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Failed Modernization of the Ethiopian State: Oromo Perspectives on Ethiopian Political Culture

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The dominant feature of modern politics is the emergence of the nation-state. This is the outcome of a number of interrelated social, economic, political and cultural processes, stretching several centuries back into European history. Innovative ideologies such as the enlightenment and crucial political events such as the French and the American Revolutions led to the emergence of electoral democracy based on a strong individualistic ethos and on the idea of popular sovereignty that rulers should be accountable to the ruled. In Europe linguistic homogeneity was a major fea-

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ture for the emergence of the nation-state (Anderson 1983), but successful modern multi-ethnic democracies such as Switzerland and Canada show that modern multi-cultural states can perform equally well by adopting a federal structure. Federalism, in fact, facilitates the integration of linguistically diverse citizens into the state's processes and fosters the feeling of loyalty of all citizens to state symbols.

In Africa political modernization is the result of a sudden process of colonization (Apter 1965). This has produced a problem of incongruity between African and modern European political, legal and economic models. Even though postcolonial African states were formally founded on such a poorly articulated platform, the prevailing attitude towards modern states mirrors the colonial dogma of relegating the traditional (African) component to a negative and backward domain. In recent years, this misconception has been seriously challenged. For instance, during a conference on globalization held in Addis Ababa in 1999, Archie Mafeje pointed to the passive or indiscriminate adoption of alien models as one of the root causes of many of Africa's problems. In order to get out of the crisis, Mafeje suggested that Africans look to their roots, traditions, and histories and reinterpret them in new ways.[1] If, as we suggest, the strength of modernity in the political field lies in citizen identification with the state and its symbols and participation in the state processes, then African modernity should include provisions to bridge the gap between traditional political practices of the diverse ethnic groups within the state and the standard governance requirements. Indeed several African countries have taken some institutional steps in this direction.[2]

Ethiopia holds a special place within the African context. Because European colonialism lasted only five years, most mainstream studies consider that Ethiopia was scarcely affected by colonialism. However, recent approaches have adopted the perspective of 'domestic' colonialism to account for the di-

rect connection between the parallel constructions of the Ethiopian Empire and the colonial European empires in Africa (Holcomb and Ibssa 1990, Asafa Jalata 1993). According to this view, the domestic colonial construction led to the formation of rigid ethnic hierarchies. While in other African colonies a dichotomist opposition of whites and blacks was associated with modernizing political, social and economic processes, in Ethiopia internal stratification was built on a feudal system[3] that remained unchallenged until the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974.

In mainstream Ethiopian studies ethnic stratification remained largely understated, while the feudal organization of society, was primarily represented as a spatial extension of the organization of the Abyssinian kingdoms.[4] This feudal organization was openly addressed and came to be referred to as 'traditional society,' as contrasted with the forces of progress and modernization that ultimately led to the 1974 revolution. Everything that concerned the cultures, models and values of the rural people—in other African contexts all these would be regarded as 'tradition'—simply disappeared from the dominant economic, historical, political, and legal discourse, relegated to the marginal domain of anthropology. Despite the production of a number of outstanding theses on various aspects of Oromo social, economic, juridical and political organization, few were published and even less were disseminated in Ethiopia. Only recently have publications on Oromo been made possible abroad, with important fora provided by the *Journal of Oromo Studies* and *Oromo Commentary.*[5]

Due to this peculiar situation, 'tradition' and 'modernity' may be understood ambiguously in Ethiopian academic and political discourse. The discontinuity between traditions and current practices is probably better expressed in terms of harmonizing local (rural or ethnic) and national (urban or Ethiopian) models, rather than in terms of tradition (Africa)/modernity (Europe). In any case, the problem of the pluralism of

(political) cultures in Ethiopia has mostly been discussed in relation to the Eritrean question. In the past it was especially expressed in terms of nations and nationalities rather than tradition/modernity or in ethnic discourse. Fentahun Tiruneh (1990: 85 – 97) dedicates a full chapter of his book *The Ethiopian Students: Their Struggle to Articulate the Ethiopian Revolution*, to the nation/nationalities question. He traces the internal ideological struggle on the issue within the Ethiopian student movement, concluding that it culminated in the 1971 resolution of the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA), which proclaimed "the right of all nationalities of Ethiopia to self-determination and…the complete equality of all nationalities regardless of their size" (1990: 87). One can immediately recognize that some of the leading principles of the 1991 Transitional Charter of Ethiopia, later incorporated into the 1994 Federal Constitution of Ethiopia, were reverberations of the 1971 ESUNA declaration. Indeed, federalism was another of the critical themes of the ideological debate in the Ethiopian student movement (Fentahun Tiruneh 1990: 90, 96).

The students might have been the driving force behind the Ethiopian Revolution, but the revolution took its own course. The *derg*, the military government (1974-1991), established an even more centralist and authoritarian political system, still ethnically stratified, but built upon a system based on state ownership of land rather than the feudal property ownership system it had replaced.

The political objectives discussed by the students in the early 1970s came to the foreground after the fall of the *derg* in 1991. This is perhaps the first time in Ethiopia that an attempt was made to introduce a modern constitutional and administrative arrangement based on the principle of electoral democracy. A democratic federal constitution was approved in 1994, and the Ethiopian state was formally decentralized along ethnic federal states. The new federal constitution was

intended to reduce the distance between the state and the various peoples of Ethiopia, adopting Western political philosophy, standards, and models.

