New configurations of Ethiopian ethnicity: the challenge of the South
Abbink, G.J.

46. Other sources give other lists of kings, e.g., Dil Ne'ad (or Anbessa-Widim), Mahbere-Widim, Agb'a-Siyon, Sinfe-Ari'd, Negash Zaré, Asfiha, Ya'qob, Bahr Assegid, Id(1)m Assegid, Yikunno Amlak. Another: Girma Asferé, Dil Ne'ad, Mahbere-Widim, Negash Zaré, Wenag Seré, Akile-Widim, Tesfa-Iyesus. (Negash Zoré is spelt so in my source—it is not a typing error for Zaré.)

47. This time span of 333 years occurs in many sources, some giving it as the time the Zagwé dynasty ruled, not—as indicated here—the period the "Solomonic line" was "deprived" of the throne, including the rule of Yodït. The figures vary considerably—from 133 to 375 years for the Zagwé dynasty alone; cf. C. Conti Rossini, [Bergamo, 1928], 303.

New Configurations of Ethiopian Ethnicity: The Challenge of the South

To the memory of Jacques Bureau 1947-1998[1]

Jon G. Abbink
African Studies Centre, Leiden University

Introduction

In the 1920s the Chicago-school sociologist W. I. Thomas formulated his famous theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." This succinct description of the power of social representations applies more than ever to ethnicity and ethnic identity, in their figmented or real forms. In a world where a fuzzy cultural identity like ethnicity is being "appropriated" by politics, it becomes a fixed entity and a basis for presumed group interests. The notion of "ethnicity as a given", i.e., as a so-called undeniable quality of group relations, dominates current discussions on multiculturalism in the postmodern West and on cultural and group rights in developing countries, although it has many times been demonstrated to be false.

One may wonder what new things can be said on ethnicity and politics in general, and in Ethiopia in particular, after at least two decades of anthropological theorizing and especially after the undue "politicization" of the academic debate on these matters. Probably we have come to the point where a serious understanding of Ethiopia's modern political history in the last two decades is hindered not helped by using an "ethnic paradigm" (cf. Hizkias 1993). Certainly, ethnicity, language and ethnocultural differences are historical facts, and can indeed not be negated or brushed aside as irrelevant. As Claude Ake has said (1993: 13): " . . . the construction of ethnicity is not only political, but also cultural; it is not always cynical and opportunistic, it is sometimes a survival strategy of people struggling to affirm their humanity."

Ethnicity and its socio-political use are also eminently "modern." But as it is always embroiled in political, social and economic issues, it needs to be addressed *through* the latter. Despite empirical evidence of its vehemence as an idiom of conflict, it is doubtful whether ethnicity can be a category of social reality in its own right. It is true that the great advantage of ethnicity—as an idiom of "fictive kinship" based on ideas or myths of shared descent—is indeed that it can be used very successfully as a strategy of political mobilization. For political purposes, it seems that the historical referents of ethnicity should just about be enough to "ring a bell" in the presumed constituency, i.e., to appeal to that "kinship" feeling: the accuracy of the claims and arguments based on ethnicity is not important.

I re-emphasize in this paper—in line with recent anthropological and political science insights into the phenomenon—that the discourse of ethnicity that has emerged is usually an ideological ploy for other interests advanced by elite groups and that ethnicity in itself does not have ontological status as an independent "social fact," except in a loose, cultural sense. Ethnic identity is often being used to construct differences that were not there before. The fact that people identify themselves differently in cultural-historical terms does not logically imply that they act or prefer to act on the basis of ethnicity in all contexts and political conditions.

Ethnicity is thus a *discursive construct*, and primarily to be interpreted as a cultural-cognitive representation of social conditions and problems that can harden into an alternative—though usually inaccurate—version of social reality. A successful explanation of ethnic phenomena, which have been problematized especially by colonialism and by postcolonial state action, should simultaneously address the political and socioeconomic elements involved.

In Ethiopia, one might say, "hardened ethnicity" has set the confines of official political discourse, and the "politics of identity" define the political system and its arenas. Two factors at present lead to ethnicities hardening and being presumed, also by their adherents, to exist as immutable collectivities: a) the nature of state activity in a culturally heterogeneous country: the state—apart even from the regime running it—has hegemonic ambitions as an administrative structure with its own codes, and is a vehicle of partial or elite interests; and b) the characteristics of emerging globalization as a cultural process. By connecting the local and the global—through market forces, migration, new electronic and media communications, and ideologies of group contrast and identity—these trends redefine local particularisms and accord them a new role in wider arenas (cf. Appadurai 1996: 3-4).

Of course, a logical or intellectual critique on "ethnicism" and "ethnic liberation" will in itself not have any effect in conditions where ethnic ideologies are capitalized upon in an uncritical or duplicitous manner by "ethnic entrepreneurs" (see Mikell 1996). But such critiques cannot be neglected either. Incidentally, the easy ascription of ethnic identities, especially by Westerners studying politics and conflict in Africa, may also betray a transformed discourse of "tribalism," which is discredited on scientific and moral grounds (cf. Campbell 1997).

In this paper I discuss some issues of ethnicity and the "national project" in Ethiopia in relation to the *Southern Regional State*, or, to use its elegant official name, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS). It borders the Oromiya and Gambela states as well as Kenya and Sudan and has a population of about 11 million, or some 17 percent of the total Ethiopian population.[2] The Southern Region is known for its notable ethnolinguistic diversity.

