

Lund University
Department of Political Science

STV004
Spring 2007
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Narrating Nationalist Discourse

The Politicization of Ethnic Identity Among the Oromo of
Ethiopia

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Abstract

The primary concern of this thesis is the politicization of ethnic identity among the Oromo ethnic group of Ethiopia, the narratives underpinning its nationalist discourse and the potential implications they have on contemporary Ethiopian social and political life. Potential links between narratives, identity and collective agency are examined in this context. The findings in large part stems from a field study conducted between December 2006 to February 2007.

The study concludes that the elites have played a pivotal role in the politicization of Oromo identity and the nationalist project it has spawned. However, in relation to the broad masses of the Oromo people this role has been a dual one, characterized by both positive and negative aspects. In contemporary Ethiopia the Oromo, as well as other ethnic groups, finds themselves in a situation where ethnicity has become the main category of indigenous social and political life. The nationalist narratives analysed in this thesis to some extent aggravate this situation. In a concluding discussion the author calls for joint efforts to broaden public discourse to open up for the possibility of more inclusive views on identity and the basis for political affiliation.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Instrumentalism, Oromo, Narrative, Ethnicity

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List of Abbreviations

Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM)

Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF)

Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)

Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE)

Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT)

Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)

Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM)

Oromo National Congress (ONC)

Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO)

Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM)

Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE)

Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

1 Introduction

Ethiopia, as a multi-ethnic country, struggles with several conflicting images of what it, as country, people and culture, actually represents¹. It is my hope that this small study will not to add or give strength to any already existing image of Ethiopia, a country I fell deeply in love with during my field-study.

There are a multitude of different indigenous discourses which are intrinsically linked to political life since each of these differing, often conflictual discourses perceive history in a certain way and from this conceptualize their contemporary problems and grievances. This thesis, at its best, will look into the world of the Oromo with a critical eye. Special points of interest are the narratives guiding their identity and action, their contemporary political situation and the history of their nationalist movement.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

This thesis takes its primary interest in the politicization of and mass-mobilization along ethnic identities in Ethiopia and the dynamics behind this process.

More specific, the focus lies on the Oromo ethnic group in Ethiopia and the nationalist project associated with it. The overarching purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the social-psychological mechanisms and socio-political context underlying the politicization of Oromo identity. Ethnic identity has surfaced as the most important social and political category in contemporary Ethiopia, thus carrying implications for the future political development of the country. Therefore it is judged to be an important subject of study for the field of political science.

¹ See for example Teshale Tibebu's article "Ethiopia: the 'Anomaly' and 'Paradox' of Africa" *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol.26 no. 4 (Mars. 1996) pp. 414-430. The articles main interest is to analyse the different images of Ethiopia that exist in the Western World.

The Oromo ethno-nationalist enterprise has to this date been mostly unsuccessful since it has failed to deliver its core objectives; independence or national self-determination. An important ambition this thesis holds is to discuss probable explanatory variables for this relative failure. Another, more theoretically oriented ambition of this thesis is to combine theoretical approaches with different ontological foundations and understandings of the nature of knowledge. The following theoretical chapter will elaborate upon these issues with the above presented ambitions as an intellectual point of departure.

The main research-question reads as follows: *What is the role of the elite in the politicization of Oromo ethnic identity?* A set of sub-questions that can be derived from the main question will also be discussed within the constraints of this paper.

Which are the main counter-narratives of Oromo nationalist discourse and what are their main components?

What role do these narratives play in the collective identity of the Oromo and what are their implications on the Ethiopian political scene?

1.2 Overview of Theory and Method

This thesis, being qualitative and theory-consuming in character, does not seek to produce results which can be used as grounds for broader (i.e cross-case) generalization (Esaïsson et al 2003:98). Instead, what is important in the case-study is to gain deeper understanding of the one case studied through an intense focus on the chosen case (Lundquist 1993:105). Furthermore, the qualitative approach has the ambition to try and bridge the gap between researcher and subject that is so characteristic for the positivist-driven natural sciences (Holme et al 1991:100). This ambition is first and foremost materialized through the narrative-identity approach adopted as the dominant field-study methodology. An assumption underlying this thesis is that it is possible to find a middle-way between the objectivist-relativist extremes, where one can observe ‘facts’ and produce knowledge about, in this case, the politicization of ethnic identity while also recognizing that this knowledge cannot exist without a surrounding social context or, if you will, a battery of presuppositions as a frame of interpretation. To concretize, this ambition is put to practice by the attempt of bridging the ontological gap between the instrumentalist approach and narrative analysis and also by arguing their compatibility and the potentials this combination can bring.

Although this thesis is thoroughly qualitative in character, an important but modest ambition underlying this undergraduate study is to make it fit for intersubjective testing. Since some of the methodological paths taken here inevitably will produce results highly open for interpretation the most efficient

strategy to promote intersubjectivity is to make explicit the theoretical basis for interpretation (Mishler 1986:66).

1.2.1 Outline of the study

This thesis essentially consists of four different but interrelated parts. The first chapter seeks to establish a theoretical framework suitable for my object of study. Apart from presenting the theoretical foundations of the presuppositions and analytical approaches that have guided the work with the thesis, this chapter will argue the need and potentials of a combination of two theoretical approaches which do not share ontological foundations.

The second chapter presents a brief overview of the development of Oromo nationalism with emphasis placed on the social and political dynamics behind the development and the role that the Oromo elites have played in this process. Moving on, the third chapter will provide the reader with an analysis of the narratives I identified as underpinning Oromo nationalist discourse. Here, the ambition is to give special attention to the second research-question found above and to analyse what roles these narratives and their components play in the nationalist discourse, as well as to discuss their potential links to collective agency. To sum up the analysis, findings and the lines of thought found in this thesis the study is concluded by returning to the discussion of the role of the elites in the politicization of Oromo identity and the potential implications of the nationalist narratives on Ethiopian social and political life.

1.3 What is Ethnicity?

Before we can discuss the basic assumptions of the instrumentalist approach we need to clear the fog around the elusive concept of ethnicity. There is no consensus on how to define this concept but there is a growing agreement among scholars that it contains both objective and subjective features (Enloe 1996:197). Following one of many possible tracks in academia, the modernist/constructivist perspective can be said to spring from the works of anthropologists Edmund Leach (1954) and Fredrik Barth (1969a). Leach argued that the study of ethnicity should focus on social interaction rather than taxonomies of 'cultural contents', while Barth argued the need to place the barriers that exclude one group from the other in the centre of attention (Eriksen 2000:51). This fixed the concept of ethnicity in the sphere of social relations, stressing its contextual and relational character. We can posit that where there is a group, boundaries exist, and these boundaries require mechanisms to maintain them (Nash 1996:24). If we follow

the modernist-track we arrive at two other important scholars, both proponents of the 'quintessential' instrumentalist position. Abner Cohen understands ethnicity essentially to be a form of political organization (Cohen 1996:84). In his view, ethnicity has two main functions. The concept provide individual psychological needs, such as meaning and belonging, which in turn can be utilized and also manipulated by elites through for example the promotion of symbols and myths charged with psychological relevance for the target group/individual. But ethnicity cannot survive as a meaningful form of social organization if it does not play a more 'functionalist' role. In this perspective, ethnicity needs to be utilized as an instrument in the competition for scarce resources and political power or prestige to survive as a relevant form of identity-affiliation for individuals and groups alike (Eriksen 2000:61).

Paul R. Brass (1996:85) recognizes that ethnicity is a highly fluid and contextual phenomena by distinguishing between different levels of development of ethnicity as a form of social organization and collective identity. The first stage of ethnic consciousness takes the form of what he calls an ethnic category, which is defined as: " Any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labour and for reproduction forms an ethnic category." The process of ethnic transformation discussed by Brass is vital to the analysis in this thesis and will therefore be presented under a separate heading below.

1.4 Introduction to Instrumentalist Theory

It is hardly possible to give a fully satisfactory account of the complex instrumentalist approach in this brief overview, but an attempt to discuss its most crucial parts is essential. Most importantly for the analysis conducted in this thesis are the core concepts of the instrumentalist position. (1) That the elites play a decisive role in the formation of ethnic identities and mass-mobilization along ethno-cultural lines. (2) That the importance of ethnic identities is relational, that is, only relevant in social comparison, and that the relevance of this social comparison in turn spring from the surrounding socio-political context. (3) That a collective ethnic identity is not something primordial and static but fluid, evolving and continuously renegotiated. In this perspective a politicized ethnic identity develops along a certain path from "category" to "nationality" where these stages correlate with the social and political context which in turn can be distinguished from each other. Ethnic identity is essentially a phenomenon with its roots in the modern world, and the politicized version of ethnic affiliation is a product of the surrounding socio-political environment. In sum, politicized ethnic identity is a product of ethnic group interaction within the framework of the state (Chanie 1998:103). The state, as provider and distributor of scarce resources is the larger arena within which the competition for these goods takes place, thus making the

competitors political actors per se. Societies undergoing rapid change such as the social dynamics associated with modernization are especially susceptible to the politicization of ethnic identity. As Brass (1991:45) notes: “The critical contact points in ethnic nationalist confrontations are the educational and political arenas – the schools, colleges, institutions of power and governance”. The surface of conflict identified by Brass can, if anything, be expected to expand as a consequence of modernization.

