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**SECTION II
EASTERN AFRICA**



**LOCAL LEADERSHIP
AND STATE GOVERNANCE IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA:
FROM CHARISMA TO BUREAUCRACY**

Jon G. Abbink

It is likely that the majority of rural people in Sub-Saharan Africa live in societies with some form of indigenous political structures. It is therefore relevant to inquire into the nature and prospects of these forms of political authority in an era when states are in crisis and governance is precarious. What intermediate roles do these structures, for instance chiefs, fulfill in African political life, and how do they form the framework for the construction of authority and legitimacy? It is remarkable that in the debates on African 'democratization processes' (e.g., Ake 1996; Bratton & Van de Walle 1997; Glickman 1996; Joseph 1997; Ottaway 1997), few references are made to the roles of indigenous structures and chiefs. There almost seem to be two different discourses on African politics, one led by political scientists and law scholars, another by historians and anthropologists; and it is time to reconnect.

Specifically the debates on local leaders and chieftaincy in Africa reveal a few recurring themes:

- (a) the high measure of 'constructedness' of chieftaincy in contexts of colonial and postcolonial state rule;
- (b) the ambiguous, contested role of chiefs in modern bureaucratic settings, where they stand with one leg in 'tradition' (or, perhaps better in convention) and with the other in the state administration that attempts to co-opt them;
- (c) their tenuous connection with cultural traditions;
- (d) their alleged potential for community empowerment in the processes of political liberalization that have marked Africa since about 1989.

strong foothold in local society and were accountable to their people. Indeed, if they became too popular they were removed. Their loyalty only had to be upward: towards the emperor and his political circle. In fact, a deep-rooted patrimonial structure of personal ties and loyalties was in place: a seemingly 'rational', modernizing structure remained caught in a political culture of traditional authoritarianism.⁵

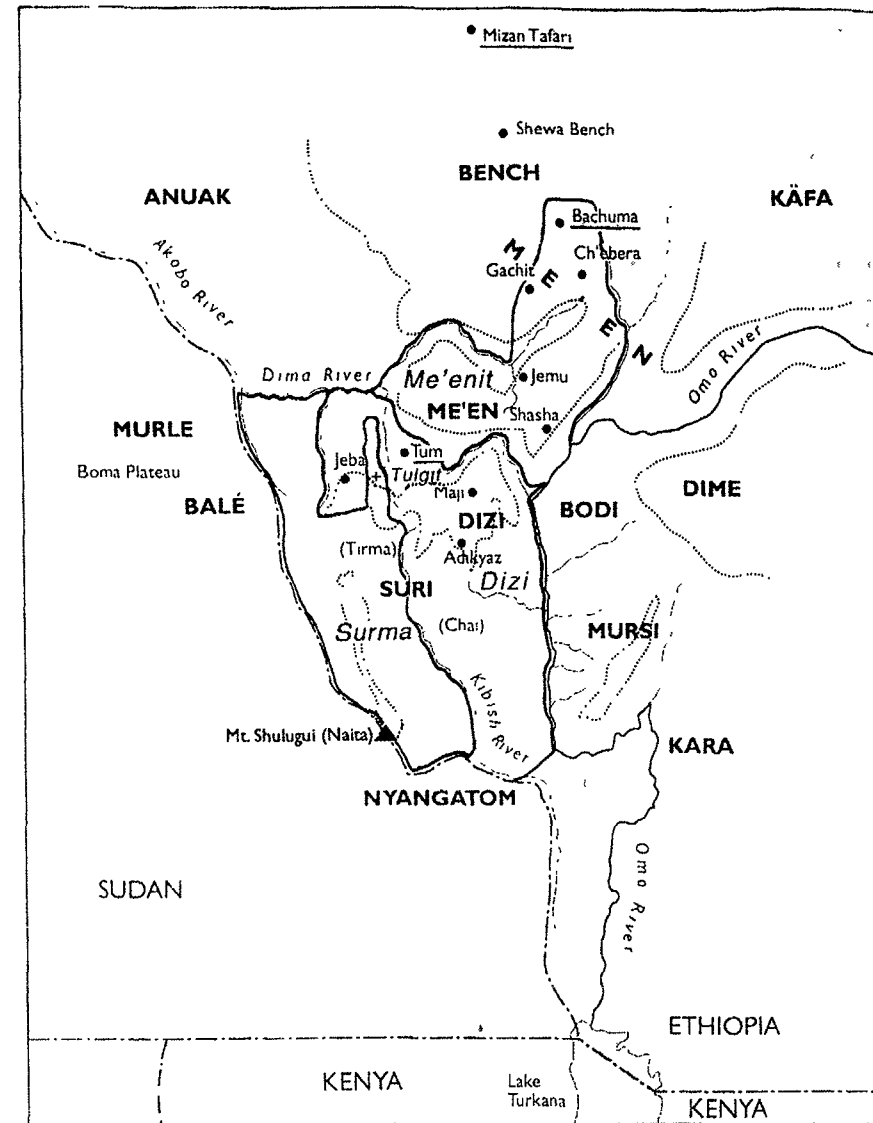
In the *Derg* era, the revolutionary state from 1974-91, this authoritarian pattern was much reinforced, and wherever traditional chiefs existed they were violently removed and suppressed in a concerted effort to undermine the so-called 'backward' socio-cultural fabric and class structure of rural Ethiopia. Indigenous 'customary law' traditions were not recognized in the state courts, except perhaps at the lowest, more informal level (the local judge court, or *atbiya dagna*; see Aberra 2000, 221).

In the empirical sections of this paper I show that the above three forms of authority co-exist and interact until this day and define much of the local political dynamics, including violent conflict. Rethinking governance and democratization in Ethiopia, with a government claiming to bring a new democratic empowerment to all 'nationalities' (ethnic groups),⁶ means not bypassing the indigenous structures of decision-making and identity formation that partly define people's outlook and commitments.