Despite the fact that drastic changes have been introduced over the years in the economic field (from feudalism to socialism to liberalism) and in the political arena (from an absolutist monarchy to socialist centralism and to democratic federalism), we argue that Ethiopia's political culture is still characterized by an unbroken continuity of political exclusion. Various observers have pointed out that the democratic constitutional provisions were poorly implemented, while important political parties, including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), are still excluded from the formal political arena (Assefa Fiseha 2006; Human Rights Watch 2005; Lister 2004; Pausewang, Tronvoll and Aalen 2002; Tronvoll and Aadland 1995; Leenco Lata 1999). In his article on party dynamics in a society severely divided along ethnic lines, Donald Horowitz reports serious political exclusion was practiced in Ethiopia in 1993, despite the good 1991 premises (1993: 22-3). Besides party politics, political exclusion severely inhibits participation in state processes and the feeling of loyalty to state symbols by a large portion of the population, who accordingly cannot be considered full citizens.

In this paper, we argue that the failure of modernization of the Ethiopian state has a manifestation at the symbolic level, with individuals and entire groups still feeling that they cannot be part of the Ethiopian national or federal community. We further argue that failure in the political field, the 'regulatory' component of a state system that is all-encompassing, is the root cause of the Ethiopian poverty and delayed development, hence producing 'failed modernization' in a more concrete sense. The post-1991 events show that macroeconomic initiatives and national and international policies cannot by themselves solve the poor conditions of life of most Ethiopians. From 1992 to 1998 and in the wake of the Ethio-

Eritrean War, Ethiopia has received significant financial support from the international community. The policy of economic liberalization that was implemented after the fall of the *derg* has made credit for new investments available through a reformed banking system. Despite impressive national and international efforts, the country is still caught in a cycle of food deficiency. According to UN official estimates, 10 million people were at risk of famine in July 2000. This figure appears to outnumber all previous crises.[6]

Between 1998 and 2000, we studied these problems during a research financed by the Ethio-Italian University Cooperation Programme, based in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology of Addis Ababa University. We investigated the factors that affect ethnic solidarity and integration in towns west of Addis Ababa. We conducted semi-structured and group interviews[7], and door-to-door surveys in Holota, Walliso and Ambo. Interviews were also conducted in Dambi Dollo, 700 km. west of Addis Ababa, chosen for comparison of people's experiences in a region distant from our primary research area. Because Addis Ababa University and the Italian Cooperation did not extend the research funds into the conclusive data analysis and write up phase,[8] the data on which our interpretation is based is limited to the transcribed interviews of urban Oromo elders reputed as people with special knowledge of the history of their town. The informants were selected by crosschecking the names randomly provided by the people of the town during a preliminary survey with a list obtained from the town administration.

Even though the article deals with historical events connected to the construction of the Ethiopian imperial state, our purpose is not to reveal hitherto unknown historical truth. The article is essentially a work of interpretation of the meanings of our informants' accounts, with a view to understand the political values of these urban Oromo, their perceptions of the Ethiopian state, and the way they relate to it. We have

found out that since the time of their incorporation, the Oromo have confronted the need to take a position in relation to the Ethiopian state, either to be in or out, collaborate or fight against it. We hope that our focus on the symbolic foundation of the Oromo and Ethiopian political culture may give meaningful historical insights relevant to the current dilemma of Oromo nationalists between electoral competition and protracted insurgency.

COMPETING FORCES FOR REGIONAL SUPREMACY

During the first half of the nineteenth century, political power in what is today the Ethiopia region was highly fragmented, with the emergence of several political-military centers and of several warlords competing for regional supremacy and control of trade routes. In the Oromo-inhabited areas, internal change within Oromo society and the development of long-distance trade led to the emergence of several Oromo kingdoms in the Gibe region, including Jimma Abbaa Jifar (Mohammed Hassen 1994; Gulma Gemeda 1984, 1989; Lewis 1965). During the same period, some Oromo leaders also gained control over various Oromo communities (Tesema Ta'a 1986).

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, some of the Abyssinian political-military centers were able to obtain access to significant quantities of firearms by controlling the international trade of slaves,[9] gold, and ivory and by establishing international connections (Tsegaye Tegenu 1996: 186). The new technology of warfare dramatically affected the power balance in the region, enabling some of the centers to expand, and facilitating the construction of the so-called 'modern' Ethiopian empire.

The interviews conducted in Holoota and Walliso clearly show how competition among different centers of power affected local perceptions of the relations of power in a changing environment. The major actors in our informants' narra-

tives were Menelik from Entoto-Finfinne (Addis Ababa), Goobanaa Daacee from the Tuulama region of Oromoland, the armed soldiers from Gojjam, and Hassen Injamo, the Muslim leader of Qabana (located near Jimma), who rebelled against the advancing forces of Menelik and was suspected to have taken refuge in the domain of Abbaa Jifar. (Guluma Gemeda 2002: 53-5).

The elders interviewed in Walliso on 27 November 1998 emphasized a crucial confrontation between Hassen Injamo and Goobanaa.[10] Here are some excerpts of the interview:

> [The Amhara] first waged war to put the new people under their control. The people were displaced by the war. There was a popular man who used to fight against Oromo. He was called Hassen Injamo.
>
> Hassen Injamo was Hadiyya. … Some Gurage accompanied him. He wanted to become a king himself. He campaigned against the Oromo to dominate them. In the beginning Hassen fought against the Oromo.
>
> Then he made agreement with prominent Oromo elders. On the other hand, he converted some Oromo to Islam through the sheikhs who accompanied him. Hassen Injamo converted Oromo into Islam. He even forced Amhara to become Muslims. He fought many people up to the areas of Awash and made them pay tribute.
>
> Hassen Injamo has ambushed and attacked the churches and burnt the *tabot,* ark of covenant. He planned to wipe out Menelik's forces. When this was reported to Menelik, he sent Goobanaa.
>
> There was a connection between Abbaa Jifar and Hassen Injamo because both of them were Muslim (*Interview* 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).

