



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions**

Adegehe, A.K.

### **Citation**

Adegehe, A. K. (2009, June 11). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13839>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13839>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Peripherality, Ethnic Makeup and History: Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions

### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the asymmetrical features of Ethiopian federalism and provided an outline about emerging trends of autonomy conflicts at the country level. The task of this chapter is, however, to provide a general background on the two study regions – Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz. Both regions share a number of similarities. For instance, they were historically peripheral to the Ethiopian State and hence their constituent ethnic groups have little presence in the national political landscape. They also suffered from chronic marginality in terms of social and physical infrastructure development. Indeed, in spite of some of the positive changes since 1992, the two regions still lag significantly behind the highland regions.

Besides peripherality, both regions have cross-border ethnic ties. In fact, the international boundaries that Ethiopia shares with the Sudan and Somalia divide the ethnic groups of the two regions. There is, however, some variance in the significance of the ethnic groups to the politics of the neighbouring countries. The Ethiopian Somali region had enormous importance to the politics of Somalia. In contrast, the multiple minorities of the Benishangul-Gumuz remain peripheral to the politics of the Sudan.

The Somali<sup>1</sup> and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions, established at the beginning of the 1990s, as part of the federal restructuring of the country. The SNRS came about by merging the former Ogaden and Dire Dawa autonomous regions and Somali inhabited parts of the East and West Hararge, Bale, Sidamo and Borana administrative regions. In

contrast, the merger of parts of the former Assosa and Metekel administrative regions led to the establishment of the BGNRS.

## 5.2 Peripherality of the Two Regions

Since their incorporation into the Ethiopian State, the Somali and the B-G regions remained at the periphery of the Ethiopian State. For instance, many parts of the two regions are not yet accessible by modern transportation and communication facilities. More importantly, religious, economic and historical differences between the ethnic groups of the two regions and the dominant Amhara-Tigrayan ethnic groups reinforce the peripheral position of the two regions.

In terms of religion, in both Somali and B-G regions, Islam has a wider following than Orthodox Christianity that has been the dominant religion at the political centre. There is also a marked difference between the highlanders<sup>2</sup> and the ethnic groups of these peripheral regions in terms of dominant economic activity. The former predominantly practice sedentary peasant agriculture, while the latter derive their livelihood from nomadic pastoralism (Somali) and hunting, shifting agriculture, and extraction of alluvial gold (Benishangul-Gumuz region).

### 5.2.1 Periphery from Addis Ababa, significant to Mogadishu: Somali region

The Somali region since its incorporation into the Ethiopian State remained peripheral to the political economy of the country. The level of social and physical infrastructure in the region is dismal compared with the generally poor level of the country. Moreover, security in the region is still precarious. This is in part due to the ongoing armed-conflict between the ONLF and the troops of the government. As a result, there is no regular public transport service in much of the region. The widespread distribution of automatic weapons and recurrent outbursts of violence between Somali clans over land resources further aggravates insecurity in the region. The continued instability in neighbouring Somalia with which the region shares not only a long border, but also people adversely affects its security.

**Map 5.1 Zonal and woreda division of the Somali region**

Source: UN-OCHA (Unofficial map)

Even today, the presence of the Ethiopian State in the Somali region is weak. Why has the Ethiopian State failed to establish a strong presence in this region? This could be because of the inhospitable semi-arid and arid climatic conditions of the region and the resultant nomadic way of life of the people. Indeed, nomadic pastoralism that is characterised by an egalitarian lifestyle and loose attachment to territorial control seemed to have inhibited the development of hierarchical administrative structures among the Somali (Lewis 1999).

As a result, when Ethiopian rulers took control of the region at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they did not find structures of power that they could either co-opt or replace. Although they sought to co-opt clan chiefs by giving them traditional titles and salaries, this did not lead to the pacification of the region. The clan chiefs could not exercise full authority over their people, because of what I.M. Lewis characterised as ‘close to anarchy Somali egalitarianism’ (Lewis 2002: 9). Unable to impose their model of governance – cooptation and/or replacement of pre-conquest authorities in the Ogaden, Ethiopian authorities, during first few decades of their rule used predatory raiding as a way of collecting tribute (Garretson 1993).

There was also a sharp contrast between the towns established as launching pads of military expeditions during Menelik's expansion in the sedentary and pastoral regions like Somali. In former, these towns emerged as incipient urban centres, while in the latter, they still largely remain heavily fortified. In this respect, before the change of the military regime in 1991, in Jijiga (presently capital of the SNRS) alone there were close to a dozen military camps.

In addition to the problem of pacifying the region, Somalia that followed a policy of 'redeeming the lost territories' right after its independence in 1960 contested Ethiopian sovereignty over the Ogaden. In fact, because of its strategic location, size and resources, the goal of bringing the Ogaden into Somalia became the central objective of the pan-Somali project (Markakis 1987). In 1963, the government of Somalia established the Ministry of Somali Affairs. This ministry was responsible for 'the affairs of the Ogaden and other unredeemed Somali lands' (Ibid 181). Moreover, Somalia made the unprecedented decision of providing its citizenship to all ethnic Somalis irrespective of the country in which they live. As a result, thousands of Ethiopian Somalis went into Somalia in search of education and employment. It was then difficult to distinguish the citizen from the refugee and the liberation fighter. That was why Ogaden refugees who fled to Somalia after the 1963 Ethio-Somalia conflict were 'enmeshed in the faction-ridden political life of the Somali Republic...' (Ibid 181). Indeed, the late military dictator, Mohammed Siad Barre used Ogaden refugees in order to quash the opposition of other clans precipitating a bloody conflict between them and their Ishak hosts during the 1980s (Lewis 1989: 577). All these contributed to provide a unique position to the Ogaden; it became significant in Somalia's politics, while it remained peripheral to the Ethiopian State.

### 5.2.2 Double periphery frontier region: Benishangul-Gumuz region

In contrast to the Somali region, the titular ethnic groups of the B-G region that straddle Ethiopia and the Sudan remained marginal to both countries. This lends itself to characterising the region as a double periphery (Triulzi 1981). More importantly, the historical association of the various ethnic groups of the region with the ruling circles of both Ethiopia and the Sudan had been painful. For instance, until the first few

decades of the 20th century the ethnic groups that today constitute the B-G were raided for slaves in both Ethiopia and the Sudan (Abdussamad 1995: 57).