To refer to the title of this paper, the "South" is a double challenge: 1) to the Ethiopian federation, because of the fact of ethnolinguistic diversity and the lack of a dominant ethnic majority (as opposed to the situation in, e.g., the Amhara, Oromiya, Tigray, Somali and Afar regions), and 2) to the development of the Southern region itself: can a fruitful coalition of ethnic elites (or a "transethnic" elite) be found that will successfully manage policy and administration in that multiethnic region? What will then be the role of ethnic identity and identification in the politics of this region? In what follows I make some remarks on these points, preceded by some general background.

Ethnicity and Identity: The Ethiopian Context

After the demise of the *Derg*, the rights of nations, nationalities and people were first recognized and discussed on the National Conference of Peace and Reconciliation called by the victorious Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in July 1991, to which delegations of the peoples in

the South were also invited. They were often hastily assembled and some had curious names and identities, such as the "Omotic" delegation. Under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-95), a new ethnic-based map of Ethiopia and its regional states was introduced already in 1991. The map took *language* as the chief criterion for boundaries and ethnic identity. In the preliminary delineation of the boundaries between the ethnolinguistic areas, the EPRDF government has extensively used the "nationalities map" of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (1983) a political research bureau that did research work under the Derg regime (the first government to officially "recognize," if only in name, the Ethiopian nationalities).[3] In fact, most results from the work of the ISEN have been directly taken over. So far, under the post-1991 regime, there has however been no *officially issued* map with the internal boundaries of Ethiopia (i.e., between zones and *woredas*, and with precise regional borders), i.e., the zones and *woredas* are still insecurely delimited.[4]

In 1994, after the transition period led by the EPRDF-dominated Transitional Government, Ethiopia became a "federal democratic republic" composed of nine regional states, which bear the name of their majority ethnic group, except Gambela and the Southern Region. Addis Ababa is a special region, a kind of city-state (with its own separate charter since mid-1997). In 1995, the city of Dire Dawa was separated from the Somali Region (due to violent clashes and persistent mal-administration) and is now administered directly under the federal government. The regional states are assumed to operate with a large measure of administrative and political autonomy in the framework of federal decentralization.

Democratization is one of the main political aims stated by the Ethiopian government and is primarily seen as equal to the recognition and realization of "nationality" rights, meaning ethnic group rights. Among them are use of the "indigenous" language (e.g., in primary education), development of the groups' specific cultural expressions, and regional self-administration. Ethnic group identity has been declared the basis for the entire political process: for party formation, for the delineation of regions and electoral districts, for registration of voters (ethnic group membership should be stated here), for eligibility of a candidate to one of the two post-1995 chambers of parliament, and for staffing the administration of local and regional governments.

The various regional states have the job to implement and promote regional development, autonomy and ethno-cultural rights. On the federal level, the states are politically represented in the second chamber of parliament, the *Council of the Federation*. The members of this Council (CF) are chosen (delegated) by the nine member states. This Council is dominated by the federal executive power and has limited influence: it has no right of initiative[5] and cannot amend the legislative process. The CF can only comment on and ratify proposals adopted in the House of Peoples'Representatives (HPR), "settle disputes" between member states (e.g., on borders), and interpret and contribute to amending the Constitution. A Constitutional Inquiry Commission, announced in Art. 82 of the Constitution and installed in July 1996, serves under the Council of the Federation (although it does not have a sufficiently independent role).[6]

At present, Ethiopian citizenship for all practical purposes (voting rights, marriage, *k'ebele* registration, etc.) is defined *through* ethnic identity (i.e., by official ascription, making it, e.g., obligatory for children of mixed family to "choose" to belong to the ethnic group of one of the parents, even if this in itself can already be difficult to determine). This ethnic definition of citizens thus seems to have been extended into domains where it is completely irrelevant.

The South and Its Background

Most groups now in the SNNPRS were forcefully incorporated into the Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century, although many territories had been part of (or were under the strong political and religious influence of) the Ethiopian political domain in earlier ages (e.g., Wolayta, Gamo and parts of Arssi). Apart from those conquered by violence, there were regions and traditional polities that submitted to inclusion into the Ethiopian empire without armed conflict.

History

Southern Ethiopia has historically been outside the realm of the South Semitic speakers,[7] and is mostly populated by Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan speakers. Up to the 1890s, the southern regions in what is now the

SNNPRS were stateless polities, or had sacred kingship or chiefdoms. Although many anthropological and ethnohistorical studies have been carried out here especially in the last two decades, the complexities of Southern political history and of the underlying cultural models and socio-organizational patterns is still not fully clear.

The regions though politically independent were not isolated from surrounding state formations, especially the Ethiopian Christian kingdom. R. Pankhurst concluded his wide-ranging historical survey of these peripheral and often "stateless" regions south of the highland state up to the late 18th century by saying that: ". . . the borderlands . . . were far from isolated from the central Ethiopic core" (i.e., the Christian state). He adduced evidence showing that they were connected through long-term economic links, religious and political contacts (and conflicts) and patterns of migration (1997: xi-xii, 443).

After the incorporation of the South into Ethiopia, these links took on a more exploitative character (*gäbbar* system) and led to the arrival of large numbers of Northern settlers of various backgrounds. Even if with these changes a new and often oppressive socioeconomic system was established, the social and political divide did not become all-encompassing. After their political inclusion into the Ethiopian state, for instance, many Southern groups responded to the call by Emperor Menilik II to defend the country against the Italians and participated in the 1896 battle of Adua.