Three Views

I start with three contemporary local views on history and authority by leaders from three ethnic groups in the area under discussion (see Map I), with my comments in brackets.

SURI ethnic group	<i>Dizi</i>	<i>woreda</i>
Jeba village	_____	<i>woreda</i> boundary
Tum administrative (<i>woreda</i>) center	+ <i>Tulgit</i>	place of mission station
.....		area above 1500 metres



Map 1. Southwest Ethiopia
Location of main ethnic groups, villages, *woreda*
boundaries and administrative centers (1998)

A Dizi chief:

“When the Amhara came to our area [with the conquest in 1898], in the time of my grandfather, we Dizi were big men. We had strong chiefs fighting each other and leading our areas with strong hand and justice. These people were also tall and hairy people, more healthy and physically stronger than we are now. They had large families, many retainers, many cattle. You see the valley down there where the Suri are now? All that area was ours: it was our pasture and bee-keeping area. Have you seen the old field walls and ditches in the lowlands near Tum? They were made by our ancestors for cultivating sorghum and *t'eff* [two indigenous grains]. My grandfather had many people working for him and giving him yearly produce. The coming of *Ras Wolde Giorgis*' people [the general leading the conquest] changed all that. We were destroyed by the *gabbar* [labour serf] system and enslaved. Do you know how many men and girls were taken away in slavery? How many men had to work as *gabbar* for *Atse Menilik*'s soldiers and for the *Maji* people? You heard of these *kātama* [fortified village built by the soldiers] people and of administrators like *Dejazmach Birru* [Haile-Mariam], a big oppressor of the Dizi, and of *Dejazmach Mengesha Yilma* [in the early days of Haile Sellassie's reign, in 1930-32]? He exploited the Dizi and oppressed them hard, in alliance with the *neft'emnyotch* [armed settlers in *Maji* village]. Let God bring them to justice. We were not treated as people; we lost our dignity. Our people became also sick and succumbed to unknown diseases.

Though my grandfather and father were respected by the Amhara and the government, they lost their power to rule. We Dizi went down, and up to now have not recovered. In the *Derg* time [1974-91] things became worse. They brought guns all over the place and ruled with violence. They stole our chiefly insignia and forced us to eat sorghum.⁷ (...) So far under *Ehadig* [= EPRDF, the current government] there is not much improvement. As you know our people are robbed and killed by the Surma all the time. I am a chief but I cannot enforce anything.”

– *Ato Dishiburji*, paramount chief of the Adikyaz area, Dizi district, February 1992.

A Suri leader:

“We Chai [a sub-section of the Suri], we are reigned by the Buffaloes [i.e., the age grade of elders, called ‘Buffaloes’]. *Golach* [a Suri and *Me'en* name for the northern immigrants] and Italians were here, but none of them were our bosses. We have paid taxes and go to markets to buy and sell, but we have our law. The country is ours.

I am the Chai *komoru* [ritual mediator] and I take care of the peace. Do you see the sky, with God, up there? Do you also see the earth here, with the village, the people? I am between them; I must take care that they come together. [Pointing to the ground] It is mine Rain must be brought forth; God must be listened to. *Ehadig* has come and put the Surma Council here. Let these people do their job, I will do mine.”

– *Londosa* (Ngatulul) *Dollote V*, *komoru* of the Chai Suri, in *Korum*, Surma district, February 1992.

A Me'en leader:

“We *Me'en* never succumbed to the *Golach*. When they came to this area, before the time of the Italians, we were living here. We had many small villages and we herded cattle. They took a lot of cattle from us, and also raided children and women. They wanted people to work for them like slaves. But they never caught our leaders, like *Ngorba* or *Gelezjba* or *Katila* and his son *Kwomoda*, who fought them till their death. *Jemu* village was never safe from us. *Shasha* the same. We also controlled the routes of *Maji*. The rulers of the *Golach* sat in the villages; we had no *Golach* chiefs among us. But they did damage to us with their soldiers. We could not work in the fields and herd cattle without fear; we could not send women and children to markets, because we could not be sure that they all would return. At that time, the village people [i.e., the northern immigrants in the highland market villages] really were our enemies and we fought them, with rifles that we had acquired from them by trade or capture. We did not respect their chiefs and never went to them to help solve our problems. We were judged and guided by our *komoruts* [ritual leaders]. In later years we learned more how to live together. [.....] Now we have more problems with people like the Surma. We are more divided, and no

longer have strong leaders.”

- *Kenyazmach* Gauli, a leader of the Bayti Me'en, Kella area, Me'en region, February 1988.

These are three *contemporary* reflections on power and leadership from three of the minority groups discussed in this study: the Dizi, the Suri and the Me'en. The fragments show a memory of rivalry and of contested power. They reveal oppositions between locally existing forms of governance and the structures of a conquering or imposed state that are still relevant today. The statements also indicate that the speakers continue to attach value to their own cultural tradition, shaped before the northern conquest, the Italian occupation or the penetration of the modern state. As leaders, they derive continued legitimacy and acceptance among their people, like their predecessors. From a survey and interviews with the common people of these three ethnic groups it appeared that they were recognized and complied with, up to a point. The ritual functions that the leaders/chiefs perform are valued and they are still seen as focal points in community life and figure in people's new conception of group identity.

None of these leaders (or their predecessors) became officially recognized 'chiefs' with legal powers and administrative functions under Ethiopian state law. They were left to arbitrate in the domain of 'custom' and played no political role except as local rebels in moments of state crisis (See below). What then was the background of the Ethiopian state discouraging the recognition or formation of local 'chiefs'?

