

# Ethnicity and Inter-ethnic Relations: the 'Ethiopian Experiment' and the case of the Guji and Gedeo



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Thesis Submitted for the Degree:

Master of Philosophy in Indigenous Studies

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tromsø

Norway

Spring 2007



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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work to the Guji and Gedeo individuals, who lost their lives as victims of politicised ethnicity and its immaterialised promises. Particularly, it is dedicated to the Guji Spiritual leader (*Abba Qallu*), who was imprisoned in connection to the 1995 conflict and lost his life in jail.

## Preface

The successful completion of this thesis would be difficult, if not impossible, had it was not been for the commitment and devotion of my Supervisor, Profesor Sidsel Saugestad, in giving me constructive and scholarly feedbacks beginning from the early inception of the project topic all through the drafts of the thesis. I am deeply indebted to Professor Sidsel under whom I began to consider my self as a young researcher.

My gratitude goes to the University of Tromsø, Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Lånnekassen), Centre for Sámi Studies, and Centre for Environment and Development (SEMUT). While the University opened my path to the international academic milieu by giving me admission to the programme, the latter three, particularly Lånnekassen supported me in financing my study. Moreover, great thanks to my academic coordinator, Rachel Issa Djessa, whose highly motivating words and thought provoking comments added a spirit of inspiration while writing my thesis.

I am grateful to my colleague and friend, Solomon Hailu, for his unreserved help during my fieldwork and consistent motivating words all through my study in Norway. I am grateful also to my field assistants, particularly Mr Tesfaye Tilahun. Likewise, I am indebted to the Guji and Gedeo elders, and government authorities for their readiness to share with me their invaluable knowledge, without which theoretical arguments would have not been complemented by empirical evidences.

My special heartfelt gratitude goes to my Fiancé, *Chaltu* (Diribe) Feyissa, whose love, advice and care helped me to survive challenges of life during my stay in Tromsø. Her motivating words are engines of strength when I feel tired. *Chaltu* is exceptionally unique in my life and she is at the centre of my success next to God. My thanks to her are endless.

I am very much grateful to and proud of my friends for their unreserved moral supports during my two years' stay in Norway. Great thanks to Tadesse Jaleta and Tseganesh Higu; Kefyalew Gomoro and Jifare Tolera; Senbete Toma and Roman Gobana; Firew Tarekegn, Dagim Jirata, Abiyot Legesse, Fekadu Adugna, Biniam W/Gebriel, Yacob Cheka, Teketel Adane, Ragassa Ayana, Arega Degife, Megerssa Tolessa, Gashaw Hunde among others. Last but by no means the least, my fellow students at the University of Tromsø are in my memory for their friendly cares without which life in Tromsø would be very difficult.

Asebe Regassa Debelo

Tromsø, May 2007

# Table of contents

	<u>Page</u>
Dedication-----	i
Preface-----	ii
Acronyms and local terms-----	v
Abstract-----	vi
<b>Chapter One: Introduction-----</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Research Themes and Problem Formulation-----	1
1.1.1 ‘Formal Ethnicism’ and ‘Ethnic Federalism’ as analytical tools-----	3
1.2 Major Assumptions of the Study and Research Questions-----	3
1.3 Objectives and Significances of the Research-----	4
1.4 Methodology-----	5
1.5 Outline of the thesis-----	9
<b>Chapter 2: Chapter Two:</b>	
<b>Theoretical Approaches and Literature Review-----</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Conceptualizing ethnicity in African context-----	11
2.2 Theoretical discourses on ethnicity: transcending primordialists/constructivist paradigm? -----	12
2.3 Ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia: myth or reality? Contending views from myth to ‘National Question’-----	16
2.4 Ethnic identity: embedded in the groups or a mere political artefact? -----	19
2.4.1 The ‘contested’ Amhara ethnicity -----	20
2.4.2 Ethnic identity as a response to state power – the Tigre case -----	22
2.4.3 Ethnic identity rooted in historical distinctiveness – the Oromo-----	23
2.5 The Gada System -----	24
2.6 The ‘National Question’ and Ethnic Policy in Ethiopia: The Root to ‘Ethnic Federalism’-----	27
2.6.1 An Empire under ethnic hegemony -----	28
2.6.2 The Ethiopian Experiment of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ -----	29
2.6.3 ‘Formal Ethnicism’: a viable alliance or divorce with democracy? -----	35
<b>Chapter Three: Setting the Context of the Study-----</b>	<b>37</b>
3.1 The Guji -----	37
3.1.1 The People-----	37
3.1.2 Guji Social Organization: Secular and Spiritual World of the Gada -----	38
3.1.3 Economic transformation of the Alabdu Guji -----	41
3.1.4 Guji-state relation after incorporation-----	42
3.2. The Gedeo-----	43
3.2.1 Gedeo myth of origin: the group’s self-ascription -----	43
3.2.2 Incorporation of the Gedeo into Ethiopian Empire-----	44
3.2.3 Gedeo-state relation and their down-slope expansion: -----	46
3.2.4 Gedeo social organization and some cultural practises-----	49
3.2.5 Some changes in Gedeo social life-----	51

<b>Chapter Four: - Guji-Gedeo Relation: Ethnic dichotomies and complementarities</b>	53
Introduction: what tied these groups together?	53
4.1 Deconstructing the myth of common ancestry:	54
4.2. Economic interdependence	58
4.3 Cultural practices as inter-ethnic connections and disjuncture	61
4.3.1. The Gada systems and the Qallu institution	61
4.3.2. Inter-ethnic marriage	62
4.3.3. The ‘myth of curse’ and the <i>Gondoro</i> tradition: belief as instrument of inter-ethnic cohesion	64
4.4. Ethnic self-image and image of the ‘other’	68
4.5. Summing up: linking economic and cultural determinants to ethnic identity	70
 <b>Chapter Five: The Guji-Gedeo Conflicts of 1995 and 1998: Questions of territorial integrity and self-government</b>	73
5.1 Background of the conflicts	73
5.2 The contentious referendum as a triggering factor for the 1995 conflict	75
5.3 The 1998 conflict	80
5.4 The Post Conflict Relations	83
 <b>Chapter Six: National Discourse on Ethnicity and Local Inter-ethnic Relations in Ethiopia</b>	87
6.1 Ethnicity in the Contemporary Political Context of Ethiopia	87
6.2 The Convergence between Ethnicity and Indigenusness in African Context	91
6.3 ‘Formal Ethnicism’ and Inter-ethnic Relations	93
6.4 Reassessing Guji-Gedeo conflict	96
6.4.1 Beyond resource competition	96
6.4.2 Local Reality in the face of heightened ethnic politics in Ethiopia	97
 <b>Chapter 7: Conclusion</b>	100
7.1 Contextualizing ethnicity beyond academic discourse	100
7.2 Does ethnic dichotomy perpetuate conflict?	101
7.3 Which way forward?	103
 <b>References</b>	105
<b>Appendices</b>	

## List of Acronyms and Definition of local terms

### Acronyms

- EPLF - Eritrea Peoples' Liberation Front  
EPRDF - Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front  
ESM - Ethiopian Student Movement  
FDRE - Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia  
OLF - Oromo Liberation Front  
OPDO - Oromo People Democratic Organization  
OSSREA - Organization for Social Sciences Research on Eastern and Southern  
Africa  
PDOs - Peoples' Democratic Organizations  
TPLF - Tigray People's Liberation Front  
SNNP - Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples

### Definition of local terms

- Abba* - Father, leader, head  
*Abba Gada* - Head of Gada Assembly  
*Abba Qallu* - Head of Qallu institution (Spiritual leader)  
*Boka* - Ceremonial local wine made of honey  
*Butta* - Gada ritual ceremony undertaken every eight year at which  
power transfer takes place  
*Ensete* - *Ensete ventricosum* (false banana)  
*Galma-Qallu* - A compound where Qallu leaders live  
*Gondoro* - Indigenous method of conflict resolution among Guji and  
Gedeo peoples  
*Hayicha* - A title for member of gada officials among the Gedeo  
*Naftagna* - Northern settlers in subjected regions since late 19th century  
*Qallu* - Spiritual institution among the Oromo  
*Qeexala* - Traditional prayer among the Gedeo  
*Waaqa* - Supreme power in Oromo indigenous religion  
*Waaxa* - 'Caste' group living among the Guji



## **Abstract**

This study deals with ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations in African context, with particular emphasis on the new 'Ethiopian Experiment' of ethnic politics. The study challenges the already existing thoughts on ethnicity, which map the concept on contours of polar extremes and suggests an approach to transcend the primordialist/constructivist perspectives.