1.4.1 Ethnic Transformation: From Category to Nationality

The ethnic category is the first stage of development in a politicized ethnic identity. It should be noted that the objective cultural markers themselves and their level of ‘development’ does not necessarily correlate with higher degrees of intra-group solidarity and cohesiveness (Chanie 1998:97). Instead, this ethnic consciousness is largely a dependent variable of the local elites’ success in the venture of charging the objective markers of ethnic identity with subjective meaning, and in the process construct mechanisms and criteria for exclusion and inclusion into the group. For an ethnic group to spawn a nationalist movement it first needs to be elevated to community level. If this occurs it is often in early modernizing societies characterised by emerging bureaucracies and intense urbanization, where the new institutions ability to absorb the newly educated urban middle-class is the decisive feature. The success of this transformation is largely dependent on the elites’ ability to materialize the frustration of the urban-middle class into opposition organized along ethno-cultural identity and spread this opposition to include the broad masses of the people. Another important factor in this process is the, real or perceived, existence of inequalities between ethnic groups and the government policies toward different ethnic groups. Brass (1991:65) identifies three prerequisites for an ethnic category to transform into a nationalist movement. The success of this transformation depends firstly on the strategies pursued by the ethnic organizations or movements. The organizations needs resources and skilled leadership with which the masses can identify and some level of representational hierarchy. One political organization must hold a dominant position in the representation of the community over other potential rival groupings (Ibid:48-49) (Özkirimli 2000:114). Secondly, government policies toward ethnic group demands and grievances will be influential in the transformation-process. Policies toward ethnic communities can involve everything from open harassment, expulsion or even genocide to the granting of far-reaching rights of ethnic groups through for example plural representational solutions or a state structure of ethnically based federalism, as is the case in contemporary Ethiopia (Brass 1991:50). Finally, what Brass calls the general political context is considered to be important in deciding along what route an ethnic category will develop. This category harbours aspects such as other elites’ willingness to share power and influence and the possibilities of alignment of political and social forces along other lines than ethnic or cultural.

1.5 Introducing Narrative Analysis

Narratives are about the structures which set our frames of perception; the stories we construct and use to interpret and understand the social and political world that surrounds us (Patterson&Monroe 1998:316). As I will argue below, narratives hold prominence in the structure of human cognition, and thus the narrative becomes a primary strategy for individuals to structure their life-experiences (Riessman 1993:4). In short, narratives help us make sense and create order in an often fragmented and incoherent social life. The governing structure of the process of identity-formation is in a most fundamental way provided to us by the narrative. Furthermore, the rise of identity politics seem to tell us that we increasingly act out of who we are rather than “rational interests or a set of learned values” (Somers 1994:608). Thus, narratives lie at the base of human agency (Somers & Gibson 2003:38) (Johansson 2005:85).

What drives human agency? Are human beings rational, utility-maximizing actors free from structural constraints or are our actions and lives governed by structures beyond our comprehension and individual influence? This question holds one of the perennial meta-theoretical controversies of the social sciences, namely the question of agency versus structure. An attempt to both link narratives to identity and to handle the dilemma of actor versus structure is made by Somers (1994). Here she argues that *narrative is a fundamental ontological condition of social life* and introduces the concept of narrative identity. According to Somers (1994:616):“(...) narratives are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment”(the authors italics). The relationality of parts implies that an isolated event can never constitute a narrative. To be meaningful, narrativity requires events to be linked and sequenced to each other in terms of temporality and spatiality, though not necessarily chronologically (Somers&Gibson 2003:59). The term ‘causal emplotment’ is the chief coordinating strategy of the narrative. It is through this process that, in the words of Somers and Gibson, the events become “episodes”.

The construction of all narratives requires selective appropriation, which is intimately linked to the thematic characteristic of narratives. In the construction of narratives we chose to give prominence to some elements while others are de-emphasized or even discarded (Ibid). This is not a process of rational agency which the word ‘chose’ might connote, instead different themes relevant to the individual or group guide the appropriation process (Somers&Gibson 2003:61).

1.5.1 The Dimensionality of Narrative

When introducing the concept of narrative identity Somers discuss what she labels the four dimensions of narrative. The first dimension is the ontological narrative. This dimension of narrativity is intrinsically bound to identity as it helps us as individuals and groups to make sense of and act in our social surrounding (Somers&Gibson 2003:61). In short, this dimension of narrative is used to define

who we are, which in turn can be a precondition for how to act (Somers 1994:618). If more directly translated into terms of agency versus structure, the ontological dimension of narrativity is the hyperstructure of agency that set the structural boundaries for the potentials and limits of social agency. Focusing on interpersonal relations and the social context in which narratives are constructed and used, we find the public narrative. This dimension of narration has an institutional character and harbours entities such as the family, church, or nation. The public dimension of narrative provides us with plots; myths, explanations and warnings which provide the frame for comprehending complex phenomenon such as the origins of social disorder (Somers 1994:619). The third dimension of narrative is the meta-narrative, which refers to discourses with universal claims of truth (Johansson 2005:97). These can be the great, coherent, often teleological and conflictual stories of our time such as Modernization and Enlightenment, Barbarism vs. Civility or Capitalism vs. Communism (Ibid). In the words of Patterson & Monroe (1998:326) the meta-narratives: “[...]...appear as abstractions and universals, erasing their own history and particularity”.

Finally, the conceptual narrative dimension contains the stories constructed by social scientists such as theories of economic growth or the very instruments and concepts created and utilized by the social sciences, which Somers and Gibson argues are constructed, and thus conditioned, within the larger frame of the meta-narrative of modernization (Johansson 2005:98).

It is important to note that this categorization is far from problem-free. For example, one might question the actual possibility or need to divide the narratives structuring social life into different dimensions. The lines demarcating the dimensions are fuzzy and they seem highly woven into each other. Perhaps most notably one should question the division between public and conceptual narrative since they seem very similar (Patterson & Monroe 1998:326). In my interpretation, the different dimensions of narration presented here all seem, interexistingly, to have implications on collective agency.

Bearing this in mind, I shall focus not so much on the categorization of different dimensions of narratives as on emplotment (why a narrative has the storyline it does and the different themes the plots revolve around) as well as the functions the narratives have on Oromo self-identity (Somers 1994:616).

1.6 Combining Instrumentalism and Narrative Analysis

Above I stated that the combination of approaches in this case is more a question of division of labour than a total merger of theories. Instrumentalism is useful when analyzing the socio-political, empirical context which the politicized ethnic identities spring from and exist in. It lets us identify tangible, and therefore more easily perceived, explanatory variables explaining the politicization of ethnic identity. This approach recognizes the material interests, the competition for

scarce resources, to be the most important aspect of collective agency with ethnicity as the basis for organization. It should be obvious that the more functional aspects of ethnic group identity are decisive in its politicization but there is also a need to emphasize less tangible, more social-psychological, sources of collective action and group-mobilization. Not least to act as a counterweight to the air of rationalism often attached to the instrumentalist approach.

The ontological roots of instrumentalist theory lies in the objectivist tradition which claims that there is a reality 'out there' and that objective facts and data can be observed and collected. From this perspective, the elites seem oriented by material benefit calculus, operating in an isolated void from the larger social context in which they act. The masses, on the other hand, are understood as relatively uniform in constitution and interests, while being constantly duped and used as cannon-fodder to serve as the means towards the elites' highly individual ends². This is clearly an image that needs nuances.

The world surrounding us consists of more than readily observable tangibles, indeed it is also a world of interpretation and subjective reflection (Calhoun 1995:4). The knowledge we gather and the 'facts' we observe are embedded in presuppositions; they change with their specific socio-cultural context and the power-relations they are positioned in. Martin Hollis (2002:228) uses the following metaphor to advance the same argument: "Do we literally 'see' that that the marksman is aiming a rifle? The rifle is a compound of wood and metal. To identify it as a rifle, we need to bring a battery of concepts and a wealth of social knowledge to bear. The proverbial visiting Martian, physically equipped to see what we see, would not see a *rifle*." By the same line of argument, interests are, in search of a more adequate word, socially constructed, that is, constituted through interaction with the structures and actors of the social world and perceived through the prisms of individual and collective particularity. Perhaps the first step in grasping this argument in relation to the context studied here is to recognize that identity and interest are interrelated and not so easily separated. By combining instrumentalism and the narrative identity approach I hope to nuance the image of the rational and cold-calculating elites and introduce the idea that identity and interests are intrinsically intertwined concepts. Calhoun (1995:232) notes that: "To create the modern politics of class required identity struggle that persuaded the workers that their common identities as workers should overshadow their differences on lines of craft or field of production, region, religion, gender etc[...].... The quintessential politics of interest, in other words was rooted in a politics of identity." One's identity, which in the case of ethnicity is inherently collective, then becomes the chief compass of one's interests. These interests are most probably situated in the material and the 'ideal' sphere simultaneously.

² This critical point is related to a broader theme of critique of the instrumentalist approach which discuss the seeming inability of the approach to explain why people, in terms of emotions, at times invest so heavily in nationalism that they ultimately are ready to lay down their life for it. For a comprehensive discussion on this matter, see Özkirimli, Umut, 2000. "Theories of Nationalism: a Critical Introduction". Palgrave: New York.

If we recognize the need to balance the instrumentalist focus on functional and material aspects of ethnicity with social-psychological oriented variables the narrative identity approach can be used as a methodological instrument in the interview-situation.

It is my belief that the theoretical deficit with regard to interests as a source of collective agency can be overcome if one incorporates the concept of narrative identity in the methodological tool-box when analyzing the politicization of ethnic identity. Firstly, this is because the narrative identity approach recognizes that actions spring from identity; from *who* I am rather than *what*. Thus narrative identity becomes a more relevant analytical point of departure. The narrative identity approach can also be used as a starting point for an analysis with the ambition of harmoniously including both structure and agency, without letting one determinant take prominence over the other. The concept acknowledges the autonomy of the actor in that it locates the source of agency in identity but it also recognizes that identity, and thus interests, itself is constructed in a certain social context of inter-existing and sometimes conflicting narratives which govern the alternatives available for utilization within the social arena.