**Map 5.2 Zonal and Woreda division of the Benishangul-Gumuz region**



Source: UN OCHA (unofficial provisional map)

Political developments in both Khartoum and Addis Ababa shaped the history of this frontier region. The collapse of the Mahadist Sudanese State at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the extension of Ethiopian sovereignty to the region (Bahru 1991; Triulzi 1981). Similarly, the fixation of the boundary between Ethiopia and British occupied Sudan in 1902 resulted in the division of some of the titular ethnic groups of the region between Ethiopia and the Sudan (Abdussamad 1999: 436).

As a typical frontier region, B-G has been ‘a traditional hiding place for refugees and fleeing peoples from both sides of the border, and a settling ground for different ethnic groups... inaccessible and uncontrolled, the natural refuge of outcasts’ (Triulzi 1981: 1).

It is probably because of the refuge this frontier region provided for many minority ethnic groups that we find several ethnic groups with varying linguistic and identity patterns. Linguists who were perplexed by this situation dubbed the region a no man’s land (Bryan 1945).

Interestingly, they have not yet finished their task of classifying the languages of the region into the major linguistic families of the country (Bender 1981; Fleming 1984).

As many partitioned Africans by arbitrary boundaries, the ethnic groups of the B-G in the past showed flexibility in their association with regional powers. Thus, their sense of loyalty to the various powers that came to control them was fluid. The Sheikhdoms of the Bertha played an important role in local administration by offering their services to the different regional powers, which managed to exert their power and influence in the region (Garretson 1980; James 1986). For instance, Sheik Khojele, the legendary ruler of Assosa showed a remarkable flexibility in his allegiance to foreign powers. He served the Turco-Egyptian, Mahadist Sudan, Ethiopian and Italian rules over the region (Atieb 1973). In contrast, some of the minority ethnic groups such as the Komo and the Gumuz used the international frontiers of the region to resist slavery by crossing the boundary and seeking protection from the British who controlled the Sudan at the time (Perham 1948: 327).

Another important facet that explains the peripheral position of the several minority groups of the region has been their designation by the dominant groups. In Ethiopia, many of the north-west borderland ethnic groups were collectively called by a derogatory term, *Shankilla* ('slave'). Similarly, the Sudanese used a derogatory term, *Abid* ('slave') (James 1979:7-8).

It is in areas of social and economic status that the peripheral position of the B-G is most evident. For instance, there are still fewer people from the titular ethnic groups who live and work in the regional capital Assosa. People from the highland regions of Amhara and Oromia predominantly staff the civil service in the region. The presence of the titular ethnic groups in the commercial and business activities of the region is still minuscule. Because of little investment in infrastructure development, the transport network within the region is weak. Hence, many of the *woreda* capitals are not accessible by vehicle. In sum, because of its low economic and political integration, the B-G has been peripheral to the Ethiopian State.

### 5.3 Ethnic Makeup and Relations

In spite of their similarities in terms of peripherality and frontier location, the two regions have differences in terms of ethnic makeup.

The SNRS is one of the most ethnically 'homogenous' regions within Ethiopia (see table 1.2). In contrast, multiple minorities inhabit the Benishangul-Gumuz region. In addition, the region contains a large number of non-titular communities drawn predominantly from the dominant Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups.

### 5.3.1 Somali ethnic identity and the clans

Ethnic Somalis, according to the 1994 census, predominantly inhabit the SNRS. They account for about 95.6 per cent of the total population of the region. The proportion of non-Somalis who are called in the region as 'Amhara'<sup>3</sup> within the region is small. The non-titular population do not have political representation. This may warrant their consideration as a new minority.<sup>4</sup>

The Ogaden/Darrood clan is the most dominant clan within the SNRS in terms of both population size and territorial coverage (see map 5.3). From among the nine administrative *zones* in the SNRS, it dominantly inhabits six.<sup>5</sup>

The SNRS is distinct from other regions of the country not only because of its near ethnic 'homogeneity' but also because of its cross border ethnic ties. For many decades, the homogeneity discourse dominated the literature on Somali ethnic identity.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the Somali were presented as a homogenous nation who 'share a common tradition; speak the same language, respond to the same poetry, derive their wisdom (and their experience) from the camel economy, and worship the same God' (Laitin and Samatar 1987: xv). This monolithic view on Somali identity remained influential for many decades partly because of its strong propaganda value for the pan-Somali unification project that Somalia adhered since its emergence in 1960 (Prunier 1996: 1).

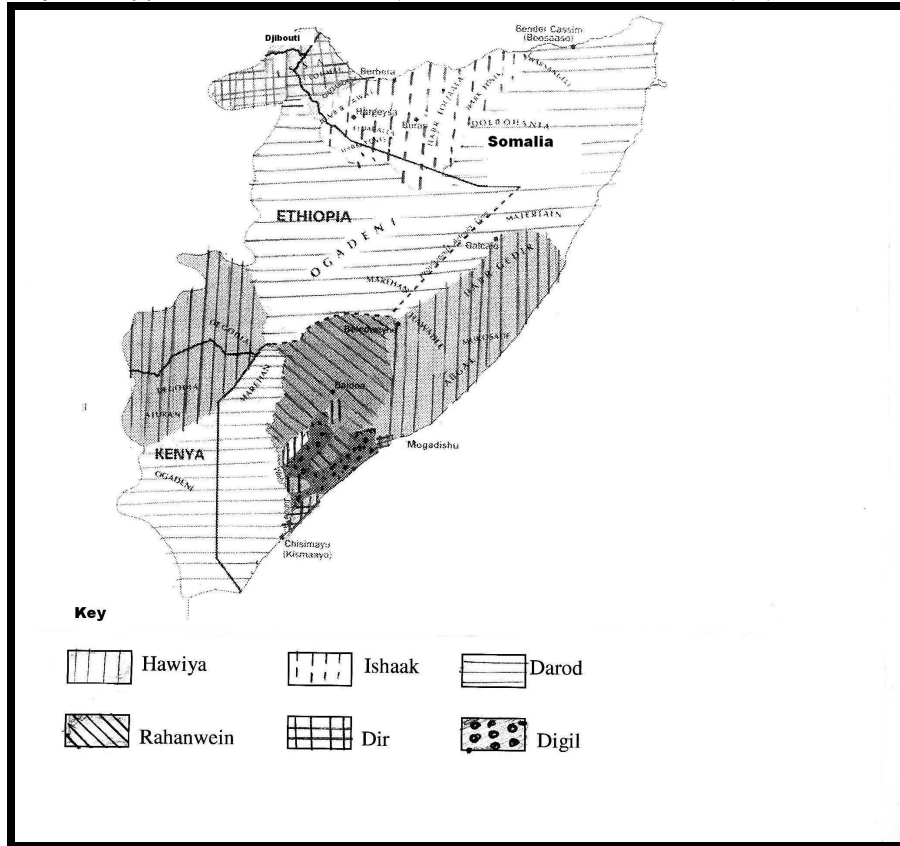
However, there has been criticism by Somali and other academics against this approach (Ahmed and Green 1999; Besteman 1995; Cassanelli 1982; 1995; 2000). L.V. Cassanelli, one of the first few scholars who questioned the homogeneity discourse underlined that although the Somali society is more homogenous than most other African States, it is '...deeply divided by occupation, class, physical type, and dialect' (2000: 14-15). More critically, Ahmed and Green (1999: 14) challenged the homogeneity dictum by saying, 'the classical argument... that all Somali people belong to one ethnic group, speak the same language, follow the same religion and share the same culture and