In the eras of Emperor Haile Sellassie and the *Derg*, the Southern region never was a unified area in either economic, cultural or political terms. For instance, the Gurage region was part of Shoa; the eastern areas of Gedeo, Wolayta, Gamo, Guji (now in Oromiya) or Konso belonged to the large Sidamo Region. The Käfa Region was a large conglomerate of very diverse groups, from Jimma Oromo to pastoralist Dassanetch. The southwestern parts, around Maji (in Käfa) and Gambela (in Ilubabor), were the most neglected parts of Ethiopia, remote and lacking infrastructure. In 1991, five regions (*killils* 7 to 11) were designated in the South by the then governing Transitional Government of Ethiopia: Gurage-Hadiya-Kambata, Wolayta, Omo, Sidama and Käfa. In 1992, these very diverse regions were then again unilaterally merged into one by the government.

Actual Ethnocultural Diversity

The 1994 Census of Ethiopia lists dozens of ethnolinguistic groups in the South, amongst whom 45 were "officially" mentioned in the original November 1991 redefined map. The largest groups, in order of magnitude, are: Sidama (1.8 million), Gurage (including the non-"Sebat Bet" groups Silt'e and Soddo, 1.6 million), Wolayta (1.2 million), Hadiya (875,000), Kaficho (561,000) and Gedeo (460,000).[8] The smallest groups count from a few hundred to a few thousand. These groups are divergent not only in language (some belonging to the South-Semitic family, others to Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan), but also in socioeconomic organization, religion and political structure. There were sub-regional similarities and alliances between groups, but never any unity or solidarity, not even on the level of the previous five Regions 7 to 11.

As in other areas, the South also has cities and towns that—because of their mixed character—fall outside the *killil* concept: Shashemene, Awasa, Mizan Täfäri, Tepi, Dilla, etc.[9] In a prophetic paper of 1989, the late Jacques Bureau (1989: 4) already indicated the problematic place these partly de-culturized, de-ethnicized urban people would have in the ethnic scheme of things in Ethiopia. This concerns a group of about five to six million people in all. Outside the Southern Region the problem also exists: notably, of course, in Addis Ababa. For Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa the problem was "solved" by declaring them special, chartered cities. In Harar (Region 13) an uneasy (and occasionally violently disturbed) balance existed between the Harari, the Oromo, and other minority groups. For the many middle-sized towns the situation has led to acrimonious struggles for power and access to jobs and other resources. This is also the case in the towns of the SNNPRS, notably Awasa and Shashemene. While these towns cannot be claimed to be the "native ethnic area" of any group except in an anachronistic, nominal sense, people are forced to make an often impossible choice as to their "ethnic identity" and their mother-tongue in the educational system. Even if urban people retain contacts with a rural area of origin (for ceremonial-ritual reasons, family visit, or by giving financial support), it is obviously beside the point to identify them with these areas if they have no way or wish to go back there and have been living in town for all of their lives.

In these mixed cities, local power holders may also opt to enforce dominance of the group they are said to belong to. For instance, in Awasa, capital of the Southern Region, it is asserted by some local people that Sidama people (who are well-represented in the zonal administration) claim the town as part of their territory (though it was not traditionally theirs) and try to expand their numbers in the town. People from the countryside are allegedly allotted building plots bypassing the master plan, and get easier access to jobs in the administration (There is of course no official way to check these anecdotal allegations). Such local dominance would also mean that the Sidama language would eventually have to be taught in the schools, pushing out Amharic, the national working language used until now in these mixed urban areas.

Economic and Political Role of the South within the Federation

The SNNPRS is still marginal in Ethiopia as a whole. Its political and economic clout is very limited.

- In the organized collective opposition to the *Derg* regime political or civic movements from the South did not play a noticeable role, and partly as a result of this the Region has, politically speaking, not been able to assert great influence on the national level. Leaders have been appointed by the EPRDF, and did not emerge through grassroots movements.

  Regional autonomy of the SNNPRS is not fully prepared or implemented, and most policy directives still come from Addis Ababa. Decentralization of decision-making is not put in place in a convincing manner. Lack of institutional capacity is one part of the story; the forced "indigenization" of the administration—putting people from the Region itself in important positions even if they lack the skill, experience and right attitude—another.

  Political parties are not salient in the region. Groups formed during and after the 1991 Peace and Reconciliation Conference, such as the "Omotic delegation" (whatever that may have meant, as "Omotic" is not an ethnic designation but a language-group term, coined by linguists in the 1970s) or the Käfa Peoples Democratic Movement, have disappeared. All important political and administrative positions in the South are taken by members of EPRDF-affiliates, especially the SEPDU.[10] Opposition parties are not visible in the region, but even the official parties allied with EPRDF are conspicuously absent from public discourse.

- Economically, the SNNPRS is not a priority area and remains relatively at the margins. There has been a growth of investment and development projects after 1991, but few emanating directly from the regional government. Local infrastructure across the region is still very inadequate (especially roads and communications), although two big projects stand out: a new road linking Wolayta-Soddo and Jimma,[11] and a new international airport in Arba Minch (to handle the expected foreign tourists). Private investment in the region between mid-1992 and January 1997 was c. 5 percent of the national total[12] (far below the percentage share of the region in the total population: 17.2 percent). The Regional State's Investment Office in Awasa has recorded only a very limited number of private investors and new projects, mostly small trade, some craft industries and hotel construction. Some parts of the Region also remain vulnerable to famine, although—leaving aside deficiencies of reporting—it is never as bad as in Tigray or Amhara regions.[13]

  On the production side, the SNNPRS has a large share in the Ethiopian coffee harvest, and also in staple foods (It is in third place after Oromiya and Amhara regions in grain production). Also, other export crops, like hides and skins, pulses and oilseeds, are produced. Tourism (stone monuments, game parks, ethnic and cultural traditions) is another source of revenue and has great potential for growth. Industry and services (except for some higher educational establishments in Awasa and Arba Minch) are hardly present.