1.7 On the Field-Study Methodology

The field-work of this thesis has been dominated by interviews which can be divided into two different parts with regard to their methodological approach. The first and major part of the interviews have been focused on eliciting narratives from the respondents while the second and minor part of the interviews have been conducted with 'experts' or persons with special knowledge in this thesis' field of interest. The political situation in Ethiopia is very tense, and participating in interviews and discussions concerning ethnic nationalism and clandestine political activity might pose a serious threat to the respondents' personal security. One could argue that this applies especially to members of the Oromo ethnic group³. The individual security of the informants has been my highest priority, and that is why I have chosen to decode these respondents with only the date of the

³ For example, see the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report of May 2005 Vol. 17 No. 7 "Suppressing Dissent: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in Ethiopia's Oromia Region."

interview. However, when referring to information provided by individuals with expert knowledge their names appear uncoded, partly to strengthen claims made in this text and partly because these individuals already to a varying degree are public persons with well-known opinions and positions, such as opposition-politicians. The date and place of all interviews are listed in an appendix attached to this paper.

Following a narrative approach, the interviews have been qualitative, semi-structured and respondent-focused in character, the main reason for this being that it is the subjects themselves, their thoughts and perceptions that are to be studied (Esaiaasson et al, 2003,254) (Gomm 2004:176). Semi-structured interviews seem to be the only reasonable strategy to make room for, and thus be able to ‘capture’ and interpret the narratives of the interviewees. Mishler (1986:67) notes that: “Looking at how interviewees connect their responses into a sustained account, that is, a story, brings out problems and possibilities of interviewing that are not visible when attention is restricted to question-answer exchanges.” Narrative accounts are highly open for interpretation and one might thus question the reliability and validity of these accounts. The question of what valid knowledge actually is comprises the question of what truth is (Kvale 1997:215). There are no obvious strategies of eradicating this problem, but by aligning myself with Kvale (1997:209) in a moderate post-modern understanding of ‘Truth’, which dismisses the notion of a universal, objective Truth but accepts the possibility of specific local, personal and societal forms of truth I tell of the epistemological underpinnings of this thesis. The world we seek to understand and the knowledge we want to gain through theorizing is not only made up of empirical hard facts. It is also a world of subjective reflection and phenomenological experience (Calhoun 1995:4). When using qualitative methods to gain knowledge, however subjective, particular and context-bound this knowledge might be, I would suggest not staring ourselves blind on issues of validity and reliability that inevitably leads to perennial meta-theoretical discussions. Instead, the internal logic or coherence between theory, method and research-results and the very craft of the study as a whole should be given greater importance.

I have chosen to focus the interviews with a narrative approach to an elite-segment of the Ethiopian Oromo community for reasons which I will elaborate below. The ‘elite’ can be identified as persons of often urban residence, that have gone through higher education or hold more qualified positions/occupations in Ethiopian society and show a relatively high level of ‘consciousness’ and engagement in global as well as local affairs. There is a relatively broad agreement among scholars that nationalism essentially is an elite-project since the elites play decisive roles in the intellectual as well as organizational sphere of nationalist enterprises. They reconstruct and invent traditions, myths and emotionally charged symbols to mobilize the people for collective agency. Their intellectual or artistic constructions (i.e academic texts, artwork etc) facilitates the ‘imaging’ of a coherent community or a collective identity with a set of shared characteristics differentiating them from others, which provides the rationale for cultural or political autonomy. Thus, the reason for limiting the selection of respondents in this study to that of elites is that the narratives underpinning

nationalist discourse are essentially elite-constructions only later mediated to the broader masses.

2 The Politicization of Oromo Ethnicity

There are roughly two conflicting discourses on Ethiopian history that today serve to inform the background of the complex issues of ethnicity, political power and democratization in Ethiopia. Each different interpretation of the country's history implies a specific solution to the country's problem of ethnic tensions, thus making it hard to escape the political overtones of many of the scholarly interpretations of Ethiopian history and roots of the contemporary problems (Merera 2002:94). One discourse is closely connected to a Pan-Ethiopian ideology, which assess that the modern, multi-ethnic Ethiopian nation grew out of a political elite composed of different ethnicities who, in a relatively harmonious way, incorporated a multitude of different ethnicities into one, single and unified Ethiopian identity⁴. The other view is that many different nations were emerging before the creation of the Abyssinian Empire in the region, but that the orthodox Christian group, the Amhara from the central highlands of present day Ethiopia (Shoa), through imperial expansion and colonial practice came to subdue the other ethnic groups and made them to serve the exclusive interests of the Amhara, embodied by the modern Ethiopian state (Tesfaye 2002:52; Keller 1998:111).

The Oromo group generally adheres to the latter perspective and understands their history as one of oppression by and struggle against the colonial practices of the 'Abyssinians' or *Habeshas* (Amhara-Tigray), allied with the church and the Western imperial powers (Holcomb&Sisai 1990; Mohammed 1990; Leenco1998; Jalata 1998).

In any case, a recurrent characteristic of Ethiopian history is the attempts at nation-building and centralization; to construct Ethiopia as a coherent and unified nation-state both in terms of identity and with regard to geographical boundaries. However, since the 1960's these efforts of ordering the Ethiopian nation-state and self-identity into one entity have been strained by various 'ethnic liberation movements' as well as multi-ethnic political groups organized on the basis of ideology (most notably different versions of Marxism), the latter being marginalized on the contemporary Ethiopian political scene.

4 Proponents of this view in Ethiopian society are often the elites of the Amhara ethnic group, the second biggest ethnicity after Oromo and once the dominant group. Scholars advancing this discourse are for example Donald Levine (2000) who has celebrated the 'incorporating genius' of Amhara identity and Christopher Clapham (1988).

Arsi-Oromo, Borana-Oromo and Wollega-Oromo. Instead of blood or genetic makeup, the Oromo base their ethnic identity on objective cultural markers, the most important being the language *afaan* Oromo and the practice of a social and political system of governance galled the *Gada*. This complex system of power-sharing and governance also encompassed mechanisms of assimilation of other ethnicities on fairly egalitarian terms (Mr. Bulcha Demeksa). Once an individual had adopted an Oromo identity and went through the necessary rituals he was accepted as fully Oromo, and not as half-caste.

Although many Oromo are Muslim, a fair share are Christianized and in the region of Western Wollega many are Protestant as a result of missionary activity in the area. Before the religions of the book were introduced to the Oromo they practised a pagan religion called *Waq'a*. The *Waq'a* is still practised in some areas today, and nevertheless is continues to influence other parts of Oromo social and cultural life.

The struggle between the Oromo and what they perceive as Amhara/Tigrayan (their term of preference being Abyssinian) colonization is one of the most important features of Ethiopian history and the country's contemporary political life (Keller 1995). The often violent dialectic between these two ethnic groups is one of the most important starting points in understanding the development of a politicized ethnic identity and the accompanied ethno-nationalist project among the Oromo.

2.1.1 The Gada-system

One of the cultural components that have been highly instrumental in fostering a sense of communal solidarity and connectedness in the Oromo community is the ancient form of Oromo socio-political governance – the *gada* system with its democratic and egalitarian features. The *gada* was practised throughout Oromo lands prior to the invasion of the Abyssinian invasion, and was later banned as the Oromo came under the rule of the *neftegna* (Lemmu 1998:84)⁵. The *gada* had some important democratic features in the form of checks and balances, e.g periodic succession and a complex system of power-sharing which was based on 8-year age-cycles (Jalata 1998:38). The mechanisms of popular power exercise inherent in the *Gada* contrasts sharply with the autocratic, 'strong-man' rule of the political tradition of the Northern people. On the other hand it excluded both women and young men from the political process. A man had to be at least 30 years of age to stand for elections to the assemblies. Some informants expressed the need to update the *Gada* to make it "fit for the modern world" and to realise its practical implementation, especially with regard to the gender-deficit (06/12/20).

⁵ The *neftegna* is the term used for the Amhara overlords who settled on Oromo lands after the conquest and cultivated the land in the feudal-styled system called the *Gabbar*, which reduced many Oromo peasants to serfdom, or took up vocations associated with the Imperial regime such as tax collection.

Others felt that the women were granted far-reaching democratic rights and forums for resolving social issues in the original form of the system (06/21/12; Mrs. Almaz). In any case, the practice and nostalgia over the gada system has proved to be a very powerful symbol of contemporary Oromo identity, as confirmed by the field-work of this thesis.

2.2 The Framing of Future Conflict

The cornerstones of the modern Ethiopian state was laid by the territorial expansion, conquests and institutional engineering of the early emperors, starting with Tewodros (1855-68) and Yohannes (1872-89) who managed to subdue Oromo leaders in the northern region who at the time formed the Yejju dynasty. At this point in history the main mobilizing factors were religion and region rather than ethnicity, but Tewodros was the first Ethiopian ruler who recognized ethnicity as an explicit factor in his project of Empire-building, mainly through ending the rule of the Oromo in the North, which he despised (Merera 2002:59).

Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913), with the help of firearms and imperial allies conquered vast areas where the geographically scattered Oromo resided, most notably Menelik expanded to the southern regions of present day Ethiopia. The Oromo resisted this invasion with varying zeal in different areas but were eventually subdued by the Imperial army, partly because of inferior firepower and partly because of the Oromo leaders' inability to forge political unity at this early stage (Baxter 1994:169; Chanie 1998:96). The Amhara conquest meant the banishment of gada-rule and the superimposition of a set of new institutions designed for the pacification of the inhabitants of the conquered areas and the efficient extraction of resources. Many Oromo took a more or less openly cautious or even hostile approach to the *neftegna*, but many also intermarried and absorbed into the cultural framework imposed by the Amhara overlords on their subjects by adopting the Amharic language, the Coptic Christian doctrine and its accompanied cultural practices.