Ethiopia: Diversity in Cultural Traditions and Customary Law

Since the fourth century BCE, Ethiopia knew an evolving tradition of central imperial control: a monarchy expanding from the northern highlands set the tone for a political tradition of hierarchical rule and the building of central state institutions and a symbolism, buttressed by the Orthodox Christian faith. However, throughout the country's long history, this imperial tradition articulated with other societies and political systems. A process of fusion and often violent expansion proceeded for hundreds of years. In many regions, rival smaller-scale states emerged; in others the local polities continued existing, both

forms in a tributary relation with the emperor. A show of political loyalty was usually enough, as massive assimilation was not the aim of state policy. Only under Emperor Haile Selassie was there a more forced emphasis on cultural and linguistic homogenization, at least as far as official public life was concerned: the education system, the army, the courts and higher political functions demanded 'Amharization', adopting the language and the cultural style of the Amhara dominant group. This led to disparities and discontent, and, combined with material and political concerns, contributed to the emergence of ethno-regional revolts. (Gebru 1991)

For most of its history Ethiopia had varying borders and was a loose federation of culturally and linguistically diverse groups which now traded and then fought with each other. The varying indigenous law traditions survived until this day. (cf. Abera 1998, 34f) One important point is the absence in Ethiopia of a Western colonial legacy in politics and law.⁸ The 'indirect rule' model, as we know it from Central and West Africa, was not applied: subjects were either directly under the emperor, or were loyal to their regional chiefs and lords who had nominal accountability to the emperor. Most importantly, there was no cultural or colour divide as in the case of Western colonialism.

In the regions incorporated since the late nineteenth century, pre-existing forms of governance and authority included segmentary societies (Somali), age-grade societies in the east and south (Oromo, Konso, Darasa, Sidama), 'divine' kingdoms (Wolayta, Maale, Oida), democratic assembly-societies (Gamo), and hierarchical chiefdoms in the central and southern regions (Aari, Bench, Dizi). These systems differed in their extent of centralization, horizontal vs. vertical political communication, their conceptions of 'authority' of persons or groups, and in their political economies. This diversity of polities, enhanced by major language differences, posed a challenge for the centralizing Ethiopian empire-state and its twentieth-century modernization project.

As evident from the often violent conquest of southern regions (Arsi, Wolayta, Harar), the process of grounding imperial power and legitimacy was seriously contested, especially when local people violently resisted. In the process, indigenous structures of governance were often destroyed, and hereditary chiefs or kings were initially removed or replaced with direct appointees from the centre

(appointment of military chiefs as governors). Their rule was based on the control of resources and local labour power. This was the *gäbbar* system: every northern soldier, settler or administrator received a number of local people as his *gäbbars* or tributary retainers, labour-serfs who had to work on his land, fetch fuel wood, do maintenance work, deliver tribute in kind, etc. This system was a heavy burden on the local population, crippling their own productive capacity. It led to abuse, over-exploitation and impoverishment.

Alongside this first layer of control, a second one was allowed to exist: that of local, indigenous representatives. These people were of low rank, placed under the governor or district administrator, and acted as liaison men for their own society. Under the *ancient régime* up to 1974 there were several of such positions, two of which are important in the region to be discussed: the *balabbat* and the *chiqa-shum*.⁹

The *balabbat* (in Amharic: 'one who has a father', i.e. a recognised genealogy indicating status as a 'big man') was the legitimate claimant or owner of a certain territory, and confirmed in his position by the administrators. He could be a clan elder, a spirit-healer, a ritual leader, or a traditional chief or king of a certain ethnic group. Later the word simply came to mean 'big man' or leading, wealthy figure in the local community, i.e. also outside the ethnic group in question. For instance, in the Maji area there were even several Amhara *balabbats* who had assimilated to local society, although they stood above it in rank or cultural prestige. In the government structure, the *balabbat* had no legally well-defined administrative tasks, but he was held responsible for order and for the political compliance of the local community. He often became more dependent on the central authorities than on his own community, thus losing local cultural legitimacy.

The *chiqa-shum* ('mud chief') was a government-confirmed chief of a rural area or a village (nominally under the *balabbat*). While having no military or judicial powers, these chiefs were officially to keep law and order, organize collective works, allocate of land, and communicate government laws and directives to the rural populace (Berhane 1969, 38). Although the incumbents got this position either by inheritance, by nomination or by election within the local community (Berhane 1969, 36), the *balabbat*-appointment was not always a logical extension of the local leadership pattern based on

indigenous socio-cultural ranking.

Hence, local leaders or chiefs from an ethnic or regional group were at most government liaison men¹⁰ under more powerful, direct appointees of the Emperor. The empire state looked for *loyalty* in leaders, and if local elite figures were pliant they remained in place and could even amass wealth, e.g., as land owners. If deemed unreliable they were ignored or relegated to the symbolic realm, while others, with a feeble prestige or legitimacy basis, were appointed. It must be said, however, that after the conquests, Emperor Menilik II (1889-1913) and Empress Zewditu (1916-1930)¹¹ tried as much as possible to appeal to the cooperation of regional lords and traditional leaders, and did not resort to force each time there were differences of opinion.

However, the *cultural articulation* of these two traditions of authority and leadership – the central and the local – remained complex and varied across groups. There was both continuity and rupture in local leadership (see Donham 1986, 37). This can also be seen in the case of three groups discussed here: the Dizi, the Suri and the Me'en.

These are small-scale societies, varying in population (from about 26,000 to 28,000 for Dizi and Suri to 70,000 (for Me'en), in language and a social organization, but united in their economic and political marginality at the south-western fringes of Ethiopia. Their area (Maji) was long seen by highland Ethiopians as a place of exile (Hodson 1929; Garretson 1986). Marginality meant exclusion from the centres of power, economic exploitation and cultural inferiority.