tradition...is inaccurate and misleading'. While the ideology of pan-Somalia fuelled the homogeneity discourse, the collapse of the Somali state impels re-examination of concepts and approaches in the study of Somali society and its identity (Ahmed 1995).

Coming to the internal organization of the Somali society, segmentary division takes a central place. Accordingly, the Somali society is hierarchically divided into several clan based institutions of patrilineal descent.<sup>7</sup> At the top of all the clans are the two 'founding fathers' of all the Somali clans, Samaale and Sab.

**Map 5.3** Approximate location of Somali clans in the Horn of Africa



Source: Adopted from CIA 2002

The descendents of these 'founding fathers' are divided into six major clan-families,<sup>8</sup> the Dir, Issaq, Hawiye, Darrod, (from the Samaale side) and Digil and Rahanweyen (from the Sab side). In addition, there are occupational minorities called Sab.<sup>9</sup> The clan families, which are the

upper limit of clanship, are in turn divided into clans, sub-clans, primary lineages, and *diya*-paying<sup>10</sup> groups. This is because the clan-family is large and widely scattered and cannot act as a corporate socio-economic unit (Lewis 1999: 4). Nevertheless, it ‘...frequently acts as a corporate political unit...’ particularly in national and regional politics when sub-clan organisations are too small to have a meaningful role in political processes (Ibid). Traditionally, the clan is ‘led by a clan-head’<sup>11</sup>...[but] it has no centralized internal administration or government’ (Lewis 1999: 5). Next to the clans or sub-clans, there are lineages with which ‘a person normally describes himself as a member’ (Ibid 6).

Below the sub-clans, the *diya*-paying group is the most important clan organisation, it is compact, can easily be mobilised and provides security for its members (Laitin and Samatar 1987). The members of a *diya*-paying group enter into an informal contract called *xeer*.<sup>12</sup> They pledge to support each other particularly in the payment and receipt of compensation in respect to actions committed by or against their group (Ibid 6).

Because of ‘the absence of any external authority, the alternative to blood... payments (compensation) was almost always retaliation in kind.’ Thus the institution of blood payment reduces incidences of open conflict within Somali society (Cassanelli 1982: 20-1). Clan elders oversee implementation of blood payment and this brings in the role of traditional authority in the management of conflicts and the governance of Somali society.

Although clan organisations are important for regulating conflicts, their segmentary nature has implications for domestic and international politics. In other words, the Somali clan system is both ‘centripetal and centrifugal, at once drawing the Somalis into a powerful social fabric of kinship affinity and cultural solidarity while setting them against one another in... antagonistic clan interests’ (Laitin and Samatar 1987: 30-1).

### 5.3.2 Ethnic relations in the Benishangul-Gumuz

In contrast to the Somali region, the B-G is a truly multi-ethnic region of several minorities. None of the ethnic groups of the region constitutes more than 50 per cent of the total population (see table 1.2). The B-G constitution recognised the Bertha, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo ethnic groups as owner nationalities of the region. In addition to these titular ethnic groups, the region has a large non-titular population, which

accounts for more than 40 per cent of the total population. The majority of the non-titular communities are from the politically and economically dominant ethnic groups of the country, the Amhara and Oromo who account for 22.2 per cent and 12.8 per cent of the region's population respectively. It is also important to underline that the largest proportion of the present non-titular population in the BGNRS came to the region during the 1980s through a controversial resettlement programme. The military government forcefully resettled tens of thousands of highland peasants from drought-affected regions to the lowland plains of the Benishangul-Gumuz region. One of the direct outcomes of the federalisation of Ethiopia was the transformation of the settlers and other highlanders, into a new minority status.

The relationship each of the titular ethnic groups maintained with their minority neighbours and with other dominant powers, ranging from the Sudanese Arabs to the Amhara and the Oromo, largely shaped their ethnic identity. For instance, Bertha's historic relationships with their more powerful neighbours defined their identity and internal hierarchy. In this respect, their tradition maintains that the ruling families of the group – the half-caste Witawit<sup>13</sup> were descendants of marriage association between the ruling families of the 'pure-Bertha'<sup>14</sup> and Arabic Islamic preachers who came to the region from the Sudan (Bahru 1991; Triulzi 1975).

This cleavage within the Bertha is not clear to the outsider, as there are no linguistic, religious or other distinctions between the two groups. The Witawit, however, differ from the so-called pure-Bertha not only because of their fluent Arabic and Islamic faith, but also because of their 'unshakable belief [in their]...racial, cultural and political superiority over the Bertha' (Triulzi 1981: 7). This division developed into an exploitative relationship between the Witawit and the pure-Bertha in which the latter, along with other minority groups like the Mao, Komo and Gumuz formed the bulk of the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave trade in the region in which the Witawit participated, not only as conduits but also as slavers (Abdussamad 1999). Moreover, the Witawit used pure-Bertha slave labour to extract alluvial gold (Ibid 8).