Menelik is regarded as the architect behind the modern Ethiopian nation-state and it is the territorial expansion of his army that most Oromo perceive as a colonial experience. The penetration of Imperial power in the conquered regions was facilitated by three essentially feudal instruments. The *rist*, allowed Abyssinian soldiers to settle on land grants, the Amharic language was superimposed on the conquered peoples, while the language of the Oromo (afaan Oromo) was perceived by Abyssinian elites as a threat to Ethiopian identity and the process of nation-building (Mekuria 1997:326). Thus, it was not permissible to publish or teach in afaan Oromo up till the end of Haile Selassie's rule (Kidane 1997:120). Furthermore, the *gabbar* system in fact introduced serfdom on most of the peasantry in the conquered areas. The Orthodox church allied with the emperors in their mission, legitimizing the dominance of the Amhara (Tesfaye 2002:53).

The building of the empire carried with it the seeds of future conflict. Menelik gathered many different ethnic groups to live under one polity on highly unequal terms through military expansion and in accordance with this relied mostly on military force and, to a lesser degree the power of the different components of the early Ethiopian/Abyssinian national doctrine. The Oromo elite was probably worst hit by this; they had to change their language, culture and sometimes even their names to occupy a societal status clearly disproportionate of their numerical strength (Merera 2002:63).

At this point in time, the ethnic consciousness and political unity of the Oromo were relatively weak, a symptom of this being the fact that the elites many times chose to absorb into the Amhara cultural framework. At this point in time the Oromo elites did not manage to charge the collective cultural markers such as language and the gada-system with subjective relevance as a strategy for mass-mobilization, except perhaps in the case of the Arsi Oromo who's resistance against Menelik's army was far more fierce than in other Oromo areas (Bahru 2002:62). However, in a cross-regional perspective the sense of collective Oromo identity remained weak. Then again one should take into account the harsh campaign against Oromo resistance which obviously played an important role in the lack of collective expressions of identity and attempts of opposition to the rule of the Habeshas. In any case, this period in history introduced a real and concrete feature that would be readily used by the Oromo elites later on for the mobilization of their people: a shared experience of subjugation, oppression and discrimination (Chanie 1998:97).

2.3 The Initial Phase of Ethnic Transformation

When Haile Selassie emerged on the stage in 1917 the empire had been centralized and a largely coherent state structure harbouring roughly 80 different ethnic groups had been realized under a monarchical, authoritarian rule. However, feudal politico-economic features were still a recurrent characteristic of the Ethiopian polity (Abbay 2004:594; Tesfaye 2002:54)

The situation in Ethiopia at the time resembles what Brass describes as 'elite competition in early modernizing or pre-industrial societies'. This was the first phase in the ethnic transformation of the Oromo. Even though the process of modernization and nation-building had been started by his predecessors, Haile Selassie accelerated these joint projects. The Amhara social and political discourse excluded the history of the conquered peoples, perceived the cultural practices of these peoples as barbarian and in the case of the Oromo made use of a derogatory term which carries connotations of racism and slavery, *Galla*, as a misnomer to this group (Leenco 1998:128). The emerging institutions echoed this discourse through for example the school curriculum, thus further facilitating a system of ethnic stratification in the country. In sum, the cultural and linguistic domination that to some extent always had been present in the Ethiopian regions

intensified under Haile Selassie and took on a much more blatant form (Merera 2002:70).

Oromo elites were still being co-opted through 'Amharization' and at this time seemed in general more guided by individual benefit than the emancipation of their people. However, under this period the ethnic consciousness of the Oromo was germinating as a consequence of the expansion of modern institutions. This would prove to have profound effects for the near future (Keller 1995:626; Abbay 2004:595; Mekuria 1997:335). The relatively rapid social changes brought by the modernization process heightened competition for jobs and education, and among many of the young Oromo who became urbanites and had the opportunity to go through at least a basic level of education a sense of ethnic identity was growing as the limits of social mobility were increasingly being recognized by them.

During the first phase of Haile Selassie's rule the articulation of collective social, political and economic rights for the Oromo as one unified group was weak, if not even non-existent. This was primarily a consequence of the geographical dispersal of the Oromo, the harsh repression they faced and the elites' tendency to assimilate into the Amhara culture in hope of personal gains rather than attempting political unity and mass-mobilization (Chanie 1998:98).

The intermission of Haile Selassie's rule came with the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (between 1935-1941). The Italian occupation had two profound effects that each contributed to the present day situation of competing ethnic nationalisms in Ethiopia. First, the occupation meant the expansion of capitalism in the Ethiopian empire. The Italians developed an industrial and communications infrastructure to be able to extract resources in a more efficient manner, which also hastened the development of urbanization (Jalata 1993:84). Second, the Italians used a strategy of divide and rule by trying to exploit the regional, cultural and ethnic differences among the peoples of Ethiopia and to some extent also co-opted elites of different ethnic groups (Merera 2002:70). When the Italians arrived, many Oromo greeted them as better than the Amhara (Bulcha Demeksa). The Italians changed the *gabbar* landholding system and instead granted them rights to the land they had cultivated before under Amhara landlords (Jalata 1993:84). Thus, the Italian occupation sharpened the ethnic consciousness of many Oromo and with the end of the occupation and the reinstallation of Haile Selassie some ethnic groups, particularly the Tigrayans and Eritreans, took advantage of the fact that the centralist Ethiopian state was in transition and rebelled against it (Tsfaye 2002:58). One of the historical failures of the Oromo elite was arguably that they did not take advantage of the power vacuum and general state of confusion that followed for a short period after the Italians departed to mobilize their people.

Using Brass' vocabulary this was the initial phase of ethnic transformation among the Oromo, which is characterized by the elites' early attempts at multi-symbol congruence and the charging of objective ethnic markers with subjective meaning (Brass 1991:30). The pioneers of modern Oromo nationalism were the few, young and exclusively male urban and educated Oromo whom were exposed to the *en vogue* radical ideologies, gaining increasing global support in the mid 1960's, in conjunction with realizing the limits of social mobility to them on

account of their ethnic origin and the systematic denial of their history and culture.

Although with limited success at this stage, some Oromo elites started promoting potentially potent ethnic symbols such as language, territory, religion and also the shared experience of oppression by and subjugation to the Abyssinian centralist rule to mobilize their people. Here it is important to take the geographical factor into consideration. The Oromo were, and still are, dispersed throughout a wide geographical area. This dispersion obviously gives rise to differences in life-styles, cultural practices and other values. Therefore, the sense of ethnic identity also varied along regions. The Shoa-Oromo for example, had not at this time experienced a politicization of their ethnic identity to the same extent as the Arsi, since their degree of interaction with and integration into the Amhara cultural framework was far higher (06/12/21). Furthermore, it needs to be emphasized that the fostering of unity among a vastly geographically scattered ethnic group such as the Oromo probably was obstructed by the poor communications infrastructure available at this time. Nevertheless, this was a period of increasing elite attempts at mass-mobilization which hinted of the dawn of the nationalist movement.

2.4 Fermentation of Ethnic Sentiments

After Haile Selassie had been reinstalled the Ethiopian modernization drive accelerated once again. A new constitution that, although only in theory, introduced a representative system with a Chamber of Deputies and a Senate along with several civil rights was decreed in 1955 (Tsfaye 2002:60). The education system expanded and the Haile Selassie I university college was installed in Addis Ababa in 1951. In sum, the bureaucracies and institutional infrastructure associated with modern polities were booming in Ethiopia during this period. But, in terms of cultural and linguistic policies there was an intended status quo. Mekuria Bulcha (1997:338) argues that: "By excluding the cultures and histories of the non-Abyssinian peoples from its curriculum, the school system was working against the very purposes it was meant to accomplish – social integration and assimilation." From the perspective of the Imperial regime, the Oromo with their numerical strength and resource-rich territory needed to be kept in check. By expanding the institutional infrastructure of the state the regime created new and expanding arenas for competition and also heightened the likelihood of such competition by perpetuating an exclusionary nationalist ideology christened Amharization, dominated by a discourse in which the germinating ethno-nationalist movements within Ethiopia had no place.

The educational system came to produce two groups, the old educated elite and the new educated elite. The former group which comprised those educated in the 1930's-1950's was easily absorbed into the existing aristocracy and nobility with high salaries and social prestige given to them and thus remained loyal to the emperor. However, the latter group which emerged in the

1960's, was of a more mixed ethnic composition and harboured the already employed in the middle and lower levels of state administrative hierarchy as well as students of Haile Selassie I university in the capital, the country's sole university. It was this latter group that was to prove susceptible to developing a politicized ethnic identity and, eventually, to voice nationalist demands (Chanie 1998:99).

There were two crucial factors that set the stage for the crystallization of a politicized ethnic identity among the Oromo and other ethnic groups of Ethiopia at this time. The first was the international binary ideological climate, which exposed many young, urbanized and discontent to ideologies with alleged emancipatory agendas such as Marxism. The second was the frustration of the urbanized, educated unemployed (ibid). Brass, among many other scholars with slightly different perspectives, has identified this as the classic problem of developing countries⁶ (1991:33).