Power in Ethiopia: Southern Chiefs between Empire and Local Governance up to 1974

We saw that in imperial Ethiopia, and especially in the conquered South, local leaders structurally remained on the sidelines of power. While an integrative project of centralist national development was instigated by Emperor Haile Selassie after World War II, he sought to achieve this by means of administrators and soldiers from the highland areas; customary law and local political traditions had little place in this. Nevertheless, there was no wholesale delegitimization of the ritual power and prestige of traditional leaders and chiefs in their own society: the enactment of culturally relevant ceremonies and rites,

dispute mediation, divination, etc., though seen as backward, was not prohibited or suppressed.

The Emperor's ambitious project of reforming and codifying law with the help of foreign advisors led to the promulgation of new modern law codes (such as the Penal Code, the Civil Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Maritime Code), developed on the basic principles of Romano-Germanic law (See Aberra 1998, 9-10). However, especially in the rural areas, the impact of codification of law was limited, despite Article 3347(1) of the 1960 Civil Code, which said: "Unless otherwise expressly provided, all rules whether written or not of customary law previously in force concerning matters provided for in this Code shall be replaced by this Code and are hereby repealed" (Cited in Aberra 1998, 13). The point is that there were many matters in customary law that were not dealt with in the Code and that continued to be arbitrated according to the customary rules of the ethnic group or region involved. This especially applied to the southern regions that missed the deep-rooted tradition of court litigation known in the Amharic and Tigrinya-speaking North. In addition, the national judicial infrastructure was underdeveloped and of bad quality. As courts and judges were known to take bribes and justice in the true sense of the term was not to be had, most people only went there if all other efforts had failed. Obviously, in the Codes (drafted by foreign experts), there was no reference to traditional authorities such as chiefs.

Hence, the initial ambitions of national reform and renewal were high, but the imperial state did not succeed in delivering the goods, bogged down as it was in authoritarianism, excessive centralism and stagnant, unequal system of land distribution. In practice, in conditions where the state could not or did not reach the people, local leaders were often co-opted into the system, though without formal powers. They could adjudicate according to the local 'law of the country' and appeal to custom. In the Maji area, the leaders of the Suri, Dizi and Me'en, while reduced in stature, remained in place.

The Dizi

The *Dizi* are an old sedentary agricultural society, formerly a conglomerate of about twenty independent but related territorial chiefdoms, with their own political leaders (among them, Adikyaz,

Jeba, Sai, Gobi, Dami, Maji, Mui, Or and Kolu, all existing simultaneously). The chiefs were war leaders and frequently fought for primacy of control over people and land. There was also a hierarchy between the chiefdoms, with Adikyaz, Jeba, Gobi, Maji Or and Kolu the most important.

Dizi society had a complex system of hierarchical titles or social ranks, from *kyaz* and *burji* down to *geyma* (see Haberland 1993), which is still maintained although expressed predominantly in the domain of ritual and dietary rules (Déguchi 1996). Chiefs, for instance, can never be served drinks from the same bowl as commoners, cannot sit on the same bench and have to observe food taboos. In *bergu seeli* - the yearly harvest initiation ritual - the chief figures in a prescribed role play with lower ranked ritual assistants. Dizi chiefs and their closely guarded ritual insignia (inherited beads and bracelets, ritual spears, an ivory trumpet, a brass phallic forehead ornament, etc.) which could not be touched, sometimes not even be seen, by commoners. The chiefs were rain masters and ritual initiators of the agricultural cycle. They were also mediators in disputes, often imposing a decision and punishing or fining people. They were not 'divine kings' (as among the Maale; see Donham 1994, 1999) but had a sacrality and a charisma deemed inherent in the function itself, because it was grounded supernaturally and inherited from the kin line of their ancestors. A strong chief's successor was selected from among his male off-spring to 'reproduce' that charisma. Many of these chiefly functions are still recognized, although political and fighting power are gone. While the father of the present chief of Adikyaz¹² was recognized by Emperor Haile Selassie as a local *balabbat* ('chief') and given the honorific Amharic title of *fitawrari*, he had few administrative or other political functions to play despite his remaining an authoritative ritual chief for the local Dizi.

The most important feature of Ethiopian rule in Dizi was, however, economic: the introduction of the *gabbar* system which made the local population into labour serfs to the northerners and undermined their local economy. In Dizi, the system was particularly exploitative (Haberland 1993, 11-13) and led to depopulation, humiliation and poverty. Some chiefs, like the *Maji kuri*, profited from this system (Garretson 1986, 217) only to be discarded later on.¹³ Most chiefs were

side-tracked, and their role in Dizi society changed. From powerful redistributive chiefs they became more like commoners. While social distance in Dizi society diminished, they tried to defend local people from the newcomers' onslaught, although unable to prevent the decline. The Dizi chiefs of today are still leaders and important local figures with great prestige, but they have no political role in the administrative structure. When compared to the Suri and Me'en, the Dizi chiefs seem to have made the deepest fall from power and prestige in the course of their confrontation with northern settlers and the state.

The Suri

The *Suri* (called Surma by outsiders) are a segmentary society of transhumant cattle herders and cultivators with a high degree of egalitarianism and individualism. Unlike the Dizi, they are organized in patrilineal clans. Their ritual leaders, called *komoru*, are 'first among equals' and have no political functions whatsoever. They are priest-like figures with ritual authority and a mediatory role, although their position of authority has supernatural aspects. They have a quality known as *bariri*, being 'hot' or 'dangerous', which is said to derive from their being in touch with God and the sky. This quality provides a kind of institutional charisma, reproduced in the descent line of the clan to which he belongs. There is also a more secular type of 'headman' among the Suri: the *gulsa*, who is a territorial or village leader. Although he is not 'appointed' by the komoru but elected by the local people, he holds his authority as representative of the komoru, who gives him his blessing. A *gulsa* has neither ritual competence like the *komoru* nor supernatural aura, but he must maintain law and order in the latter's name.