- Culturally and socially, the SNNPRS is perceived in Ethiopia as very heterogeneous and different, if not "backward," compared to most other regions. It is regularly in the national news because of the so-called "harmful customs" reputed to exist there, relating to cultural practices of body decoration and modification by various peoples, as well as practices around child-birth, marriage patterns, and burial rituals. During a conference convened by the EPRDF in 1994 in Addis Ababa before the ratification of the new Constitution, local leaders and representatives of the ethnic minority groups (mostly coming from the South) were told that the government would like to see them work towards the elimination of their groups' harmful customs.

The fact of ethnocultural diversity in the South does not *a priori* mean that they are a collection of loosely integrated or alienated peoples in the context of Ethiopia—far from it. Statements questioning their being part of Ethiopia or suggesting that numerical strength is the measure of power or of rights are resented by most Southern people.[14]

Present Relations between Center and Region

The relations between federal state and regional state are marked by dependency. The political and budgetary-economic autonomy of SNNPRS is limited. Overall policy is not made in Awasa, but in Addis Ababa. The Regions'President is seen to be more in Addis Ababa (as a guest of the Regional Affairs Office in the Prime Minister's Office) than in Awasa, and his government is widely regarded as having no clear policy or program of its own.

The dependency is also seen in the federal criteria for budget allocation to the Region. Allocation of the yearly budget is made on the basis of the performance of program implementation of the Region in the previous year.[15] If money is not spent or not spent efficiently, the share goes to Regions that are more successful.

The capacity-building of the Regions (in the fields of administrative decentralization, auditing and accounting, improvement of inland revenue service, statistical data-gathering, etc.) has, despite years of donor-country support (especially USAID) for action plans and implementation schemes, not been concluded. Perhaps as part of the capacity building process can be seen the enduring problem of corruption, about which there are persistent rumours.[16]

In addition, the democratic system in the South—as in other parts of the country—is insufficiently established, non-transparent and lacks institutionalization. One instance in which this shows is that of the electoral process. Elections have not offered any realistic opportunity for opposition parties to campaign and to participate. An example is the effort of the SEPDC,[17] led by the Southerner Dr. Beyene Petros, to participate in the 29 December 1997 zone and *woreda* elections: his party (SEPDC) had no serious chance to present candidates and inform the voters. The party office in Shoné (Hadiya zone) was attacked and ransacked, and party activists were actively obstructed in their work.[18]

The Changing Politics of Identity: Cooperation and Conflict

The fact of the South being an amalgam of dozens of "ethnic groups"[19] has traditionally been associated with notable patterns of intermingling of people from various backgrounds, including Northern immigrants who came after the Menilik conquest. Existing ethnocultural differences relate to different historical trajectories, varying socioecological specializations, religious beliefs, local patterns of interethnic and interclan contact, and relations to larger political wholes such as chiefdoms, ritual federations and states before the impact of the twentieth-century empire state.

Just before and after 1991, the Southern Region has known some movements or groups demanding more ethnic self-determination, autonomy or cultural rights, but not independence and secession (e.g., the Sidama Liberation Movement).[20] There were certainly rebellions, protests and revolts in the course of the last century,[21] but not systematic armed resistance on the basis of language or region-based groups. Instead, the ethnocultural movements that existed claimed a rightful and equal place for their constituency within Ethiopia vis-à-vis the traditionally dominant Christian highland people. Although after 1991 they appreciated recognition not suppression of their own languages and would like to increase the number of "their own people" in the local administration, people in the South did not see linguistic self-determination as the number-one priority, because knowledge of Amharic was and is still seen as a major gateway to nation-wide social mobility. The ambition of the Southern elites was not always to remain in their region but have the option to move out and make it elsewhere. Indeed, large numbers of educated Southerners can be found all over Ethiopia, especially in Addis Ababa. A policy limiting this movement in future will not find universal acclaim, not even among the rural people.

Hence, the South has always shown a willingness (certainly as compared to groups among the Somali and Oromo) to be part of the larger Ethiopian state, because the ties of interdependence have become strong in the past century. As some informants put it, after decades of unequal relations and of economic exploitation of the South, it would be ironic now, in the federal era, to give up

the Ethiopian state without getting even with it. In addition, to opt out would be to deny (part of) their identity. In the context of the new political system, however, these latter feelings of "dual identity" are eroding, because one element, the local-regional ethnic identification, is necessarily taking on prime importance, stimulated by the logic of the new local administrative system.

Some aspects of the post-1991 experience in the Southern Region so far could be mentioned.

The federal structure and ethnic self-determination. In federal Ethiopia, the alleged hegemony of one ethnic group (Amhara) of the pre-1991 era was declared over: no more oppression from "*näft'ännya* Northerners," was the constantly repeated—and highly simplified—message, taken over also by several radical ethnic liberation movements.

This ideology, implemented by the new government, spelled the end of the unitary state and the calling into question of the idea of Ethiopia as a nation-state. In the new Constitution of 1995, sovereignty has been given to the "nations, nationalities and peoples" of the country (Art.8.1) and the famous clause on the ". . . unrestricted right to self-determination up to secession" (Art. 39.1), and the federation is ostensibly based on the idea of a "voluntary union of peoples" with no group dominant.[22] Power was thus formally vested in the ethnic groups (*behéresebotch*) in their respective territories.

But whether this ideology of dismantling the idea of pan-Ethiopian identity found wide acceptance is less sure. Also, the fact that on a regional or local level there might be other patterns of dominance is not solved by an ethno-federal structure. Hence, the federalization and boundary creation along ethnic lines—especially in the complex South—can lead to a kind of "multiplication of levels of oppression": i.e., feelings of inequality and exploitation now being deflected from the previously dominant "*näft'ännya*-Amhara" or whatever other local elite to other locally dominant groups, e.g., Wolayta, Sidama, Kaficho or Gedeo. Smaller ethnic groups adjacent to these may feel that they are still excluded from power or treated in unequal fashion, being only left with autonomy in their own *woreda* or *k'ebele*.