Then the elders provided a detailed description of events leading up to the battle, and of the battle itself. They also explained Abbaa Jifar's behavior:

> The Jimma people got the news of Goobanaa's victory over Hassen Injamo's forces. The news they got about war was full of horrors. Then they decided not to fight against Goobanaa's army.

> Abbaa Jifar retreated. He sent a message that he was not planning to fight against the king. He appealed to the king not to come to fight him.

> In Jimma, people surrendered their territory without challenging Goobanaa's forces; Jimma people went back home peacefully without firing any bullet.

> They then surrendered their territory to Goobanaa and became *gebar*. After this victory, Goobanaa became famous. He was given appointment with a title of *ras*.

> After this event nobody has challenged Amhara forces. Then Menelik officially put the territory under his control (Interview 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).

The local Oromo can only watch these events and bear witness to the devastating effects produced by firearms. It is something they could not challenge. In this way, political supremacy in the Tuulama region was implicitly established.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE OROMO SOCIETY BEFORE THE IMPERIAL TIME

Despite the nineteenth century changes that had affected Oromo society, the interviews conducted in all the towns that were studied (Holoota, Walliso, Ambo and Dambi Dollo) indicate that the *gadaa* system was fully in operation during the second half of the century, though with local variations.

Most of our informants were town dwellers, often belonging to families that have been co-opted into the emerging

imperial structure. Still, they were capable of providing detailed and valuable description of the *gadaa* system as it existed before Ethiopia's southward imperial expansion. Most of them stressed the rituals, but some could also describe the genesis of the local system, its structural (generation class) and spatial arrangements, and they were conceptually able to keep its ritual, administrative and economic functions sharply separated. Here are some excerpts referring to the *gadaa* in Walliso area:

They [the *gadaa* officials] used to defend their territories. In their administrative system, they used to elect intelligent men. They used to elect one leader. If any problem arose, the leader will try to resolve it with the traditional elders.

In the ceremony of power transition, the group that have been ruling retires [*guula taa'u*]. The *raba,* who are the successors, assume the *gadaa* authority. The handing over of power from generation to generation is held every eight years. The new *gadaa* leaders sing a traditional song. The retiring ones on the other hand will become *guula* and stay at home. The retired ones say "oh, God, I will really belong to you" ["*Ayyee, Waaqa, ani keeti*"]. The new leader will sing a song saying: "*Riffensini kangubbattuu korma.*" This is equivalent to say that the matured one will assume the leadership position. The retired ones hold whips and stay at home in *guula*. The new leaders will be responsible in law making. This was how they used to slaughter *buttaa* and pass power to the next generation.

The other leader was called *abbaa murtii.* This person is responsible for passing resolutions and judgment. There was also *abbaa horata.* This can be equated with the minister of agriculture. A strong person who is knowledgeable is elected into this position. There is also a leader who oversees the branches of the administrative system.

> This system was highly democratic. These branches un-
> dergo power transmission every eight years.
>
> All the things that people used to buy, sell or bargain
> about were operated under the auspices of the *gadaa* sys-
> tem. The people used to report their problems and con-
> flicts between them to the *gadaa*. There were *abbaa alanga*
> from each branch of Gulu, Malu, [*gosa*, or localized clans]
> etc. … *Guuma* is paid to parents of the person who has
> been killed by a given individual. The two conflicting
> parties that were involved in this type of conflict are made
> to reconcile and to forgive each other's fault. The retired
> *gadaa* leaders are responsible to organize issues like this.
> They used to make decision over dispute concerning
> properties. The *abbaa alanga* were responsible to resolve
> conflicts between individuals (Interview 3 – Walliso, 27
> November 1998).

We were surprised by such vivid descriptions provided in an
area where the *gadaa* system is supposed to have disappeared
more than a century ago. Even the Boorana elders do not usu-
ally provide such a portrait of a system they are currently liv-
ing in. Of course, some of our informants were educated town
dwellers; hence we have to consider the possibility that they
might have been influenced by current literature on *gadaa*.
However, they describe some functional and terminological
variants that, to our knowledge, are not provided in any writ-
ten source, showing that we are dealing with a local oral tradi-
tion free from secondary feedback.

   The relevant fact in terms of symbolic interpretation is
that, before incorporation into the Ethiopian state, Oromo
society was a highly ordered, complex society, characterized
by a democratic political system. This set of ideas is evoked
by the *gadaa* system according to the logic, notions, traditions,
and political experience of the Oromo only. This constella-
tion of positive meanings can therefore be referred to as the
core values of the 'Oromo political culture,' to differentiate it

from the 'official' political culture of the emerging Ethiopian state, henceforth called 'Ethiopian political culture'—fabricated by the state or its personnel or attributed to them.

THE OROMO ROLE IN BUILDING THE EMPIRE

The narratives provided by the interviewed elders challenge the mainstream idea of the empire built through direct conquest by Menelik and the Amhara. The elders rather stress the Oromo role in this process. This idea is expressed mainly through Goobanaa, an Oromo military leader depicted in the narratives as someone who played a major military role in establishing Menelik's rule over Oromoland west of Addis Ababa. In the early phases, according to the elders, the Amhara tried to gain control over the area without intermediaries. The process went as follows, according to an informant from Walliso.

> Amhara came from Amhara land. They first planned to take over Oromo territory. Then they made a military campaign. They sent their soldiers. They evicted the Oromo people living near their territory. These Oromo were called Ume Ergano. The Ume Ergano were defeated. They were renamed Amhara Ume. Then, Amhara who were led by *Dejazmatch* Bezu were sent to fight other Oromo. The Oromo defeated them for the second time (Interview 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).

The strategy of subjugating the Oromo by force apparently did not work. Eventually, as the interview below elucidates, the Amhara defeated the Oromo only by allying with Goobanaa Daacee and using firearms.