There are indications in Suri oral tradition that in the past the *komorus* were more powerful as war leaders, but this function may have been reduced since Ethiopian rule was established around 1900. It is now limited to performing blessing rituals for warriors on the eve of a raid or campaign, and he is not involved in actual fighting or given commands.

After the incorporation of the Southwest, the Ethiopian state officials had trouble in identifying 'leaders' among the Suri. The three *komorus* (two among the Tirmaga sub-group and one among the Chai

sub-group) were not executive leaders whose orders would be followed by ordinary Suri. Thus, for them, the *balabbat* and the *chiga-shum* positions were largely irrelevant.

The government never succeeded in effectively involving this 'nomadic groups' (like the Suri) in the administration. It contented itself with maintaining contacts with what it saw as traditional leaders or spokesmen necessary to keep local peace, start mediation in disputes with farmers and get taxes. The northerners never understood the age-group organization of Suri society, which gave more authority to a collective age group of elders (called *rora*) than to the *komorus*. Nevertheless, in the late 1920s the Chai *komoru* Dolloté III, also known as Wolekibo, was recognized as a community chief and called *balabbat*, but his contact with the Ethiopian state representatives was very limited. The Suri were basically left alone, and were difficult to control anyhow in the vast, hot lowland area southwest of Maji.

In the Italian period (1936-1941), the old leadership structure in the Maji area was replaced. The Italians presented themselves as liberators, as they removed the pressure of the *gäbbar* regime of northerners on the Dizi and Me'en. Raiding for slaves and cattle was indeed contained, and Italian military administrators took over from Ethiopian ones. Several army posts were established in the area.

The Me'en

The impact of imperial rule on the third and largest group, the *Me'en* (called Tishana by the northern immigrants), was more mixed. The Me'en, a people culturally and linguistically related to the Suri, did not live in a remote border area but in a forested highland region east and west of Maji town. Many of them settled there in the same period that the northern Ethiopians arrived (early twentieth century). The Me'en were a highly mobile and expanding people, not organized in chiefdoms but in territorial groups under clan leaders and rain chiefs (called *komorut*). Their age organization has disappeared. Me'en economy was mixed, with cattle herding, shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering. The *komoruts* were similar in function to those of the Suri, and did not lead the armed resistance against the northerners. None of the five traditional *komoruts* ever took up the position of government chief; only some of their subordinate 'village

chiefs' (*bizingit*) did so as *chiqa shums*.

Throughout the period of consolidation of imperial rule in Maji, the Tishana-Me'en revolted against the efforts to include them into the *gabbar* system. In this they largely succeeded, although at a price. In this process of armed rebellion, a new type of territorial leader called *menda-buyto* (lit. 'big men') with an 'achieved charisma' emerged. They did not rise from the ranks of the *komoruts*, but had their blessing. Among the Me'en, therefore, we saw the rise of a new form of chieftaincy, legitimized by values of collective self-defence and territorial unity as above clan identity.

In the later decades of the imperial era, many Me'en, becoming more sedentary, came to accept a closer link with the state administration and some of their self-made leaders became *balabbats*. However, the Me'en *komoruts* (among them Boshu, the most important) living in the remote lowlands remained aloof from the state. They kept their prestigious position as normative ritual heads of the Me'en, but lost their effective influence outside their own area of settlement. They receded into a position of non-political headmen.

In the post-War years, after Emperor Haile Selassie's return from exile in 1941, a great effort was taken to (re)establish state control over the country. As part of this, a big chiefs' conference for the southern regions was convened in the provincial capital of Jimma in 1951. The Emperor had invited the chiefs of all the various regions and groups of the South. Several Me'en representatives also went there, a journey of one week on foot.¹⁴ The meeting was a consultative one, called to request loyalty of the various local leaders and chiefs and unity of purpose in developing the nation. It was not so much aimed to set a concrete agenda for change, except that it confirmed the abolition of the *gabbar* system. Some of the Maji leaders were recognized as *balabbats* and received an honorific Ethiopian title, such as *fitawrari*, *kenyazmach* or *grazmach*. But after their return, political authority remained in the hands of the emperor's administrative appointees.

An important result of the confrontation between imperial power and local chiefs and leaders was that ideas of governance and authority gradually changed among the local population: they saw that power and leadership were enforced by the brute use of force by the northerners,

that the Christianity they brought was a 'more powerful' faith and that the power of the Dizi chiefs was based on economic and political domination. Stories from commoner informants suggest that the chiefs' demands were no longer accepted uncritically after their loss of power since the conquest. The 'arts of resistance' were practised more openly. They recognized the 'constructedness' of leadership. But the cultural premises of legitimacy and social order, for which the *ritual* activities of chiefs were necessary, were not rejected, especially among the Suri and the Me'en. However, these cultural premises were exposed to wear and tear. This would become more evident in the period of the Revolution since 1974.

Cadres and chiefs: 'revolutionary' governance on the local level

In 1974, the imperial regime crumbled after a revolution initiated in Addis Ababa. The emperor responded neither to the demands of the restless urban population in a period of socio-economic crisis nor to the mutiny of a group of rebellious army officers, and a process of demise set in. In September 1974, a military council (*Derg*) was in place and became the centre of power. It radicalized under the influence of a faction led by Col. Mengistu Haile-Mariam who became undisputed head of state in February 1977 after eliminating his rivals. A period of totalitarian and violent state socialism began which would transform the country and deeply traumatize Ethiopian society (For a survey, see Donham 1999, 13-36, 122:50; Abbink 1995; Andargachew 1993).