We therefore see that in reality there are "nested" inequalities among groups along various dimensions: social, religious, or economic. These can then lead to further "ethnic-based" oppositions in the *political* sphere. The system tends to structurally force groups to act toward each other in antagonistic terms, because it "makes sense" to compete on a collective, ethnic group basis for the access to resources and opportunities. This fact is not necessarily alleviating ethnic tensions, as is the purpose, but often fuelling them.

Political balancing of ethnic group representation. The regional government in Awasa is a carefully balanced assemblage of people from the various dominant ethnic groups: the President is a Sidama, the powerful Secretary is a Wolayta, the second secretary is a Kambata, and the Commissioner of the important Social and Labour Affairs Bureau is a Hadiya, obviously all members of EPRDF-parties.[23] Among the main advisors behind the scenes are people from the core-EPRDF, mostly of northern origin. The administrative personnel, cadres and local political leaders are mostly recruited on the old principle in Ethiopian politics of "raising people from the dust," thus creating personal loyalty and dependence (on the power-holders).

In the political domain there is also continuing discord over which groups "belong together" and which ones are "different." Two cases in point are the Gurage who, while already being very heterogeneous, have sub-divided into ever more constituent units (because there are certain advantages going with separate group status, see Markakis 1998), and peoples in the Omotic-speaking group, e.g., the Wolayta versus the Dorze or Gamo: Koucha, Doko, Borodda, Ochollo, etc. The latter have resisted Wolayta "hegemonism" and the teaching of the Wolayta language (in Latin, not Ethiopic, script) in their schools, despite its great similarity to their own languages: they wanted Amharic instead (cf. Bureau 1993: 83).

Educational policy. Education takes on special importance in the still under-staffed and undereducated Southern Region. In fact, education and language policy may be the core issues of policy in the South, and the most volatile ones at that. The reason is that they activate sub-regional rivalries between the larger ethnic groups and the smaller ones as to what languages or dialects should be used in education (see above). In partial recognition of this fact the Regional Education Bureau has since 1997 tacitly decided to discourage the proliferation of the use of ethnic languages in school teaching in the Region, in favor of Amharic as the *lingua franca*.[24]

Ethnicity as conflict. There have been numerous border conflicts and violent confrontations in the South and bordering regions between people in zones and

woredas based on the ethnolinguistic criteria, many of them not even being reported in the local—let alone the international—press. A comparative analysis of why these conflicts erupted and whether they are more serious than under previous regimes, stands to be made. One could mention those between Guji and Wolayta in 1991-92, between Shekatcho and northerners in 1994, between Anyuwak and the government in 1993, Hadiya and Gurage in 1995, Surma and Dizi and government in 1990-97, Surma and Nyangatom in 1988-1997, Gurage and Oromo in the Zeway area (1996), etc. In all of them, people were killed. Some of these conflicts have roots in the past (e.g., traditional oppositions between highlanders and lowlanders or nomadic pastoralists and agricultural settlers),[25] but the scale and nature of present-day incidents is notably different compared to those in previous years. I highlight only a few from the Southern Region that represent different types of conflict.

a) In early 1997 there was a dispute on the apportioning of peasants to either the Hadiya zone or the Gurage-Endegegn area (Konteb *woreda*). Several people were killed here in skirmishes when government troops tried to force the issue. The conflict was about who belonged to what ethnic group and who could on account of that make claims on land.

b) In the Maji-Bench zone there is a permanent tension between the smaller ethnic groups of Surma, Dizi and Me'en and the village people (of mixed origin). In the course of the past six years hundreds of people have been killed in raiding, ambushes, reprisals, and road robbery. A government punitive action in 1994 made a few hundred casualties among the Surma. The conflicts are *not* necessarily caused by government policies, but all the same police and government have not been able to prevent violence from escalating or to bring the culprits to justice.

c) A serious conflict was the one in July 1998 which emerged between Guji and Gedeo people over the border between their zones (The Gedeo are sedentary peasants and the most important coffee producers in the hills; the Guji are herders-cultivators predominantly in lowland areas). The groups had "clashed spontaneously," according to a government spokesperson, commenting on it only weeks after its occurrence.[26] There were reports of hundreds of people killed and more than a hundred thousand displaced in a week of fighting, during which government forces apparently did not or could not stop the carnage. This case could not yet be locally investigated in detail by outsiders. An EPRDF inquiry committee installed by the federal government reproached the Regional president for failing to anticipate the violence and not timely calling for federal assistance to quell it.[27] The event seems to be sadly unique in post-1991 Ethiopia in its being so bloody and large-scale, even if initial numbers of dead were much exaggerated. In another respect it may be a warning sign, because perhaps never in recent Ethiopian history has there been a local conflict so explicitly styled in ethnic terms: "the Guji" versus "the Gedeo" (instead of highlander cultivators versus agro-pastoralists, or people of this or that locality versus those of another).

In view of the local conflicts of the above three types, one is inclined to say that the issue of *ethnic identity and borders* in the South is a very sensitive and unresolved issue, not only because of the limited time span that has elapsed since the new policy came into effect, but also because of the uncritical acceptance of the principles underlying it.

The same may hold for that of the future role of the ethnocultural *heritage* of the various groups. The right to develop and respect this heritage is, fortunately enough, recognized under the present regime and the new Constitution, but what this means in practice is not clear. Issues that may contradict national policy might in future be discouraged, e.g., traditional leadership patterns, collective ethnic rituals or forms of collective religious expression, the role of popular folk healers, certain forms of social organization, and the whole series of "harmful customs" identified earlier.