It is argued that in the face of rising ethnic politics in Africa, and particularly in Ethiopia where everything is ethnified, ethnicity can no longer remain only an analytical concept nor can inter-ethnic relations be understood separately from the political context. This study thus makes use of ethnicity both in analytical and political contexts. The concepts of politicised ethnicity or 'Formal Ethnicism' and its policy instrument - 'Ethnic Federalism' - are used in drawing the contours of national discourse on ethnicity and the dynamics of local inter-ethnic relations, taking the Guji-Gedeo relations in Southern Ethiopia as a case study. In this study, I argued that with the politicisation of ethnicity in the country's political scene, particularly following its articulation in a formal political programme of the government in 1991, ethnic entrepreneurs activated elements of dichotomies at the expense of mutual co-existences like the Guji-Gedeo case.

The historical relationship between the Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups has been examined in the context of economic interdependence, sharing some elements of cultural practices, political allegiances, belief in ancestral curse in case of homicide and myth of common ancestor. It also addresses the 1990s conflicts between the two groups drawing lines of connection between the national discourse on ethnicity and the local realities.

This study also casts some light on the convergence between ethnicity and indigenusness in an African context, both concepts inconveniently sidelined by the bogus ambitions of post-colonial African leaders who try to build 'nation-states' at the expense of the rights of their member groups.

# Chapter One: Introduction

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## 1.1 Research themes and Problem Formulation

At the onset of independence, African countries were caught between two different legacies of colonialism – nation-building projects forged on the artificial borders drawn by colonial administration and the demand of groups for self-determination or at least self-administration. These two legacies were mutually incompatible both by the means and the ends desired, as the first would be accomplished at the expense of the latter. Unfortunately, neither the nation building nor the groups' aspiration for self-government was successfully achieved in many parts of the continent despite strong backing from postcolonial governments for building nation-states out of diverse ethnic groups.

Although Ethiopia remained as a sovereign state free from external colonial conquest, it had much in common with the colonial experiences in other parts of the continent. The empire-building process launched by the Abyssinian kingdom in late 19<sup>th</sup> century against the autonomous states of southern, south western and south eastern parts of today's Ethiopia through relentless campaigns of conquest enables one to draw a direct parallelism with colonialism (Tibebu 1995: xv). The conquest led to the birth of an empire under Amhara ethnic hegemony, land appropriation from the indigenous peoples, political domination, cultural marginalization and economic exploitation of the subjected groups. Thus, the root of ethnic questions in the country is based on the creation of the empire and the subsequent dynamics of its evolution (Gudina 2003:1).

The coming to power of TPLF/EPRDF<sup>1</sup> in May 1991 created a landmark in the history of the country as far as ethnic questions are concerned not because it addressed the issues on the practical ground but for the first time the government policy formally recognized ethnicity as a fundamental instrument to 'protect the rights of ethnic groups and as a remedy to past injustices'. Constitutionally, the country's political map was restructured by ethnic-based federal arrangement which ostensibly gave 'autonomous' rights to regional states. The constitution formally introduced a new policy of federal arrangement termed as 'Ethnic Federalism'. Indeed, the new Ethiopian constitution is a unique development in African context and perhaps at the world level in

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<sup>1</sup>TPLF (Tigray People Liberation Front) was organized in 1975 by the Tigrean youth who was discontented with the shift of political power to the Amhara and the subsequent 'suppressions' of the group under the Amhara hegemony. The principal aim of TPLF was liberation of Tigray. As a political strategy to enter into the territories beyond Tigray and as a camouflage to attract the support of the West for political, ideological and financial support, the Front superficially changed its name to EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1989 by creating surrogate parties (PDOs – Peoples' Democratic Organizations) from other ethno-linguistic groups (Gudina 2003, Vaughan 2003).

recognising the rights of nations, nationalities and peoples (ethnic groups) to self-determination including secession (Article 39, 1994 Constitution). Despite such rhetoric from the government policy in formalising ethnicity as a basic framework and political agenda of the country's political and economic system, and as a mechanism of building a 'new Ethiopia', inter-ethnic conflicts have become more frequent since 1991 than before.

The present research focuses on the approaches to ethnicity both in analytical and political contexts and will look at the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations. It will explore the contours of convergence between the 'new experiment' of political ethnicity and changing local inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopia, taking the Guji and Gedeo peoples of southern Ethiopia as a case study.

Explicitly and implicitly, the study challenges the essentialist views of Ethiopianist writers on academic discourses concerning the nature of the empire itself, inter-ethnic relations, and ethnic policy. It tries to deconstruct the historical illusion of the unity of the country propagated by the supporters of the 'nation-building project' both in academic and political milieus. The study also uncovers the parallelism between the African experiences of colonial system and the internal colonial experiences in Ethiopia since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The dynamics in Guji-Gedeo relations will be analysed both in the context of the historical process that crystallised the creation of Ethiopian empire and the subsequent state building policies, on the one hand and in the context of the current state policy on ethnicity on the other hand. The material in this study thus depends on the fieldwork conducted among the groups from May to August 2006.

The Guji and Gedeo peoples are two "distinct" ethnic groups, who have co-existed for long periods in the southern part of Ethiopia. My experience with these groups started in 1999, during my study at Dilla College of Teachers Education for my Bachelor Degree. The college is situated on the Guji traditional land but is now in the Gedeo administrative zone. My four years stay in Dilla town as a student and two years as a college teacher enabled me to make contacts with some elders from both sides. It was since then that I began to take an interest in the changing relationship between these two ethnic groups. In the past the two ethnic groups were engaged in different but complementary economic activities, the Guji as pastoralists and the Gedeo as settled agriculturalists. Their economic activities and sharing separate ecological niches enabled them to create a kind of symbiotic relations. Even in some occasions of conflicts, they co-existed by resolving disputes locally using indigenous<sup>2</sup> knowledge of conflict resolution<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'indigenous' bears both sociological and legal meanings. Sociologically, "the term 'indigenous' is frequently used as an adjective to mean 'local', 'native' and 'non-European'" ( Saugestad 2001:302). The legal definition of the term entered international legal vocabulary with the ILO Convention 169 but still remains

However, recently, neither their historical interdependence nor their knowledge of conflict resolution were mobilised when unprecedented violent broke out between the two groups, first in 1995 and then in 1998. Although the causes of the conflicts are contentious, it caused considerable casualties both on human life and property. Some reports suggest that over 3000 people were killed and more than 10,000 were displaced (UNDP 1998). This brings up critical questions, which need thorough investigation: Why did the long period of mutual interdependence and co-existence between these ethnic groups break down? What are the new phenomena with disruptive impact on the inter-ethnic relationship between these groups?