The hierarchical division between the half-caste Arabs and the pure-Bertha shaped the broader ethnic identity of the Bertha. Regional powers ranging from the Sudanese to the Ethiopians, who sought to control the area for its resources such as gold and slaves through the Witawit reinforced this division (Triulzi 1975: 59). Even today, some of the Witawit resent the naming of their ethnic group as Bertha as that name echoes *abid* and was used to call the pure-Bertha by both the Sudanese

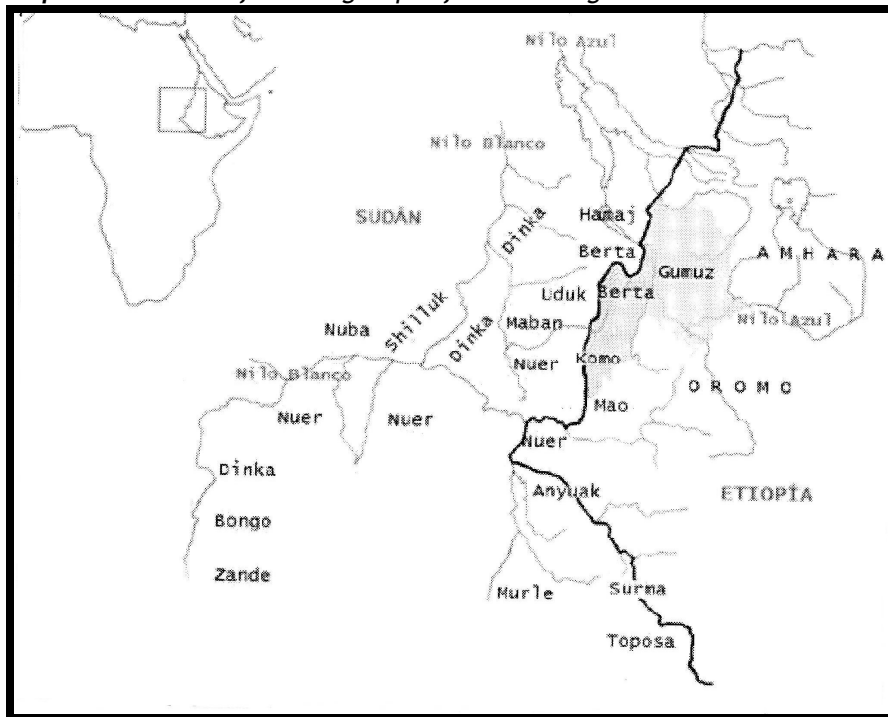
Arabs and the Witawit themselves (Triulzi 1981: 8). In contrast, many educated descendants of the Witawit who today control important offices within the B-G region on behalf of the Bertha not only support the designation of their ethnic group as Bertha, but also seek to capitalise on the victimisation of the pure Bertha in the past as an important platform to advance their political careers. In this context, Bertha politicians promote a new Bertha identity that includes both the half-caste and the pure.

Like that of the Bertha, painful relationships with more powerful neighbours explain the ethnic history and identity of the Gumuz. Slave raids and eviction from their land characterise the history of interaction between the Gumuz and their dominant neighbours. The Gumuz faced continued raids until the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from both highland Ethiopia and the Sudan (James 1986: 124). Moreover, the settlement of the Oromo from the south crossing the Blue Nile in the Metekel area during the early 20th century displaced 'the Gumuz...to the hot and inhospitable lowland areas' (Abdussamad 1995: 54-5).

The continued pressure placed on the Gumuz from several sides as subjects of slaving raids not only shaped their settlement pattern but also left an indelible mark on their identity and the way they relate to each other and their ethnic neighbours. According to Frederick Simmons (1960: 53), 'the survival of the Gumuz against the pressures of Islam from the Sudan and against Amharisation from Ethiopia was ensured by their flight and acculturation to their country, which is marked by its inhospitality because of its arid climate and malaria infestation.'

The painful relationships that the Gumuz had with their powerful neighbours and their collective experience led to the development of a common ethnic identity. In fact, the Gumuz of the Dedessa Valley accepted the derogatory term *Shankilla* as their own self-name in order to forge unity among various Gumuz clans (James 1986: 121). They even attempted to extricate the derogatory connotation of the term *Shankilla* by claiming that it was derived from two Oromo non-derogatory words (Abey 2001: 24).<sup>15</sup>

The Shinasha, one of the titular ethnic groups of the B-G region, also had a painful relationship with its more powerful neighbours. Like the Gumuz, they faced slave raiding by the highlanders of the Ethiopian empire. Richard Pankhurst, citing the Jesuit patriarch André de Oviedo, wrote that the forces of Emperor Sarsa Dengel raided the Shinasha in the 16th century (1997: 267-8).

**Map 5.4 Location of ethnic groups of the B-G region**

Source: (González-Ruibal and Fernández 2005)

Because of raiding and displacement, encountered by both the Gumuz and Shinasha, they retreated to the hot inhospitable lowlands of the Metekel region.

This shared plight led to tension and conflict between the two groups, as they had to compete for land resources (Tsega 2002: 15; Crosby 1901: 54). Moreover, because of the repeated threats the Shinasha faced from the highlanders (Agaw and Amhara), they assimilated into the Oromo who crossed the Blue Nile and settled in the Metekel during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Tsega 2002: 10). A traveller who visited the Metekel region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reported that due to the insecurity the Shinasha encountered, they fortified their villages in an inaccessible cliff to prevent unwanted intruders (James, Baumann and Johnson 1996: 180-1).

More recently, the relationship between the Shinasha and their ethnic neighbours kept on changing depending on the conditions on the ground. For instance, during the 1980s when the military regime settled several thousand people in the fertile lowlands of Metekel, the Shinasha,

the Gumuz and the Agaw who saw this move as a threat to their livelihood strengthened their relationships (Gebre 2004: 61).

In a similar fashion, the ethnic regionalisation of Ethiopia since 1991 led to the emergence of a new alignment in the Metekel region between the Gumuz and the Shinasha excluding the non-titular groups (Ibid).

In contrast to the other constituent ethnic groups of the B-G region, the Mao and Komo are little studied minority groups. Both groups are located along the Ethio-Sudanese frontier (Cerulli 1956: 12). The Mao are found within the B-G and Oromia regions, while the Komo live in the B-G, Gambella and the Sudan. The Komo language is a member of the Nilo-Saharan linguistic family, whereas the classification of the Mao into one of the linguistic families of Ethiopia remains incomplete. The naming of the Mao is still controversial. Some argue that the Mao call themselves and their language Mao (Siebert 2002: 5). In contrast, Wendy James (1979: 8) in an earlier study noted that they do not call themselves Mao and their Oromo neighbours used this name. Lionel Bender went even further and underscored that the term Mao, in the same manner as *Shankilla*, was a derogatory term used by the Oromo (1975: 128).

