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CONTOURS OF THE  
EMERGENT AND ANCIENT  
OROMO NATION

CASAS Book Series No. 84

*For Dureeti, Doie & the Oromo  
youth of the Qubee generation*

This issue is revised and published to celebrate  
the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA)

CONTOURS OF  
THE EMERGENT AND  
ANCIENT  
OROMO NATION

*Dilemmas in the Ethiopian  
Politics of State- and Nation-Building*

MEKURIA BULCHA

The Centre for Advanced Studies  
of African Society (CASAS)



The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS)  
P.O. Box 359 Rondebosch, 7701  
Cape Town South Africa

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– the president of Oromo Gadaa Republic in the past, Adana, Oromia

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## Glossary of Oromo and Amharic words

<i>aadaa</i>	(O) custom, culture
<i>abba</i>	(O) father, owner of, for example land, in charge of, for example office, position, etc.
<i>Afaan Oromoo</i>	(O) the Oromo language
<i>gabbar</i>	(a, O) serf, tenant
<i>awurajja</i>	(a) province
<i>warada</i>	(a) district
<i>caffee</i>	(O) assembly, Oromo parliament
<i>chawa (chewa)</i>	(a) the militia of medieval Abyssinia kings; a militiaman of the period
<i>Dergue</i>	(a) the military committee formed in June 1974 and turned into ruling junta until June 1991
<i>enset</i>	(a) false banana; a plant which provides the staple food of parts of southern Ethiopia
<i>guddifacha</i>	(O) adoption
<i>kebele</i>	(a) unit, community; the smallest administrative units created by the <i>Dergue</i> and also used by the present government of Ethiopia to organize, administer and the urban population.
<i>moggaasaa</i>	(O) naming, “sharing” identity through adoption a group of people into a clan and the nation, Oromo tradition of the collective adoption of non-Oromos.
<i>nagaa</i>	(O) peace; moral code governing peaceful co-existence among humans and of human with the natural environment
<i>naftanya (neftegna)</i>	(a) gun-carrier (lit.), settler-colonizer, a class of Amharic-speaking Orthodox Christian-settler-colonizers established in the wake of the Abyssinian conquest of the south
<i>Odaa</i>	(O) sycamore; a symbol of the gadaa system; Oromo national emblem
<i>safuu</i>	(O) respect, awe
<i>qaalluu</i>	(O) priest in traditional Oromo religion



<i>Waaqa</i>	(O) God
<i>Waaqeffannaa</i>	(O) The traditional Oromo religion; its liturgy and belief system
<i>Waaqeffattaa</i>	(O) Believer in God; follower of the rites of traditional Oromo religion

### **Abbreviations**

AMC	Agricultural Marketing Corporation
CCT	Commission for Culture and Tourism of the Regional State of Oromia
EPLF	Eritrean People's liberation Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People revolutionary Party
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
MTA	Macca-Tuulama Association
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
POMOA	Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs
SNNPP	Regional State of the Southern Nations and Nationalities and Peoples
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE FIRST EDITION

The idea of this study was conceived in the early 1990s in reaction to the failure of the democratization process initiated by the Charter which the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) had adopted following the demise of the military regime in 1991. The TGE, a coalition of all the political organizations opposed to the military regime, was established as a halfway house to democratic state to be formed through elections, but was dissolved within a year. The Tigrayan People's liberation Front (TPLF) which was, not only militarily the strongest, but also supported by external powers emerged as a dominant party. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) which was a junior partner in the TGE was treated mercilessly by the TPLF and eventually left the coalition in 1992. Its leaders were killed or exiled and the former members of its guerrilla army were massacred in thousands in legally setup camps. By the end of 1992, the red Cross and other humanitarian organizations were reporting that over 20,000 Oromos, including women and children, were in concentration camps erected all over the Oromo country and thousands of them were dying of infections with contagious diseases in the foul camp environments.