For the first time, and only for a brief period, the pressures of the international/donor community opened up for some degree of organizational freedom after a failed coup against the Emperor in 1960. This resulted in a growing sense of ethnic identity as associations based on ethnicity were formed among the country's diverse ethnic groups (Keller 1998:111). A landmark of emerging Oromo ethno-nationalism was the creation of the Macha Tulama Self-Help Association which was created by urban Oromo intellectuals in the 1960's. It was initially meant to help socio-economic development in Oromo areas but rather quick became a megaphone for expressing the basic grievances of the Oromo and was soon linked to the uprising in Bale (Mekuria 1996:58). The meetings of the Macha Tulama were very well-attended and sub-branches and regional divisions mushroomed all over the country, but except for the urban centres it was most successful in the south among the Arsi Oromo. The fact that the meetings and speeches were held in their own language, afaan Oromo, permissible for the first time in a long period had a great symbolic importance for many Oromo. Although the Macha Tulama would prove to be the seed of the Oromo ethno-nationalist organizations, at first issues of land and resource-control were not being raised. In its initial stages the demands was for first class citizenship rather than secession from the Ethiopian state itself (Keller 1995:627). Nevertheless, rather naturally the activities of the Macha-Tulama inspired Oromos to dig deeper into their history and culture, eventually digging the very trenches out of which the militant nationalist struggle would be waged. Eventually the regime became weary of the growing Oromo activity and when the Macha Tulama raised the question of land and self-determination it soon became prohibited with its leaders either killed or imprisoned (Jalata 1998:7; Tesfaye 2002:63).

⁶ Another classic theoretical contribution on this issue has been offered by Ted Gurr through introducing the concept of relative deprivation (1971) the feeling of deprivation as something that first and foremost is relative and not absolute, in the sense that one compare one owns situation with the situation of other group and individuals and groups in the surrounding society.

The creation and subsequent banishment of the Macha-Tulama organization paved the way for an organized, militant approach to the Oromo issue. This task was taken up by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) which was created in 1974 with the goal of liberating the Oromo and creating an independent Oromia. It was not only the Oromo who started ethno-nationalist enterprises during the declining years of the imperial regime. Other organizations such as the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF) were formed in the wake of the armed uprisings in many of the country's rural areas.

The initial fermentation of ethnic sentiments in Ethiopia which took place at this time was the emergence of the new dominant perspective in Ethiopian political and social life; the competing ethnic nationalisms.

2.5 Military Dictatorship and its Response to Ethnic Nationalism

In 1974 the Imperial regime was overthrown by what started as an urban-based, popular revolt (Bahru 2002:229). However, eventually power came to be concentrated into the hands of a military junta with Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam as the undisputed autocrat. The regime, which labelled itself Marxist would prove to be the most repressive and autocratic in the political history of Ethiopia.

One of the promises of the new regime was to deal with the grievances of the various ethnic groups whose cultures and languages had been suppressed by the imperial regime. The new regime declared that each nationality would have autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs, and that these groups would have the right to determine the contents of its social, political and economic affairs, use its own language and elect its own leaders (Mekuria 1997:346). This soon proved to be empty rhetoric and instead, power came to be even more centralized than under the imperial regime. Through institutional engineering, the Mengistu-regime, commonly known as the *Derg*⁷, managed to widen state power as the newly created regional and local institutions were filled with loyal cadres, effectively shutting out a variety of groups which could be perceived as political alternatives (Mekuria 1996:64) (Tsfaye 2002:68). Eventually, any notion of an independent civil society was crushed.

The Oromo as well as other ethnic groups in the country had generally welcomed the revolution in the hope that it would rid them of the heavy yoke of material as well as cultural repression placed on them under the imperial regime. The promises of recognition of the group rights of the country's various ethnic groups coupled with a land reform designed to abolish the *gabbar* landholding-system were designed to create a political base for the new regime. The land reform

7 Derg is the Amharic word for committee or council.

enacted by the military regime to mobilize support among the peasantry lowered the susceptibility of ethnic appeals to the Oromo masses as land ownership was abolished and given back to the original cultivators. When the Oromo peasants saw the Abyssinian landlords leave the countryside a major historical and material grievance was removed, potentially making mass-mobilization against the regime less likely (Markakis 1998:142).

However, it would not take long until the Oromo elites, as well as other ethnic groups such as the Tigrayans and Eritreans, would create ethnic liberation movements to take up the struggle against the Derg, which they eventually perceived to be yet another Abyssinian colonizer (Fullerton-Joireman 1997:394).

There were a number of factors contributing to the downfall of the Derg, but the most important was arguably the rural policy of the regime, which soon focused more on quota deliveries and villagization rather than equal opportunities for livelihood, and its inability to handle the pressing issue of ethnic nationalism (Merera 2002:86). The antagonizing policies of the military regime made the peasantry more susceptible to the rallying cries of the different ethno-nationalist groups, which by now were mushrooming across the country. By the end of the 1980's the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) were operating in the North, soon allying with the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and receiving support from among other the U.S.A and Sudan (Leenco 1998:55). The ethno-nationalist groups that the military dictatorship worked so hard to suppress eventually ousted the regime with a combined military effort in May 1991, although the TPLF were the militarily dominant among the fronts who marched in to Addis Ababa at what date (Mekuria 1996:66; Vestal 1999:4).

2.5.1 The Ascendance of the EPRDF – Elevating Ethnicity to Prime Status

When the Marxist regime was removed from power Mengistu himself fled to Zimbabwe as representatives of the TPLF, EPLF and OLF met in London in a conference organized by the U.S.A. The TPLF, the prime representative of the Northern Tigrayan minority, had created the umbrella-organization Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) already in 1989 by sponsoring several satellite ethnic movements such as the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), The Amhara Nation Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) (Chanie 1998:102). The creation of OPDO, initially made up of war captives, can be understood both as an attempt to gain Oromo legitimacy and to challenge the potentially strong opposition by the OLF.

In July 1991 a national conference was held in Addis Ababa with the goal of drafting a new national charter (Tesfaye 2002:73; Kidane 1997:126). The arrangement of a national conference with the participation of different ethnic and political groups signalled what at first seemed to be a commitment to reconciliation and pluralism. The conference resulted in the creation of an 87-seat

council of representatives and the establishment of the interim-body the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) where the bulk of the seats were held by the EPRDF. Its leader, Meles Zenawi, was appointed as president and his party also held key posts such Defense and Foreign Affairs ministries while the OLF received four portfolios of lesser weight (Lyons 1996:123; Vestal 1999:8)⁸.

Not least because the overthrow of the Derg had been brought about by the 'ethnic liberation fronts' it was a basic political reality for any regime attempting to govern the now highly conscious ethnic groups within the Ethiopian state to address the ethnic issue in some manner.

The transition was dominated by the EPRDF through a combination of effective organization and leadership, military power, external support and control of the agenda. It was structured around ethnically defined regions and constitutional emphasis on self-determination that de facto institutionalized ethnicity as the primary consideration in the domestic politics of Ethiopia (Keller 1998:114; Lyons 1996:125). Out of this process the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) was created.

Even if the TPLF already from the beginning of the transformation-process of the Ethiopian nation-state aspired for hegemony it should be noted that even a political actor with genuine democratic ambitions would have found Ethiopia largely unprepared. The centralization efforts and brutal repression of first the Emperors and later the Mengistu regime had destroyed the foundations for a viable civil society by using its institutions as megaphones for state propaganda and a nursery for loyal cadres (Fullerton-Joireman 1997:403). The EPRDF inherited a political tradition deeply entrenched in authoritarianism and mutual suspicion between different ethnic groups which was far from fertile ground out of which to build a democratic society.

During the June 1992 regional elections the EPRDF failed to create an atmosphere of free political competition, instead leaving the opposition vulnerable to harassment, intimidation and fraud (Lyons 1996:127). The OLF found that they were not able to register their own candidates in some areas where OPDO also were represented and their members experienced harassment and imprisonment (Vestal 1999:31). This convinced them of the TPLF's aspiration for hegemony and subsequently they withdrew from the elections and were then told to leave the EPRDF were they previously had held 12 seats. The leadership of the OLF went abroad and declared war on the EPRDF regime (Chanie 1998:103). The clashes that followed after the OLF's declaration of war led to a low-intensity armed struggle which to this date has left the OLF severely weakened (Keller 1995:630).

8 Meles Zenawi, the current prime minister and 'strong man' of Ethiopia had ascended to the top echelons of power within the TPLF from an organization within the organization: The Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) which had played the role of the ideological vanguard of the TPLF when in the bush fighting the army of the Derg. However, the ousting of the Derg coincided with the end of the Cold War. The ascendance of the United States of America as the world's sole superpower had thus made Marxist rhetoric less of a winning strategy to render support from the International community. Meles Zenawi and the TPLF/EPRDF thus had to tone down their ideological preferences.

The consequence was a new flare of ethnically based conflict and a severe setback to the democratic legitimacy of the transitional process as the primary representatives of around 32% of the Ethiopian population no longer were a part of the electoral process.

During the time of campaigning by the OLF in Oromo areas under the TGE the organization proved highly efficient in mobilizing their people (Dr. Merera). The success in mass-mobilization suggests that the Oromo nationalist project had reached a final stage in its development. As this brief overview of the development of Oromo nationalism has shown the elites have played a pivotal role in this process.

At the time of the TGE most Oromo seemed to favour a secessionist solution rather than other power-sharing arrangements such as federalism and regional autonomy. The potential strength of a unified Oromo people was also recognized by the TPLF-dominated EPRDF, which led the organization to obstruct the mobilizing efforts of the OLF with a variety of different strategies described above. Since the withdrawal of OLF from the transition-process and the outlawing of the front there seems to have been few, if any, advancements in their agenda. Instead there are indications that the core leadership of the OLF is turning away from the secessionist position in favour of a genuine federal solution and regional autonomy (Mr. Tsegaye Wolde).