> After they failed to take over Oromo territory, they made a military alliance with Goobanaa Daacee.

> The Amhara found out that Goobanaa was a very strong man. Goobanaa was popular in Abichu area for his skilful fighting on horse back. Menelik got information concerning Goobanaa's fame. They decided to make agree-

ment with him. They sent a priest to Goobanaa. He told
Goobanaa that they [the Amhara] would give him an
appointment if he would help them in putting Oromo
territory under their control. The priest told Goobanaa
that the Amhara were willing to give him half the terri-
tory they would occupy. He [the priest] also told
Goobanaa that he would be crowned a king. He gave
him presents like clothes and other attractive things. Then
Goobanaa made a campaign against Oromo (Interview
3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).

The elders from Holoota maintain the same view as elders
from Walliso concerning the reasons why the Amhara defeated
the Oromo.

Menelik put the area under his control by allying with
Goobanaa … . He promised him leadership over the
entire land. Then Goobanaa waged war. They recruited
military men with guns from Gondar. They used fire-
arms that Oromo did not see before. Then they put Shawa
land under their control. When they invaded Shawa land,
the Oromo community living around Walliso strongly
confronted them. The Walliso people could go up to an
extent of killing the war leader *(Tor Mari)* of Goobanaa's
army (Interview 1 – Holoota, 24 November 1998).

The implicit meaning of the text is that only the Oromo could
defeat the Oromo. Although in the historiography Goobanaa
is considered a mere general of Menelik, the interviewed
Oromo elders stress his autonomous action of conquests with
inputs from Menelik, namely firearms and means to recruit
military men with guns from Gondar. He does it based on an
equal share and equal level agreement with Menelik.

All informants from Holoota and Walliso explicitly refer
to the strategy of dividing the Oromo in order to rule them.

The Amhara used tactics to defeat the Oromo. They ini-
tiated one group of Oromo to fight against other

Oromos. When they wanted to occupy Oromo territory, they first initiated the neighboring Oromo to go and fight against other Oromo groups. They used to spread mistrust among Oromo and create conflict between them.

Goobanaa was allied with Menelik. Goobanaa spread propaganda over the entire country. He made agreement with Oromo living here. He invaded one group of Oromo by creating alliance with another. This was how he broke Oromo unity. This was how Amhara succeeded in occupying Oromo territory. Amhara did not defeat Oromo alone. They made Oromos to fight against each other (Interview 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).

Goobanaa is a powerful but highly controversial symbol among the Oromo. The dominant meaning is certainly a negative one. For instance, he is mostly recalled to convey the idea of collaborating with the dominant Ethiopian elite against Oromo interests for personal benefit. Indeed, as recounted above, Goobanaa is held responsible for breaking Oromo unity, an image recalling the idea of betrayal. Nevertheless, as is well known, symbols may convey multiple meanings and the attitude towards Goobanaa that is emerging from the interviews seems rather ambivalent. Indeed some of the informants have described Goobanaa as an *abbaa gadaa* in Jidda area, belonging to the Abichu, a senior Oromo clan. After termination of his service, he is said to have started to seek personal benefit. The reference to the status of *abbaa gadaa* may have a twofold implication. On the one hand, a holder of the office of the *abbaa gadaa* is a symbol of true Oromo-ness, with a positive component in it. On the other, Goobanaa personifies the idea of betrayal, because he gave up proper social principles and behaviors (see below).

In the interviews this positive element is never openly referred to; however on several occasions the informants implicitly expressed a sense of pride in Goobanaa, the fierce

fighter, the one who greatly contributed to the founding of the Ethiopian empire and the one who shared great power within the early imperial structure. In the opinion of an informant from Walliso: "In Ethiopian history the only two individuals appointed with the title of *ras* were *Ras* Darge and *Ras* Goobanaa. Goobanaa fought fiercely against different people" (Interview 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998). If our interpretation is sound, the stress on Goobanaa's role and autonomy in building the empire gives a dimension of Oromo-ness to the process of the founding of the Ethiopian Empire.

This component seems further stressed in the part of the interviews dealing with Goobanaa's establishment of imperial administrative set up in Walliso area, through the *looko* institution.[11]

> In the beginning Goobanaa put three individuals under his control. He left the area to *Dejazmatch* Garedew, *Dejazmatch* Manaye and *Negadiras* Shosho [these are Amhara]. He did the same thing in Bacho. The people he appointed were not sitting idle. The three individuals he appointed started Christianizing famous individuals from the community. They did this at different spots. Then gradually strong Oromo men came under their control. Land came under the ownership of different individuals attached to the administrative system.

> When the Amhara came, they appointed strong Oromo leaders to serve their purpose. They appointed Dara Gadaa from Lemman, Bellamo Roge from Abadho, Quntura Garja from Kono, Bulto Galan Kefo, Guluma Lube and Sabaqa Cali from Maru. These were individuals appointed by Goobanaa.

> Goobanaa appointed the *looko*. There were three *looko* in the area. One *looko* could have 7 to 10 *balabat* under its administration. Each *balabat* was accountable to his own

looko. The order that comes from the centre reaches the *looko* first and then goes to the *balabat*.

The *looko* were Oromo.

Gulumma Lube, Manne Bulli in Ammaya, Bellamo Roge in Walliso; Dhugo Bulto in Bullele, Ture Galate in Sodo; these were the *looko* in the area. They owned the whole territory (*Interview* 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).

What is evident in this narrative is that the Oromo were deeply involved in the administrative structure set by Goobanaa in Walliso. Some of the Oromo administrators were strong local Oromo leaders, such as Bellamo Roge who had previously been selected to one of the *gadaa* offices. The divisions entrusted to the *looko*, and the subdivisions under them reflected the clan and lineage structure previously administered under the *gadaa* system. In this area west of Addis Ababa, we have therefore evidence of indirect rule.