This Ethiopian-Marxist version of modernity (as a programme of development and as an attitude of rejecting the past and of orientation towards the future) began with a concerted effort by the new regime to reform the social order and property relations. Several aspects are important here. First, the nationalization of all land and the dismantling of the landed aristocracy. This happened after the 1975 Land Proclamation, nationalizing all land. A huge 'educational campaign' (called a *zamatcha*) against the old order was launched in the same year to be carried out by urban students sent out to the countryside to teach peasants socialist values, dislodge all 'landlords' and make a start with collectivist-socialist agriculture. Most peasants, especially those in the south, welcomed their new access to land, but the overall results of this campaign were disastrous. In northern Ethiopia where peasants already

equivalent to their own *rora* elders and *komorus* with which to deal on an equal basis. This skepticism remained vis-à-vis all subsequent local administrators, who formally included the Suri area into newly formed peasant associations ruled from the highland villages but did not have much impact there.

Among the Me'en, the revolutionaries identified the clan leaders and new territorial chiefs (often sons of the former war leaders who had resisted the northern settlers) and accused them as *balabbats*. Several of them, for instance Adabalcha, the chief of the Bayti Me'en, were put in prison, humiliated, forced to break food taboos and robbed of chiefly symbols. Others did not wait for their own arrest and fled to forest areas, to remote lowlands or to Sudan. The revolutionaries also targeted another type of Me'en leaders: the spirit mediums, who acted as traditional healers and diviners and had an important function of social control in Me'en society. They were labelled as 'impostors' by the cadres and were forbidden to practice their arts or to accept livestock and other gifts as payment. Some continued their work in secret; some were forced to flee to the areas out of reach of government agents.

Internal division in Me'en society increased when local people were sought out to become cadres, as they spoke the local language and 'knew the culture'. Some of these were young Me'en who had lived in Amhara families; others were products of the mission school. Several *sons* of the traditional rural elite, whether northerners or of indigenous ethnic groups, also became cadres for the revolutionary government.

In June 1977, three years after the revolution, the Me'en allied themselves with other disaffected people from the Bench and Suri people and staged an armed revolt against the revolutionary activists and the northerners, attacking eight highland villages.¹⁵ The attack was coordinated by the Me'en leaders and relatives of people previously arrested and dishonoured. A two-day battle followed, and dozens of Me'en and villagers were killed. On the eve of the third day, reinforcements from the provincial capital were sent and the attackers were beaten back. The villages of Ch'ebera, Barda, Tui and Gesha were abandoned after the attack and the last three of them were completely destroyed. About a week after the first attack, the rebellion came to an end, and a revenge action of the Ethiopian army began, tracking down leaders, especially lowland Me'en and the families of the clan leaders,

rain chiefs and spirit mediums, which they saw as the root of the unrest. A contingent of well-armed government soldiers and policemen carried out a three-week punitive expedition across the Me'en area: hundreds of livestock and other possession were confiscated and huts burned.

The result of the suppression of the revolt was that several Me'en went into hiding in inaccessible forest areas or lowlands. This occurred at a time when in the urban centre of the country the 'Red Terror', a bloody political persecution of *Derg* opponents, raged in full force. Of this the Me'en were certainly aware. Among the fugitives were all important Me'en territorial leaders, like Bilemu, Juga Ngorbok, Gelejba, Shaya, Kwomoda and Gauli (some of them *komorut*, clan leader or spirit medium). Invitations by the administration to fugitive chiefs to come out and negotiate were not heeded after two leaders (a Bench and a Me'en) who had naïvely done this were executed. Most of them, therefore stayed away for many years.¹⁶

For the *Dizi*, the effects of the revolution period and the *zamatcha* were also dramatic. Their chiefs and social order were the issue of a big assault on their legitimacy and even their life. In fact, there was an attempt to eliminate the entire class of hereditary chiefs and ritual insignia and objects confiscated and destroyed. As the *Dizi* were a sedentary group in a compact area they were easily targeted by the revolutionaries. They did not have the power to muster armed revolt, and had no 'escape routes' like the Me'en and the Suri. Only the *Jeba-burji*, chiefs of the most isolated western chiefdom of *Dizi* close to the lowlands, went into exile, coming back only after the fall of the *Derg* in 1991. Among the *Dizi*, there is thus a tragic record of devastation and public humiliation of chiefs. But the *Dizi* chiefs did not die out; they survived in the margins, keeping a low profile.

As noted in an earlier study:

In its radical modernisation drive; the *Derg* succeeded, more than Haile Sellassie ever did, in removing these traditional chiefs from the political arena, replacing them with peasant-association chairmen, a new style of politicized and dependent local leadership. Headmen and chiefs retreated to the cultural domain, where their survival was deemed harmless (Abbink 1997, 65).

The 'revolutionary approach' of the *Derg* government, by grounding itself in a *negation* of the socio-cultural order of local societies, produced a serious rupture in patterns of leadership and authority. It prevented local people from combining their traditional cultural commitments with new ideas and practices of development and administrative reform. It created a revolutionary bureaucratic command structure that became the conduit of totalitarian policy, bypassing local needs and sensibilities. On top of that, in economic terms the *Derg* time was a period of decline, which had made even the observance of local ceremonies and customs very precarious.

The 'Ethno-Federal' State: Continuity and Change

Under the EPRDF regime in place since May 1991, another radical transformation of Ethiopian politics took place. The core of this regime was formed by the ethno-regional insurgent movement – Tigray People's Liberation Front.¹⁷ It extended the ethnic rights ideology to all the other groups of the country but kept the reigns of central power in its own hands. The *Derg* state structure was dismantled and a new 'revolutionary democracy' based on democratic centralism and a formal recognition of the rights of the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia was announced. Thus 'ethnic tradition' was again recognized, against past 'Amhara domination and suppression'.¹⁸ All previous administrators were removed in the name of this 'revolutionary ideology', even if they had been politically neutral and had a good record.