What struck me most in the whole process was, not only the impunity of the Tigrayan elite who dominated the new government, but also of the behaviour of the Amhara opposition parties which had lost power following the demise of the military regime. If not physically, the Amhara opposition was also violent against the Oromo, at least in their rhetoric. Infuriated by the moderate gains which the Oromo made in terms of linguistic rights and territorial autonomy after decades of struggle, they resorted to a virulent discourse that denigrated Oromo culture and demonized Oromo identity (Zitelmann, 1994). There were two questions which occupied my mind: "Why did the members of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which came to power as an opponent of dictatorship turn into a brutal dictatorship itself in such a short time? Why are the Amhara opposition parties so furious against the Oromo who are not in power, and whose leaders are in exile or in concentration camps?" The behaviour of the new government and the Amhara opposition manifested their problem with Oromo identity is even deeper than what Paul Baxter (1978) anticipated two and half decades earlier in the now classic article, "Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo." Born to Oromo parents,

I have attended school and the university in Ethiopia and have worked as a state employee before I left the country in August 1977, but the behaviour that I have been witnessing since the early 1990s is beyond what I had ever imagined. In my view, the fact that the opposition was not only against the regime, but also the Oromo, who are also in opposition against the same regime, suggested that the question was deeper than power-politics. It had something to do also with the way they perceive(d) the Oromo. Reflected in the revival of Oromo language and territorial autonomy, collective Oromo identity in-itself is posing a threat. Thus, the contradiction between Oromo self-perception and how the Amhara and Tigrayan elite seem to see them led me to engage in a research project on identity politics. The investigation took me deeper into the history of Oromo-Abyssinian relations.

Although the completion of the project took many years, the process resulted in several book chapters and more than twenty conference and workshop papers. In the meantime, many friends and colleagues in several countries have contributed to the realization of the objectives of the project. Constructive comments came from many colleagues who read draft versions of the chapters of the book at different stages in its development. It is impossible to list here all to whom I am indebted; I will mention only some and also thank the rest for their generous contributions.

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### **A Note to the Second Edition**

The first edition of this book which was published in 2011 and had a few editorial errors. Those errors are corrected and two new photographs are added to this edition. I would like to thank Princess Mahezant Habtemariam Kumsa for sending me a copy of Madame Atsedo Habtemariam Kumsa's photo and Mr. Lube Birru for a copy Madame Warqee Gadaa's photo.

### **Notes on Oromo phonetics**

Oromo words including Oromo places and personal names are spelled according to the Oromo alphabet, *qubee*, which is based on the Latin script. Five digraphs are used in the Oromo alphabet: *ch*, *dh*, *ny*, *ph*, *sh*. The alveolar dental stop *dh* exists only in Cushitic and Omotic languages. The glottal stop, which is a consonant in the Semitic and Cushitic languages, is represented in Oromo by an apostrophe ('), e.g. *bu'ura* (basis), *du'a* (eath), *ho'a* – heat

<b>Qubee spelling</b>	<b>Sound description</b>	<b>Oromo example</b>	<b>Correspondence in English</b>
<i>ch</i>	a palatal voiceless stop	<i>achi</i> – there	as in ‘chain’
<i>sh</i>	a palatal voiceless fricative	<i>shan</i> – five	as in ‘shirt’
<i>ny</i>	a palatal nasal	<i>nyaata</i> – food	as in news
<i>dh</i>	an alveolar voiced implosive	<i>dhagaa</i> – stone	
<i>c</i>	a palatal glottalized stop	<i>caalaa</i> – more	
<i>q</i>	a velar glottalized stop	<i>qeesii</i> – priest	
<i>x</i>	a dental glottalized stop	<i>xinnoo</i> – small	
<i>ph</i>	a labial glottalized stop	<i>tapha</i> – play	

The gemination of consonants and lengthening of vowels are always indicated by doubling the letter since they are of semantic importance.

