African Affairs, 103/413, 593–614
DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adh043

DIVERSITY AND STATE-BUILDING IN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT

In multi-ethnic Ethiopia, diversity has been a serious obstacle to state-building. In fact, the process of state-building has been chequered with ethnic tensions, squabbles and conflicts. Although ethno-regional identity politics, at least in its most violent manifestation, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the country, its seeds had been sown with the rise of the absolutist state by the middle of the twentieth century. The political entrepreneurs of Ethiopia's various communities have pursued divergent ways of dealing with diversity. The dominant Amhara followed an assimilationist policy (1889–1991); since the 1960s, the Eritreans and a section of the Oromo political actors have opted for the secessionist route; and since the mid-1970s, the Tigrayans have gone for the 'accommodationist' alternative. Of the three choices that the political actors have had, this article argues that the 'accommodationist' path, despite its serious flaws, has effectively discredited both the assimilationist and secessionist options. Ethiopia's current constitution may contain amendable articles. Its very accommodationist character, however, seems to make such amendment difficult, given the highly politicized nature of ethnicity in the country. In this sense, Ethiopia is permanently changed and the accommodationist formula is unavoidable in the process of state-building.

LIKE OTHER SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES, ETHIOPIA is home to many ethnic groups. However, unlike its sub-Saharan counterparts, Ethiopia was not quite a colonial artefact. Nor was it a mere geographical expression, prior to the advent of the forces of modernity that colonialism brought to Africa. At least in the highlands, the sedentary agricultural life, trade, the long history of the monarchy and the Orthodox Church had significantly enabled ethnic groups to know each other — to intermarry and establish commercial links as well as to unite against common enemies and, of course, to fight with each other for regional primacy.

In northern Ethiopia, the highlands of Eritrea and Tigray have been occupied by the Tigrayans. The Amhara, to the south of them, occupy the highlands of Wello, Gondar, Gojjam and northern Shewa. Still further

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south are found Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, the Oromo. These three principal ethnic groups have not always lived precisely under the same political roof. The oldest major polity in the region, Axum, had only Eritrea and Tigray as its core region. The domain of the Zagwe kingdom in north-central Ethiopia that followed Axum in the eleventh century was also very circumscribed. But the 'Solomonic' rulers from northern Shewa in central Ethiopia, who came to power in 1270, were expanding southwards and annexing regions that were occupied by various ethnic and religious groups. Briefly, however, the centre of power moved back to the north when, in 1872, a Tigrayan was crowned as Yohannes IV, Emperor of Ethiopia. During his tenure, which lasted until 1889, he and his most celebrated general, Ras Alula, effectively defended Ethiopia from European and Arab expansionists.[1]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Amhara king of Shewa, Menelik, was able to gather sufficient firearms not only to make him the strongest man in Ethiopia by 1889, but also to expand southwards and annex the huge Oromo landmass, hitherto outside the Ethiopian state.[2] By 1906, when the conquests were over, Ethiopia's current physiognomy was crystallized. The shift of power from Tigray in the north to Shewa in central Ethiopia gained permanence when the forces of modernity penetrated the region, ultimately metamorphosing the state to a condition of absolutism.

Dominated by the Amhara of Shewa, the state continued to evolve along glimmers of modernity's well-trodden absolutist path.[3] With a standing army, taxation, bureaucracy, codified law and a nascent market system, the government significantly centralized the administration, marginalizing the economic, political and military bases of the feudal ethnic elites. The state's administrative and academic institutional structures were not conducive to diversity; they favoured assimilation.

The assimilationist policy

Diversity is anathema to absolutism. Following a brief period of Italian rule, the absolutist state was reinstated in 1941 with British help, though it staggered along for the rest of the decade. For instance, it was able to quell the 1943 Weyane insurgency in Tigray only with the support of the British Royal Air Force. Once it had managed to consolidate power by the

1. Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea during the Scramble for Africa: A political biography of Ras Alula, 1875–1897* (Michigan University Press, East Lansing, MI, 1982).
2. See Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A history 1570–1860* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990); Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (Kuraz Publishing Agency, Addis Ababa, 1991), p. 32.
3. See Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From autocracy to revolution*. Occasional publication 1 (Review of African Political Economy, London, 1975); Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1974* (Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa, 1991).

1950s, it launched its assimilationist doctrine in earnest. Homogenizing Ethiopian society was perceived as a pre-requisite for the emergence of a unitary state. In this regard, language and history became crucial tools for diluting diversity.

i. The politics of language: Amharic, the language of the dominant elite, became the national/official medium of the country and non-Amhara Ethiopians were obliged to study it. Outside the official arena, too, people were directly and indirectly encouraged to abandon their own mother tongues in favour of Amharic. By privileging Amharic, at the expense of all other Ethiopian languages, the state pursued a policy of intense amharanization. The destruction of ethnic particularities was considered the best guarantee not only of the rise of a unitary state in a uniform society but also of the maintenance of the political and economic *status quo* of the ruling elite. This gave the empire-state the appearance of what a prominent scholar of nationalism called 'a prison-house of nations if ever there was one'.[4]

It was the eagerness to homogenize Ethiopian society effectively and thoroughly that led the state to implement its assimilationist policy hastily in Eritrea. For instance, during his first extensive visit to Eritrea (26 January–10 February 1954), Emperor Haile Selassie visited the various towns of the western lowlands — Tessenei, Barentu, Aqordat and Keren. At these stops, he could not wait to impress upon the people, who had barely joined Ethiopia in a UN-sponsored federation in September 1952, that they had to study Amharic, which he claimed was an 'international language',[5] unlike Arabic which was trying to compete with the local language, Tigre, as a *lingua franca* of the region. Furthermore, the UN-sponsored constitution of Eritrea specifically stated that Arabic, along with Tigrinya, was the official language of Eritrea, and yet the emperor dismissed it as a mere 'dialect' that could not possibly be on a par with Amharic.