Like the Gumuz, the Mao and Komo had difficult relationships with their powerful neighbours. Indeed, the pressure on the Mao and the Komo became more intense after Sheik Khojele of Assosa peacefully submitted to Menelik and became a loyal vassal at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His autonomy was contingent upon making regular payments of tribute in gold and slaves to the crown in Addis Ababa. This required him to apply harsh tactics on the Mao, the Komo and other subordinate groups in order to raise revenue and slaves (Abdussamad 1999: 437). This forced the two groups further to the fringes of the periphery (Cerulli 1956:16; Johnson 1986: 229). Although powerless in the face of their dominant neighbours, the Komo played one predator against the other. They also exploited the frontier aspect of their location to escape the heavy exaction their neighbours put on them by alternating their residence between the Sudan and Ethiopia (Johnson 1986: 239).

The Mao and Komo have a long history of interaction because of their geographic proximity and shared plight. Thus, they have exchanged many cultural values between each other. For instance, Mao social organisations were influenced because of their absorption of the Komo (Cerulli 1956: 20). Cultural exchange between the Mao and Komo gained new momentum after the establishment of the Mao-Komo special district and the recognition of both groups as owner ethnic groups of the B-G region. Hence, the formation of a local government organisation, a political party and a development association under the newly invented

identity of Mao-Komo could accelerate the amalgamation of the two ethnic groups. In fact, both groups may find it expedient to use this invented Mao-Komo identity in order to defend their interests within the B-G region (González-Ruibal and Fernández 2005: 10).

## 5.4 History of Incorporation and Administration

Both the Somali and the B-G regions became part of the Ethiopian State at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through wars of conquests by the armies of Emperor Menelik. The manner in which the different ethnic groups within the two regions incorporated into the Ethiopian State shows the two broader trends that prevailed during the expansion, peaceful submission and resistance. From among the ethnic groups of the B-G, the Bertha rulers after some resistance submitted to the invading army of Menelik. This led to the recognition of their autonomy. However, the other ethnic groups of the B-G region suffered slaving raids even after their incorporation. In contrast, Menelik incorporated the Ogaden through a series of military conquests.

### 5.4.1 Somali incorporation and administration

The Somali region is one of the territories incorporated into the Ethiopian State during Emperor Menelik's southward expansion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bahru 1991: 61-8; Teshale 1995: 30-2). Menelik's interest to expand into the Ogaden was motivated by his desire to control the ancient trade routes that pass through Harar to the Somali coast and the livestock potential of the region. Moreover, there were political and strategic reasons behind the expansion. Control of the lowlands was particularly sought to secure the precarious independence of the country (Tibebe 1994: 71). However, like the other territories conquered by the forces of the Ethiopian empire, Menelik justified the conquest as a reunification of the former tributaries of the Ethiopian State (Teshale 1995: 41). In addition to domestic factors, the expansion into the Ogaden had an international context. Opportunity to conquer the Ogaden was opened to Menelik after the Egyptians evacuated from the historic city of Harar in 1884/85 (Mohamed 2002: 1179-80).

It is possible to view Ethiopian rule in the Somali region from four angles in chronological order. The first phase (1891-1935) could be

characterised as *raiding as expression of sovereignty*. In 1891 the incorporation of the Ogaden began. In the same year, the garrison town of Jijiga was established and this facilitated the campaigns to the interior of the Ogaden. Ethiopian forays in the Ogaden culminated when the authorities signed treaties in 1897 with the British and French defining their Somali possessions (Tibebe 1994: 72).

The administration of the Ogaden differed from the dominant patterns of administration that emerged in the newly incorporated territories in the south. In other words, the imposition of the *neftegna* or the cooptation of the chiefs of the native population (the *balabat*) widely practiced in the south could not be transplanted in the Ogaden. As a result, periodic raiding became the key expression of Ethiopian control (Barnes 2000: 49-53; Lewis 2002a: 65-85; Sheik-Abdi 1977: 58-9).

The second phase (1935-1954) of Ethiopian rule in the Ogaden can be considered as a period of *changing of powers and uncertainty*. The 1935-1941 Italian occupation of Ethiopia left some legacies in the region. During this period, the Italians merged the region with Italian Somaliland and made it part of their colony of Italian East Africa – *Africa Orientale Italiana*. After the end of Italian rule in 1941, the British who spearheaded the war that led to the defeat of the Italians, decided to retain the Ogaden. They also combined Italian Somaliland and the Ogaden. This contributed to the development of pan-Somali nationalism (Tibebe 1991: 17-18).

In 1954, the UN allowed the Italians to return to Italian Somaliland as trust administrators (Lewis 2002: 141). In contrast, the British continued to occupy the Ogaden on the pretence that their control over the region was vital to the war effort in the Pacific. However, the main reason for British insistence to control the Ogaden was their desire to reconfigure the future administration of all Somali territories in the Horn of Africa. In 1946, the author of the British plan to unify all Somali territories under a single trust administration, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin suggested that 'the interests of the Somali people would be best served if the existing union of Somali territories were continued' (cited in Lewis 2002: 124). Because of Ethiopian opposition and the support that the Haile Selassie regime received from the USA, Britain rather reluctantly restored the Ogaden to Ethiopian rule in 1954. However, this did not pass without incident. In Jijiga, protests over the decision were clamped down forcefully by Ethiopian authorities (Lewis 2002a: 130; Markakis 1987: 56).