<b>Short</b>	<b>Example (O)</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Long</b>	<b>Example (O)</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>a</i>	<i>annan</i>	Milk	<i>aa</i>	<i>anaan</i>	to me
<i>e</i>	<i>kenmaa</i>	talent, gift	<i>ee</i>	<i>keenyaa</i>	wall
<i>i</i>	<i>bifa</i>	Colour	<i>ii</i>	<i>biifa</i>	spray
<i>o</i>	<i>bona</i>	dry season	<i>oo</i>	<i>boonaa</i>	proud
<i>u</i>	<i>dugda</i>	Back	<i>uu</i>	<i>duuba</i>	at the back

<b>One consonant</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Geminated</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>y</i>	<i>wayaa</i>	cloth, dressing	<i>yy</i>	<i>wayya</i>	better
<i>l</i>	<i>qalu</i>	to slaughter	<i>ll</i>	<i>qaalluu</i>	Priest in Oromo religion



# 1

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

At one and the same time, nationalism insures humanity against imperial tyrannies, while lending its name and sometimes its power to the creation of local tyrannies (Anthony D. Smith, 1994: 196).

### BACKGROUND

Identity politics has occupied the centre stage in political debates and academic discourses since the 1980s. However, there is still a persisting ambivalence toward research on the subject. By the concept of identity politics, sociologists, social philosophers, political scientists, anthropologists, and scholars from related disciplines mean social mobilization based upon various collective identities (of subaltern groups, national minorities, colonized peoples, and women) that were previously hidden, suppressed, or neglected by the policy of the state or the dominant group. Identity discourse, particularly when it comes to ethnic identity, is shunned by many social scientists because of ethical and political considerations. There seems to be a fear that research on the subject will widen differences between groups. Doing research on ethnic identity in particular is seen as playing into the hands of racists and social exclusionists. While the fear may be warranted, we should also note that the typical purpose of scholarly research on identity and culture is not to give prominence to differences between peoples and cultures, but to appreciate the values of diversity, or to expose the injustices that are exercised by states against citizens who represent values, moralities, and ethno-cultural identities that are different from those of the ruling classes or the dominant groups. Therefore, I will argue that to ignore differences in order to depoliticize ethnic identities can amount to ignoring injustices committed against ethnic minorities. Furthermore, as noted by a scholar,

The idea that identity politics is incompatible with democratic society is insufficiently nuanced, and an unnecessary position to hold for liberals. The possibility that some of the different moral goods generated by identity-based movements may be conducive to liberal democratic citizenship, in particular, is worthy of further consideration (Kenny, 2004: 87).

The point is that we should differentiate between the claims of the oppressed peoples to have their identities recognized and xenophobic discourse of racist organizations. Differently stated, the politics of identity is not necessarily an anti-thesis of the politics of democratic citizenship. It can and it does promote democracy when the dominant and dominated groups concede, as the Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor (1995: 241) has cogently expressed it, to the principle of reciprocal recognition among equals. The aim of the ethno-nationalism of right-wing parties is the maintenance of a mono-cultural state or cultural homogenization to create such a state. The struggle of oppressed minorities is, by and large, for a positive recognition of their cultures and identities.

Partly because of the ethical issues mentioned above, the politics of recognition and social justice is still a contentious terrain in social research. While some scholars ignore identity research in toto, others give priority to research on distributive justice over research concerned with claims for recognition. Particularly, scholars within Marxist perspectives tend to prioritize the equitable redistribution of resources over the recognition of identity claims. However, as indicated by some leading scholars in the field (Taylor, 1995; Fraser, 2003; Parekh, 2008), social justice requires both equitable redistribution of resources and positive recognition of identity claims. These two dimensions of justice are intricately interwoven, and in many cases powerless minorities suffer injustice both in terms of misrecognition (disrespect, denigration, and denial of their identities) and in terms of inequitable distribution, which includes not only denial of their fair share of resources but also the exploitation of their labour or other resources by dominant groups.