3 Narrative Analysis of the Oromo Nationalist Discourse

John Sorenson (1993:38) notes that: “Past, present and future are not distinct periods but part of one interactive and endlessly self-reflecting process of imagination.” But, yet universally ethno-nationalists seek to present history and time itself as a linear process of unfolding events, to impose order and causality where fragmentation prevails and through this establish a continuity of history instrumental for their own specific agenda. In this sense, Oromo nationalists are no different. This is a necessary mechanism in any nationalist enterprise, enabling them to build communal consciousness and challenge dominant discourses. The deconstruction of one version of history in favour of another carries with it tangible socio-political implications. Most notably, there is a risk of substituting one static and essentializing discourse with another – thus polarizing positions between different ethnic groups. Nationalist discourse with its myths and folklore is generally a thoroughly aestheticized political phenomenon and it often appears as almost apolitical in its more culturally-related expressions (Calhoun 1995:232).

At an early stage in the course of the interviews I found that certain themes and storylines were reoccurring with a relatively high frequency. An attempt to conceptualize these themes and gather the material to be analysed under a set of labels oriented by the dimensions and mechanisms of narration suggested by Somers and Somers & Gibson is presented below.

3.1 The Dominating Socio-Political Discourse

As a starting point to this short enquiry one should contemplate the unique position Ethiopia occupies in both the collective mind and scholarly tradition of the Western world. The dominant discourse on Ethiopia is not a one-directional social and intellectual construction created in the West and imposed on a passive recipient. Rather, Western *Éthiopian* thought has been heavily influenced by myths, images and narratives that emerged out of indigenous power-relations and were created by local elites, which were only later mediated to the West. When the indigenous dominant discourse was adopted new dimensions were added to it while simultaneously merging it with broader discursive themes such as racism and the essentialization of non-western cultures (Sorenson 1998:232).

The endogenously constructed discourse on the historical development of the Ethiopian nation consists of a set of readily identifiable building-blocks. Firstly, the antiquity of the nation is stressed, some even dating it back 3000 years

in time and presenting it as the offspring of the Aksumite Civilization, initially made up of Semitic groups that crossed the Red Sea from the Arabian Peninsula. This is linked to the Semitic character of Ethiopian (Amhara-Tigrayan) language and identity, a thesis itself advanced by the Solomonic myth⁹. The long tradition of Christian confession of the Northern-Centre elites is another important component in this discourse that serves to distinguish Ethiopia from its geographical surroundings and neighbours. By stressing religious similarities with the West the Amhara-Tigrayan elites sought to denounce and distinguish themselves from an 'African' identity.

The Abyssinians also had their mission of Civilization. As all hegemonic discourses, the Habesha-version of history with its underlying narratives needed an 'Other' to contrast imagined virtues, moral and values with. This was provided by the existence of the different ethnic groups, most notably the Oromo, whom in this version of history was incorporated and assimilated into the Empire and the Amhara cultural framework in a relatively harmonious way, with little reference to a system of ethnic stratification. The Oromo, then referred to as the Galla, were in an almost systematic fashion depicted as uncivilized, filthy and in possession of more 'Negroid' features than the Northerners¹⁰. The misnomer Galla was readily accepted by the West, where it was used in both popular and scholarly thought and work well into the last decades of the 20th century (Leenco 1998:131). In the same discursive tradition the Oromo are seen as newcomers, even invaders into the Ethiopian lands and thus de facto alien to the Empire (Zitelmann 1996:110). Hultin (1996:83-84) describes the full image of the 'barbarian invader' projected by this discourse by stating: "In much Ethiopian historiography the historical migration and expansion of Oromo-speaking groups has been imagined as the culmination of a series of barbaric – that is Cushitic and Muslim or "pagan" – invasions of an ancient Semitic-speaking, Christian or Judeo-Christian, monarchical, literate civilization in the heart of darkness". The incorporation of the Oromo into the Ethiopian empire with its distinct cultural framework thus became a matter of the good will of the Amhara-Tigrayan elites.

⁹ The Solomonic myth, which still is accepted as a historical fact by many Ethiopians, explains that the Queen of Sheba travelled to Jerusalem and met with King Solomon and later gave birth to his son. Subsequently she returned with the arch of the covenant and the son who would be the start of a 'divine genealogy' ending with Haile Selassie who, through this connection claimed a 'mandate from God'. This myth has had an enormous impact on scholarly as well as popular thought on Ethiopia for several reasons. By claiming connections with the Judeo-Christian World, Ethiopia was written into one of the most influential 'Grand' narratives of the West – Christianity. Thus, the Solomonic myth served to create an image of Ethiopia as less African and more European; an outpost of Christian civilization among a sea of savages, pagans and Muslims.

¹⁰ Denoting the Oromo as *Gallas*, have been common practice for most of the Ethiopian history. This is in itself a proof of the hegemony of the Amhara discourse. The term Galla is derogatory and carries with it connotations of racism and slavery. Leenco Lata (1998:130), a senior OLF member, describes how every OLF press release well into the 1980's had to start with a statement on how the term Galla is thick with derogatory connotations, so as to establish the common use of *Oromo* instead of *Galla*.

This was the context out of which the Oromo political and discursive challenge to the dominant discourse on Ethiopia grew as ethnic sentiments fermented in the latter half of the 20th century. Scholars of Oromo origin as well as Western social scientists sympathetic to their cause took up the struggle over knowledge starting from the late 60's. They started to construct counter-narratives which sought to oppose and deconstruct the Amhara *grand récit* of history, in the process 'rediscovering' their own past and constructing new historical narratives and themes adapted to suit their own political goals.

3.1.1 Narrative of Colonization

The Abyssinian invasion of Oromo lands, what Oromo nationalists regards as a colonial experience, contain the 'Grand' plot that serves to inform and structure all other connected and interrelated narratives. Mechanisms of selective appropriation give prominence to this event as the root cause of not only the suffering of the Oromo people, but also the growth and development of Oromo nationalism. The effect of this is that any analysis or understanding of present social or political problems of the Oromo (and other subjugated ethnic groups in Ethiopia) emanating from the nationalist camp reaches back to the initial Abyssinian subjugation of the Oromo (Mr. Bulcha Demeksa).

By and large, the storyline of Abyssinian colonization of the Oromo revolves in the orbit of the ontological dimension of narrativity, in the sense that it provides the foundation from which other narratives underpinning Oromo nationalist discourse are derived. The present Tigrayan hegemony over the Ethiopian state is seen as an example of the historical continuity of Habesha domination of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia¹¹(e.g 06/12/20;07/01/08;07/01/19). At the root of this narrative is a deep feeling of victimization and historical injustice which gifts the nationalist project with a moral superiority and sense of mission.

The narrative of colonization takes a dialectic shape, pitting the righteous, peace-loving and egalitarian Oromo against the vicious and authoritarian Abyssinians. The dialectical contradiction in values and character referred to above seems to operate as a main fundament of the self-identity for many of the informants (e.g 06/12/20; 06/12/21;06/12/24;07/01/03). The sharp contrast between what is perceived to be Oromo values on one hand and Habesha values on the other suggests that this is one of the basic building-blocks of Oromo self-identity and thus also an imperative of agency for the individual as well as collective. Even closer related to individual and group action is another highly

11 Even though the Oromo is by far the most numerous ethnic group in the Southern regions, these areas are inhabited by roughly 40 other ethnic and cultural groups which in some instances have their own, relatively less vocal, nationalist groupings and organizations such as (ex.) During the expansion of the Amhara elites into the Southern regions of contemporary Ethiopia under the leadership of emperor Menelik these ethnic groups suffered largely the same fate as the Oromo.

reoccurring theme in the interviews; the stories of pride, moral righteousness and resistance.

3.1.2 Narrative of Resistance

The Abyssinian conquest of Oromo-inhabited lands coincided with the Imperial ambitions of the European powers. In Oromo nationalist doctrine, the external ties with Imperial Europe and the access to modern military technology, primarily in the form of firearms, makes a decisive factor in the defeat and subjugation of the Oromo (Jalata 1990; Hassen 1996; Holcomb & Sisai 1990; Leenco 1998; Mekuria 1997). The emphasis on modern technology versus more traditional weaponry such as spears and bows in the narrative of resistance has two main functions. (1) It provides an exogenous explanation to the conquest of Oromo areas. The focus on firearms implies that it was not because of cunning, strategy or superiority in any endogenous sense that the Abyssinians managed to subdue the Oromo, but rather because of its connections with the European Imperial powers (06/12/24; 07/01/20). (2) Placing emphasis on the technical aspects of the defeat of the Oromo armies allows for ignoring the existence of Oromo elite collaborators and lack of political unity within the different Oromo communities at the time. Indicative of the will to overlook or forget the Oromo collaborators is the fact that only two informants expressed this as a source of shame for the Oromo people (06/12/26; 07/01/24). This is a prime example of the mechanism of selective appropriation at work. However, it should be emphasized that this ‘forgetting’ need not be a conscious process; indeed as Ernest Renan remarked, forgetting historical inconveniences is a central part of constructing nationalist discourse (Özkirimli 2000:36).

The futility of the resistance (given the Abyssinian access to firearms) seems to render it an even stronger element of bravery in the eyes of many informants that sets the ideal of action in the also highly, in terms of organizational and military resources, unequal struggle of today. The different stories on the theme of resistance were often thick with symbolic meaning. Tales of battles were plotted around contrasting events displaying the brave (and sometimes successful) resistance of the Oromo armies and the brutal atrocities of the Abyssinians, embodied by the mutilation of Oromo civilians, women and children and the burning of villages.