In July 1997 a new research project was initiated by the House of the Federation (HoF), the upper chamber of parliament, to make an in-depth study of the languages and cultures of the various least known "nations and nationalities" in Ethiopia. Researchers of Addis Ababa University and the Ministry of Information and Culture were asked to carry it out, with financial support from the Office of the Speaker of the HoF. It is now in progress. According to inside sources, one of the underlying aims of this survey is to use the data for a better delineation of the ethnolinguistic boundaries of the nations and nationalities and then of their zones and *woredas*. In the meantime, however, tensions and conflicts over existing border issues continue.

Local Views

What do the people of the south themselves think of and expect from current policy and the new administrative divisions? Nobody really knows. Little research has been undertaken or reported on this important subject. The following remarks should also be seen as tentative. One cannot be sure that the government has a full picture of the real needs and aspirations of people in the sphere of political democracy, economics, and especially "ethnic identity" and group relations. Of course these needs are now themselves actively shaped by government policy. The EPRDF came to power through armed insurgence in a specific ethno-regional area, and has maintained its position on the national level by tight control of the process of political reform, based on ethno-regional administrative reorganization. Ethiopia is a country without a rooted democratic tradition, where the stakes are high. State power is a big asset which cannot be left up for grabs; ruling groups have always tended to rule via patronage and favoritism and can only allow the reins to loosen when regime power is well-entrenched To do otherwise would be political suicide. One can perhaps not reproach governing circles for following such a course, but it is not surprising that it does not solve the problems of ethnic and regional inequalities and meet the aspirations of the people for democratic decision-making and justice. In addition, if a regime systematically creates administrative elites politically loyal to itself rather than to the constitutional and rule of law principles, this suggests that a form of neopatrimonial politics, this time *through* the idiom of ethnicity, is continued. The developments in Southern Ethiopia are not necessarily an exception to this.

From observations and interviews in the South over the past four years, it appears that there are skeptical, sometimes contradictory, views on the policy of decentralization and ethnic autonomy. On the one hand, people are happy that past oppression has been recognized, that their language is officially no longer denigrated, that on the local and zonal level they are represented in the administration and that their own languages and people are used. These facts should not be underestimated. On the other hand, people see a familiar patronage system of power and privileges, and do not see the long-term benefits of an over-emphasis on ethnic identity—especially if it will constrain their contacts

and opportunities elsewhere in Ethiopia, and if it undermines the unifying elements in the country. A local leader of the Me'en people who was interviewed in 1993 in the Maji area echoed a view often heard: "We don't know what it will bring, this '*behéreseb*' thing'. What does it mean? We are living here together and have to solve shared problems. We will have to wait and see. Now the matter is not 'ripe' yet" (Amharic: *Nagäru gàna albassalım*). In general, such pragmatic ideas still predominate over ideological ones. What people want is keep access to the resources from and assistance by the political center, from which they were so long excluded. If, however, in the present circumstances, access to state resources is to be realized through an appeal to ethnicity (cf. Markakis 1998 on the Gurage), people have little choice to do otherwise.

In the final instance, the great challenge posed by the South as a multiethnic region in Ethiopia is that of any federation, namely, as law scholar Adeno Addis (1993: 621) noted, that of: ". . . linking heterogeneous groups in a process of institutional dialogue." If, however, ethnicity as an organizational principle is allowed to unduly dominate political organization, administration and even economic development, such a process of institutional dialogue is structurally discouraged.

Ethnicity between Political Construct and Sociocultural Identity

The fact remains that ethnicity is the new means for defining an agenda, mobilizing support and getting acceptance by the newly defined Ethiopian state. It thus also creates new ways of access, of social mobility, and of power for previously powerless groups, however faulty the basic assumptions and historicist arguments of ethnic group identification and an ethnic-defined state may be.

The South (SNNPRS) is a region vital to the redefinition and survival of the Ethiopian federation and of Ethiopian nationhood. At the present juncture, this idea of nationhood and identity is a growing problem also for the reigning elite, in the wake of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict and the existing ethno-nationalism in some areas (Somali, Oromo, Afar).[28]

There is an objective need in this multi-ethnic and diverse Southern Region to sustain commonalities and shared institutions which facilitate the bridging

ethnocultural/linguistic differences and define common issues and interests of efficient governance and economic development. Due to the area's heterogeneity and the numbers game, no one "ethnic group" is able to dominate any other, although current policy stimulates sub-region/group competition for power.

In the study of "ethnic groups" in a complex multiethnic society like Ethiopia, I would maintain that the focus of analysis should not only be on how such groups "interact" with the state, but how individuals and elites do. It is difficult to speak of ethnic groups as collective, acting agents unless they are ascriptively defined as such. The critical factor—in the new political space for ethnicity created by the federal state—is emerging ethnic elites and individuals, people acting as agents in the name of the ethnic group presumed to exist and collectively express itself. These change agents can be brokers in the classic sense: crossing boundaries, making use of differential access to "resources" (including an identity and legitimacy derived from mandatory, ascribed ethnicity), and carving out a power base *not* critically anchored in local society.

The new federal structures and the system of ethnic representation have thus created new opportunities for action for Southern people who long remained in the margins. The new system has yielded several new venues of social mobility for minority group elites[29]—there are direct lines of access to the center for the chosen few of the various groups, provided they pledge loyalty to the dominant party. Thus there may be new opportunities for political communication, although not necessarily more meaningful "democracy" or local autonomy. The price of the heightened organizational significance of ethnicity on the regional, zonal and *woreda* levels is, however, the increased volatility and conflict potential of ethnic group consciousness and "interests." In this respect, the Gedeo–Guji conflict may be an omen of what is to come.

