by a joint scholarly team of foreign and Ethiopian scholars affiliated to the French Centre of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University and Debre Berhan University. He received his PhD from Addis Ababa University in History. His research affiliation is medieval Ethiopian history, particularly on the interaction and integration of peoples and cultures.

**Emeritus Professor Bahru Zewde** obtained his doctoral degree from the University of London and has published several books and articles on modern Ethiopian history. He has served as Chairperson of the Department of History and Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa University. Outside the university, he has also served as Executive Director of Forum for Social Studies and First Vice President of the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences. He has authored several books and articles on Ethiopian history.

**Dr. Girma Negash** is Associate Professor of History and the former Head of the Department of History at Addis Ababa University. He did his PhD in History in 2014. He has been an educator all his life – teaching history at different secondary schools until he moved to Addis Ababa University 20 years ago. Since then, he has taught courses both at undergraduate and graduate level in the Department of History. His research interests include: Economic history, Labour

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**Dr. Shimelis Bonsa** is Associate Professor of Modern African History and Politics at Stony Brook University, New York. His research interest includes modern and contemporary African history and politics with a focus on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. He is the author of monographs, book chapters, and articles, including the book he recently coedited: “The Horn of Africa and Italy: Colonial, Postcolonial and Transnational Cultural Encounters” (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018). His latest book, “Urbanizing a Nation, Modernizing a City: Addis Ababa 1941-1975”, will be out soon.

**Professor Tegegne Gebre Egziabher** is Professor of Urban and Regional Planning and Development at the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Addis Ababa University, where he has been teaching and researching for many years. His research focuses on urbanisation (urban policy, urban poverty, rural urban linkages), regional development, local economic development, decentralisation and governance. He has published extensively in his areas of expertise.

**Dr. Tsegaye Zeleke Tuffa** is Assistant Professor of History at Jimma University. He obtained his BA and MA from Addis Ababa University, and his PhD from the University of South Africa (UNISA). With nearly twenty years of teaching experience at Jimma University, he has authored and co-authored numerous articles on various aspects of Ethiopian history. His research has focused mainly on the late medieval and modern history of Shawa/Central Ethiopia.

**Dr. Zemelak Ayele** received his LL. B from Addis Ababa University, an Advanced Diploma in Federalism from the Institute of Federalism, Fribourg University, and LL.M and LL. D from the University of Western Cape (UWC). He is widely published in the areas of decentralisation, federalism, and electoral democracy in Ethiopia and Africa. He is a former director and associate professor at the Centre for Federal and Governance Studies of Addis Ababa University, a research fellow at the Dullah Omar Institute of UWC, and a non-resident Fellow of the Forum of Federations. Dr Zemelak co-convenes the African School on Decentralisation (ASD). He is currently serving as a senior political advisor at the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD-Ethiopia).

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