### **1.1.1 ‘Formal Ethnicism’ and ‘Ethnic Federalism’ as analytical tools**

With the constitutional recognition of ethnicity in Ethiopia, a process of ethnification has been intensified. I use the concept, ‘Formal Ethnicism’ (Woldesellasié 2004:123) in analysing the convergence and divergence between state policy on ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations. The concept, ‘Formal Ethnicism’, is not used in legal or other official documents of the government in Ethiopia but entered the academic vocabulary as a description of the formal institutionalisation and constitutional recognition of ethnicity in the country after 1991. ‘Formal Ethnicism’ in Ethiopian context denotes a top-down approach used by ethnic entrepreneurs in their pursuit to mobilise and gain legitimacy from the diverse ethnic groups in the country. On the other hand, ‘Ethnic Federalism’ is a formal term used both as a legal and analytical concept derived from the ethnic-based federal arrangement put in place since 1991.

While ‘Formal Ethnicism’ denotes the approach by which the issues of ethnicity and ethnic groups would be officially addressed, ‘Ethnic Federalism’ is a policy instrument through which the former would be implemented.

## **1.2 Major Assumptions of the study and Research Questions**

The main theme of this study is investigating ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopian context, giving the Guji-Gedeo relations as a case study. The major assumptions in this study are:

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controversial, particularly in African context (see ILO C.169 and Martínez Cobo 1986). In this study, I use the term contextually both in its sociological and legal meanings.

<sup>3</sup> In this context, I use ‘indigenous knowledge’ to refer to local knowledge traditionally used by a community in its livelihood and/or social interaction.

1. In the current Ethiopian context, the dynamics of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations are intimately intertwined with and influenced by the political instrumentality of the concept. It follows that local inter-ethnic interactions can not be fully understood as phenomena separate from the state's political and economic policies and administrative interventions in local relations. Concomitant to this, it is assumed that ethnic dichotomies as phenomena of social categorization would not in themselves perpetuate inter-ethnic conflict, and neither would fair ethnic policy threaten national unity. Rather, the activation of ethnic differences for group interest may express these negative connotations attached to the concept. The change in Guji-Gedeo relations may also be seen in line with this perspective.

2. Although ethnic questions (demand for self-administration, access to resources and political representation) are fundamental issues and were entrenched in the historical creation of the modern imperial Ethiopian state, the new Ethiopian Experiment of 'Ethnic Federalism' seems to have aggravated tensions between ethnic groups. The new regime that assumed government power in 1991 formalised political ethnicity and introduced ethnic-based state structure, but failed to materialise its policies on the practical ground. The assumption, as I will try to demonstrate in this thesis, is that the self-contradictory nature of ethnic policy and implementation procedure together with the articulation of ethnicity as a political instrument could have ignited inter-ethnic conflicts.

In line with these assumptions, this study asks the following key research questions:

- How did the Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups maintain their ethnic boundaries or dichotomies through their long history of interaction?
- How and why did the long period of mutual interdependence and co-existence between these ethnic groups break?
- To what extent can one say that ethnicity and ethnic identity are newly induced phenomena that have created a new boundary between them?
- What is the impact of the current state policy on ethnicity on worsening of inter-ethnic relations between the Guji and Gedeo peoples? More specifically, as claimed by some scholars, how does "Formal Ethnicism" contribute adversely to ethnic conflicts in the country, particularly to the Guji-Gedeo conflicts?

### **1.3 Objectives and significances of the research**

**Objectives:** The general objective of the research is to understand - within the context of the ongoing state policies on ethnicity - how state policies affect inter-ethnic relations; and more

specifically how this led to conflicts between Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups in Southern Ethiopia. The specific objectives are to:

- Uncover the historical relationship between these groups as a means to understand the contemporary relationship.
- Investigate how economic and political changes at local and national levels have affected the relationship between the Guji and Gedeo peoples.
- Examine the traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution used by the groups.
- Assess the prospect for future relation between these ethnic groups on the basis of the existing circumstances.

**Significance of the study:** By examining inter-ethnic relations (both co-existence and conflicts) between Guji and Gedeo, both in a local perspective and from the context of state's policies on ethnic groups, and discussing the indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution that sustained their harmonious co-existence for several years, the study may have the following significance:

- It may contribute to the understanding of the role of the state policy in maintaining and/or disrupting inter-ethnic relations.
- It contributes to a better understanding of changes and continuities in inter-ethnic relations in the field of anthropology.
- It helps to understand the concepts of ethnicity, ethnic relations and inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia and more specifically in the case of Guji and Gedeo peoples.
- Adds its share to indigenous studies, particularly the role of indigenous knowledge of resolving conflict, indigenous traditions of interdependence and the role of the state in disrupting local relations.
- Enables the new generation of the two groups to develop an aspiration to revitalize/resuscitate the tradition of peaceful co-existence as in the past and to enhance the revival of local methods of conflict resolution among the groups.

## **1.4 Methodology**

Methodologically, this thesis is based on a qualitative approach mainly with anthropological and to some extent historical orientations. For theoretical frameworks, it is based on the existing theories of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations. Following Barth's argument that focuses on boundaries of ethnic groups rather than its cultural contents in boundary

maintenance mechanism among distinct ethnic groups (1994:15), the approach of this study is focused on boundary maintenance and elements of group dichotomization and complimentaryization among Guji and Gedeo peoples. However, I go beyond Barth's concept of 'boundary over content' to the extent of perceiving the two as intimately interwoven concepts rather than discrete group characteristics. To situate the study in historical context and to draw the contours of the processes that gave rise to ethnic questions in Ethiopia, and particularly the Guji-Gedeo case, I make a use of historical analysis on the birth of the modern Ethiopian state, the subsequent ethnic hegemony and the root to the current 'Ethnic Federalism'.

I will complement the theoretical frameworks and literature reviews that follow, with the rich and valuable oral information I got through dialogues with key informants during my fieldwork. These 'remembered-past' narratives enable me to bridge between historical and anthropological 'facts' and to build on different perspectives from both groups of my study.

In this study written material was collected from the libraries of Addis Ababa University, Organization for Social Sciences Research on Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) centred in Addis Ababa University, my home Dilla University and the University of Tromsø.

For the fieldwork among both groups field assistants were employed. As Berreman (1962) described, the background and the social acceptance of field assistants among the study group enable an ethnographer to win the confidence of the groups, to cross to their back-region information and reduces informants' attempt to conceal their secrets. To this end, assistants were selected in accordance with their familiarity with the community, their knowledge about the geographical sites, and to some extent based on their knowledge about the field of study.

Different approaches have been used for the fieldwork part of data collection. Individual interviews, small group discussions, informal conversations, and personal observation were mainly employed. While group discussions were mainly used to scrutinize some 'controversial' or contested issues even within members of a particular group, informal conversations were chosen in order to uncover the back-region information of a group.

Informants were selected on the basis of their knowledge about the issues concerned, their position as local elders, as leaders of traditional social organizations, as heads of religious institutions, and positions in government offices. During interviews and group discussions, elders narrated about the myth of Guji-Gedeo genealogical relationship – however contested it is –, their mode of past economic interdependence, and cultural

relations. Such information helps me to draw analytical contours of convergence and divergence of views between members of the groups on their relationship, ethnic self-image and image about the other, and the degree of interdependence of the groups. I also spent some of my time observing interactions between members of the groups in common market areas, tearooms, public transport stations and so forth.

All along the fieldwork, multitudes of challenges were encountered. The recent memory of the conflict in the minds of the subjects, instability in the political atmosphere of the country at large and limited literature materials, particularly concerning the 1990s conflicts, were a few among several practical as well as methodological challenges.