We have to consider that at that time Oromo society was already in transformation because of the trade. The *gadaa* collective governance was giving way to the emergence of authoritarian leaders in several places and with it the appearance of processes of stratification. In this dynamic context a new macro-factor appeared: firearms and colonization. The elders do not have a macro-vision of the colonial process, but they could clearly perceive the advent of a new era under the pressure of a new technological factor, firearms. Goobanaa made the choice to participate in the process and become a primary actor and embodiment of this change. The ambivalence of the elders for this choice and for the success of the fierce Oromo leader should not be a surprise.

THE EMPIRE AS AN ANTI-SOCIETY

In analyzing Oromo perception of the Ethiopian political culture, our central issue is to understand what type of Ethiopianess was established in the wake of Menelik's conquests. De-

spite the involvement of some Oromos in the Amhara admin-
istration of the Oromo society, the Oromo perception of the
empire is extremely negative. There cannot be any doubt that
for the Oromo the ultimate source of imperial authority was
violence. This, again, can be traced through the life-history of
Goobanaa. One informant notes, "At the time Goobanaa made
the alliance with Menelik, he was in the bush. He used to rob
and kill Oromo. He was a leader of bandits." (Interview 3 –
Walliso, 27 November 1998).

The implication is clear. Although in practice Goobanaa
was probably one of the emerging Oromo warlords in a dy-
namic economic and political environment, he is portrayed as
an enemy of the Oromo participating in anti-social behavior
even before his engagement with Menelik, basically a *shifta*
(bandit) in the mold of other Amhara war leaders of the time.
But Goobanaa was different because he fought against his own
people and later adopted the methods of the Ethiopian em-
pire against his own people:

> Goobanaa tortured many of his opponents. He used to
> mutilate the genitals of males. My grand uncle was one
> such victim… . He was called Indhe Asho. He was the
> brother of my grand father. Many people were muti-
> lated. They treated them badly to make them become
> loyal.

> You have asked us what has happened after Goobanaa
> got victory in the area of Walliso. There was a song. The
> lyrics of that song manifest frustration. It is as follows.

> Ha cufanii balbala
>   Let doors be closed
> Maal cufamni akkanaa?
>   What kind of closing is this?
> Gannii namaa hinbarritu
>   The rainy season feels prolonged
> Dubbii Goobanaa Dhacee

>   The matter of Goobanaa Dhachee
> Malii Dubbin akkanaa?
>   How awkward a matter it is?
> Namni nama himbirmatu
>   When nobody comes to your rescue
> (*Interview* 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998)

Other elders who were present during the same interview pro-vided the following explanation of the song:

> Have you really understood the implications of the poem? Many people were killed, tortured and their genitals mu-tilated. They were completely defeated. There was no family whose member was not affected in one way or another. People were confused about what they should do. They were confused whether to live or to die. The poem sung by one of the captives indicates the desperate condition they faced. (*Interview* 3 – Walliso, 27 Novem-ber 1998)

When dealing with the horrific consequences of Goobanaa's choices, the elders abandoned the model of independent be-havior and put the blame on his Amhara allies. In the words of one informant, "Goobanaa was told to reward those who would submit to his authority and punish those who would reject it (Interview 3 – Walliso, 27 November 1998).[12] This tendency is better exemplified by the narration of Goobanaa's death. Goobanaa, the putative betrayer of proper Oromo society finds himself betrayed by his allies.

> *Ras* Goobanaa was a prominent person during the rule of Menelik. He fought against people in Gojjam, Gonder, Wollo, etc. He helped Menelik control the country by force. Menelik arranged marriages between one of his relative and *Ras* Goobanaa to make him loyal to his au-thority. Then Menelik and his associates feared that *Ras* Goobanaa could claim authority to rule the whole coun-try. In order to get rid of this uncertainty, they poisoned

> *Ras* Goobanaa and ended his life. They killed him after
> they made him their brother-in-law (Interview 2 –
> Holoota, 24 November 1998).

This part strengthens our interpretation of the ambivalent attitude towards Goobanaa. The equal share agreement with Menelik could have justified Goobanaa's attempt to build a new political system. The empire was anti-society, but still a victorious one, one to which the Oromo could have taken part, an idea symbolically evoked by Goobanaa's marriage. But the final betrayal of the powerful Oromo fighter, someone who had a significant share in founding the empire, put an end to this political project and to the Oromo-ness that could have been forged at the outset of the imperial identity construction. In the elders' narratives, Goobanaa is never directly addressed as a betrayer. Rather, the Amhara betrayal of him looms large. As a result, the Oromo are condemned to a role of rural servants (*gabar*) and have to carry the yoke (see below).

Regarding the Oromo *balabat* and *looko*, they are essentially reduced to opportunists who collaborate with the victors for personal benefit. The feeling towards the *balabat* is expressed well in the following narration referred to in a case of land dispute:

> Oromo peasants then reacted to an Oromo *balabat* in
> this way: "we have exploited this land together long ago.
> We have been fighting against our enemies together. How
> did it really happen that you order us today?" Then the
> Oromo expressed their objection to the Oromo *balabat*
> who were allied with Amhara by refusing to hand over
> land to them. They rather handed it over to the Amhara
> *balabat* (Interview 1 – Holoota, 24 November 1998).