In the rest of Ethiopia as well, at the expense of academic quality and standards, Amharic elbowed English out of primary as well as junior high schools during the early 1960s. The language was also privileged in Addis Ababa University, the country's national university, when its Amharic Department was renamed the Institute of Ethiopian Languages in the late 1970s. This name gave the impression that other Ethiopian languages were also being taught and studied. In practice, however, only Amharic was offered and, in essence, the institute remained an Amharic department. But the renaming of the department did signal the desire to make Amharic

4. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1983), p. 85.
5. Edward Clark, 'Emperor's visit to Eritrea, 26 January–10 February, 1954', Amconsulate, Asmara, to the Dept. of State, Desp. 126 (Washington, DC, 12 March, 1954). US National Archives, Washington, DC.

the Ethiopian language. Such empowerment was an obvious recognition of the language's value in accelerating the assimilation of the various ethnic groups into the dominant Amhara. Along with language, the state used history as a tool of assimilation. With their own readings of the past, the ethnic elites also used history for their centrifugal tendencies, transforming it into a genuine bone of contention.

ii. The use and abuse of history:

'Le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger. L'investigation historique, en effet, remet en lumière les faits de violence qui se sont passés à l'origine de toutes les formations politiques.' — Ernest Renan

Ethiopia is, paradoxically, both blessed and cursed with a rich past. Unlike those who suffer from a sense of lowliness because their past is blank, Ethiopia can brag about its 'three-thousand-year history' — a source of pride and identity to its people. On the down side, the rich past has been a burden for the country, because its political entrepreneurs have been vying to claim it for their own manipulative purposes. Recognizing the significance of the untapped energy of the past more than a century back, Ernest Renan forewarned that historical enquiry is dangerous to the concept of a nation. People, he exhorted, should therefore learn how to forget the past and build their nation consensually on the basis of 'a daily plebiscite'.

Renan's exhortation notwithstanding, the past lives in the Ethiopian present: political entrepreneurs summon it and selectively refer to its events as if they had occurred yesterday. Yet the past does not exist in the form of fossilized events. On the contrary, it is an on-going and active process of restructuring bygone events, so much so that political entrepreneurs find it quite serviceable for their ambitions. As such, memory becomes the voice of the past listened to in the present and sung for the future. Endowed with this unique power of imagining identity by linking the past with the present as well as the future, memory has been a principal zone of political contest in Ethiopia.

In its quest for hegemonic power through which the people would be ruled consensually, the state vied with centrifugal elites for history by producing, privileging and maintaining particular versions of bygone events as collective representations of the Ethiopian past. Subordinated ethno-regional elites reacted by seeking their own history, with their own heroes and villains. Indeed, the Ethiopian case supports Renan's statement that history poses a serious challenge to the process of state-building. Memory's centrality in the zone of political contest can best be illustrated by how Ras Alula has been seen through divergent nationalist prisms. He was arguably

Ethiopia's most celebrated general during the last third of the nineteenth century, and played a crucial role fighting the Egyptians at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876), the Mahdists at Kufit (1885), and the Italians at Dogali (1887) and Adua (1896).

Described in glowing fashion by neutral foreign delegates, politicians, travellers, journalists and missionaries,[6] Ras Alula's high calibre and unique achievements were irrelevant for the absolutist and hegemony-aspirant state. Deliberate historical amnesia was the tactic pursued by the state to deny him credit because, as a Tigrayan, he was regarded as counter-productive for the state's ambitions. Ethiopia's historiography, for instance, was silent about his contribution to the battle of Adua, where Ethiopia became the only African country triumphantly to check the colonial onslaught. The state's policy on the past, along with its policy on language, merely ended up nourishing centrifugal inclinations on the part of ethno-regional political entrepreneurs.

iii. Centripetal versus centrifugal forces: The assimilationist path helped the absolutist state to build an Amhara cultural supremacy in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the state continued to reinforce the centripetal forces and weaken the centrifugal tendencies of non-Amhara elites, by securing control of most of the country's political and economic institutions.

The Amhara had enjoyed primacy in state-building since the ascent of the Shewan king, Menelik, to the Ethiopian throne in 1889 and the transformation of the Oromo village of Finfine into the city of Addis Ababa, capital of the Amhara rulers of the country. The emergence of Addis Ababa as the economic, political and cultural centre of Ethiopia was further assured by the construction of a railroad connecting it with the French port of Djibouti. The railway brought glimmers of modernity to meet tradition in Shewa.[7] Since modern people appear where modernity takes place, the Amhara were its primary beneficiaries in Ethiopia. Thereafter, public policy favoured economic and educational investments in Shewa and other Amhara regions.[8] The unequal educational and economic opportunities and the concomitant differences in living standards in the country continued to nurture centrifugal inclinations, which in turn prepared the ethno-regional landscape for conflict.[9]

6. See Alemseged Abbay, 'The Trans-Mareb past in the present', *Journal of Modern African Studies* **35**, 2 (1997), pp. 321–34.
7. Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 68–71, 101–2.
8. Donald Rothchild, *Managing Ethnic Conflict in Africa* (Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1997), p. 77.
9. John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987).

As the state translated its economic muscles into political muscles, the political grievances of the disadvantaged groups reflected their economic grievances. Economically weakened and marginalized by the state, they were underrepresented in the political process. The bureaucracy was filled with mostly Amhara elites. The overwhelming majority of Haile Selassie's top government officials and provincial governors, for instance, were from the Amhara of Shewa. Amharic, as the official language, became the 'language of power', limiting public participation primarily to the dominant group.[10]

Although the differential access to goods and services, the exclusion from political processes and the disrespect shown to the cultures and languages of the various communities continued to generate a sense of deprivation relative to the Amhara, open resistance was by and large considered risky and acquiescence was preferred because the state was too powerful. Thus, despite the richness of resources for ethnic mobilization, neither economic nor political grievances, by themselves, triggered a nationalist insurgency.

In fact, nationalist upheaval may work contrary to economic exigencies, as the departure of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the increasing desire of Québécois to secede from Anglophone Canada, and the split of Eritrea from Ethiopia amply demonstrate. The emotion that is invested in ethno-regional conflicts cannot be adequately explained in economic terms.[11] Thus, in Ethiopia, factors other than economic, political and cultural grievances were needed to set off nationalist insurgencies.

Conditions for sparking off ethno-regional conflicts were created in 1974 when the absolutist regime of Haile Selassie was overthrown and state institutions were weakened. As the ruling elite lost its grip on power, ethno-regional tinderboxes were in the making. Hitherto marginalized ethnic groups increased their communal awareness and began to engage in the intense competition for power, thus creating a revolutionary situation. The weakness of the state, and not infrequently its failure to provide security to its citizens, particularly during 1974–8, created a favourable environment for ethno-regional movements such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), juxtaposed with other ideological organizations such as the Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), to proliferate. At this juncture, Somali irredentism overran the Ogaden. The EPRP disputed the legitimacy of Ethiopa's military junta, the Derg. Secessionist forces controlled most Eritrean towns for the first time since 1961. And it was not until 1978 that the state managed to defeat irredentist Somalia, quell the urban resistance by the EPRP and push the secessionists out of the Eritrean towns.