There were mixed reactions from the groups towards the researcher and the topic of the study. The time of my fieldwork coincided with political instability in the country at large and particularly in the study sites. A few months before my departure from Norway in early May 2006 violence erupted in the Gedeo zone between the Gedeo and some non-Gedeo ethnic groups. This conflict had left an atmosphere of suspicion in the minds of the subjects and government authorities. It followed that, both the authorities and ordinary Gedeo informants were careful to keep the back-region information of their group. However, in spite of careful control on their back-region performances, the Gedeo did not reject me as an alien intruder. While elders conveyed an impression of accepting me as a member of the Oromo, whom they apparently consider as their ‘brothers’, most Gedeo individuals viewed me as a University teacher – an impression equally important in my quest for winning their confidence.

On the Guji side, the reaction to the researcher was not as smooth as one might presume – as both the Guji and the researcher belong to the same ethnic group, the Oromo. Mixed reactions were conveyed. It is a common trend among Oromo government officials (i.e. OPDO members)<sup>4</sup> to keep a distance to Oromo students and professionals since they suspect this class to be in opposition to their surrogate existence under TPLF/EPRDF regime. As a result, they were sceptical to let me know what they perceive as political ‘secrets’ of the organization. The Guji elders, whose mental horizon is mainly confined to the geographical and dialectical scope of the people, considered me as an outsider researcher. As Linda Smith (1999:10) has described, insider researchers, like outsider researchers, face rejection or

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<sup>4</sup>OPDO (Oromo People’s Democratic Organization) was organized in 1990 from the military captives by the TPLF during its war against the military regime in northern Ethiopia. From the onset of its establishment this political organization lacked the appropriate political power from the TPLF and legitimacy from the people it presumably organised to represent. It is, according to Merera Gudina’s words, “the mouth by which TPLF speaks to Oromo people” (2003:123).



suspicion from their own community that emanates from the researchers' religious, educational and political backgrounds.

In both groups, impressions of suspicion and reluctance were overcome through field assistants to whom the informants and government officials had a sense of belonging and trust, and by presenting myself as a neutral researcher rather than a politically or ethnically affiliated person. Moreover, I presented my study and its significance recalling an atmosphere of mutual understanding about the past harmonious relations and sense of brotherhood among members of the two groups.

Another challenge was related to reliability or authenticity of information while collecting the data. In dichotomised groups and among groups with memories of conflict - like the Guji and Gedeo peoples - it is not uncommon to encounter mutually contradicting views. The question is, "whose view is reliable and authentic?" and "who decides it?" Concomitant to the contradictory and contested views both groups tried to recruit the researcher to their side by reasoning all possible 'justifications' that would put the ethnographer in a state of confusion unless carefully managing the impressions. This is what Robben (1995) describes as "ethnographic seduction". This required cross-checking the views of the informants and cautious interpretation of the subjects' impressions (Robben 1995, Berreman 1962).

Gender dimension has been another challenge I faced while collecting data among the Guji and Gedeo peoples. It should be noted that both Guji and Gedeo peoples are male-dominant in many social affairs and women had no/less independent voices. As a result, women are assumed to share similar worldviews with their husbands and the men at large. That is why in this study, the voice of women is silent not because they had no views on topics related to the study but because the culture itself obstructs women from forwarding their opinion on issues outside of the household activities. Even when asking to interview local women who had been active in conflict resolution or at least who would have invaluable knowledge on traditional conflict resolution, they refused to share me their knowledge unless given permission by their husbands, who were not happy for the request. Both women and men among the communities have the perception that such discussion belongs to affairs of men to which women rarely participate.

In the current Ethiopia's context, where conflicts are connected to the state, researchers are not encouraged to undertake impartial research on issues of ethnic conflict, and the Guji-Gedeo conflict and the post-conflict relations are not well studied. The constraint of literature materials prompted me to focus much on information from my informants in

order to bridge the gap. However, the ‘sensitivity’ of the topic itself made my informants sceptical to expose themselves. Thus, the names of informants are kept anonymous in some cases, particularly under the chapter dealing with the recent conflict.

This study makes use of concurrent method of data analysis in which different narratives, perspectives, analytical and conceptual expressions, and theoretical approaches are analysed within the contextual frameworks of the subsequent chapters. The close linkage between the chapters necessitates the use of going forth and back particularly while dealing with chapters 4, 5 and 6, and almost all chapters rely on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks and literature reviews under chapter two.

### **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

The study is structured into seven chapters. The first chapter sets an introduction to the thesis, and outlines the themes and problem formulation of the study. Here, the early inception of motivation to the topic has been briefly discussed in connection with my contact with elders from both groups since 1999. The methodological parts of the research - methods of data collection, challenges, strategies used and methods of data analysis - have also been dealt under this chapter.

The second chapter is relatively broad in content and covers the conceptual and theoretical approaches on ethnicity and ethnic relations, and literature materials on the birth of the modern Ethiopian empire, ethnic conflict, ‘Ethnic Federalism’, and contested views on the current approach regarding ‘Formal Ethnicism’ in the country.

The background of the study areas – geographical setting, economic livelihood, social organization, and myth of origin of the Guji and Gedeo peoples, and their relation with the Ethiopian empire after the late 19<sup>th</sup> century conquest - are the themes dealt under the third chapter.

Chapter four focuses on Guji-Gedeo relation and articulates the concepts of ethnic dichotomy and complimentarization in different cultural, economic and political settings shared among the groups. This chapter gives vital information about the early interdependence and mutual co-existence between the groups and outlines the beginning of the change in their relationship.

Chapter five focuses on the specific Guji-Gedeo conflicts of 1990s, detailing the contesting views from the two protagonists on the cause of the conflicts, the way the conflicts ended and post-conflict relations.

Likewise, the convergence between national discourse on ethnicity and local realities in inter-ethnic relations is dealt in chapter six. This chapter looks at convergence between ethnicity and indigenesness in African context and casts some light on the impacts of 'Formal Ethnicism' on local inter-ethnic relations. It further looks at the Guji-Gedeo conflict beyond the commonly assumed "resource competition theses".

The last chapter concludes the main themes of the thesis with particular emphasis on a paradigm to ethnicity beyond the constructivist/primordialist thoughts and incongruence of ethnic dichotomy and conflict. It also provides some possible steps forward in a quest to articulate ethnicity and ethnic politics that may contribute to create more harmonious inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopia and particularly between Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups.

## Chapter Two: Theoretical Approaches and Literature Review

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### 2.1 Conceptualizing ethnicity in African context

The middle of twentieth century opened a new chapter in the political history of Africa with the rise of nationalism and independence achieved by African states. Nevertheless, sooner or later postcolonial states became “battle grounds” among groups, political elites and ex-nationalist leaders for control of the state which controlled the production and distribution of resources (Mohammed and Markakis 1998: 7). By these early days of independence ideologies of development, democracy and nation-building were the cornerstones behind political movements. Unfortunately, the architects of these ideologies in postcolonial states failed to satisfy expectations of the people and nationalists who fought for political, economic and social transformations in the respective states. This failure of the states discredited the ideologies and undermined the postcolonial regimes, and paved the way for the second chapter in the modern political history of the continent towards the turn of the century (ibid). The new wave of political struggle was waged under “banners of democratization being one, religion another. Ethnicity, however, has proven the most potent force for political mobilization by far throughout black Africa” (ibid: 7).