The third phase (1954-1974) could be termed as a period of *emergent Somali nationalism, and contested authority in the Ogaden*. The restoration of



Ethiopian rule in the region after the defeat of the Italians saw unprecedented resistance and insecurity (Tibebe 1991: 24). To overcome these problems, the government adopted some policies intended to help win the support of the people of the region. To this end, the emperor made a high profile visit to the region in 1956. In his often-quoted speech to a meeting of Somali notables in Kebri Dahar (Ogaden), he said:

Differences in language often create misunderstanding and can seriously affect the responsibilities that are being bestowed on you.... Our police whom we have sent among you have come to assist you in keeping order and security.... It is our desire that schools will not only impart education, but also will foster understanding and co-operation among the military, the police and the civilian population.... Acquire the necessary education whereby you will be able to take over the various positions and responsibilities that await you in the Central Government Administration.... Lack of knowledge of the national language will be a barrier. You will now have a good chance to learn to read and write Amharic. (cited in Gesheker 1985: 11)

For the first time, the government opened schools and health facilities in the region during this period. Additionally, some Somali notables gained appointments as district governors. Moreover, Somali clan chiefs received regular salaries and traditional Ethiopian court titles (Markakis 1987: 175). Concomitant with policies of inducements, the imperial government in its bid to bolster its presence restructured the region's administration. Hence, the Ogaden, which was maintained as a single *awraja*,<sup>16</sup> after its restoration to Ethiopian rule, was incrementally divided into five *awraja* and 23 *woreda*.

However, the effort of pacifying the Ogaden by reorganising the structure of local administration and by providing government services like education and health did not dampen the agitation of the people for the pan-Somali aspiration. The independence of British and Italian Somaliland in 1960 and their subsequent unification into Somalia elevated the goal of Somali unification to a constitutional principle.

The late 1950s saw the emergence of Somali nationalist organisations in the Ogaden that sought armed rebellion against Ethiopian rule. In 1963, Ethiopian government's attempt to collect tax ignited widespread rebellion in the region. The rebellion was led by clandestine Ogaden organisations. This conflict triggered the first military confrontation between Ethiopia and Somalia (Markakis 1987: 175-7).

The fourth phase (1974-1991) could be characterised as *military rule in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu and war in the Ogaden*. In October 1969, the Somali military seized power after a bloodless *coup*. The military government outlined its intention to continue the ‘unification struggle’ (Lewis 2002: 207). It, nevertheless, postponed active involvement in the pan-Somali nationalist project until it consolidated its power within Somalia (Lewis 1989: 573). However, the chaos and instability in Ethiopia following the removal of Emperor Haile Selassie by a popular revolution in 1974 was taken by the Somali leaders as the right moment to effect their goal of bringing all Somali territories under one flag (Gebru 2000: 638-9).

The Somali government followed a two-pronged strategy. First, it bolstered military capacity by taking advantage of the rather generous supply of weaponry by the ex-Soviet Union. Second, it established liberation movements to aid its goal of uniting all Somali inhabited territories with Somalia. To this end, the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) began operating in January 1976 with the aim of ‘liberating’ Somali inhabited territories in Ethiopia. Six months later, Somalia established the Somali-Abbo Liberation Front (SALF)<sup>17</sup> for Muslim Oromo insurgents from the neighbouring Bale and Sidamo provinces of Ethiopia (Markakis 1987: 225). Both organisations were ideologically, organisationally and logistically under the grip Mogadishu (Gebru 2000: 640).

The two countries went into a full-blown war in 1977. Initially, the Somali troops overwhelmed their Ethiopian counterparts. But Somali initial successes were not translated into total victory (Ibid). In the midst of the war, there was a dramatic change of alignment by the two belligerent countries. The Soviet Union that remained a patron of Somalia since its declaration of scientific communism in 1970 abandoned it in November 1977 and embraced Ethiopia. Moreover, it airlifted much needed military hardware to the Ethiopian army. Between November 1977 and March 1978, the Ethiopian counteroffensive with the help of Cuban and Yemeni troops managed to reclaim all the territories the Somali troops occupied. The 1977/78 Ethio-Somali war had several important implications on the politics of Somalia. For example, it undermined pan-Somali nationalism and dislocated millions of people (Besteman 1996: 589).

In 1987, when the Derg established the PDRE, it introduced some changes in the regional administration of the country. In line with this, it established two autonomous regions – Ogaden and Dire Dawa for ethnic Somalis. In 1992, when the EPRDF introduced 14 ethnically

constituted regions, the Somali region or Region 5 established by bringing together all Somali inhabited territories in Ethiopia.

The following section outlines the history of incorporation and the evolution of the administration of the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

#### 5.4.2 Benishangul-Gumuz incorporation and administration

The B-G region is located along the Nilo-Saharan belt of the Ethio-Sudanese border that stretches thousands of kilometres from the Ethio-Eritrea border in the north to Ethio-Sudanese border in the south. These border areas were not until recently attractive to the politically dominant Amhara-Tigrayan highlanders (Perham 1948: 324). As a result, Ethiopian authorities used the locally dominant ethnic groups for extracting revenue and policing (Johnson 1986: 221-2).

There are marked differences in the relationships of the different ethnic groups of this peripheral region with the Ethiopian State. On the one hand, after their submission, the Witawit-Bertha gained some autonomy. In contrast, the Gumuz and other minority ethnic groups suffered under continuous campaigns of enslavement. Two contrasting models lend themselves to the discussion of these variations – *raiding and retreat* (Gumuz), *semi-autonomy*, and *junior partnership* (Bertha).

The history of interaction between the Gumuz and the Ethiopian State is one of *raiding, slaving and retreat*. The history of the incorporation of the Metekel region<sup>18</sup> in which the majority of the Gumuz reside was more painful than the incorporation of the Bertha of the Bela-Shangul region.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, many Ethiopian emperors from earlier times raided the Gumuz of Metekel for slaves. According to Richard Pankhurst, ‘the Balayas [Gumuz] were referred in the chronicle of one of the Ethiopian emperors of the sixteenth century as *agbert*, the Geez<sup>20</sup> term for slave, implying that they were a people from whom slaves were taken, or from whom it was considered permissible to seize them’ (1997: 268). Tadesse Tamrat, in his part, summarised the attempt of several Ethiopian emperors who sought to control the Gumuz country since the 16<sup>th</sup> century by saying:

In order to bring the land, its resources and the people under control, kings such as Sarsa Dengel (1563-1597), Susenyos (1607-1632), Fasiledes (1632-1667), Yohannes (1667-1683), and Iyasu the Great (1607-1706) had successively conducted devastating and destructive campaigns on the Gumuz, achieving a final breakthrough and attaching them through the ancient system of indirect rule by appointing neighbouring Agaw chiefs

(under patron-client relationship) over them (cited in Wolde-Selassie 2004: 62).