10. Rothchild, *Managing Ethnic Conflict*, p. 77.
11. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (California University Press, Berkeley, CA, 1985), p. 134.

The secessionist path I: Eritrea

Modern people, in competing for scarce political and economic resources, usually perceive competition through sub-nationalist prisms. The tiny intelligentsia and the nascent middle class produced by Ethiopia's limited exposure to modernity had to determine whether sub-nationalisms were bound to pass from their benign level to a malignant stage and whether inter-communal bickering had to veer towards settlement or confrontation. Although their decisions have ideological implications, most frequently political entrepreneurs tend to be driven by sheer hunger for power.[12] The political climate of Eritrea illustrates this point.

Eritrea, which was carved out of historic Ethiopia in 1890 by Italian colonialism, was under British trusteeship during the 1940s awaiting a UN decision on its fate. Its emergent political entrepreneurs were jostling for resources. Leaders like Tadla Bairu and Tadla Oqbit embraced the unionist ideology of merging Eritrea with its 'mother' Ethiopia. Under the slogan 'Ethiopia or Death', they made a crucial contribution to uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia. During the political bickering, when the fate of Eritrea was in the balance (1941–52), personal ambition drove Tadla Bairu to make use of the sectarian identity card to discredit his nemesis, the conditional unionist Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam. Referring to his Tigrayan parentage, Tadla Bairu accused Walde-Ab of being a Tigrayan who had no right to be in the Eritrean political landscape. Following the successful merger of Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952, while Tadla Bairu was rewarded with the post of Eritrea's chief executive, Tadla Oqbit became its police commissioner. However, their powerful and prestigious posts were gradually downgraded as the emperor superimposed Amhara officials upon them. Tadla Bairu was finally removed from his top post in Eritrea to become Ethiopia's ambassador to Sweden. Disenchanted, he ultimately abandoned that position to join the secessionist Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) — a complete reversal of his unionist ideological stand. Tadla Oqbit, who regretted his role in merging Eritrea with Ethiopia, died in mysterious circumstances from a gunshot in his office.

Thus, there is a clear personal advantage in playing the identity card as aggressively as possible. Political entrepreneurs who present themselves as champions of their communal groups exaggerate and manipulate the identity fear for their own advantage. As such, not only are they products of the communal fear of the future, but they are also its manufacturers. As his usefulness to the Amhara political actors waned, Tadla Bairu's frustrations were conveyed to the American consul: 'The Shoans . . . could not care less what happened to Eritrea, provided it was fully integrated into the

12. See Michael Brown, 'The causes of internal conflict', in Michael Brown *et al.* (eds), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001), pp. 3–25.

Empire'.[13] While Tadla Bairu accepted the ambassadorial appointment to Sweden, his rival, Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam, who had always opposed Eritrea's unconditional merger with Ethiopia, refused to be bought and declined the Emperor's invitation to meet him in Addis Ababa. He preferred self-exile. Just before going into exile, he revealed his anxieties at a lunch on 14 May 1953 with the American consul, Edward Clark, and the United Nations representative in Eritrea, Albert Reid. According to Clark, Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam

> . . . spoke with conviction about democracy, freedom and respect for the rights of the individual. While unwilling to submit to what he considers the ruthless authority and autocratic rule of the Amharas, which in his view will set the cause of democracy back a hundred years, he was obviously a chastened and discouraged man. In spite of his adversities he spoke rationally and intelligently and I was frankly impressed by the sincerity and conviction with which he discussed the problems confronting Eritrea and its people . . . Although his views are quite naturally colored by his own particular political situation here, I should state in all fairness to him that his remarks were not impassioned or demagogic, but rather level and thoughtful at all times.[14]

Walde-Ab's behaviour, full of sincerity, commitment, selflessness and principle, was an exception to the rule of political entrepreneurship. At face value, his remark that 'the ruthless and autocratic rule of the Amharas . . . will set the cause of democracy back a hundred years' appears to be an exaggeration or a manipulation of the identity card. Beyond a touch of sensationalism when he spoke of democracy, there was not much of an exaggeration or manipulation, however. While Haile Selassie's Ethiopia was autocratic, British Eritrea (1941–52) was introduced to a rudimentary sense of democracy with freedom of the press, elections, the unionization of labour and a multi-party parliamentary political system. Thus he believed that 'the ruthless and autocratic rule of the Amharas' was going to extinguish the rays of democracy that the British had given Eritrea.

By and large, Eritreans, including ideological foes such as Tadla Bairu and Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam, accepted a federal relationship with Ethiopia in 1952. From the outset, however, Ethiopia began dismantling the federal arrangement, to the dismay of Eritreans of all ideological shades. A golden opportunity was missed when the peaceful demand for restoration of the federation passed unheeded and a grinding and devastating thirty-year war for independence was fought. The political game of chess became a zero-sum game, as the negotiable demand for restoration of the federation underwent a qualitative change into a non-negotiable demand for

13. Quoted in Lloyd Ellingson, 'The origins and development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement', in Robert Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopia*. (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1979), p. 614.
14. Amconsulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Despatch 126 (Washington, D.C., 15 May 1953) US National Archives, Washington, D.C.

independence. In the process, the crude repressive policies of the absolutist state imposed a sense of collective identity upon the Eritrean people, who were merely brought under the Italian political roof 'by an act of surgery: by severing . . . different peoples from those with whom their past had been linked and by grafting the amputated remnants on to each other',[15] but who lived as 'strangers to one another', according to Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam's press conference in Beirut in 1971.[16]

The armed struggle for secession began in 1961. In order to invent an identity for all the people inhabiting the Italian artefact of Eritrea, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) which, at long last, had managed to monopolize the custodianship of Eritrean nationalism, wanted to make history serviceable to its imaginings. But the past, which normally gives political actors a cognitive framework, has hardly helped the EPLF. Unlike their Tigrayan co-ethnics who had a rich past to recall, Eritreans had no distinct political community to remember. As such, imagining Eritrea appeared fraudulent and without the moral basis for statehood.