Despite the new winds of change that made ethnicity part of both academic and political discourses by the turn of the century, it has been given a retrogressive connotation by different actors in Africa. Political leaders, for example, viewing it as destructive to national unity, denounce it passionately and ‘development theorists’ perceiving it as a check to economic growth, also condemn it (Vaughan 2003:43). Influenced by the colonial thoughts, many consider it as a continuation of ‘primitive tribalism’ that inflicts inter-group hatred and conflict. Hamesso (2001:8) correctly argues that ethnicity is given tribalist connotation whenever referred to in Africa, but the same cause and action may be labelled as ethnic issue in Europe. In short, the concept has faced multidimensional interpretations in the continent.

Notwithstanding these views against its promotion in political and academic arenas, ethnicity - with its broad debatable conceptual and practical approaches - has become one of the instruments of political mobilization by elites, a ‘badge’ for self identification and ascription of others among individuals/groups in multiethnic states, a criteria for recruitment to office/employment and, as some argue, a source of conflict, division, and threat to national integrity in countries like Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia (Abbink 1997:159).

Whatever label(s) might be attached to it, ethnicity has entered the political, social and academic arenas of post-colonial Africa with its contested and contestable interpretations.

## **2.2 Theoretical discourses on ethnicity: transcending primordialist/constructivist paradigm?**

Since the middle of twentieth century, when ethnicity as an analytical concept entered the academic arena, a lot has been written and debated on its conceptual definitions, its manifestations in social or group interaction, the role it plays in group mobilization for 'common ends', and so forth. It is neither my intention nor the scope of this study to go into the details of all controversies related to the concept, ethnicity. However, for better understanding of inter-ethnic relations, which is one of the objectives of this thesis, a few words must be said about how ethnicity is construed in Africa.

In Africa, as elsewhere, the concept of ethnicity is a topic of great discussion among scholars and politicians. While one school of thought (the primordialist approach) describes ethnicity as a group's self identification and/or ascription by others to belong to a certain ethnic group on the basis of common primordial ties such as kinship, language, culture, customs and sometimes religion, the other school of thought (the constructivist approach) attributes it to a construction or as an instrument of groups' mobilization for political or economic purposes (Banks, 1996:39-40). The arguments are not as simple as they seem. Some claim that there are 'irreconcilable' and 'unbreakable' barriers between the two divergently contending views. According to Banks (1996:47) "the contents of an ethnic identity versus its boundary; the primordial gut feeling of an identity versus its instrumental expression; the individual versus the group; ethnicity as an all-inclusive general theory versus ethnicity as a limited approach to particular problems" are the polar extremes central in theories of ethnicity. For the convenience of this study, I will outline the first two 'polar extremes'.

When one looks at ethnicity as analytical concept in academic spheres, Fredrik Barth's edited essays (1969), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; particularly its introduction to the volume sparked a new scene in theories of ethnicity. Barth argues that investigation of ethnic groups' categorization/distinctiveness should focus on "ethnic boundary that defines the group, not on the cultural stuffs it encloses" (1994: 15). However, some criticise Barth assuming that he neglected the place of covert signs and diacritical features in ethnic categorization. For instance, Banks (1996: 14-16) claims that Barth heavily relies on the very

cultural features he claims he is rejecting. As it will be detailed in chapter four of this thesis, I argue that ethnic groups' cultural stuffs are as imperative as the boundary and thus both should be viewed as two faces of the same coin rather than separate determinants.

Another important point of divergence is whether ethnicity causes action or is supplemental to other factors to justify action. The statement by Banks on “the primordial gut feeling of an identity versus its instrumental expression” addresses the argument whether ethnicity is a cause of action or a means to an end. For primordial theorists, the primordial attachments inherent in ethnicity cause an action or conflict. For instrumentalists actions have material causes and ethnicity can be a by-product or a resource in achievement of other events but does not cause actions (Vaughan 2003: 45). For example, Clifford Geertz, seen as a primordialist theoretician, argues that states with homogenous societies are more stable than the heterogeneous ones because the latter lack common feeling among the members (1996:42). However, Geertz's argument baldly ignores historical coexistence of diversified ethnic groups, on the one hand and the role played by external forces against such harmonious inter-ethnic relations who manipulate differences for political, ideological and economic motives on the other hand.

In any discussion of ethnicity in Africa, both theories – in their simplified form - remain debatable. For the constructivists, ethnicity in Africa can be attributed to the colonial system of “divide and rule policy” and the opportunities it created for African politicians to exploit the system of division for their own advantage (Johnston 1998:137). In explaining the case in Rwanda, Johnston - following the idea of David Newbery - states, “ethnic identities are *constructions* under colonial rule shaped both by colonists and African actors who sought to exploit *the new context of power relations* to their own advantage” (ibid: my emphasis).

This view is still contestable because if we trace back to the history of African society and their social structure, which early anthropologists describe as ‘tribal grouping’ (see Banks 1996:27-36 for the works of Manchester School Anthropologists in Africa in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century), attachment to extended family, lineage groups, kinships, shared customs, myth of common origin, shared language and ancestral territory (home) was and still is embedded in groups' self-identification and categorization of others (Hamesso 2001:20-21). From this statement, it can be inferred that ethnic groups long existed in Africa before slave trade and colonialism – the events which some associate with the construction of ethnic groups in Africa.

In the case of Ethiopia, the absence of external colonial experience (except the Italian occupation of 1936-1941) on the one hand and the empire-building project spearheaded by

the Amhara ethnic group in late 19<sup>th</sup> century on the other hand, convinces some to see the Ethiopian case from the internal context rather than the African colonial experience. For example, Knutsson (1994: 86-87), who conducted extensive fieldwork in Ethiopia, argues that if ethnicity and ethnic group classification were accredited to the European colonial system of divide and rule policy in other African countries, such categorization is best attributed to the Abyssinian (former name for northern Ethiopian kingdom) conquest in Southern Ethiopia. However, Knutsson's argument ignores the groups' inherent ties to elements of commonalities even before the advent of the Abyssinian administration to the south.

On the other hand, some arguments correlate the current ethnic issues of the country to the EPRDF's political experiment since 1991 (Woldesellasié 2004:123-124, Aseffa 1996). The argument implies that ethnicity in the country is a new political artefact constructed by the state since 1991.

In short, my point of departure is that there should be a clear distinction between politicised ethnicity/ethnification of politics, and ethnicity as a group's self-identification and categorisation of the other. Putting differently, ethnicity as an instrument of political manipulation, groups' mobilisation and a banner for power competition is conceptually and practically different from using the concept as analytical tool to uncover groups' categorization in a context of social interaction. In the African context, the colonial system of divide and rule policy played a great role in politicising ethnicity by emphasising group differences through differential education, unfair political participation, uneven social services and so forth. In Ethiopia, politicised ethnicity emerged in 1960s when the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM)<sup>5</sup> for the first time rose up with ethnic/nationality questions against the century old ethnic hegemony (Gudina 2003:96-97). Since then, the already existing elements of ethnic characteristics – common language, psychological makeup, and history, experience of suppression, customs and sometimes myth of origin – were activated as strong engines of group mobilisation by different elites. What makes the political change in 1991 rather unique is that the government officially introduced ethnicity as a fundamental instrument of 'addressing nationalities' questions'.

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<sup>5</sup>The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) was first organised by the students of the then Hailesillasié I University (now Addis Ababa University) in early 1960s and later spread to the colleges and secondary schools in the country as a protest against the exploitative feudal system of the imperial regime, which particularly impoverished the rural life. After the mid 1960s the movement was transformed into a radical phase with emerging nationality questions. Inspired by Marxist-Leninist philosophy of National Oppression thesis and the solution provided for this – right to self determination of nations and nationalities including secession – the ESM politicised ethnicity and brought it to the public forum for the first time. ESM played a central role in Ethiopian Revolution of 1974.