THE ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION OF THE RURAL COMMUNITY

In his historical study on the food supply for Addis Ababa, Tekalign Wolde-Maryam (1995) has appropriately argued that

the political and military processes of the late-nineteenth century lie at the origin of urban control over land and labor in the hinterlands. In the most fertile parts of the empire, including the area west of Addis Ababa, the land in the territories occupied by the colonists was demarcated and property was systematically registered with the introduction of the *gabar* (a word derived from Shawan land tenure) land title assigned to individuals. As noted by Tekalign Wolde-Maryam (1995: 11), land registration was interpreted by several Ethiopian and expatriate historians as a process of privatization, commoditization or westernization. All of these ideas related to modernity and several scholars have explicitly mentioned this land reform as a prelude of Haile-Selassie's more systematic attempt to modernize the country in the post-Italian period. Our interviews, while describing in detail the exploitation imposed on the Oromo rural community, confirm Tekalign's rejection of the idea of modernizing land relations, since access to land became 'increasingly politicized, rather than to be separate from state or group politics as the concept of freehold suggests" (1995:17).

Land demarcation and registration were used to impose several types of tribute and *corvée* labor in favor of the state, the *balabats* and other nobility, and the settled-armed soldiers.[13] Although the *gabar* land title could be transferred, the peasant never initiated such a process owing to a rational individualistic decision in the absence of any recourse to non-agricultural occupation. Transfer of the *gabar*'s land rights mostly occurred as a result of land confiscation, a systematic means to impose the will of the conquerors. Indeed the interviews conducted in Holoota and Walliso clearly show that physical punishment and, above all, eviction from land were the main coercive means of backing the political system, something running opposite to the concept of 'private holding of land.' If the political and economic practice is considered together with the theoretical mainstream representation of the land tenure system intro-

duced by the Shawans, then land registration simply appears as a way to transfer land rights from the local Oromo communities to the Ethiopian state and its personnel, either Amhara or Oromo collaborators, and as a powerful coercive political instrument. This is etched in our informant's memory as follows.

> Those people had about 700 or 1000 soldiers. These soldiers came and occupied Oromo land … . These soldiers made individuals pay taxes by giving them tickets. After giving tickets those farmers were required to hand over part of their produce. When the farmers hesitated, giving away part of their produce, these soldiers would automatically expel them from their lands.

> The Oromo were the ones who would grind grain for Menelik's soldiers, who were predominantly Amhara. The Oromo used to fetch drinking water, firewood, hay and also transport the yoke for Menelik. Those Oromo who refuse to obey the orders of Menelik had their land confiscated.

> Yes, the Oromo owned horses and did go to war, too. Those Oromo, who became loyal by cutting grass, fetching firewood, grinding grain and also going to war … could maintain their land. To the contrary, the Oromo who refused to obey and accept the orders did lose their land. Even those living somewhere away from the town went to war in order to maintain their land. The ownership of land was based on one's loyalty to the king. If one refused to go to war, his land would be given to those who went to fight under the order of the king.

> They obey orders because of their fear of arrest and fear of being tied up by *sansalat, igirbirat* ….

> If anyone fails to fulfill one's obligation, one would be put in prison and lose one's land (Interview 1 – Holoota, 24 November 1998).

> If one fails to pay tax, he would immediately be impris-
> oned. They were kept in chains (Interview 2 – Holoota,
> 24 November 1998).

The exploitation of the rural communities continued through
the subsequent political dispensations of twentieth-century
Ethiopia. In terms of economic relations, taxation and extrac-
tion of all the available rural surplus, remained extremely high
despite several tax reforms introduced during the imperial time
(Schwab 1972). Later, the *derg* introduced new modes of state
exploitation (Baker 1990: 220-3).

Rural producers carried the brunt of the cost of modern-
ization, without any benefit accruing to them in return (1993:
49-66). Illustrating this, Fassil G. Kiros writes:

> The burden of modernization fell on the rural producers
> in more ways than one. They were made to provide most
> of the commodity for export. They provided tax rev-
> enues required for the maintenance and expansion of
> new state apparatus. And only they could provide the
> food and other raw materials required for the support
> of an increasing number of dwellers of the new towns.
> And all this, as already stressed, with little or no change in
> the structure and technology of the traditional produc-
> tion system (1993: 57-58).

Fassil further goes on to say, "Urbanisation in Ethiopia has
not been characterised by mutually reinforcing processes of
change involving the rural and urban areas … . The new Ethio-
pian urban centres … were principally centres of consump-
tion rather than production" (1993: 62). Various services, in-
cluding education, were largely provided in towns, with the
rural population having a very limited access. The urban–rural
interaction was established as a one way relation of exploita-
tion and remained in effect through all phases of Ethiopian
history.

Urban–Rural Interrelation and Ethno-Cultural Dichotomy

Our research confirms what is already evident in other studies that most of the earlier towns originated as military posts and grew as centers of political control and tax extractions (Baker 1990: 212).[14] They became the focus of the imperial structure, with the presence of mostly Amhara administrators and a large number of soldiers. Over time towns acquired more and more functions and attracted larger numbers of migrants, mostly coming from distant areas. Surveys conducted during our field research show that non-Oromo immigrants formed the majority of the town population.

The local communities, by definition "rural" since a town settlement was non-existent before the building of the empire, had little involvement in urban life, where the Amharic language was used. The local cultural models, values, languages and modes of governance survived the conquest and subsequent occupation, but they were relegated to the rural context deemed incongruent with modernity. Accordingly, towns came to be associated with the new imperial polity and its associated functions, while the rural environment remained the 'domain of the (local) people.' Still at the time of Bassi's research among the Boorana Oromo of southern Ethiopia, the rural actors used to differentiate sharply between *aadaa Booranaa* (the culture of the Boorana-Oromo) and *aadaa katamaa* (the culture of the town) or *aadaa mangiiftii* (the culture of the government). The two sets of norms and values, the Oromo on one side and the town/government (Ethiopian) on the other, are thus dichotomized and associated with rural and urban spaces, respectively.