Coming to grips with the idea that a shared memory is the basis for a collective identity, the political actors were set to solve the legitimacy problem by revisiting the past. Hence, they called up the various parts of the past and relegated those that were not serviceable to active amnesia. However, simply ignoring historical facts and figures that were still remembered by the people was not always enough for the construction of a distinct Eritrean identity. For instance, unlike their Amhara counterparts, the Eritrean political actors found the efficacy of conscious and active amnesia doubtful at best to dilute the resonance of Ras Alula in the popular memory. His judiciousness and military genius were imprinted too markedly in the Eritrean popular memory to fade in the time span of a century. Even the British, who took over administrative responsibility for Eritrea after the departure of the Italians in 1941, soon learned that Alula was fondly and passionately remembered.[17] Today, the Christian highlanders revere him with maxims and stories.[18]

The memory of Alula thus remained antithetical to the construction of a distinct Eritrean identity because it brought the Tigrinya-speaking population of Eritrea closer to their co-ethnics in Tigray/Ethiopia rather than to the various ethnic groups in Eritrea. In essence, it cannot justify a distinct

15. See G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A colony in transition, 1941–52* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960), pp. 10–11.
16. Quote attributed to Walde-Ab Walde Mariam, news conference, Beirut, 1971. Transcript in the archives of the EPLF, Asmara.
17. According to the British political officer in Eritrea, G. K. N. Trevaskis, 'One and all confirm that Ras Alula was a just ruler, well loved by the people, and that at no time in its history has the Hamasien been so tranquil or free from the interminable disputes which are today the characteristic features of its daily life.' Trevaskis papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Mss-Brit-Emp-S.367 Boxes 1–2. 1944–1951 Eritrea, p. 139.
18. See Abbay, 'The trans-Mareb past'.

identity for Eritrea. Ideologically, therefore, Alula had to be expunged from the popular memory by ritualized assault. Suddenly, the man, whom 'One and all confirm . . . was a just ruler, well loved by the people', has been transformed into an enemy of the very people in whose memory he resonates. The wars that he fought and won against foreign forces in what is today Eritrea have been boldly reframed as wars that were fought by the gallant Eritrean people in defence of their country[19] — an Eritrea that did not exist as an independent entity nor entertain an identity distinct from that of Tigray across the river Mareb. However, the bold attempt to create a nationalist ideology out of invented 'history' did not work because the pre-modern antecedents that resonate in popular memory were not compatible with the community imagined by the EPLF. Since the ethnic past over '*la longue durée*', which is invaluable to current nationalisms,[20] was not serviceable to the secessionist ambitions of the Eritrean political actors, resuscitating and maintaining the issue of the colonial boundary that Italy created (1890–1941) became Eritrea's sole *raison d'être* — a political justification it shares with other African countries.[21] Other centrifugal forces in Ethiopia such as the Oromo, however, have not enjoyed the luxury of such political justifications.

The secessionist path II: Oromo nationalism

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which claims custodianship of Oromo ethnic nationalism, is among the oldest centrifugal forces in Ethiopia. Yet it has had limited success in mobilizing the Oromo people into a costly ethnic war. This may be explained partly by the fact that the Oromo occupy a huge landmass in diverse ecological niches with few transport networks. A good section of them are pastoralists, lacking the powerful sources of collective identity such as the nostalgia of imperial political myths and ecclesiastical organizations that are normally associated with

19. EPLF, *Ertran Qalsan* (Sahel, Eritrea, 1987), p. 26.
20. Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History* (University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, 2000), p. 63.
21. On the legitimacy problem of African states, see Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The politics of state survival* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996). The demand for independence took off in the 1960s in reaction to Ethiopia's decision to eliminate Eritrea's particularities. Otherwise, in the 1940s and early 1950s, the two principal political parties in the dominant Eritrean highlands did not have independence as their goal. The Unionist Party was for unconditional unity and the Liberal Progressive Party for conditional unity with Ethiopia (see Alemseged Abbay '"Not with them, not without them": the staggering of Eritrea to nationhood', *Africa* **56**, 4 (Rome: *Instituto per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 2001), pp. 459–91. Thus, popular memory did not help Eritrea march to victory because, as the memory of Alula shows, the EPLF simply failed to re-map it. The indiscriminate killings of civilians by the Derg created an urgent need for physical security, which the EPLF promised to give. Thus, a new identity, based on unconditional loyalty to Eritrea and the Eritreans, was being conceptualized. Misguided state policy, not popular memory, led to Eritrea's exit from the Ethiopian house.

sedentary lifestyles.[22] Nor have they possessed literacy with a standardized script, which stores cultural resources and memory. Literacy entails greater awareness, since political ideas can spread more rapidly.

As a relatively heterogeneous people, the Oromo are not united by a common interest or purpose. Nor do they share a common economic life, since commercial intercourse is hindered partly by lack of communication networks. The absence of a script did not allow Afaan Oromo to be standardized or the culture to be unified. So the Oromo barely regard themselves as a community, and they have never had a sense of collective identity based on a popular memory. Their various clans, such as the Booran, Guji, Arsi, Tulama, Selale, etc., do not share a pan-Oromo collective memory. When the Booran, Guji, and Arsi come into conflict with the Somali for grazing and water, for instance, it is parochial identities such as *Booranitti* (Booranness), not *Oromumma* (Oromoness), which become sharpened.[23] Their past too, although filled with various regional heroes, is devoid of pan-Oromo dynastic governance.[24] There has been no tradition of protracted struggle and warfare of the Oromo, as a community, against states in the Horn of Africa. Such experiences would have furnished a shared historic mythology and memories, heroes, sacred sites of combat, etc., which are vital components of the ethnic fabric. Had a common identity been rooted in myths and symbols that strike deep chords, Oromia, as the concept of a national home, would have had sentimental value. And nationalist scholars would not have wondered why Oromo nationalism has only been developing slowly.[25]

More concerned about homogenization, the centralizing Ethiopian leaders were not receptive to the ethnic particularities of the Oromo. Instead, they wanted to subject them to amharanization. And their success was relatively considerable, since the Oromo were fast assimilating into the Amhara ethnic pool, so much so that they could not even retain their own authentic name. The dominant group gave them a pejorative name, Galla, which carried

22. For such resources of identity construction, see John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1982) and Anthony D. Smith, *Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999). Even Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 85, who argues for the modernity of nations and nationalism, accepts that an old high culture can be an invaluable asset for state-formation.

23. See P. W. T. Baxter *et al.* 'Introduction' and Mekuria Bulcha, 'The survival and reconstruction of Oromo national identity', in P. W. T. Baxter *et al.* (eds), *Being and Becoming Oromo* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 1996).