Apart from such disparity of the views around the concept, as far as the issues of ethnicity and ethnic relations in Ethiopia are concerned, the notions of 'integration and dichotomization' used by Knutsson (1969) are now undergoing scholarly debates in the country's Anthropological discussions. Some contend that the social interaction through political, administrative and economic systems under the dominant Amhara group lead to acculturation/'integration' of diversified groups (Aseffa 1996). For these groups of scholars, in Ethiopia, it is hardly possible to identify or classify people into this or that ethnic group as a result of integration/assimilation. As analytical concepts, integration and assimilation refer to different processes. Assimilation means vertical relationship between minorities and majorities in which the latter incorporates the former. Integration is supposed to take place in horizontal relationship when groups at equal level tend to integrate into the culture, values and ways of living of the other and vice versa. But in Ethiopian context, both concepts have been used to indicate a process leading to the same end – assimilation into the dominant group.

In any of the cases however, there was neither integration nor successful assimilation of the subjugated groups into the political, economic, cultural and social systems of the politically dominant Amhara group. The Amhara ethnic group had neither the will to integrate the 'others' into its cultural values - which the group considered as markers of its ethnic 'superiority' and distinctiveness against those regarded as 'uncivilized' south - nor had the capacity to effectively implement the policy of assimilation (Mekuria 1996:55-57; Markakis1994:225). For instance, although 'Amharization' and conversion of peoples into Orthodox Christianity were major state policies until recently, 'assimilated' individuals were barely eligible to enter into the political, religious and social systems of the state (Markakis 1994:225; Legesse 2000:8). In short, despite the state's policies of assimilation for over a century, it failed to materialize beyond the level of individuals.

Concomitant with this notion, the views of those supporting a perspective of dichotomization and boundary maintenance are different from the views of integrationists/assimilationists. It has been argued that despite interactions among distinct ethnic groups, the groups usually preserve basic markers of ethnic categorization. According to Barth,

Categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on absence of mobility, and information....Interaction in such a social system [Inter-ethnic interaction] does not lead to its liquidation [of the distinction] through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence (1994:9-10).



In his study of the relationship between the Amhara settlers and the Arsi Oromo in Rift Valley area of Ethiopia, Knutsson also contends;

Despite assimilation into an other group's economic style and ways of life, there has been an observable ethnic identity preserved among the Arsi ethnic groups in Rift Valley areas of Ethiopia...In contrast to the process that made the Baggara nomads out of the Fur farmers, the transition of the Arsi cattle herdsman to Amhara like farmers has not made them Amhara (1994:93).

Alternatively, it is also suggested to emphasise that ethnicity, like indigenesness, could be best understood as social relations where cultural differences are communicated (Saugestad 2001:306). Group distinctiveness strongly depends on identification of self and ascription by others in social interaction. In this sense, members of a certain ethnic group will be evaluated in accordance with their 'performances' of the value standards and/or possession of diacritical features designating the group against the 'other'.

While dealing with these concepts, it is equally important to integrate the approach of "group complementation and dichotomization" in which groups co-exist by sharing significant characteristics of livelihood but at the same time considering themselves different from the other. For example, Eidheim (1969) while discussing on ethnic relationship between the Saami and the Norwegian population in northern Norway indicates that the two ethnic groups share many ethnic characters but are different in some basic markers of ethnicity. As it will be discussed in the next chapters this notion works best for the Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups.

## **2.3 Ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia: myth or reality?**

### **Contending views from myth to 'National Question'**

The issue of ethnic relations can be better understood if the nature of the relationship is singled out. Currently, most multiethnic African countries suffer inter-ethnic conflicts of different kinds. Different sources argue that ethnic conflicts are serious threats to state-building and process of democratic transformation in Post Cold War Africa (Johnston, in Christie 1998:129). Although several causes of ethnic conflicts could be identified, the arguments swing between the two 'extremes' of thoughts on ethnicity. On the first 'polar extreme' are those contending ethnicity as a cause of inter-ethnic conflict, which may be part of primordial thoughts (Banks 1996:183; Gudina 2003:54). On the other 'extreme' are the common instrumentalist notions of elite manipulation of group differences (Hamesso 2001:47) and states' involvement in instigating rivalries between groups for political

advantages (Udogu 2001:21, 35). In between these positions are also some who attribute ethnic conflict in the horn of Africa to competition over meagre resources (Jemma 2002:1), and the nature of state structure, particularly in Ethiopia (Aseffa 1996), both of which incline to instrumentalist views.

As it will be outlined in chapter six, I will argue that ethnic conflicts should be understood contextually beyond the common thoughts discussed above. While the notion that presents ‘ethnic difference perpetuates hatred and justifies conflicts’ seems unconvincing, instrumental expression of identity overlooks groups’ self awareness and labels ethnic groups as only driven by elites for material gains. Rather, ethnic conflicts may contextually combine both primordial feelings and instrumental strategies depending on the political, economic and social realities in which the actors operate. Ethnicity takes both silent and active forms of manifestation under different contexts. The silent or passive forms of ethnicity exist in primordial elements whereas the activation of these elements by ethnic entrepreneurs, leads to the emergence of the active or alert forms of ethnicity, which may in turn justify action (see Appendix 1).

Currently, critics on ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia are pointed towards the EPRDF government’s state structure. It is argued that the “self-government” structure created by the government had separated different ethnic groups, who were in the past living within the same administrative borders, into different regional states and limited their access to common resources like pasture lands (Abdulahi 2004:4). For example, the argument depicts the incorporation of Boran and Dogdi groups into Oromia and Somali Regional States respectively as a root cause of their conflict. According to this notion, the same is true for Guji and Gedeo peoples, who were included into Oromia and SNNPR respectively. Such views pose as a leading question whether and in what aspect the current state structure of Ethiopia instigates inter-ethnic conflicts.

However, it becomes a wrong generalization to assume inter-ethnic conflicts like the Guji-Gedeo case as caused by the state’s boundary division *separating* the groups. Like many post-colonial African states who suffer from artificial borders by which groups with mutually incomprehensible language and cultural codes were forced to live together while similar ethnic groups were separated (Hamesso 2001: 38), the post 1991 state structure of Ethiopia also divided the Guji in putting some of the members under the Gedeo zone while the rest remained under Oromia regional state.

According to the views of different scholars and local and international organizations<sup>6</sup>, who support the ‘resource competition thesis’, it is quite likely that resource competition has created conflicts between groups that used to live in harmony in the past, such as the Guji and Gedeo in Southern Ethiopia, Amhara and Oromo peoples in Wallaga, the Karayu and Itu, and the Afar and the Arsi Oromos in eastern Ethiopia (Teka 2004:2). But one may nevertheless ask; why did resource competition take an ethnic dimension only after 1991?

Hussein Jemma, who surveyed the recent Guji-Gedeo conflicts, strongly supports the “resource competition thesis” as a root and fundamental cause of the conflict. He contends that the conflicts emanated from “rivalry over scarce resource, which emerged following the state division along ethnic lines that was coupled with resource redistribution” (2002:1). However, neither Guji nor Gedeo informants whom I interviewed mentioned the question of resource as a primary cause for the conflict between the two groups. *Hayicha* Dama, my key Gedeo informant, associates it to external force from the Oromo side, particularly the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front)<sup>7</sup> and even Oromo politicians in the Federal government instigating hatred between “brothers”. On the contrary, almost all of my Guji informants attribute the conflict to question of self-government on their part. It becomes to be scholarly blind to reduce such ethnic conflicts merely to a commonly token rivalry over scarce resources without a thorough and satisfactory field work evidences. The investigation of Guji and Gedeo informants’ allegations will be the task of the fifth chapter of this study.