A typical example was the presentation given by an EPRDF group at a meeting in the Me'en area on 20 July 1991, which I witnessed. They had come to oversee elections for a new local council and to give an explanation of the new revolutionary ideology: the oppressive regime of the *Derg* regime and of 'the Amhara' had ended and 'from now on all nations and nationalities of Ethiopia would be treated equally'. 'Self-government of the local people' would be developed by the EPRDF. Also a new party (under EPRDF) for people from the local 'nationalities' would be established, and all were encouraged to join and claim freedom.

But while local 'ethnic leaders', often very young men, were now selected as formal heads of the peasant associations and village councils, they were co-opted into a structure of 'shadow rule' by the dominant party EPRDF. This might have some educational purpose in the years of transition, but it meant that behind these local representatives the party put its own people to supervise and rule. This effectively meant limiting local ethnic representation and organization, because all important decisions were taken by these shadow people. Furthermore, EPRDF rule consolidated the side-lining of all indigenous leaders. There were limits to the stated aim of 'promoting the local cultures', etc. Spirit mediums, descendants of *komoruts* and clan leaders had no place in the new order. The idea was to create a whole new stratum of only young people as local leaders in the peasant associations and local councils. They were supposed to make a fresh start and to administer the newly created ethnic districts (called *woreda*) of Suri, Dizi and Me'en. The new administrative system imposed by the central government did not consider a role for the generation of elders, chiefs and the *komorus*, although they were recognised as having some influence in every-day life.

We saw above that the *Derg* government was a fundamental break, because of its radical delegitimization of indigenous leadership and its rule of violence beyond anything that the imperial regime had done, and because of its destruction of the fabric of political culture with its accommodative and trans-ethnic mediation mechanisms. But there seems to be continuity between *Derg* and EPRDF in their ideas on revolutionary social change, dislodging of elites, state ownership of all land, modernist development models, and also Marxist-Leninist organizational structures. In addition, the heritage and symbolism of violence as a political means is still present and played upon under the EPRDF regime (Abbink, 1995).

In the southern countryside, the new regime did not aim to reconnect with legitimate grassroots leaders or try to understand local views on authority and governance.¹⁹ What is clear from the two phases of revolutionary government as they impacted on the local groups in Maji is that the new state agents (both from *Derg* and EPRDF) acted on the assumption that the cultural domain of traditional leadership was invalidated and refuted: for them, there was of course no such thing as

a 'sacred chief' or a 'divine king', no ritual power over growth and fertility of animals, crops and people, and no 'control over rain' With the simple and categorical rejection of this meaningful *symbolic* universe, the cadres and the government people expected that all 'traditional culture' (including 'harmful customs') would go, and that political authority would simply be vested in a 'rational bureaucratic' structure. There would be no place for ethnic or cultural 'content', nor even for a gradual 'translation' into forms of rule and dialogue that would find resonance with local people. While the cosmological or truth claims as to the causal relations between ritual activity and natural phenomena are the issue of debate also among the local people, what they wish is an efficient and dignified consultative model of governance, a new structure of responsive *reciprocity*, so to speak. This has not been developed. Thus the legitimacy of state rule will be contested.

Even though indigenous leaders like Suri and Me'en *komorus* or clan leaders and Dizi chiefs will continue to be active in their own 'ethnic polity' as respected figureheads and reference points of internal peace and dispute mediation, they cannot but lose their prestige and role even further as the new leadership gains a foothold and also as internal divisions increase. For example, there were dramatic internal changes in Suri and Me'en society over the past decades, especially an escalation of inter-group violence and increased resource pressure (cf. Abbink, 2000), leading to weakening of the role of the *komorus*.²⁰

It is ironic that the process of incorporation of local leaders and ethnic polities in Ethiopia is being implemented by *means of* a discourse of culture and ethnic autonomy – denied in the days of the emperor and ignored in those of the *Derg* – while at the same time the administrative context and ingrained political practices of governance make the actual substance and symbolism of that ethno-cultural tradition irrelevant. Thus, the political co-optation of ethnicity and local chieftaincy seems to be complete.

Reconnecting the Local and the National in Globalizing Conditions

In Ethiopia, local indigenous leaders and chiefs have never been a political force as important as in other African countries, like for instance Ghana (see Rathbone 2000) or Nigeria (Vaughan 2000). The

long-established Ethiopian political tradition of centralized government as well as the absence of a pervasive colonial system of indirect rule were some of the reasons for this.

This means that the Ethiopian case goes against a dominant trend in the literature asserting that chieftaincy is a tradition that was 'created' and 'imposed' on African societies. In the case of southern Ethiopia this would be a particularly unhistorical argument, notwithstanding the fact that leadership and authority positions underwent significant changes while confronting imperial and revolutionary rule.

Chiefs and headmen in the three societies discussed were bypassed and condoned in non-essential social and ritual functions. Their role within their own societies diminished, as the scope of their activities was limited by force. The state and its agents embarked upon the establishment of the monopoly of violence, the imposition of a tax regime and the general redirection of flows of local material resources (land, labour, and produce) to state-controlled elite channels, thus establishing the hegemony of a new secular bureaucracy. But the legitimacy of chiefs and leaders did not evaporate, not even among the hierarchical Dizi, where chiefs in objective terms were economically a burden for commoners, but where their demands and actions had customary limits of symbolic reciprocity, beyond which legitimacy revolt would follow. The local cultural universe was subverted but was not successfully replaced by the ideological regime of the revolutionary state.