The theories of recognition used in this study are addressed in Chapter 2 below. Here, it is suffice to indicate that while the aim of claims for recognition is to change social relations founded on the denial of self-representation and to dispel humiliation resulting



from imposed identities, the struggle for fair distribution is against exploitation and inequitable distribution of social and economic resources. As a discussion of the politics of identity, this study explores what happens at the interface between the expressions of feelings of superiority, on the one hand, and the rejection of hegemony and claims of equality – or the underdog’s language of emancipation – in societies with hierarchically structured ethnicities, on the other. Taking the Oromo as a case, the study identifies and analyses the indignations that can be felt and conflicts that can arise when a state and its agents actively negate ethnic identity in terms of culture, language, and history. Without neglecting the consequences of economic exploitation experienced by oppressed peoples, and without disregarding the injustices of class oppression, it is argued here that it is the harm caused of misrecognition and status subordination – hierarchical treatment of ethno-national identities, cultures, and languages – and not only the experience of economic injustice that has politicized ethnicity in Ethiopia. In other words, the study explores the counter-effects of the legal negation and physical destruction of cultures and symbols that constitute the identities of ethnic and national minorities when used as an instrument of nation-building.

The *physical or overt violence* against what essentially symbolizes the cultures and identities of national minorities is often enhanced by *epistemic violence*, which is discursively perpetrated: minority cultures, languages, and history are denied their worth by the educational system, in the writing of history, and in the courts of law by members and agents of the dominant culture. *Epistemic violence* is institutionally framed and “pedagogically” executed by state-run educational systems: it attacks the self-esteem of the dominated groups by disparaging their cultures and collective identities. It denies them worth. This study will demonstrate that it is the combination of the two forms of institutionalized violence that had *politicized identity in Ethiopia* and led to the development of ethno-national movements. Ethnic nationalism often starts with claims for respect and equality. When the appeal for respect and equality incessantly fall on the deaf ears of conquerors and colonizers, it turns into what Frantz Fanon (1959) called the “native’s violence”. This is the moment when the oppressed decide to be their own masters: the moment when peaceful claims for respect and equality are abandoned and armed struggle

for emancipation becomes the only option available to them. Starting in the mid-1970s this was, by and large, the situation in Ethiopia.

The end of the cold war era in the late 1980s and the call for democracy in the 1990s gave rise to unprecedented expectations all over the world. In Africa, the 1990s witnessed the demise of some of the worst dictatorships that had plagued the continent for decades, and the departure of dictators such as General Siyyad Barre of Somalia, General Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (Democratic republic of Congo), and the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa seemed to usher the continent into a post-colonial era of democracy.

In Ethiopia, the hope for democracy was kindled with the fall of the military junta led by Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991 and the declaration of a charter for the formation of a Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in July 1991. The TGE, which was constituted mainly by a coalition of different liberation fronts, including the Ethiopian Peoples' revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had toppled the military dictatorship, promised to decentralize and democratize the state, and end a history of centralized autocratic rule that had characterized Ethiopian politics for more than a century.<sup>1</sup> The task that the TGE aimed to undertake was to lay the foundation for a new constitution based on the will of the people. Therefore, by and large, the measures which the TGE took departed dramatically not only from the policies and practices of former Ethiopian regimes, but also from policies adopted in other African states. Since the role that the TGE was to play was that of taking Ethiopia out of the authoritarian past into a new democratic political system, its mandate was limited to eighteen months after which regional and national governments were to be formally elected by popular vote and the state model stipulated by the Charter was to be implemented.

The participants of the conference that drafted the Charter and formed the TGE deemed "ethnic federalism" to be an appropriate model for Ethiopia because in 1991, arguably, it was the only logical alternative to the disintegration of Ethiopia as a state. The state-model which was envisaged by the Transitional Charter and signed at the conference was a "federation of nations, nationalities and peoples." The constitution that was subsequently drafted by the TGE, and was adopted in 1995 as the Constitution of the Federal State of Ethiopia, followed more or less that guideline.