24. Instead, it is *gada*, the long-dead ritual and integrative institution, which nationalist scholars and political actors seek to exhume. Romanticized as an egalitarian and democratic system, *gada* is being presented as a symbol of Oromo identity (see Bulcha, 'The survival and reconstruction of Oromo national identity'). However, according to the principal authority on the subject, Asmerom Legesse, *Gada* (Free Press, New York, 1973), p. 12, *gada* was neither a pan-Oromo political institution nor was it practised among all the Oromo.

25. Mohammed Hassen, 'The development of Oromo nationalism' in Baxter *et al.*, *Being and Becoming Oromo*.

with it the defined relationship between the dominant group and the subjugated Oromo. Yet assimilating Ethiopia's largest ethnic group in its entirety had serious limitations, as Fredrick Barth, citing K. E. Knutsson, remarked about the Ethiopian society. This he called a social system 'where whole ethnic groups are stratified with respect to their positions of privilege and disability within the state. Yet the attainment of a governorship does not make an Amhara of a Galla, nor does estrangement as an outlaw entail loss of Galla identity.'[26]

Despite unique endowment with immense economic, political and cultural grievances against the state, crucial resources that political entrepreneurs need to process in their nationalist mill, the Oromo masses have not responded enthusiastically to the invitation by the OLF to a secessionist war. One possible reason why the Oromo seem to be declining the OLF's invitation may be that the possibility of secession has never appeared attainable. Oromo nationalism could not weaken the state's power to the extent that the balance of power would disfavour the state. Only when the balance of power is conducive to centrifugal nationalism can secession appear attainable;[27] and the more successes a secessionist struggle attains, the more support it enjoys from the people.

Furthermore, the current political climate in Ethiopia is not intolerant of ethnic diversity. With the demise of the Derg and the accession of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF) to power, Ethiopia's political course changed. Oromo cultural grievances were genuinely accommodated. Afaan Oromo thus became an academic and administrative language. The Oromo elite have elected to drop the Geez script in favour of the Latin alphabet, and they can now freely enjoy their distinct identity. This genuine cultural accommodation deprives the Oromo political landscape of a resource crucial to ethnic mobilization.

In the political realm, however, accommodation has not been duplicated as genuinely as in the cultural realm. It is a truism that, for the first time in history, the Oromo are being allowed to territorialize their consciousness of identity in Oromia, which is given concrete borders. Constitutionally, Oromia has been granted autonomous status and Oromo representatives can hold federal posts. In practice, however, it is almost exclusively the co-opted and/or invented leaders who have access to political resources, not only in Oromia but at the federal level as well.

Although it is difficult to fathom fully the efficacy of the 'accommodationist' policy in stunting Oromo secessionist aspirations, the Oromo

26. 'Introduction' in Fredrick Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Little, Brown and Company, Boston, MA, 1969), p. 27.
27. See Stephen Van Evera, 'Hypotheses on nationalism and war', in Brown *et al.*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 26–60.

political landscape is not subsumed in exacerbated secessionist activities and the Eritrean scenario is not likely to be replayed in Oromia in the foreseeable future. A revolutionary situation, which cannot be invented in a vacuum, is absent from the region. Oromia is devoid of the crisis that political entrepreneurs, in general, need so badly to cement solidarity with 'their' people.[28] This does not allow the OLF to swim among the Oromo like a fish in water, to follow Mao Tse Tung's injunction. Thus, the Oromo people can respond to the OLF's invitation positively and dance to its secessionist tune only when the message on the invitation card has direct relevance to their livelihoods. Just as the pan-Arab programme of the ELF was repulsive to Eritrean Christians, the OLF's quest for independence carries no emotional appeal, especially when it is the *gada*, not a dynastic past, that is presented as a virtue to emulate, and a Latin script, not a native invention, is promoted as 'a primary symbol of national Oromo identity'.[29] A nationalist ideology can have only a rough ride unless it is appealing to specific interests of language, culture and history, as well as economic grievances such as the absence of land reform and political grievances such as the lack of representation in the administrative apparatus. Since the 'accommodationist' policy, with all its flaws, appears to have diluted the sharpness of some of these issues, at least for now, they cannot nurture the OLF's nationalism. Furthermore, the overall behaviour of the regime, which is not as crudely alienating as that of its predecessors, denies centrifugal political entrepreneurs crucial resources for mobilization. Finally, today secession is out of fashion partly because it is too reminiscent of a struggle that sees no light at the end of the tunnel.[30] Nor is there a global force, as in the Cold War era, that could possibly provide Oromo nationalists with material and political support. This enhances the preferability of the accommodationist choice.

The 'accommodationist' option: Tigray

Made up of predominantly Amhara officers, the military junta that succeeded Haile Selassie in 1974, the Derg, was no less centrist and assimilationsist. Like its predecessor, the Derg continued to sow the seeds of violence as in South Africa under apartheid and Burundi under the Tutsi, by letting its ethnic group dominate the decision-making process.[31] Its policy of retaining inherently discriminatory economic, cultural and

28. See Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979), p. 17.
29. Bulcha, 'Survival and reconstruction', p. 66.
30. See Ted Gurr, 'Peoples against states: ethnopolitical conflict and changing world system', *International Studies Quarterly* **38**, 3 (1994), pp. 347–77, and 'Ethnic warfare on the wane', *Foreign Affairs* **79**, 3 (2000), pp. 52–64.
31. Rothchild, *Managing Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 61, 63.

political institutions nourished Tigrayan ethnic nationalism. The disgruntled Tigrayan elites, who felt excluded, began questioning the legitimacy of the system. But their actions incurred even more acute state violence, domination and discrimination.

State violence made it easier for the Tigrayan political entrepreneurs to invite 'their' people to an ethnic nationalist war. The invitation effectively called up Tigray's rich dynastic past. For instance, while the EPLF tried to erase the Alula era from the popular memory and the assimilationist Amhara political entrepreneurs preferred to ignore it, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which assumed the custodianship of Tigrayan nationalism, on the other hand, readily invoked it as a means of mobilizing the people for an ethnic nationalist insurgency (1975–91). Alula was exalted for defeating foreign aggressors, resisting Amhara domination and advancing Tigrayan interests. And this struck a deep chord among the Tigrayans because it resonated in their collective memory. Alula became a model of courage, judiciousness and virtue to emulate, buttressing the Tigrayan group psychology — a psychology which was increasingly nourished not only by the unsettling feeling of lagging behind the dominant Amhara, but also by the crude state violence.

Otherwise, however valuable the past may be for inciting and mobilizing people, it cannot on its own ignite ethnic insurgency. If it could, then ethnic conflicts, including their intensity and magnitude, would be predictable. Far from that being the case, ancient grievances alone cannot explain why there has been intense ethnic conflict in Nigeria and not in Ghana, for instance; or why ethnic conflict in Malaysia is less deadly and more manageable than that in Chechnya; or why there was genocide in Rwanda but an amicable divorce in Czechoslovakia.