Prospect

In the wake of the new post-1991 "experiment" in federal Ethiopia, various authors and commentators have emphasized the relevance of ethnicity and the reconstitution of communal ethnic identities in the country and assumed that *the ethnic paradigm* is best to explain current realities. While ethnicity and culture difference are indeed salient phenomena in Ethiopia—as in most other African countries—and need a *positive* evaluation as sources of identity and

cultural wealth,[30] their political use and scope are not self-evident. In fact, the political and social role of organized ethnicity is fraught with contradictions. Successfully dealing with ethnicity also depends to a great extent on the institutionalization of a minimally open democratic political system which creates a space for accommodating claims to group rights and for developing effective common policies beyond part-identities.

In terms of social science theory, the phenomenon of resurgent ethnicity and ethnic identification in Ethiopia's political system—and their historically and politculturally shaped dynamics—must be "retrieved" by a political science or political anthropology approach. Explanations do not flow from descriptions of the "ethnic complexity" and "ethnic oppression and inequalities" of southern Ethiopia *per se* but in the facts of neopatrimonial elite-politics, economic inequality and cultural ranking allied to them, and which work *through* the idiom of ethnicity. One might follow Bratton and Van de Walle (1997: 20) in developing a "politico-institutional" approach, but then augmented with an anthropological theory of political culture (cf. Hyden 1996: 32, 34).

In the context of Southern Ethiopia, a generalization of the "ethnic oppression" argument, as we saw, has no logical end. Interpreting social and political problems only in terms of ethnic group relations, is intellectually vacuous and morally questionable (cf. Samir Amin's 1994 analysis). The faults of this approach are clear enough, and could be summarized in a textbook.[31] The historical precedents in the past hundred years in Africa and especially Europe have been rather dismal as well.

Finally, talking about the process of "proliferation of boundaries" in the Horn of Africa, C. Clapham recently gave the following assessment (1997: 249): "... [I]n particular, by corralling people within their supposed 'homelands,' it is liable not only to lead to the kinds of upheaval, disruption and death which we currently associate with 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia, but also to intensify the difficulties of finding some balance between the badly degraded resource endowments of the region and the needs of all its peoples." This statement finds confirmation in a growing number of studies on political ethnicity in Ethiopia, including those on the Southern Region. If people in the South define such boundary situations as real—for whatever reasons—they will indeed be real in their consequences.

The Ethiopian "political experiment" with ethnic federalism is not concluded. Since it was initiated, it has opened up significant space for a rethinking and restructuring of the Ethiopian political system. On the basis of both the new opportunities it has created and the problems it encountered, one would expect that the formulas used so far are not the end of the road, but elements of an ongoing process. The challenge of the South shows that further experimentation is needed, perhaps with less emphasis on ethnic group-rights politics and more on the institutionalization of transparent democratic structures and on constructively redefining Ethiopian citizenship.

Notes

1. The present article was originally planned as a contribution to a book on contemporary Ethiopia to be edited by Dr. Jacques Bureau, who passed away in Paris in April 1998. We mourn Jacques'untimely death and remain much indebted to him for his original and erudite scholarship and his dynamic contributions to Ethiopian Studies.
2. In October 1994 the figure was 10,377,028. See *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia. Results for Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region. Summary Report* (Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority), 1. The SNNPRS is the third largest, after Oromia and Amhara states.
3. See ISEN 1983.
4. If such a map would be issued, many observers say, pandemonium would follow.
5. Neither has the House of Peoples' Representatives.
6. Six of the 11 members of this Commission are chosen from the Council of the Federation, and five are political appointments, close to the Prime Minister.
7. I.e., Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigré, Argobba, Aderé (Harari), Gurage.
8. See the full *1994 Census Report on the Southern Region* (Addis Ababa: CSA), 119-120.
9. Even in villages like Maji (in the Bench-Maji zone), with only some 3000 inhabitants, one counts members (although in small numbers) of at least 15 "ethnic groups" there.
10. Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Union, member of the EPRDF.
11. New roads are indeed being built, but local people and users complain about the poor quality of the work: after one rainy season, the roads are again in a state of decay.
12. Compared to Addis Ababa 18.8 percent, Tigray 45 percent and Oromiya 13.78 percent. See *Ammarach* (journal of the CAFPDE, a broad front of civic and oppositional political groupings formed in 1993) 1, no. 17, p. 7, and *Addis Tribune*, 11 July 1997.