Today the Ethiopian Constitution recognizes over seventy ethnic groups as nations, nationalities, and peoples. article 39 of the Constitution defines nation, nationality, or people as “a group of people who have or share a large measure of common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological makeup, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory”. The definition makes it clear that most of these peoples have languages and cultures that are distinctively and definitively their own. This and the territorial restructuring of Ethiopia into a federation of “autonomous” regional states is an acknowledgement of the fact that Ethiopia is a multination state. The territorial demarcation of five of these regional states – afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, and Tigray – was based on ethno-linguistic criteria. Four of them, the SNNP, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Harar, are multiethnic.

Reactions to the idea of “ethnic” federalism have been mixed. In the beginning it was both lauded and criticized at home and abroad (Bulcha, 1991). Supporters of the Charter saw it as an instrument for a transition from dictatorship and oppression, to freedom. Its critics saw the recognition of ethnicity as antithetical to Ethiopian unity, arguing that it would lead to the disintegration of the Ethiopian state. It was predicted that the recognition which the Charter accords to ethnicity would lead to the intensification of conflicts. It is suggested that ethnicity is an invention of intellectuals “who have devoted much time and energy in promoting it” (Poluha, 1998: 38). Downplaying the importance ethnicity has played historically in the contradictions between the Ethiopian state and the non-Amhara peoples, it was maintained that the EPRDF had taken the initiative “in camouflaging the roots of all problems and all contradictions in Ethiopia in ethnic clothing” (ibid.). It is argued that the “agenda of ethnification and ethnic decentralization is politically dangerous” for the country and its people (ibid.). As the International Crisis Group (2009: 23) correctly put it, “The constitutional clause that gives nationalities the right to secede is touted as a proof of the EPRDF’s anti-Ethiopian stance.” Notwithstanding the comments of critics, the political model adopted at the transitional conference was dictated by circumstances that had led to the fall of the *Dergue*. The political and geographical restructuring of the Ethiopian state using language and ethnicity as criteria was the only option that was acceptable to

the national liberation fronts that participated in the transitional conference of July 1991.

Two decades have passed since the transition to democracy was solemnly declared by the TGE, but Ethiopia has become a de facto one-party state<sup>2</sup>, and notwithstanding the constitution it had adopted in 1995, authoritarianism continues to be the style of its rulers. Sources such as the US State Department, Human Rights Watch, and the International Crisis Group report intermittently that Ethiopia's military forces have been engaged in armed conflicts, albeit low in intensity, with opposition forces in some of the regional states in the country. Crackdowns and mass arrests are conducted almost routinely by the Ethiopian security police against members of ethnic groups and their organizations are strong indications that the rule of law has not been respected by the regime. The International Crisis Group (2009: 27) reports that "Oromo nationalism is increasing, as pervasive government repression increases both real and perceived grievances." Ethiopia's socio-economic situation has not shown any significant improvement over the decades following the change, and millions of the country's citizens are constantly threatened by famine in the southern regions, which were traditionally surplus producers of food crops.<sup>3</sup> The democratic promise of the Transitional Charter was not respected in either political or economic terms.

The political problems started to surface in June 1992, when a number of important parties, which together claimed to represent the interests of the majority of the country's population, not only withdrew from the transitional government (TGE), but also boycotted the regional elections that were held later that month. The negation of the essence of the Charter as a passageway from dictatorship to democracy became clear as the OLF accused the EPRDF, the largest and dominant party in the TGE, of a catalogue of crimes including the assassination of OLF members and of harassing and intimidating the OLF's candidates for the local and regional elections (Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1992). Supported by its military muscles, the EPRDF, an umbrella organization dominated by members of the Tigrayan People's liberation Front (TPLF), "won" not only the 1992 local and regional elections, but also more than 90 per cent of the seats in federal parliament in the national elections which were held in 1995, and formed the national government that replaced the TGE. Anyway, according to international observers, the 1992 elections

“did not in any meaningful way represent the free and fair will of the Ethiopian people in a democratic manner” (ibid. p. 14). This brought the transition to democracy envisaged at the transitional conference of July 1991 to an early end. The parliamentary elections of 1995 more or less confirmed the 1992 results. The results of the 2000, 2005, and 2010 elections showed no improvements over the previous ones. Today Ethiopia is a one-party state.