Nowadays, a cautious re-evaluation of forms of tradition-oriented governance on the local level is in progress. People are not 'going back to the past', but rediscovering principles of traditional legitimacy that metaphorically relate the political process in some kind of natural or cosmic order (an indigenous view of sustainability, so to speak), codify reciprocity and express people's daily concerns centered on peace, rain, fertility, reproduction and earning a living.²¹ Despite the revolutionary onslaught, for many local people in the Maji area it has *not* been proven that traditional leaders, be they chiefs or rain mediators or former *balabbats*, are only oppressors and exploiters that brought a downturn in their fortunes, as always asserted by the revolutionary authorities of the *Derg* or EPRDF. On the contrary, people now tend to blame the

central state and its 'cadres' for unthinkingly undermining the old order in dramatic movements of agitation and change, and for disturbing pre-existing mediation mechanisms for solving disputes and conflict without replacing them with an effective state judicial structure. In such comments, local people pointed not only to their increased economic hardships, but also to the destruction of their cultural order. Their distrust of state political agents and their policies of violence and war (the civil war before 1991 and the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea), collectivization and political control seems greater than ever. In contrast to the chiefs, these politicians and state cadres were not accountable to them but only to the higher authorities in the far-away capital.

Local people also become more aware of the global discourse of democracy and human rights. Even the Ethiopian constitution of 1994 announced a host of such rights, including third-generation collective rights. But people see them flouted almost everyday by a state failing to deliver, and they reconsider the rights and duties under the 'indigenous' regime of their leaders and following their own cultural assumptions. It is, for instance, remarkable how all across the multi ethnic South, the respect for traditional religious and political leaders resurged after the fall of the *Derg* regime in May 1991 (see Donham 1999, 183; Olmstead 1997, 212): people want to reconnect and re-establish continuity and meaning.

In present-day Ethiopia, there seems to be a need for a new model of vertical political communication in the true sense of the word. Certainly on the local level, there is still no working democratic structure of political parties, voting for alternation of political leaders or a judicial system accessible for all and free from bias and bribes. Local leaders or chiefs can fulfill a role here, especially if they get more recognition and, perhaps, more training, and could develop mutual lines of communication (now completely absent). The policy of ignoring them and relying only on young people who are malleable and susceptible to the ideology and policies of the reigning party is not always productive. Decentralization and self-rule models can make better use of local leaders, as examples elsewhere in Africa have amply demonstrated. An important starting point would be to recognize the role of adjudication and mediation that the remaining chiefs still have

in every-day life, following local representations and ideas of legitimate authority. The elitist and neo-patrimonial political system in place may prevent the rapid development of such more effective lines of political communication, but it is certain that creative reconnections between local-level everyday politics and the wider national arena of the state are sorely needed.

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Notes

1. And elsewhere. See the revealing study of M. Herzfeld (1992) on European bureaucracy.
2. In the highland areas of the historic Ethiopian state (Begemdir, Gojjam, Tigray, Wollo, Shewa) as well as in Oromo-speaking areas (Wollega, Illubabor) since the mid-nineteenth century there were semi-independent provincial kings who recognized the nominal sovereignty of the emperor and paid tribute but in practice enjoyed much autonomy. The problem of how to deal with indigenous leaders and customary law became acute after the great southward expansion of the Ethiopian state since ca. 1880.
3. This was the Ethiopian *shum-shur* principle: to (unpredictably) appoint and demote.
4. E.g., after the conquest of the rebellious Wolayta kingdom in 1894 by emperor Menilik II, its king T'ona was taken prisoner and exiled, but his

grandson Ato Fisseha Desta later became the regional administrator of the Wolayta region.

- 5 While Emperor Haile Sellassie (r. 1930-1974) created most of Ethiopia's modern institutions, initiated a large-scale codification of law and organized an electoral system, he did not intend to liberalize Ethiopia's political system in a significant way. Neither did he succeed in creating a more just system of land distribution.
6. See Abbink 1997a; Cayla 1997; Assefaw 1998.
7. For Dizi chiefs to eat sorghum (a Dizi staple food) was a serious taboo.
8. With the exception of Eritrea, deeply affected by Italian colonialism from 1890 to 1941.
9. There were also others. See Berhane 1969 (p. 40-41).
10. There are no traditions of female chieftaincy, but occasionally females stepped in to take the chiefly position. For a fascinating study of a remarkable female chief among the Dita people in the Gamo area of Ethiopia, see Olmstead 1997.
11. This also applies to the a-typical *inter-regnum* of Abeto Iyasu, an uncrowned king of Ethiopia (1913-16) removed by force?
12. See Photo 1 in Haberland 1993 (following p. 32). This chief died in 1970
13. The descendants of the Maji kuri are now few in number and very impoverished. None of them has any position of authority. This chiefly line was probably delegitimized by their close collaboration with the northern overlords, and in the 1990s the candidate to fill the post has even refused to take it up. See Abeje 1999:42.
14. One of the Me'en leaders attending was B'asagala Galt'ach, the leader of the Selakoroi clan, who recalled this event with pride in an interview in 1990. Some Dizi chiefs also attended. But from the Suri nobody came.
15. This passage is based on Abbink 1994: 747-48.
16. Of other leading families, such as the Shaya and the Bilemu, who were from old komoru lines and highly respected by the Me'en, several young members were arrested and killed. In the Shaya family, only one brother of four was left. After the disappearance of his brothers, the heir never set foot in the villages (domain of the government authorities).
17. For a general study of this movement, see Young, 1999.
18. This was a very simplified formula, because dominance was not on a purely ethnic basis, let alone only by Amhara.
19. Indeed, even in the new democratic structures that were hesitatingly put in place after 1991, the independent or opposition party elected representatives were not accepted. For instance, after the 2000 national elections, these people and their supporters were even actively persecuted

and intimidated. (See Tronvoll 2001, forthcoming) Local populations are therefore becoming wary of involvement in state politics.

- 20 Some years ago, one of the Suri komorus was killed by a fellow Suri (a male agnate), which meant a very serious breach of Suri custom. Since then, this territorial section of the Suri has been in disarray. But the komoru institution itself is not discarded.
21. They also keep relying on elements of indigenous traditions relating to knowledge of the natural environment, forms of oral tradition, public discourse and narrative traditions on the history and genealogies of their people and, in the case of Suri and some Me'en, of cattle.

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