3.1.3 Narrative of Origin

The setting for this narrative, which best could be described as public in character, is the Oromo lands before the invasion of Yohannes’ and later Menelik’s imperial

army which is portrayed as a harmonious Garden of Eden, where equality and peace reigned through the institutional design provided by the gada (06/12/18). Many informants expressed the understanding that it was only during this 'golden-age' of the Oromo people that the 'true' Oromo identity could be said to have existed (07/01/08; 06/12/23). This suggests that the deprivation of the gada from the bulk of the Oromo people also deprived them of an anchor-point of their collective identity.

The mythical shimmer of a Great and proud past serve to upset ethno-nationalist sentiments and incite action to resurrect the golden-age of the past, embodied by the objectives of the nationalist movement. The gada also provides the elusive container where to enshrine Oromo values.

The narrative of origin comprises more than just the mythical nostalgia of a deprived and conquered past instrumental to stirring ethno-nationalist sentiment. It also holds in it the stories of how the Oromo was 'awakened' to the cause of ethnic nationalism and from where its modern representatives, individuals as well as organizations, originated. It is worth noting that although there has never been an Oromo nation-state in the modern sense of the word, Oromo nationalist generally regard themselves as members of such a nation in a way resembling what Anderson (1991) calls the imagined community. Indicative of this was the answer I got from a young student (07/01/08) when asked what the Oromo identity meant to him. He simply said that: "It is nothing really special. I know my identity, it is just as belonging to any nation." Regardless of the nation existed in the past or not, a central theme in nationalist discourse is to perceive and present the 'nation' as something primordially ahistorical – something that has always existed (Calhoun 1995:233).

The emergence of the Macha-Tulama Association was suggested by many informants to be the springboard of Oromo nationalism, which in turn lead to the creation of the OLF (e.g 06/12/20). This perception of a dualistic historical continuity in terms of repression and resistance is a central mechanism in the construction of narratives within the Oromo nationalist movement. Seen in the light of narrative analysis it represents an attempt to turn *events* into *episodes* and thus establish a form of (potentially subjective) causality and order which forms the frame of reference for contemporary grievances and struggles.

4 Summary of Findings and Concluding Discussion

This concluding chapter will try to sum up the major points of analysis, discussions and lines of thought elaborated in this thesis. Special attention will again be given to the role of the elite in the politicization of Oromo identity and the potential links between nationalist narratives, collective agency and their potential implications on contemporary Ethiopian political life.

4.1 The Health of Oromo Nationalism

Up to this date the Oromo ethno-nationalist project has been, perhaps paradoxically, both successful and unsuccessful. The elite of the Oromo community has been successful in transforming the objective cultural markers of Oromo ethnicity with a subjective politicized meaning, especially after the 1960's. This process of ethnic transformation has been a product of ethnic group interaction within the state. The pivotal socio-political factors behind this transformation have been relative inequality in resource distribution, discriminatory government policies and the expansion of institutions and bureaucracies which largely have, if not excluded the Oromo then at least discriminated them and limited their social mobility.

The instrumentalist approach suggests one important explanatory variable in the failure of nationalist movements to be the dissonance of interests, both within the elite-groups and between the elite and the masses¹². In the case of the Oromo, this can only be said to be partly true. Even though there are a dissonance of interests between elites and mass, i.e the importance of identity-issues versus issues of livelihood, the OLF does not have a problem of mobilization but rather organization (inter elite-conflict) (Mr. Tsegaye Wolde) (Dr. Merera). The OLF still enjoys very strong support among urban and rural, educated as well as uneducated Oromo. But, they remain militarily weak and the top echelons of the leadership all reside abroad, distanced from the military activities as well as the everyday-lives of the people they claim to represent.

¹² For an extensive discussion of the importance of convergence and divergence of interests between elites and mass see Merera, Gudina,2002. "Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy 1960's-2000." Shaker Publishers: Maastricht.

What can be described as an absence of representational hierarchy among the leading elites of the Oromo people is another factor with resonance on the fate of the nationalist project. Today there are several different organizations claiming to represent the Oromo people apart from the OLF and the EPRDF-constructed OPDO¹³. The existence of several organizations claiming to represent the Oromo implies that there is some degree of intra-elite conflict within the leadership of the Oromo community. When discussing the reasons for the many organizations focused on Oromo issues one should bear in mind that this group numbers almost forty million people spread out across a vast geographical area. In the light of this, it becomes less puzzling that the interests of the Oromo are advanced by several organizations and that their conceptualization of contemporary grievances and problems for the Oromo differ somewhat (Dr. Merera).

An interesting phenomenon to take into account when concluding this analysis is the changing nature of the agenda and core objectives of the OLF since the genesis of the organization in the mid 1970's. At its creation, the front (at least in rhetoric) would settle for nothing less than 'decolonization from Abyssinia' and secession. Most of the OLF members and their supporters wanted to see an independent state of Oromia after the fall the Derg (Sorenson 1998:226). This should perhaps be viewed against the background of heightened expectations brought by the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia as well as the creation of an independent Ukraine in the wake of the Soviet disintegration. Today, the emphasis on secession is played down in favour of a political solution within the boundaries of contemporary Ethiopia. The 'softer' stance of the OLF to date can perhaps be interpreted as a discreet and slow distancing from militancy, suggesting that the OLF, given time, might be able to transform itself into a

political party working within a constitutional framework to deliver their objectives. However, this is a distant perspective not least because the ban and accompanying terrorist-label attached to the OLF remains in place.

4.2 The Role of the Elites in the Politicization of Oromo Identity

The role of the elites has both a negative and a positive potential - a dual role (Merera 2002:166). As is familiar, instrumentalism stresses the competition over scarce resources among elites as fundamental to ethnic politicization. At its best this will be a struggle for the groups 'fair share' of resources and recognition previously denied to them and at its worst it can be an instrument of deception and

¹³ Other organizations representing the Oromo are for example: The Oromo National Congress (ONC), the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM).

manipulation of the broad masses for individual benefit in the form of political power and material wealth.

Oromo elites have historically played both a positive and negative role in relation to the broad masses of their people. In the early days of the Ethiopian state-building project, during the time of Shoan-Amhara expansion into Oromo lands some absorbed into the Amhara cultural framework and collaborated with the *neftegna*. Some of Menelik's and Haile Selassie's more prominent military generals were Oromo and effectively helped with the subjugation of their own people with the horizon of individual benefit in clear sight. With the emergence of the Macha Tulama association in what year a broad-based Oromo movement was born that in many ways resembled the *negritudé*-movement¹⁴.

Later on, the Oromo masses response to the arrival of the OLF on the political scene in Ethiopia was fairly unison – the organization was greeted as liberators and legitimate representatives of the people (Mr. Bulcha Demeksa). However, it cannot be said that the interests of the top echelons of the OLF and the broad masses of the Oromo were in full consonance at the time and neither that they are now.

At present, the role of the elites in the question of the Oromo in general and its nationalist-project in particular is somewhat hard to assess because it is divided on several issues. For the elites connected or sympathetic to the OLF it is increasingly hard to play any role, positive or negative, because suspicion of OLF support or sympathies will most likely lead to imprisonment or other forms of harassment from state officials and federal police. Furthermore, the bulk of the OLF leadership today reside abroad in a reality that by any standards could only be described as diametrically different to the everyday life and experiences of the majority of the Oromo people inside Ethiopia. From this distance, scholarly activity, lobbying and fundraising are arguably the most likely activities by the elites in the diaspora. In fact the lions share of the Oromo nationalist discourse is now produced by intellectuals residing abroad (Sorenson 1998:247). It is a topic for further research to investigate the links between diaspora and domestic politics, in the Oromo case as well as other ethnic nationalist enterprises.

Another segment of the Oromo elite are opposing the strategies of the OLF, chiefly its emphasis on military struggle, and instead have set out to continue struggles for recognition and group rights within the constitutional framework. The most prominent of these are the political parties Oromo National Congress (ONC) and the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM). A balance sheet of the role of the elite in the politicization of Oromo identity gives that it is a decisive role characterised by the dualism discussed above. It is obvious that the elite has played a positive role for the ethnic group as a whole in aspects such as the proliferation of the Oromo language and culture but it is more

¹⁴ The Negritudé movement was started by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas. It was an intellectual movement which sought to valorize what they perceived to be specific African characteristics to rid the concept of Blackness and Africanness of negative connotations and instill pride where there once was shame.

dubious if the more outright political, sometimes militant, activities of the elites has changed the material situation for the Oromo in any noteworthy sense.

4.3 Concluding Discussion

In the theoretical chapter I tried to establish the potential links between narratives, identity and collective agency. To put this theoretical discussion in the specific context, my most central argument outlines as follows: the logical consequence of the politicization of Oromo ethnic identity, fundamentally a process of ethnic group interaction within the state, has been a nationalism championed by both elites and mass which is (subjectively) perceived as a fundamental part of Oromo identity. Taken together, the Oromo nationalist discourse is itself underpinned by a set of interrelated narratives which have two main functions. (1) To challenge or ‘deconstruct’ the hegemony of the Amhara-Tigrayan discourse. (2) To incite the masses with a sense of common identity, goal and higher purpose so as to advance the nationalist agenda, which may or may not coincide with the interests of the broad masses. On a broader level, these two functions merge into the one central: to *promote collective agency with Oromo ethnicity as the guiding organizational principle in the struggle for group rights, resource-control and political power.*

The creation of counter-discourses is a process that entails the fortification of boundaries between the specific group and the collectivities surrounding it. The successful creation of tightly-weld group-identities requires enemies and ‘Others’. In the case of the Oromo this is provided by the ‘wicked’ Habeshas. Thus, elements of essentialization exist in the Oromo discourse, both on part of the members of the group and the ‘outsiders’- most notably the Amhara and Tigrayans. During the interviews several, and sometimes contradictory, personality traits were proposed to characterize the members of the group. This is a common practice of nationalist discourse (Sorenson 1998:239). Oromos were presented as both “peace-loving and committed to egalitarian standards” and “brave, fearless warriors” (e.g 06/12/15; 07/02/04). Simultaneously the ‘Abyssinians’ were described as “treacherous” and “in total lack of respect for human rights and democracy” (06/12/21; 07/01/03).