The most crucial questions are why the EPDRF members who came in as opponents of dictatorship had turned into dictators negating the spirit of the Charter, and why the other parties failed to restrain them. It is not the first time that the Ethiopian state missed the opportunity for change and democratic development. This had happened in 1960 as well as in 1974. The abortive coup against Emperor Haile Selassie I was to change an extortive feudal state in which half of the population consisted of serfs exploited by a small minority of landlords. Haile Selassie did not take that as an opportunity for change (Greenfield, 1965). Instead, he used the suppression of the coup for the consolidation of his autocratic rule. The consequence of the decision was continued tension and dissatisfaction that led to a revolution in 1974 and the demise of the monarchy. The revolution created another opportunity for change. It abolished not only the monarchy but also a feudal landholding system which had been the main pillar supporting the old system. But the structural opening was closed as soon as autocratic centralism of the so-called Solomonic Dynasty of which emperor Haile Selassie I was said to be the 225<sup>th</sup> monarch was replaced by military dictatorship which turned the empire into a killing field of civilians and combatants.<sup>4</sup>The question is, what is the source of this seemingly never-ending political problem?

### *Ethiopia's political malaise*

Historians and sociolinguists categorize the Ethiopian population into four linguistic clusters: Semitic-speaking, Cushitic-speaking, and speakers of Omotic and Nilotic languages. although the contours of these clusters shade into each other in many instances, they also represent a dividing line between conquerors and the conquered, that is, between the politically dominant Semitic-speaking Abyssinians, who constitute about thirty-five per cent of the population, on one hand and the Cushitic, Omotic and Nilotic-speaking majority, who constitute 65 per cent of the population, on the other (CSA Report, 2001

cited in Gudina, 2003: 132). The Oromo, who are Cushitic-speaking, belong to the latter group.

It is common knowledge that the Oromo are the largest population group in northeast Africa and, perhaps, also the second- or third- largest nationality in the whole of Africa. There are no accurate population statistics in Ethiopia. The reason is political. However, estimates by various sources indicate that for the last eighty years, the Oromo constituted about 40 per cent of the Ethiopian population (Perham, 1969; Keller, 1988). In 2010, the total population of Ethiopia is estimated at 80 million, of which the Oromo are said to constitute 40 per cent, the Amhara 25 per cent, the Sidama 9 per cent, the Somali 7 per cent, the Tigray 7 per cent, the afar 4 per cent, the Walayta 4 per cent, the Gurage 2 per cent, and other nationalities 3 per cent (US Bureau of African affairs, November 5, 2010).

Observers have explained the sources of the deplorable political situation of Ethiopia in different ways, mentioning both actor- and structure-related factors. There are those who blame the government and opposition for the political problems of the country, while others explain Ethiopia's economic problems by lack of resources and technology. There are even those who look at the problems in an historical perspective, positing that the failures and decline of Ethiopia are caused by its "estrangement" from the imperial tradition under the previous and present regimes and arguing for a "return to the source" as the sole panacea for the country's political and economic malaise (Kebede, 1999: 397). However, the nature and sources of the Ethiopia's problem are more complex than these scholarly theses seem to explain.

It is plausible to argue that the problem of the Ethiopian state is essentially similar to the problems facing many African states. The people in these states are oppressed and poor. Their poverty is often not the result of a lack of exploitable resources, but, to a greater extent, a consequence of bad governance often reflecting colonial heritages (Diamond, 1988). Bad governance, corruption, regime tyranny, etc., which arise partly from the colonial heritage, often make conflict inevitable, and in many of the African states political conflict creates preconditions for abject poverty. Thus, often trapped in the tenacious grip of tyrannical regimes and humiliating destitution, many of the African peoples have lived and continue to live in post-colonial states that seldom respect human rights, observe social justice or satisfy basic

human needs. In its broad outlines, the source and nature of Ethiopia's political problems should be seen in this perspective.