On the other hand, there is an emerging argument about conflicts in the horn of Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, which portrays it as “elite-driven conflict” rather than ethnic conflict. In his article about “Ethnic Conflict in the Horn of Africa: Myth and Reality” Aseffa (1996) contends that, particularly in pre-1991 period, the conflicts in Ethiopia were against exploitative class rather than against ethnic groups. But this argument is not a sufficient explanation for the Amhara ethnic group’s domination of the country’s economic, political,

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<sup>6</sup>In August 2004 Africa Peace Forum (APF), Ethiopian Pastoralist Research and Development Association (EPRDA), Inter Africa Group (IAG), Pastoralist Concern Association Ethiopia (PCAE), and Safer World (SW) held a joint seminar in Addis Ababa on Conflict Prevention and Peace Building.

<sup>7</sup>The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is an armed organization born in 1974 with a major aim of struggle of self determination for the Oromo people, their liberation from oppression and exploitation [under Ethiopian empire], and establishment of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Oromia (Chanie, 1998:101) or towards the achievement of right for self-determination of the Oromo people and voluntary unity of Ethiopian people (Hassen 1996:77). It is not uncommon to hear the Government’s accusation of the Front for any conflict in the country since the front boycotted the Transitional Government in 1992 and continued with armed struggle.

cultural and social affairs for more than a century (i.e.1880s to 1991) against which many of ethnic wars were fought.

As it will be detailed below, ethnic conflicts in the country were largely associated with ‘national questions’ in quest for freedom and liberty of respective ethnic groups from the Amhara domination in pre-1991 period (Tibebu1995: xv) and against the rising Tigrayan hegemony since then. In the Ethiopian context, the ‘national question’, sometimes referred as nationalities question, refers to the political struggles launched by members of ethno-national groups to abolish ethnic domination and suppression. Since mid 20<sup>th</sup> century it has been premised on promoting political rights, freedom, and equality, respect of identity of the politically, economically and culturally oppressed and marginalized ethnic groups (Abraham 2003:34).

My approach, in the present thesis, is that ethnic conflict in the country should be understood as different dimensions of self-government. The first is conflicts of ethnic groups against the state. This argument sees ethnic conflict in the country as fundamentally rooted in the nature of ethnic hegemony both under the Amhara and Tigre ethnic groups. Putting it differently, it was and is a question of self-government, equality, fair distribution of resources, equal representation and so forth. The other aspect of understanding conflicts is inter-ethnic conflicts as evidenced in many occasions in the country. Against the views of those supporting ‘elite-driven’ conflict and competition over scarce resources as fundamental causes, I will argue that many of the inter-ethnic conflicts – if not all – particularly in post-1991 period are also associated with question of self-government as the new state’s restructuring divided similar ethnic groups and lumped together different ones.

## **2.4 Ethnic identity: embedded in the groups or a mere political artefact?**

Is ethnic identity a post 1991 political fabric of “invented tradition” among ethnic groups in Ethiopia? Unfortunately, in Ethiopia, personal political agenda have crossed into the academic boundary and are largely influencing the approaches of scholars in their writings, particularly on contested issues like ethnic identity. Today, Ethiopian politics swings between the forces of ‘state integration’ or pan-Ethiopianism on the one hand and ‘ethnic groups’ right of self-government’ on the other. It is hard to find a virtually neutral Ethiopian scholar in his/her writings on the above contending views. Supporters of the ‘nation-building’ project try to mystify the realities about ethnic identity among diversified groups. For example, Aseffa (1996) explains that it was the post 1991 ethnification process, which created the idea of

belonging into separate ethnic group on the basis of blood and/or linguistic division. According to this perspective, the current waves of ethnic identity in the country are largely the results of post 1991 political construction.

As Woldesellasie (2001: 5) argues, “Since 1991 the political context in Ethiopia has changed from the *age-old tradition of imagining and symbolising “Greater Ethiopia”* to the practice of a political structure articulated under the ideology of ‘Formal Ethnicism’” (emphasis mine). However, the question is whether this political experiment constructed a new ethnic identity or activated on the existing group dichotomies.

Against the constructivist approach, other Ethiopian as well as foreign scholars brought the notion of ethnic identity as embedded in the cultural, political, religious and traditional ways of life of different ethnic groups (Lewis 1996, Baxter 1996, Hamesso 2001). Indeed, it becomes academically untenable to downgrade groups’ attachment to common values to the extent that ethnic identities are imagined as mere constructions of the political experiment put in place in 1991.

For further scholarly analysis of the positions – ethnic consciousness as ‘invented tradition’ or ‘embedded in commonalities’ - I will examine three different cases of ethnic identity among the Amhara - the group that dominated the country’s socio-political, economic and cultural systems until 1991 -, the Tigre - the group dominating state power since 1991 and the Oromo (the numerous but highly subordinated ethnic group in the country).

#### **2.4.1 The ‘contested’ Amhara ethnicity**

There are many scholars who argue that “Amhara” is not a defined ethnic entity; rather it is an elusive concept, which sometimes refers to all speakers of Amharic language (Aseffa 1996, Woldesellasie 2001:41-45, Teka 1998:119-120). Although these scholars present themselves as constructivist theorists, in this context it seems that they have approached categorization of ethnic groups more from the primordial perspective in which an ethnic group is aggregate of people with common primordial ties like language, common ancestry (myth of common origin), shared historical memories, customs, practises, and sometimes common religion (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:6 cited in Teka 1998:117). Referring to the above definition of ethnic groups, Teka argues as follows,

If we use these criteria in the Ethiopian context and apply them to the ethnic group under consideration, the Amhara, there would be little agreement on the outcome. The Amhara do not have myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, a link with homeland (they have several homelands), but they do have elements of common

culture, specifically a language, and sense of solidarity among at least some members of their group (1998:117).

The above expression provides unsatisfactory explanation for the claim that the Amhara is not a defined ethnic group. Above all, it seems to have ignored the fact that ethnic identity and categorization are premised on self-identification and ascription by others. Common solidarity among members indicates identification of self and acceptance by the group against the 'others' with whom the group has had less/no solidarity. In addition, the argument that "the Amhara do not have myth of common ancestry and shared historical memories" is ill founded. Religion, region, language and legend to common descent are the bedrocks in Amhara ethnic identity (Guddina 2003).

Denying Amhara ethnic identity is not only debated among scholars but currently it is also fuelled up in the political arena. One of the top leaders of "Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD)"<sup>8</sup> was once asked by Ethiopian journalists about his ethnic background and replied, "I am an Ethiopian. I know my parents are also Ethiopians... What I know about my ethnic back ground is only this. I was born in one of the Ethiopian provinces, Gojjam [Gojjam is one of Administrative Zones in Amhara Regional State]..." Whether this man genuinely lacks sense of Amhara ethnic identity or deliberate deny of this identity for political agenda depends on how one perceives the issue contextually.

Both Aseffa (1996) and Woldesellasi (2001) tried to deconstruct and depict Amhara ethnic identity to a micro-level where it is perceived as a mere distinction between Christians and Muslims or Christians and followers of "traditional religions". This argument goes further in contending that the Gojjam Amharas are different from Gondar Amharas as Shawan Amharas are different from Wollo Amharas. This argument lacks sufficient evidence but even if it could be evidenced, Herbert S. Lewis states that, "ethnicity begins at home - but can be extended to others who are seen to share at least some of the same characters and symbolic elements" (1996:39).