13. The 1997 FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission mentioned (in section 6.3.2) that of the total required food aid, 6 percent would have to go to the SENNPRS. Some local observers in the South report that the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (a federal government agency) is not very helpful in the timely alleviation of the problems in their region. Emergency aid often arrives too late to the people in danger, especially to those displaced by conflict.
14. As far as its general ethnocultural identity is concerned, it is not likely that the majority of Southerners subscribed to the view of Ethiopia's Prime Minister, who said in 1992: "The Tigrayans had Aksum, but what could that mean to the Gurage? . . . The Agew had Lalibela, but what could that mean to the Oromo? The Gonderé had castles, but what could that mean to the Wolayta?" *Ethiopian Review* 2, no. 9 (1992). Such statements (no longer heard today) reflect an historically unfounded disregard for (the possibility of) commitment of Southern peoples to Ethiopia and to the concept of Ethiopian identity.
15. Cf. also the comments to this effect of W/o Almaz Meko, Speaker of the Council of the Federation, on the Voice of America (2 September 1998). Size of the population and the relative level of development of the region also play a role.
16. See the recent report in the independent Ethiopian weekly *T'omar* (11 November 1998). While many details and facts in such reports remain to be substantiated, they cannot simply be dismissed.
17. Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Coalition, or often called in Amharic *Debub Hibrät*. It was founded in March 1992, as a unified Southern peoples'coalition to oppose perceived divide-and-rule tactics by the EPRDF in the wake of the 1991 National Conference. It had some members in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (e.g., the Vice-Minister for Education), up to their forced removal in 1993.
18. Interview in July 1998 with SEPDC officials, Addis Ababa. See also SEPDC Press Release, Addis Ababa, 13 January 1998.
19. Many on the basis of simple toponyms, suddenly declared fully-fledged "ethnic" after 1991.
20. Then led by a controversial person who had been in *Derg* service and allegedly involved in the Red Terror.
21. See Bureau (1993: 99-100) for an armed revolt by the Zada-Gamo against Amhara settlers, and McClellan (1998: 193-94) for one of the Gedeo against their overlords.
22. For an analysis of the Constitution and its relation to ethnicity, see Abbink 1997.
23. This was the case in 1997-98.
24. Personal communication from experts working in USAID, Addis Ababa.
25. Examples from the Maji area in Gerdesmeier 1995.
26. See Reuters news dispatch of 19 August 1998, and *Addis Tribune* 21 August 1998.

27. Amharic weekly *T'omar*, 23 September 1998. In late August these displaced were ordered by government authorities to leave their towns of refuge and return to their localities (see *Ammarach*, 21 Nehasé 1990 EC).
28. See the interesting interview with Ato Sebhat Negga (TPLF Politburo-member) with the weekly *Efoyta* (Addis Ababa, May 1998), reflecting on this issue.
29. As, e.g., evidenced by the automatic assignment of a parliamentary seat for 22 of such small ethnic groups, and their representation in the zonal and regional state governments.
30. Cf. the increase in historical and ethnographic accounts by "natives" on their own group or ethno-region. For a few examples, see Nocho 1994 on the Kaficho people, and Wanna 1997 on Wolayta.
31. See for one example, the recent study by Lebanese-French author Amin Maalouf 1998. For general intellectual backgrounds of the particularist and unreflexive anti-Enlightenment discourse on, among others, parochial group identities, see already Finkielkraut 1987.

References

Abbink, J. 1997. "Ethnicity and Constitutionalism in Contemporary Ethiopia." *Journal of African Law* 41, no. 2: 159-74.

Amin, S. 1994. *L'Ethnie à l'Assaut des Nations: Yougoslavie, Ethiopie*. Paris: UNRISD–L'Harmattan.

Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bratton, M. and N. van de Walle 1997. *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bureau, J. 1989. *"Ethiopia, a "Multi-national" Society: Questions Regarding the Study of its Nationalities."* Addis Ababa, unpublished paper.

___. 1993. "Quatre textes relatifs à l'histoire des peuples ométo." *Bulletin de la Maison des Etudes Ethiopiennes* 3: 81-101.

Campbell, A. 1997. *Western Primitivism: African Ethnicity: A Study in Cultural Relations*. London: Cassell.

Clapham, C. 1996. "Boundary and Territory in the Horn of Africa." In *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*, edited by P. Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju. London and New York: Pinter, 237-50.

Finkielkraut, A. 1987. *La Défaite de la Pensée*. Paris: Gallimard.

Gerdesmeier, V. 1995. "We Are Fighting Each Other Now, But in the Battlefield We Were Friends." Gewalt, Gewaltmonopol und Ethnizität in Südwestäthiopien. Gründe für eskalierende Konflikte in der Region. In *Krieg und Frieden. Ethnologische Perspektiven*, edited by P. Bräunlein and A. Lauser. Bremen: Kea-Edition, 147-60.

Hizkias Assefa 1993. "Crucible of Civilization and Conflicts: Ethiopia." In *Arms and Daggers in the Heart of Africa: Studies on Internal Conflicts*, edited by P. Anyang'Nyongo. Nairobi: Academy Science Publishers, 15-32.

Hyden, G. 1996. "Rethinking Theories of the State: An Africanist Perspective." *Africa Insight* 26, no. 1: 26-35.

Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities. 1983. *Ach'ir yeItiopia Behéreseboch Maweqiya*. Addis Ababa: ISEN.

Maalouf, A. 1998. *Les Identités Meurtrières*. Paris: Grasset.

Markakis, J. 1998. The Politics of Identity—The Case of the Gurage. In *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa*, edited by M. A. Mohamed Salih and J. Markakis. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 127-46.

McClellan, C. W. 1998. "The Tales of Yoseph and Woransa: Gedeo Experiences in the Era of the Italo-Ethiopian War." In *Personality and Political Culture in Modern Africa: Studies Presented to Professor Harold G. Marcus*, edited by M. Page, et al. Boston: African Studies Center, Boston University, 181-94.

Mikell, G. 1996. "Ethnic Entrepreneurs and Generals: Human Rights and Development after Structural Adjustment." Paper presented at the UNDP–ISS Conference on Africa, Governance, Democracy and Human Rights, Panel III, December 9-10 (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies).

Nocho Wodeebusho 1994. YeKaficho Hizb Tarikawi Minch. *Addis Ababa: Artistic Printers*.

Pankhurst, R. 1997. *The Ethiopian Borderlands*. Lawrenceville, N. J. and Asmara: Red Sea Press.

Wanna Wogesho 1997. Ye*Wolayita Hizb Tarik*. Addis Ababa: Berhanenna Selam Printing Press.

Acknowledgment