The boundaries of the modern state of Ethiopia, like those of the other post-colonial African states, were drawn during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, the making of the Ethiopian state was different in one aspect: unlike the other African states, Ethiopia's boundaries were not drawn by Europeans but by the Abyssinians, who at the time of the European colonization of Africa conquered and annexed the territories of self-governing neighbours, thereby becoming the only African nation that participated in what historians have called the "Scramble for Africa" (Bulatovich, 1898 [2000]; Gann and Duignan, 1969; Marcus, 1969).

The state that resulted from Abyssinia's conquest of its neighbouring territories and peoples was consecutively known as the Ethiopian empire (until 1974), the Democratic Socialist republic of Ethiopia (1974 to 1991), and the Federal Democratic republic of Ethiopia (since 1991), depending on the declared ideology of the ruling elite. As an empire, modern Ethiopia was ruled by emperors from the 1880s to 1974; as a "socialist republic," it was controlled by a military dictator from 1974 to 1991; and for the last twenty-five years, the self-styled "democratic republic" has been headed by a prime minister who wields political power in a manner that barely differs from that of his predecessors. It is important to point out here that the frequent changes of names and ideologies have much to do with the idea of creating a homogenous Ethiopian nation which has occupied the Ethiopian regimes for a long time. Since the aim was to assimilate the non-Amhara peoples and put an Abyssinian cultural and linguistic stamp on Ethiopian identity and state, the goal of "national-building" did not become a reality.

However, despite the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity that characterizes its inhabitants, Ethiopia was presented by its ruling elite as a Christian nation with Amharic as its indisputable official language until the revolution of 1974.

The source of this exclusionary policy and practice has, in part, been an imperialist arrogance that regards other cultures and languages as "inferior" and un-Ethiopian. It was hoped that all the non-Abyssinian peoples would opt for the politically dominant or "superior official" culture and abandon their own language and cultural traditions. Consequently, little effort was made to

accommodate the different cultures into a national framework (Keller, 1988).

Rejected by the populations it had targeted, the policy of cultural homogenization and “nation-building” has never been a success story. But failure did not discourage the ruling elite who remained quite adamant about their assimilation policies. They used repression, both during the long reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) and the military regime (1974-1991) of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, to prevent organized expressions of ethno-national identity, which were deemed a hindrance to their nation-building policies.

While the purpose of the repression used by the different regimes was similar, the forms it took, i.e. the methods adopted by the state agents who have been responsible for its execution, as well as the groups of people who were affected by it, have varied significantly over time. The conquered groups were not only occasionally brought to their heels by the state’s “raw coercive power”, to use Edmond Keller’s (2005: 87) words, but many of their members were also so intimidated that they had to understate or even abandon their ethnic and cultural identities. However, in the final analysis, terror and violence proved to be counterproductive as instruments of nation-building: terror and violence only deepened old conflicts and created new ones between the state and many of the ethnic groups and led to the proliferation of “ethnic” nationalisms and the intensification of the struggle for ethno-national identities, and in several cases demands for independent states (Markakis, 1987; Clapham, 1988).

#### PURPOSE, SCOPE AND THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

As indicated above, one of the consequences of cultural and political repression in Ethiopia is the growth of dissident nationalism in opposition to the “official” nationalism promoted by the state. Oromo nationalism which is in focus here is one of the dissident voices of nationalism opting for an independent state. Although some of the repressive policies of the previous regimes were relaxed and a quasi-federal system of government has been adopted by the current Ethiopian regime two decades ago, much of the age-old socio-political, economic, and cultural problems are yet to be resolved. The conflicts that have characterized relations between most of the conquered peoples and the Ethiopian state for more than a century still remain in place. By and large, the contradictions reflect struggles for and against



the recognition of ethno-national identity, or conflict between the subjugated peoples' claims for recognition on the one hand, and the Abyssinian-cum-Ethiopian elite's interests to maintain their dominant political position in the country, on the other.