Hence, the Gumuz for centuries faced the expansionist drives of their highland neighbours in northwestern Ethiopia. Some scholars, based on records of travellers suggest that the Gumuz used to live 'in the higher country of what is now central and southern Gojam in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, although they were exposed to intermittent slave raids and were already beginning to retreat down into the lowlands' (James 1986: 121). Agaw traditions also maintain that they settled in the areas that today became the Agaw-Awi *zone* of the Amhara region after displacing the Gumuz (Ibid).

Finally, King Teklehaimanot of Gojam conquered the Gumuz in 1898 (Abdussamad 1995: 57). After this conquest, the Gumuz country became part of Agawmidir *anraja* under the king of Gojam (Wolde-Selassie 2004). Even if the Gumuz were conquered and brought into the fold of Ethiopian rule, they were not pacified for many years to come. The relationship that prevailed well into the 20th century between them and their Agaw/Amhara neighbours was thus a frontier type in which the latter were interested not only to impose their dominance, but also to expand their settlements in territory of the former. In this respect, raiding the Gumuz for slaves continued until 1938 (Abdussamad 1995). The Gumuz, to escape these raids dispersed and left their country for the inhospitable lowlands of the Blue Nile valley. Some even crossed the Blue Nile and settled in the Dedessa valley, which was then under the domain of Oromo rulers of Wollega.

The Gumuz who lacked the military prowess to defend themselves from the attacks of their highland neighbours resisted the unceasing encroachment into their territory by retreating further into the fringes of the lowland country (Abdussamad 1999: 436). Moreover, they engaged in occasional skirmishes with their highland neighbours and indiscriminately attacked any highlander they encountered. For example, in the 1950s and 60s, they blocked roads in Metekel, 'chased state tribute collectors, hunters, ... merchants and burnt non-Gumuz villages' (Tsega 2002: 18). The government response was even more violent. It sent military expeditions to take measures and armed highland settlers. However, this did not stop the conflict but rather, intensified the violence between the *reds*<sup>21</sup> (highlanders) and *blacks*<sup>22</sup> (Gumuz) (Ibid 18-19).

The 1974 revolution that brought an end to tenancy and feudalism in Ethiopia did not bring a major change in the relationship between the Ethiopian State and the Gumuz. The settlement of thousands of peasants from famine hit areas of the country into the Metekel region without any consideration of the impact of this scheme on the livelihood of the Gumuz further pushed them to the periphery and increased inter-ethnic tensions (Gebre 2004; Getachew 1989; Wolde-Selassie 2004).

Thus, the formation of the BGNRS in which the Gumuz are one of the titular ethnic groups is a water shade. Much of the discussion about the Gumuz also holds true for the small minority groups – Shinasha, Mao and Komo who like the former suffered in the past.

In contrast to the Gumuz, it is possible to characterise the incorporation of the Bela-Shangul region into the Ethiopian State as *semi-autonomy and junior partnership*. From ancient times, the historic Bela-Shangul region gained fame for its gold resources. Thus, many powerful states that emerged in the present Horn of Africa region and beyond sought to control it (Triulzi 1981: 2). Similarly, Emperor Menelik who was attracted by the gold riches of the region sent his troops at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century soon after the incorporation of Wollega in 1882. Some argue that the collapse of the Mahadist rule at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that exercised overlordship in the area gave incentive to Menelik to send his troops to Bela-Shangul (Bahru 1991: 66). Anyhow, the three sheikhdoms of the area, the Bela-Shangul, Aqoldi (Assosa) and Khomosha were incorporated into the Ethiopian State after some failed resistance in 1897 (Ibid). The planned common resistance against Menelik failed as one of the rulers, Sheik Khojele of Assosa submitted to the invading Ethiopian forces. He also provided key intelligence, which helped the invaders break up the remaining resistance (Atieb 1973: 40).

Following the incorporation of the region, the Ethiopian authorities imprisoned the three sheiks from 1898 to 1908. In this period, one of the military chiefs who took part in the conquest was put in charge of the territories. Later, Menelik put the three sheikhdoms under the hereditary rulers of Leqa Naqamte (Atieb 1973; Triulzi 1981). In 1908, after their release, the Witawit rulers regained their territories.

Right after his return, Sheik Khojele of Assosa began to build his power with material and financial assistance from the Emperor in Addis Ababa. Consequently, he consolidated his power and developed strong relationships with the imperial court in Addis Ababa. As a result, the death of Menelik in 1913 and the resultant confusion over imperial succession did not affect his position. Khojele maintained his position by providing lavish tribute in gold, ivory and slaves to those who were in

charge in Addis Ababa. Because of his strong relationship with the centre, in 1914 he became the overall ruler of the three Bela-Shangul sheikdoms. In fact, until his death in 1938, Khojele remained unassailable to his rivals within the region. He even managed to maintain his grip over Bela-Shangul during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (Atieb 1973: 56).

The death of Khojele in 1938 and the restoration of the Emperor in 1941 brought a major change in the autonomous status of the Bela-Shangul region and the role of its hereditary rulers. Thus, *reduced autonomy and direct rule* are terms that characterise the period from 1941 to 1991. The long maintained autonomy of the Bela-Shangul region ended in 1941. Even if the emperor seemed interested in finding a successor to Khojele from his descendants, because of disagreement among them, he appointed an administrator from the centre (Rasheed 1995: 16). However, the descendants of the hereditary rulers of the region found appointment at district and sub-district levels (Ibid 19). The coming of officials from the centre intensified after the change of the imperial regime in 1974. The Derg removed the descendants of the hereditary rulers from their administrative positions. Nonetheless, after the 1987 reorganisation of local and regional government under the PDRE, Addis Ababa appointed some of the descendants of the former Witawit rulers in the Assosa Administrative *zone*. In 1992, when the EPRDF established 14 regional administrations, the historic Bela Shangul region came to be part of the Benishangul-Gumuz region with the Bertha as one of the titular ethnic groups.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the two study regions and shown unequal relationships that prevailed between the ethnic groups of the Somali and the B-G regions and those who controlled the centre. This is evident in the peripherality and marginality of the two regions to the political economy of the country. Hence, both regions lag far behind the highland regions in terms of social and physical infrastructure.

In spite of their similarity, the Somali and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions exhibit many differences in terms of their ethnic makeup and cross-border ethnic relations. In this respect, the Somali region is one of the most ethnically homogenous regions of the country, although as will be discussed in the next chapter; there are some latent ethnic differences.