The past, arguably, played a vital role in the Tigrayan nationalist insurgency. Yet it was the physical insecurity of the peasantry — caused by the increasingly paranoid Derg — which enabled political entrepreneurs to create more effective ethnic fault lines. As ethnic nationalist resistance intensified, so did severe state reprisals against the peasantry. For instance, on 22 June 1988, the frustrated Derg massacred up to 2,500 marketeers in Hauzien, central Tigray. Venting frustrations on civilians by such senseless massacres was accompanied by the equally senseless deportation of Tigrayan peasants to the Oromo regions of the south.[32]

As the cycle of violence continued, centripetal and centrifugal political entrepreneurs relied crudely on ethnicity and regionalism, rather than institutions, not only in a spiral of bidding, and outbidding, but also in winning the hearts and minds of the masses. For instance, President Mengistu

32. See Africa Watch, *Evil Days: Thirty years of war in Ethiopia* (New York, 1991); Amnesty International *Report* (24 August 1988).

announced that 'there was no means of separating the bandits [TPLF] from the [Tigrayan] people'.[33] In his attempt to reinforce Amhara ethnic nationalism against the Tigrinya-speaking people, Mengistu claimed that the 1943 Weyane insurgency in Tigray was seeking to create a 'Greater Tigray' or a 'Tigray-Tigrignie' trans-Mareb state. And the TPLF-led insurgency, he continued, had basically the same goal of uniting the Tigrinya-speaking people on both sides of the river Mareb under the same political roof. This speech was publicized through all channels of the mass media, such as the daily Amharic *Addis Zemen* of 19 October 1990.

By misrepresenting the objectives of both the Weyane and the TPLF insurgencies, Mengistu was inciting the Amhara to ethnic mobilization against the Tigrinya-speakers. He did not quite succeed because, as a general rule, the messages of political entrepreneurs can barely reach sympathetic ears unless they manifest sufficient credibility.[34] The aura of fear facilitated the work of mobilization for the centrifugal political actors and the TPLF used the identity card effectively. Borrowing the Maoist expression of 'draining the sea to kill the fish', the Derg targetted innocent civilians. The TPLF message echoed among the people because it summed up how they felt. Ultimately, the predominantly illiterate Tigrayans domesticated the Maoist expression, internalizing it in their own language and routinely employing it in their political discourse. For peasants, anxiety-laden perceptions become crucial sources of group psychology,[35] which Tigrayan political entrepreneurs effectively harnessed to dislodge the Derg from the saddle of power in 1991.

In the saddle of power

> A feudal monarchy and a repressive dictator couldn't hold Ethiopia together. Now we are trying another way. If Ethiopia breaks apart, then it wasn't meant to be. (Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, quoted in *Time* magazine, 4 November 1991, p. 47)

Cognizant of the fact that it was ethnic nationalism that catapulted them to the saddle of power and knowing well that centrifugal tendencies were what pushed Ethiopia to the brink of break-up, the TPLF-dominated coalition government of the EPRDF had to address nationalism first. In this task, unlike their predecessors, the new rulers seem to understand that accommodation is a larger global trend. Indeed, the preference of confrontation over accommodation, as in Turkey's refusal to bargain with the Kurds, is an

33. WPE Polit. Bureau 23rd Emergency Meeting, 20 December 1989 (Tahsas 12 1982). These records are kept in the office of the Special Prosecutor, established to prosecute the Derg officials for crimes against humanity: Addis Ababa.
34. Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, 'Nationalism and the marketplace of ideas', in Brown *et al.*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 67–8.
35. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, pp. 178–80.

exception to the rule. With regard to Eritrea, therefore, they preferred a negotiated secession to the unpalatable option of continuing the debilitating war. And they vowed to devolve power to the various ethnic communities in the rest of Ethiopia.

Federalism, as the system that devolves the decision-making process, is antidotal to the unitary and assimilationist policies that were at the root of Ethiopia's political malaise. Thus, restructuring the political map along ethnic federal lines was expected to mitigate the zero-sum character of politics. As masters of their own house, the ethnic groups were to become in charge of their own domestic economy, education, administration and security. Article 39, item three, of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), therefore, stated that ethnic groups, organized in nine states, had 'the right to a full measure of self-government'. The Federal Republic has gone further. Article 39, item one, of the Constitution stipulates that 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession'. At face value, item one exudes the regime's cavalier and laissez-faire attitude, because most countries which practise federalism do not include such radical articles in their constitutions. But secession is not as easy as it sounds. Item four of the same Article makes the conditions for secession practically impossible to meet.[36]

As such, the article appears to have a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is designed to serve as a threatening stick against the perennially centralizing and assimilationist forces. On the other hand, not only does it give people the feeling that they are part of the Ethiopian household of their own free will, but it may also give them the feeling that their equitable access to power is safeguarded. Indeed, the essence of self-determination, as Walker Conner states, is precisely about having the choice to secede, not actual secession *per se*.[37] Very few secessionist movements succeed in breaking up the polity from which they want to split. Most of them use the threat of secession as a mere bargaining chip for settling at less than independence — a meaningful autonomy.

36. The conditions are:

a) when a demand for secession has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Legislative Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned;
b) when the Federal Government has organized a referendum which must take place within three years from the time it received the relevant council's decision for secession;
c) when the demand for secession is supported by a majority vote in the referendum;
d) when the Federal Government will have transferred its powers to the council of the Nation, Nationality or People which has voted to secede; and
e) when the division of assets is effected in a manner prescribed by law.

37. Walker Connor, 'A primer for analyzing ethnonational conflict', in S. A. Giannakos (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2002), p. 31.

Ideally, increasing decentralization of the decision-making processes, far from being an inevitable step to the break-up of Ethiopia, should depoliticize ethnicity. There is an inverse relationship between the policies of centripetal and centrifugal forces; the more homogenizing and centralizing a state, the stronger the centrifugal tendencies. It was only when Ethiopia dismantled the federal arrangement with Eritrea that the Eritreans decided to fight for total independence. The case of Quebec also supports this point. Most of the aspirations of the Québécois in Canada have been accommodated, and the majority of the people are not particularly enthusiastic about having a political roof of their own. Yet, by virtue of perceiving themselves as among the first settlers in North America and among the founding peoples of Canada, they want Quebec to have more powers than the other provinces. In 1987, Quebec sought a 'distinct status' in an asymmetrically federal Canada in what was packaged as the Meech Lake Accord. After three years of squabbling, the Accord failed to go through. Its failure inversely affected Québécois nationalism. It augmented their desire to be masters in their own house more than at any other time in the past, so much so that in the referendum held in 1995 on whether Quebec was to remain Canadian, the separatists lost only by the narrowest margin ever. In the Ethiopian case also, whilst centralizing forces have energized separatist inclinations, accommodating diversity can only stunt the centrifugal movements.