Since there are many non-Abyssinian nationalities who share the experience of conquest and imperial domination, a question may arise as to why I have limited my focus on the Oromo and not conducted a comparative study. Principally, the decision is dictated by methodological considerations: the sheer number of the subjugated national minorities and differences in the trajectories of their interactions with the Ethiopian state suggests treating them as a group in a project like this one, unwieldy. In terms of its manifestations and duration, the conflict between the Abyssinian state and the Oromo people differs markedly from the interactions it has had with most of the other conquered peoples. Therefore, the aim here is to gain deeper insight into the history of the struggle of the Oromo people, and for that, case study is a more fruitful approach than a comparative study of the struggles conducted by the non-Abyssinian national minorities. The historical sources (Asmé 1905[1987]) indicate that the long history of Oromo-Abyssinian interactions is punctuated with conflict. The political and scholarly discourse about Oromo history and identity reflect negative experience from the past which is still retained in the collective memory of the Abyssinian ruling elite. However, the overriding fear is that a full expression of Oromo identity will mean the end of their power as well as that of Ethiopia's present cultural and linguistic identity. The Ethiopian regimes' worries about Oromo identities are deepened by Oromo geography and demography. If acknowledged as a contiguous territory, Oromoland, due to its size, would dominate the geographical map of Ethiopia. Thus, an acknowledgement of collective Oromo identity and history tends to be difficult for every regime as it would contribute to political consciousness among the largest nationality in the country. It is understood as a threat to Ethiopian identity as a "nation" and a state. Consequently, in the past, Ethiopian regimes have spent much energy manipulating information about the territorial identity and demographic facts about the Oromo people.<sup>5</sup> Paul Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alexandro Triulzi have argued that for the Amhara ruling elite, the Oromo not only posed a political challenge, but also a cultural and national one. They note that the Oromo political movement was seen

by the former as “doubly subversive because it stood for a different sort of moral order to that of the Amhara elite which explains why the regime [*Dergue*] used its cruellest and crudest forms of violence against any signs of distinctive Oromo identity” (Baxter et al, 1996: 13). This views of the Ethiopian ruling elite are shared by many scholars who believe that the creation of solidarity among the Oromo based on the idea of being Oromo would entail the dissolution of the Ethiopian state. Therefore, though indirectly, Ethiopianist scholars have even contributed to the suppression of collective Oromo identity, while some of them deny the existence of such identity; others have made it invisible.

Taking into account what is said above, the study of identity politics which is presented in this work is framed in the five sets of themes discussed below. Under the first set of themes which run through several chapters, the study will reinterpret old facts and unearth new ones about Oromo history and society. The second set of themes supplements the first set, focusing on the nature and consequences of the nineteenth-century Abyssinian conquest of Oromoland. The third set of themes describes the struggle which the Oromo people have been waging since the 1960s, the hopes for democratic accommodation that have been raised and dashed and, consequently, the trajectory which the development of Oromo nationalism has taken. The fourth set of themes outlines the contours of the emergent Oromo nation. The fifth set of themes speculates about the future of Oromo relations to the Ethiopian state. The themes are all elaborated in the following section.

## 1

### CONTOURS OF THE ANCIENT OROMO NATION: HISTORY, TERRITORY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

This study starts with a critical analysis of the identity of the Oromo people as represented in Ethiopianist historical discourse. The discourse is located in a historical trajectory that spans a period of five centuries: the first set of themes focuses, inter alia, on the territorial origins of the Oromo people and the so-called Oromo invasion of Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. Ethiopianist historiographers posit that the Oromo were unknown to the Abyssinians before the sixteenth century: while presenting the Abyssinian–cum–Ethiopian territorial