Additionally, the pervasive clan division that exist within Somali societies undermines the unity of ethnic Somalis. Hence, as discussed in the next chapter, with the introduction of the regional autonomy in 1992, the clans in the Somali region began to act as if they were separate ethnic groups. In contrast, the Benishangul-Gumuz is a region of several minority ethnic groups none of which constitutes more than 50 per cent of the overall population of the region. Hence, the rivalry of the two larger titular groups, the Gumuz and the Bertha, dominate the politics of the region. Furthermore, there are difficulties in the relationship between the titular and the non-titular communities.

When it comes to trans-boundary ethnic relations, the Somali region has remained significant in the politics of Somalia. The irredentist policy of independent Somalia and the wars that it and Ethiopia fought led to the entanglement of the relationship between the Somali region and the political centre in broader international conflicts. In contrast, the ethnic groups of the Benishangul-Gumuz region remained marginal to the Sudanese State. There was thus no war of irredentism between the two countries. Using what has been outlined here as background, the forthcoming four chapters deal with intra and inter-regional autonomy conflicts and emerging centre-regional relations. The next chapter examines intra-regional conflicts within the Somali region

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The region previously known as the Ogaden is located in the south-eastern part of Ethiopia. In this chapter, the term Ogaden refers to the Ethiopian administered Somali inhabited territories before the formation of the Somali Region (or Region 5) in 1992. The Somali region or the Somali National Regional State (SNRS) is used alternatively to refer to the new regional state, which was created in 1993 by the merger of almost all of the Somali inhabited districts of Ethiopia.

<sup>2</sup> According to David H. Shinn et al. the term 'highland', 'has geographical, historical and political meaning despite the fact that it is not precisely defined. For example, Tigrayan and Amhara are generally considered to be highlander.... [They] share [predominantly] a common political structure, land tenure system, culture and religion' (Shinn et al. 2004: 207).

<sup>3</sup> The Somalis collectively call almost all non-Somali Ethiopians who reside in the SNRS from the highland regions as 'Amhara' irrespective of the personal ethnicity of the concerned individuals. This is probably because of the

dominance of the Amhara in the troops sent to incorporate the Ogaden at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Before the change of the unitary state structure, the 'Amhara', even if they were few in number in the Ogaden, they were politically dominant – they were administrators, state officials, and the language of administration and educational medium of instruction was Amharic. Now the Amhara within the SNRS are a new minority who do not have any representation in the administrative structures of the region.

<sup>5</sup> The Ogaden clan is dominant in the following six *zones* – Degahabur, Fik, Warder, Korahe, Gode and Afder.

<sup>6</sup> The homogeneity discourse on Somali identity is best explained by the title of the book, which D. Laitin and S. Samatar jointly published in 1987, *A Nation in Search of a State*. Their main argument was that unlike other post-colonial African states where the State is preoccupied in creating a nation out of nations, the Somali nation was striving to bring all Somalis under one state (Laitin and Samatar 1987: 21).

<sup>7</sup> Patrilineal or agnatic descent is established by tracing descent exclusively through males from a founding male ancestor (Lewis 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Coined by I.M. Lewis, it refers to the upper limit of clanship or a federation of clans, which claim patrilineal descent. 'Clan families because of their large size and also widely scattered settlement they cannot act corporately as political units' (Lewis 1999: 4).

<sup>9</sup> These groups are occupational outcasts looked down upon by the dominant Somali clans. Somali occupational minorities are smaller in number and are scattered throughout the major Somali clans. The 'Sab' of occupational outcasts include the Midgaan, Tumaal and Yibir (Lewis 2002: 10).

<sup>10</sup> *Diya* 'blood compensation' paid by one *diya*-paying group to another, usually in the form of livestock or cash. *Diya*-paying group refers to a compact social unit that takes collective responsibility for their own security, as well as undertaking an obligation to compensate other groups for any harm committed by one of its members (Lewis 1999)

<sup>11</sup> Different clans have different designations, which include Ugaz (Ogaden clans in Ethiopia), Sutlan (Akkishu in Jijiga area), Gerad (Bertre clan around Jijiga), etc.

<sup>12</sup> *xeer* refers to the customary law that exists between Somali clans. It is an unwritten agreement that evolved within and between Somali clan communities over generations. Although it bears no formal institutional structure, traditional elders oversee the implementation of *Xeer*. It is particularly important in rural areas of Somalia where the presence of modern political institutions is weak (Sage 2005: 5).



<sup>13</sup> Witawit refers to the dominant families within the Bertha – who have a legend that they were descendants of the mixture between the ruling families of the Bertha and Arabic merchants and Islamic teachers who came from the Sudan.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Pure Bertha’ refers to the large majority of the Bertha (excepting) the ruling families. The ‘pure’ Bertha are pure because they were not mixed with Arab blood.

<sup>15</sup> The two Oromo words are *Sabaan and qella* meaning ‘slaughter five’ (Abey 2001: 24).

<sup>16</sup> *Anrraja* refers to a sub-provincial administrative structure in the pre-1991 period.

<sup>17</sup> Somali Abbo was coined to incorporate the Muslim Oromo Somali neighbours who rebelled against the imperial regime in 1963 in the Somali unification struggle by emphasising shared cultural values between the Oromo and the Somali like Islam and their collective grievances against Addis Ababa (Markakis 1987: 263).

<sup>18</sup> The Gumuz inhabited territories of the present Benishangul-Gumuz region can be divided into two geographic regions, Metekel and Dedessa in the former Gojam and Wollega provinces respectively. This division has been reflected in the present administrative divisions of the Gumuz – the former Metekel *anrraja* has been maintained as the Gumuz *zone* of Metekel, while the Gumuz of the Dedessa valley and its environs were organised into the newly established Khamashi *zone*.

<sup>19</sup> The Bertha who are found in the former Wollega province had three Sheikdoms, Bela-Shangul, Khomosha and Aqoldi (Assosa). After the incorporation of the region into the Ethiopian empire at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the name of one of the Sheikdoms, Bela-Shangul came to be used for the three territories (Triulzi 1975). In this thesis too, Bela-Shangul is used to refer the three Witawit sheikdoms.

<sup>20</sup> Geez is an ancient Semitic language that developed in the Ethiopian highlands. It is today mainly a language of liturgy for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

<sup>21</sup> The highlanders are termed ‘reds’ because of their fairer colour complexion.

<sup>22</sup> The Gumuz were termed ‘black’ because of their darker colour complexion as compared to the highlanders.