This essentialization has immediate implications on the political situation in Ethiopia. It sows mutual distrust between the Oromo and the Amhara and thus makes prospects for viable, long-term opposition cooperation between the two largest ethnic groups in the country less probable. This worsens the potentials of the already weak domestic opposition movements, so vital to challenge the increasingly authoritarian EPRDF and achieve a truly competitive democratic system with a level playing-ground. Generally, multi-ethnic political alternatives have been systematically repressed by the Tigray-dominated EPRDF, which thrives on the ethnic divisions within the country. The core point in the *modus operandi* of the EPRDF seems to be to pit the two largest ethnic groups in the country against each other while simultaneously seeking to divide their internal

unity with the assistance of the infamous 'PDO' structure (Merera 2002). On the whole the policies of the EPRDF are designed to emphasize differences rather than similarities between the various ethnic groups in the country which despite real and concrete historical as well as contemporary grievances and animosities have a great deal in common.

Unfortunately, the narratives I have analysed serve the interest that the EPRDF has in a weak opposition characterized by disunity and internal divisions. In this political climate the EPRDF can present itself to the international donor community, observers and foreign embassies as the only viable alternative for development and change that exist in the country.

The ruling party has since its ascendance to power in 1991 de facto created an ethnocratic state, with its core made up of the Tigrayan minority¹⁵. For a minority to rule a majority the policy of divide and rule becomes close at hand and the much heralded ethnic federalism in the country, which stipulates self-determination up to secession, is by many understood as a 'sham' and only cosmetic in character¹⁶.

To sum up, the present situation of Ethiopian socio-political life is one of competing ethnic nationalisms, where opposed historical narratives are being used as one of the primary weapons in the struggle. On the whole this has created an extremely polarized situation with ethnic identity elevated to the primary consideration of social and political life (Vaughn&Tronvoll 2003).

At the root of the extremely complex spectre of problems facing the Ethiopian state and its citizens lies the question of how to democratize multi-ethnic polities and if democracy is compatible with far-reaching group rights, and if so how this kind of democracy would be designed – both in terms of institutions and the social contract these institutions would rest upon. These issues are clearly out of the capacities of this thesis as they require extensive discussion, comparison and analysis.

When analysing nationalist discourse, whether with or without a narrative approach, it is hard to escape the conclusion that nationalism of the ethnic kind is 'bad'. Certainly, this is often true – one need only look at the disintegration of Yugoslavia to confirm this. But it is a fallacy to posit that nationalism is an inherently negative phenomenon (Calhoun 2002:325). In the right structural and societal context it can have the potential to be both emancipatory, inclusive and progressive.

Because I recognize that my analysis of the narratives underpinning Oromo nationalist discourse could be seen to make this mistake I would like to conclude this paper with some words of clarification. I have deep sympathy with the Oromo

¹⁵ The 1994 census on the Ethiopian population estimated the Tigrayan population to be around 6% of the total population in Ethiopia.

¹⁶ The claim that the system of ethnic federalism is in practice far distanced from its, on paper quite radical, program is supported by a number of studies such as Merera (2002), Vestal (1999) Tronvoll et al (2002) (The full titles can be found in the list of references.)

people in their contemporary sufferings and historical grievance extent are real and concrete. However, I remain sceptical to Oromo nationalist discourse for reasons outlined above, as well as to the dual role of the elite in advancing the collective interests of this people. But, Oromo 'national' identity is firmly consolidated and should therefore be taken as a fact rather than wished away. Thus, the central problem here is not the Oromo nationalist discourse and collective identity as such but rather the political and social context. New social and political arenas conducive to a free public discourse need to develop in the country so as to enable individuals to embrace multiple identities and loyalties, existing side by side with ones ethnic identity. However, for this to come about the country needs to embark upon a genuine process of democratization and development. Obviously, this is a huge and all-encompassing task in which responsibility is shared by citizens of all ethnicities, social classes and gender, rural dwellers as well as urbanites, indigenous politicians as well as NGOS's, donor organizations and foreign embassies.

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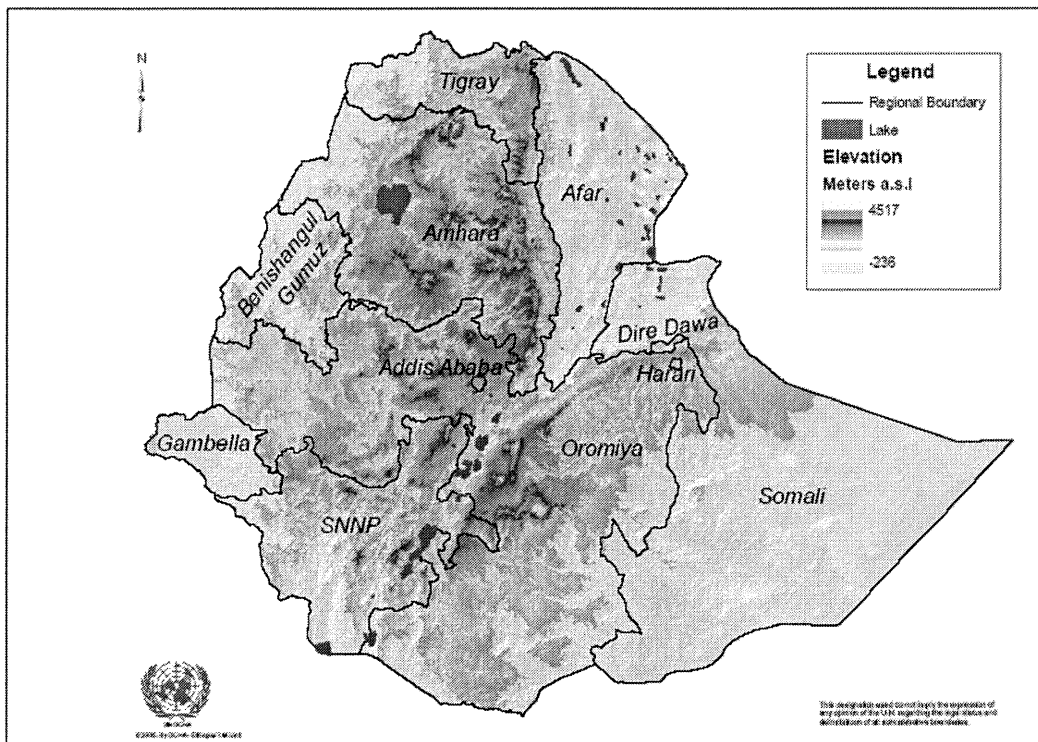
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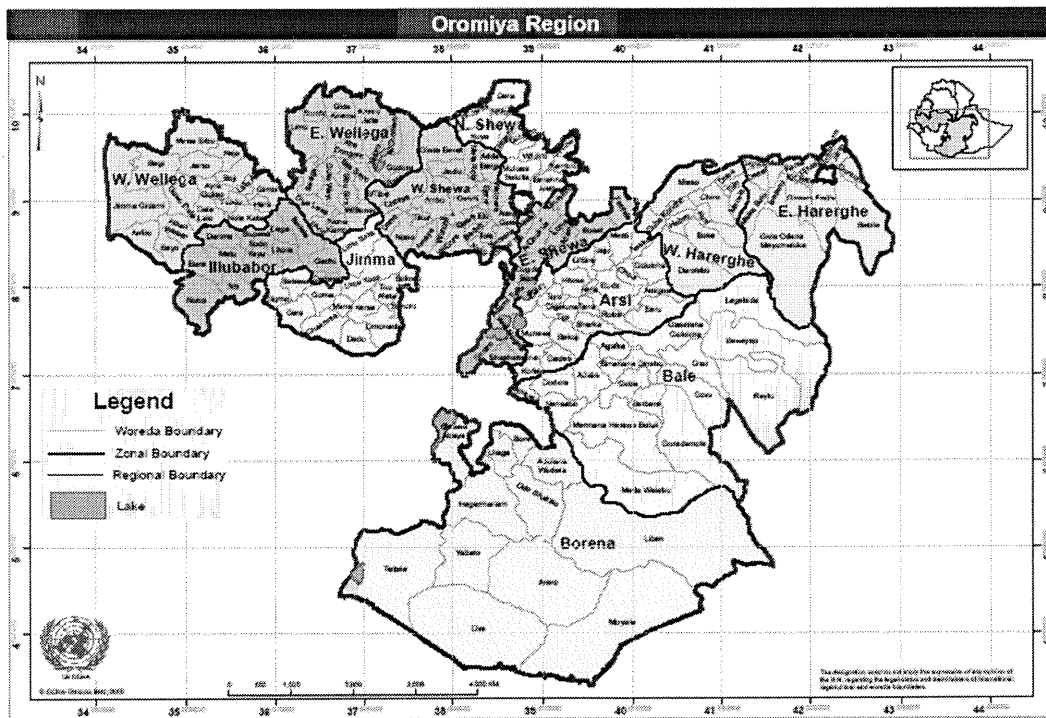
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Ethiopia Country Map



(<http://www.ocha-eth.org/Maps/Maps.htm>)

Map of Oromia Region



(<http://www.ocha-eth.org/Maps/downloadables/OROMIYA.pdf>)