The conflicting relation between the urban and the rural domains acquires an ethnic dimension, since the urban setting is often identified with the Amhara and the rural invariably with the Oromo. This perspective is partly misleading. Although the symbols of urban, or Ethiopian, culture are predominantly

Amhara (mainly the Amharic language and Coptic religion), the preliminary analysis of our surveys in towns west of Addis Ababa shows that members of all ethnic groups participate in the urban/Ethiopian culture, though with differentiated levels of involvement and as mere individuals accepting the dominant symbols. Inter-ethnic marriage in urban areas was common before 1991 (although asymmetric across the different groups) and most urban solidarity groups had an inter-ethnic composition. There were no distinct patterns of spatial distribution based on ethnicity as one can find, for instance, in Isiolo (Hjort af Ornäs 1990: 145-8) or Marsabit in Kenya (Marco Bassi's personal observation in 1986). Our data suggest that ethnic integration in urban settings is relatively high and that the Oromo participate in it, if they were willing to give up their Oromo culture, values, and symbols. However, we have also found out that the main cleavage is one that differentiates this urban context from the rural one, fitting into Lipton's (1977) model concerning the conflict between rural and urban classes. Urban-rural intermarriage was non-existent and the door-to-door survey showed that most successful Oromo town dwellers come from distant Oromo areas. Successful Oromo town dwellers participate in the national economy as any other Ethiopian, but they are not the focus of dynamic relations with the surrounding countryside. The rural population is generally excluded from trade and other town-based economic activities. Towns in Oromia have thus failed to provide a ground for diversifying the rural economy and for integrating the rural population into the wider national and international economy, as occurs in other east African small towns, such as Isiolo and Thika in Kenya, in southern Sudan or in southern Somalia (Hjort af Ornäs 1990, Andreasen 1990). In short, small towns in Oromia failed to serve as a catalyst for rural improvements.

FAILED MODERNIZATION

In this article, we have analyzed the formation of the Ethiopian Empire based on the memories of Oromo elders in towns west of Addis Ababa. In our view, this process is the symbolic foundation of the Ethiopian state and it lies at the core of Ethiopian political culture. The so-called 'modern' Ethiopia is an empire, whose legitimacy was based on a dynastic principle similar to several nineteenth century European states. However, while for the Europeans dynastic legitimacy was a traditional and accepted principle (of course challenged by revolutionary ideas), in Ethiopia, a significant portion of the people in the south considered it an Abyssinian tradition that was imposed on them by those who became their rulers through a process of internal colonialism supported by Europeans firearms. The people in the empire, whose tradition was based on different political institutions and principles, as in the case of the *gadaa* of the Oromo, simply were not able to recognize political legitimacy based on dynastic claims. The descriptions of the *gadaa* system provided by elders show that different (ethnic or local) political models are still vivid in the memory of the people. Not only do Oromo urban dwellers remember, transmit and recall them, they also clearly state, in all the towns that have been studied, that the *gadaa* system, though weakened, has always remained operational and that people continue to behave respecting the *aadaa-seera* (culture of rule of law) (interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). *Gadaa* is currently presented by urban elders in towns close to Addis Ababa as a democratic and egalitarian mode of political organization, which sharply contrasts with the hierarchical political culture of the Ethiopian empire.

In other words, the dynastic principle and the connected symbols of political legitimacy could not be shared nor accepted by most Oromo. Indeed, the discourse produced by the elders tells us that the victorious system was imposed by means of military conquest and maintained through violence and other

coercive means. In Oromo narratives represented in interviews 1 to 6, sheer brute force emerges as the sole source of Ethiopian state power, and this holds true throughout the *derg* period as well. The elders of Ambo stressed that the performance of the *gadaa* ritual in their area disappeared only when the *derg* openly banned the institution and forbade people from participating in even the simpler ritual obligations (Interview 4 – Ambo, 21 August 1999).

Despite this contrast, we have identified that the Oromo have an ambivalent attitude towards the founding of the Ethiopia state. In a period of profound social, political, and technological transformation, their cognitive scheme is dominated by the possibility of being a part of Ethiopia, but this was rendered impossible by the behaviour of the Abyssinians, the real betrayers of the common project of building a shared Ethiopian home. The lack of political legitimacy actually prevented the majority of the Oromo from participating in the Ethiopian political process. As the system developed in the century that followed its founding, the Ethiopian empire-state grew increasingly exclusive rather than becoming inclusive of the left out citizens. Being outside Ethiopia's political system and political culture is not perceived to be a conscious choice made by the Oromo, but rather a condition imposed on them by the state. In general, what we discovered in the interviews we conducted are both startling and revealing. They are startling in the sense that the Amhara conquerors chose the dangerous path of exclusion and revealing in the sense that it shows why nationalist Oromos feel they have no attachment and loyalty to the Ethiopian state.

Our central question is nonetheless whether this entrenched political culture has been changed by the recent political transformation of Ethiopia. The fact that the elders of the largest nation in East Africa continue in 1998-2000 to speak the language of political exclusion from the state and its political processes, nearly a decade after the formal launching

of a program of democratization and decentralization, is a strong indication that something has gone terribly awry. The images of Goobanaa the betrayer and betrayed, the imperial system viewed as an anti-society, the vivid descriptions of the *gadaa* system by Oromo urban elite, the fact that *gadaa* is not only still operational but also in full revival are dominant symbols in the elders' narratives, all expressing a strong grass-roots demand for political innovation.

The introduction of democratic federalism was a significant step in the effort to link the state decision-making processes to local or ethnic perspectives in context of modern party politics. This is a phase of political change comparable to the colonial transformation in Africa, with a radical change of political models, rhetoric, symbols and rituals. Once again, the Oromo participated in the founding conference and the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in the early 1990s as was the OLF, the historic Oromo political organization. The Oromo once again found themselves out of the new political construction at a very early stage after the OLF proved its competitive electoral potential in the 1992 snap elections. Thus, Oromo leaders who collaborated in the new political project and the Oromo population had to face the harsh reality of political repression and exclusion (Leencoo Lata 1999).