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was supposed to be buttressed by what appears to be consociationalism, namely, the principle of power-sharing among ethnic leaders at a federal level, balanced recruitment, and proportional resource allocation.[38] Ethnic leaders were not to be restricted to the political arenas of their respective states; they were to have access to federal political resources as well. Article 39 of the Federal Republic's Constitution guarantees ethnic groups 'equitable representation in state and Federal governments'.

At a theoretical level, therefore, by allowing groups to be represented in federal organs — the courts, the army, the police and the administration, etc. — proportionally and arithmetically, consociationalism tends to close the loopholes that ethnic entrepreneurs utilize for their outbidding activities. However, to make the best of consociationalism in particular and the ethnic contract in general, they must be subject to periodic reviews based on changing realities. Realities are not static, as is shown in the case of demographic changes in the Lebanon. The 1943 National Contract in Lebanon, which was based on the 1932 census, favoured the Maronites and other Christians (51 percent). By 1975, the demographic changes that made the Muslims a majority had made the 1943 contract obsolete.

38. Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1977), p. 25.

Reviewing the contract, based on a new census, would have given the Muslims political predominance, something the Maronites were not prepared to accept. The Maronite refusal led to a spiral of inter-group violence that turned Lebanon into a stateless entity.[39] Without the provision of a periodic review of the ethnic contract, there is no guarantee that the Lebanese scenario will not be replayed in Ethiopia, even if the constitution were to be implemented according to the letter and the spirit.

Worse still, the political system does not seem to be as federal and as consociational as it appears. In Ethiopia, as in most of Africa, and perhaps the Third World, there are elections, but not democracy. The elections do not seem to be fair and just. For instance, according to Kjetil Tronvoll, the elections in the southern region of Hadiya in 2000 were flawed. Harassment, intimidation and imprisonment denied the opposition party, the Hadiya National Democratic Party, a victory in its administrative zone.[40] Thus, those who come to power, at both regional and federal levels, are not the real winners of elections; they are the hand-picked 'compradors'. Nor do they have any autonomy. Their accountability remains solidly to the central government, not to the people whom they are supposedly representing. Consequently, in what appears to be a neo-patrimonial system, the prime minister maintains power through personal patronage and clientelism.

This argument can best be illustrated by what happened during the split in the central committee of the TPLF in 2000. Those who opposed the prime minister, including Gebru Asrat, President of the State of Tigray, Kuma Demeqsa, President of the State of Oromia, and Abate Kisho, President of the State of Southern Peoples, Nations, Nationalities — the latter two had apparently allied with the TPLF dissidents — were simply thrown out of office.[41] Although they were supposedly elected by the people, they found themselves replaced by those who are completely loyal to the leadership.

Since the gap between society and state remains wide, the current system is hardly democratic. On the one hand, for instance, it allows freedom of the press, and on the other, it harasses the editors. What happened to the only Tigrinya independent paper, *Wagahta* (*Dawn*), is a case in point. It was banned the very year it appeared with pieces critical of the government. Its editor, Berhan Hailu, herself a veteran TPLF combatant, fled to the United States.

Notwithstanding the flawed nature of the EPRDF's democracy, however, the very ideas of federalism and power-sharing are worthwhile. In the

39. M. E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War: A history to 1995* (Longman, London, 1996), chap. 10.
40. See Kjetil Tronvoll, 'Voting, violence and violations: peasant voices on the flawed elections in Hadiya, southern Ethiopia', *Journal of Modern African Studies* **39**, 4 (2001), pp. 697–716.
41. See *Africa Confidential* **42**, 9 and 21 (2001).

process, people may come to realize the advantages of tolerance, accommodation and reciprocity, which lead to mutual understanding, stability and prosperity. Pan-Ethiopian heroes, who symbolize this culture, recognizable and venerable in the eyes of all ethnic groups, may come into existence. Otherwise, heroizing controversial figures such as Emperor Menelik II, who, among the Oromo and other ethnic groups, certainly does not have the kind of heroic status he enjoys among the Amhara, may be extremely problematic to the state-building process.

It remains to be seen whether the EPRDF's Ethiopia will accommodate ethno-regional 'heroic' and 'golden' eras as well as their tragic past. The Hauzien massacre in 1988 and the atrocities that Menelik committed among the Oromo[42] are only two examples of the tragic past of ethnic groups that the state can ill afford to ignore. After all, shared suffering tends to be a more potent source of ethnic identity than shared glory and joy,[43] because it exhorts a sense of collective responsibility in the people: sacrifices were made in the past and it will be incumbent upon the people to make similar sacrifices in the future. At a minimum, such accommodation may neutralize the emotion in history that is such a vital resource for ethnic nationalism. Otherwise, crude and active neglect of ethnic joy and sadness, far from diluting the emotional content of the past, continues to retain its potency. In addition to neutralizing the power of history in ethnic mobilization, the accommodationist option needs to deal with another powerful symbol of identity — the strongest component of culture, language.

Language

> *Il y a dans l'homme quelque chose de supérieur à la langue: c'est la volonté. La volonté de la Suisse d'être unie, malgré la variété de ses idioms, est un fait bien plus important qu'une similitude de langage souvent obtenue par des vexations. — Ernest Renan*

In times of political crisis and communal fear of the future, culture, an emotion-laden and powerful symbol of identity, can be a vital tool of ethnic mobilization. Recognizing the power of primordialism, Renan argued that language should not impede the process of nation-building. Beyond such primordial factors, he contended, nations should be built on people's consent. For instance, he commended France for not bringing about unity of language by force. For Renan, a collective sense of identity is achievable without having the same tongue and without belonging to the same ethnic group.[44]

42. See Greg Gow, *The Oromo in Exile* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002), chap. 7.
43. Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (Calman-Lévy, Paris, 1882), p. 27.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.