Symbolically speaking, the exclusion and repression of the OLF leadership and its followers since 1992 is a reenactment of Menelik's betrayal of Goobanaa. Whether the instrument is marriage between families of war leaders or the new device of democratic federalism, the result is the same: the Oromo would not be allowed to be equal members of the common Ethiopian home. Oromo elders seem all too cognizant of the parallelism of history and contemporary politics. By speaking about Goobanaa in ambivalent terms, the elders were actually speaking metaphorically about the present. Since 1992, the Oromo in Ethiopia have been forced into the unenviable dilemma of choosing between participation in the con-

ditional electoral process or in underground political activity. As the elders put it: "people are confused about what they should do. They are confused whether to live or to die." Once again, 'being left out' is not perceived as the conscious choice of the Oromo, but a condition imposed on them by the exclusivist Ethiopian political culture, which the governing group vowed to change, but continued to practice.

Clearly, the mere formal introduction of a new constitutional model is not sufficient to enter into an effective democratic political system. In order to enhance the principles contained in the federal constitution, promote a broader identification with the new state's symbol, and augment political participation, it is necessary effectively to move away from the authoritarian conception of keeping a permanent line of demarcation between 'the state' and 'its citizens.' In an era when global wars are fought in the name of democratization and human rights, the participation of popular parties in national elections is the minimum acceptable standard for a successful democratization of a state. An effective change of political culture needs to take place in Ethiopia with the convergent efforts of all actors, national and international.

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INTERVIEWS

List of unpublished interviews conducted by Gemetchu Megerssa during the Research on "Ethnic Relations in Major Towns Around Addis Ababa: A comparative study of the dynamics of social solidarity," Department of Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University, Ethio-Italian University Co-operation Program).

1. Holoota, 24 November 1998: Interview with Megerssa Dadhi (translation Doyo Hargesa).
2. Holoota, 24 November 1998: Interview with Damissie Dhuki, Alemu Beyene, Megersa Dadhi (translation Doyo Hargesa).
3. Walliso, 27 November 1998: interview with Tujo Erge, Baqala Banti, Tafara Edha (translation Doyo Hargesa).
4. Ambo, 21 August 1999: interview with Walde-Samayat Waaqtole (translation Doyo Hargesa).
5. Ambo, 22 August 1999: interview with *dejazmatch* Jabessa Dahe (translation Doyo Hargesa).
6. Dambi Dollo, 9 September 1999: interview with Atomsa Weyesa (translation Sora Jarso).

NOTES

1. Personal communication at the conference in Addis Ababa in 1999.
2. For instance, Botswana, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Zambia and Nigeria have established House of Chiefs or House of Elders.
3. We use 'feudal' here to refer to the land-based relations but we do not imply any further analogy with European feudalism. For instance in Ethiopia slavery was a dominant feature.
4. See, for instance, Tsegaye Tegenu's image of the fiscal military state (Menelik's empire) represented as an extension of the *Gäbar Madäriya*

fiscal system established in Shawa during the beginning of the nine-teenth century (1996: 86-100).

5.	Baissa Lemmu (1971) and Dinsa Leepissa (1975) are two relevant early cases. The ideas contained in their studies announce later discourse on bridging customary and modern governance, including Asmarom Legesse's *Oromo Democracy,* which only appeared in 2000. As mentioned by the author: "this book on Oromo democracy developed in the context of intense discussions at the conferences of the Oromo Stud-ies Association beginning in Toronto, Canada in 1991, rather than in the Ethiopian Studies Association meetings" (2000: xii).

6.	For comparison, see earlier estimation by Mesfin Wolde-Mariam (1985) and Dassalegn Rahmato (1990).

7.	Elders were left to freely speak about broadly defined topics or to answer general questions, with little interference by the interviewer.

8.	An earlier version of this paper was presented by Marco Bassi at the XIV International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (ICES), Addis Ababa, 2000, and submitted for publication to the XIV ICES Com-mittee. It was ultimately excluded from the *Proceedings* without formal notification.

9.	Ethiopia radically differs from other regions of Africa where slave trade has been a dominant economic and political factor in the previous centuries. Several historians have defined the nineteenth century as the time of the great transformation of Africa, with an increase by about 10 times of international exchange of goods different from human beings at the continental level. In Eastern Africa, the slave trade re-mained the dominant commercial activity until the 1870s (Gentili 1995: 48-9) and slavery was still flourishing at the beginning of the 20th century (Pankhurst 1968). Based on his study of the conditions in Ethiopia just before the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Major Polson Newman finds that, despite the Edicts against slave trading "the whole social and economic structure of the country is dependent on slavery, which is supported and practiced by the Church as well as by High Court and Government officials" (1936: 83). He reports the practice of three aspects of the matter, domestic slavery, slave-raiding and slave trading (1936: 84).

10.	According to Bahru Zewde, this battle occurred in 1888 (1991: 61).

11.	We have found reference to the *looko* institution only in Walliso area. As shown in the narration below, in this area Goobanaa nominated Oromo *looko* to serve as intermediaries at the highest administrative level, with several Oromo *balabat* under each of them.

12.	This is the well-known "politics of stick and carrot," typical of authori-tarian political system. This metaphor is often recalled with reference to

current Ethiopian politics, showing a substantial continuity of the Ethiopian political culture here described.

13. The interviews conducted in Holoota and Walliso perhaps give a better understanding of the incredible burden put on the rural community.

14. Other towns, as Walliso, Ambo and Dambi Dollo, originated for various different reasons, but soon acquired the administrative and military functions.