When threatened by cultural genocide, identities become salient and emotionally charged. For instance, it was when arabization threatened the Berber culture and language in Kabylia, the Mediterranean region of Algeria, that Berberism was politicized. Kabyles want their Berber language to be accorded an official recognition as the second national language of Algeria. In defiance of Arabic and the whole assimilationist doctrine of arabization, they have retained the neutral colonial language of French as the effective language of public life. The less than harmonious relationship they have with the Arab majority, who denounce them as 'Berberists', has enhanced their sense of 'Berberness' and augmented their intra-group unity.[45]

In Ethiopia, too, as stated earlier, Amharic was a crucial lethal tool in the death of ethnic particularities in whole or in part. Alien as *la langue française* was to most of the nineteenth-century French, who entertained a sense of *mon village* rather than of *mon pays*,[46] so also to the overwhelming majority of the parochial Ethiopian peasantry Amharic tends to be remote and arcane. Its imposition as the official language has been a major source of grievance among those who did not speak it, because, in addition to the practical inconvenience of having to learn an alien language, it symbolized the ascendancy of an ethnic group to the helm of power. In Eritrea, for instance, the imposition of Amharic was certainly a major source of repulsion that engulfed the country in a costly thirty-year war, violating as it did Article 38 of the UN-sponsored constitution, which stipulated that 'Tigrigna and Arabic shall be the official languages of Eritrea'.[47]

Obviously, Ethiopians need one or more media of communication in order to achieve political, economic, cultural and social integration. But choosing one of the local languages and privileging it as the official national language symbolizes the dominant status of its speakers. As such, the fact that Article five, item two, of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, privileges Amharic as 'the working language' of Ethiopia could be a recipe for disaster, because it still symbolizes the dominant status of its speakers. The disadvantaged majority could harbour latent or unconcealed resentment against the advantaged group — crucial grist for ethnic nationalist mills. It was the imposition of Afrikaans, the language of the dominant Afrikaner minority in apartheid South Africa, as the academic language in black schools that triggered the 1976 Soweto riots. As pointed out earlier, it was also the imposition of Arabic that has

45. See Hugh Roberts, 'Towards an understanding of the Kabyle question in contemporary Algeria', *The Maghreb Review* **5**, 5–6 (1980), pp. 115–24.
46. Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The modernization of rural France 1870–1914* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1976), p. 67.
47. See *Constitution of Eritrea* (United Nations, as adopted by the Representative Assembly of Eritrea, 1952).

been nurturing Berberness among the Kabyles. Among the Oromo political entrepreneurs, in particular the OLF, as well, Amharic has been rejected. Oromo political organizations of all shades, including the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), one of the constituent ethnic pillars of the EPRDF, have dropped the Geez script — the script that is used in Amharic — and adopted the Latin script. Adopting the Latin alphabet as *Qubee Afaan Oromo* is the subtle beginning of divorce from Amharic. Picking a local language and imposing it on those who do not speak it is too burdensome, especially in the light of its uncertain rewards.

The more neutral an official/national language is, the safer it is. Despite diversity, Tanzania has been fairly successful in state-building because it uses a neutral Swahili as its official language. Even when Zanzibar flexes its centrifugal muscles, its grievances are not rooted in language. Had a language of the mainland been imposed upon the island, then Zanzibar nationalism would have been a lot stronger, as in the case of Kabylia, Soweto in apartheid South Africa, and Ethiopia — particularly pre-1991. The fact that most African states use neutral colonial languages is a blessing in disguise, because it has deprived centrifugal political entrepreneurs of a crucial raw material for their ethnic nationalist machines.

Conclusion

So far multi-ethnic Ethiopia has seen three mutually exclusive solutions to its inter-communal problems. One was the defunct assimilationist policy. This has not only been a total failure, it has also been at the root of Ethiopia's political ailment — an ailment that was created as political entrepreneurs manipulated the readily available primordial elements, along with the prevailing economic and political grievances, to quench their hunger for power. Otherwise, there is nothing given or fixed about identity, which is a contextually fluid concept. Whether based on primordial/objective factors or not, ultimately identity is subjective. It is the perception of belonging to collectivities, irrespective of the sources. 'Us' tends to be defined by 'them', as in the uneven Ethiopian historical, political, cultural and economic landscape — a landscape that transformed the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy into costly ethno-regional wars.

The second solution, the secessionist path, has been too traumatic a surgery, with an uncertain result. Eritrean political entrepreneurs led a protracted war in order to amputate Eritrea from Ethiopia. Their hard-won victory has given them neither peace nor prosperity. After trying for more than a dozen years to weave a functioning economic, social and political fabric since *de facto* independence in 1991, Eritrea is far from success in state-building. The centralizing and homogenizing policy of Ethiopia also forced a section of the Oromo elite to seek secession.

However, the current 'accommodationist' political landscape is hardly conducive to their separatist ambitions. Furthermore, secessionist struggles seldom triumph. Eritrea's victory is an exception to the rule, because it took place under unique circumstances which the Oromo political entrepreneurs should not expect to recur.

Given the implausibility of the first and second choices, the third solution, the ethnic contract of the Tigrayan political entrepreneurs, appears a relatively preferable option. In the cultural realm, except on the question of official language, the 'accommodationist' option has gone far enough. In the political and economic realms too, there is not any ethnically or regionally based discrimination. However flawed, the 'accommodationist' path has brought the era of the unitary state to an end. It is hard to imagine, for instance, that, in a post-EPRDF era, either the perennially secessionist OLF or the less hardline OPDO will accept anything less than what they have now — far from perfect federalism and consociationalism. Indeed, Ethiopia is permanently changed.

Calculating the cost-benefit of ethno-regional wars in Ethiopia shows that no one benefited. The wars were manifestly too costly. The warring sides suffered greatly, and once the dust has settled there are no real winners with tangible benefits. The fact that the wars have offered the Eritrean and Tigrayan victors no panacea is a clear demonstration that bargaining on a give-and-take basis is preferable to zero-sum positions, where at the end of the day no one wins.

Diversity may be inherently tension-prone. With imaginative policies, though, benign tension is manageable and does not have to grow into its malignant phase. It is the failure of state actors to acknowledge ethnic interests that engenders communal discord. If the structural conditions that are a breeding-ground for violence are tackled and the elite thirst for power is realistically quenched, ethnicity loses its potency as a source of nationalism. Neutralizing the power of ethnicity through bargaining on crucial political, economic and cultural issues and accommodating ethnic leaders is a pre-emptive bid for peace. It inaugurates the reign of civic nationalism over ethnic nationalism. An Ethiopian polity cemented by the common interests of its various ethnic components can be enduring.