In contrast to the views of these scholars and politicians, I see Amhara ethnicity as rather attached in many ways to the state 'built' by the group through the trinity alliance of religion, region and ethnic elements (Gudina 2003:2). Rather than deconstructing Amhara ethnicity to a local level of group designation, it seems more convincing - from the historical

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<sup>8</sup>Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party was established by the end of 2004. Above all, the Party strives to revive the past Amhara hegemony in the country's political, economic, social and cultural systems but it was banned by the government on power in October 2005 following the strikes between the opposition parties and the ruling party (EPRDF) following the contested election of May 2005.

attachment of the group with the Ethiopian state all in spiritual, regional and ethnic elements - if a scholar argues more on a more macro-level, equating Amhara ethnic identity with Ethiopian nationalism. It is relevant to repeat Markakis's expression here; "Understandably, their [Amhara ruling elites] perception of national identity was the mirror image of their ethnic and cultural ego. Thus, the language of Amhara and Christianity [Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity] became the salient features of Ethiopian nationalism..." (1994:225).

My contention here is that there is both a covert and an overt sense of ethnic identity among this group as distinct from the other groups in the country. This was evident in the traditional ruling system where non-Amhara groups were considered as ineligible to the administrative status merely because of ethnic difference (ibid: 227). In short, I argue that the Amhara ethnic group more strongly identifies itself to the state than what other nations, nationalities and peoples do.

#### **2.4.2 Ethnic identity as a response to state power – the Tigre case**

Tigray forms the heart of the ancient Abyssinian kingdom of Aksum in northern part of today's Ethiopia. For my specific enquiry of the ethnic identity among Tigre, I will argue that in the past, they had many basic objective and subjective elements of ethnicity in common with the Amhara. Subjectively, both identified themselves as integral parts of the Abyssinian state both in its spiritual and political foundations. The legendary myth of the so-called 'Solomonic Dynasty' was in the heart of self-identification of both groups. Linguistically, though they spoke different languages, the groups converged in a common religious language, the Geez (Adhana 1998: 42-43). This sense of 'collectiveness' of the group in basic common interests lasted only until late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the centre of political gravity moved from Tigray – following the death of a Tigrayan emperor, Yohannes IV in 1889 – to Shoa. The event brought not only a shift in the geo-political centre but also changed the 'ethnic composition' of power holders – from Tigrayans to the Amharas although the former continued as younger partners to the Amharas in the empire building process.

It can be argued that Tigrayan ethnic identity emerged from the group's assumption that Tigray lost its centrality in Ethiopian power politics in favour of the Amhara. Whenever a group develops sense of resentment, it tends to emphasize and activates on elements of differences rather than similarities. The Amharization policy and the suppression of the group under the imperial regime were presented as igniting factors for emergence of ethnic movement in Tigray since 1960s (Adhana 1998: 47-48; Vaughan 2003:161-163). As it will be

discussed below, it was under these circumstances that the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF) emerged in 1975 with emphasis on liberation of Tigray but with no defined political programme as to whether liberation of Tigray would lead to self-determination of the group up to secession, or remain within the Ethiopian state (Adhana 1998: 48). In short, ethnic identity among the Tigre was activated by the political entrepreneurs in their quest to mobilize the mass against their former partner group – the Amhara.

### **2.4.3 Ethnic identity rooted in historical distinctiveness – the Oromo**

The Oromo people are one of the numerous ethnic groups in Africa (Baxter et. al 1998: 7) and the largest on the Horn of Africa. In spite of the absence of accurate census data, Baxter et.al pointed out that in 1990s “there were about twenty million people whose first language is Oromo and *who recognize themselves as Oromo*” (ibid, my emphasis). This numerical value did not include many Oromo individuals who, because of the assimilation (i.e. Amharization or Ethiopianization) policies of successive Ethiopian governments (Mekuria, 1996:56-57) lost their Oromo identity or at least did not dare to identify themselves as Oromo. Linguistically, the Oromo belong to the Cushitic language family. Oromo oral tradition and historical documents trace the Oromo place of origin to the high lands of Bale, Borana, and Guji areas, more specifically Madaa Walabu areas (Legesse 1973, 2000) in today’s southern Ethiopia. Before their expansion to the present territories in 16<sup>th</sup> century the Oromo were predominantly engaged in pastoral way of life with limited agricultural practices. It is commonly assumed by social scientists, historians and anthropologists that population pressure and shortage of land were the pushing factors behind the expansion (Mekuria 1996: 50).

Despite the expansion that made the different Oromo branches to move apart geographically, the group maintained strong sense of common hood, belonging and solidarity. As Baxter (1991: 9) puts, all the Oromo branches share common psychological makeup irrespective of religion, region and economic practices. Among many elements of ethnic bonds that tie the Oromo together such as language, common origin, shared memory of history, history of suppression under Ethiopian empire and common or similar practices of customs, significant roles have been played by the traditional socio-cultural, political and ritual system – the Gada system – and the spiritual Qallu institution.



## **2.5 The Gada System as a symbolic representation of pan-Oromo identity and solidarity**

Most of the peoples in southern Ethiopia have their own indigenous social organizations, traditional practices and cultural institutions. In contrast to the northern Ethiopian Christian highland that exercised the feudal mode of production and administration, the autonomous states of the south had egalitarian systems of administration, democratic ways of power transfer and communal economic systems.

Among the Oromo, the Gedeo and the Sidama peoples, this system of political, military, economic, ritual, and juridical organization is referred to as the Gada system. So far, definitions given to “Gada system” have been complex, broad and sometimes ambiguous. However, for a simple understanding of the concept, Professor Asmarom Legesse, a social anthropologist and known scholar on Oromo Gada system (see Legesse 1973, 2000), defines the concept as follows: “The Gada system is an institution that represents an extreme development of a type of social structure known to anthropologists as age-sets” (Legesse 1973:50). He further describes, “The Gada system is a system of Gada class<sup>9</sup> (*Luba*) that succeed each other every eight years [among the Oromo] in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative and ritual responsibilities. Each Gada class is a segment of a generation” (ibid 2000:31). Though the figure differs from place to place among different Oromo branches, the maximum number of Gada grades<sup>10</sup> is eleven among the Borana of southern Ethiopia and the minimum is five among the Matcha of central, western and south-western Ethiopia. Each Gada grade has eight years interval for members to move to the next Gada grade. It is not merely founded on the basis of age-sets in which the younger succeeds the older age-set in assuming these responsibilities. Members of each Gada class are recruited on the basis of their genealogical generations as well as their chronological age (ibid). To elaborate this more, according to the Oromo Gada system, the newly born infant boy<sup>11</sup> always enters the system (the grades) exactly forty years (five grades) behind the father regardless of the age of the father. In other words, if a man gives birth to a son at thirty years, the son has to wait for another ten years until the father becomes forty. The Gada rules also prohibit

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<sup>9</sup>Gada class is “the group of people who share the same status and who perform their rites of passage together” (Legesse 1973:51).

<sup>10</sup> “Gada grades are the stages of development through which the groups [classes] pass” (ibid).

<sup>11</sup>In the Gada system women have no role in assuming military, political, ritual and legislative responsibilities. Nevertheless, they are given opportunities to give comments about any activities entrusted to men, participate in listening to the Assembly while new laws are enacted or formulated and suggest their feelings about their affairs. Their main role is in conflict resolution mechanisms.

marriage or at least bearing children before they become forty years old - entering the second phase of the fifth grade - (Legesse 2000:124). This means new children continue to be “born” into Gada class throughout most of its development and as a result classes incorporate people of different ages. In each of the grades members of every class have their own distinct responsibilities (i.e. distinct responsibilities from the other class).

At the end of every eight years there is a power transfer ceremony called *Balli* among Borana and *Butta* among Macha. It is through this ceremony that members of a certain grade transfer the power held for the last eight years to the succeeding class. This manifests its democratic nature in addition to many mechanisms of checks and balances of power to prevent power misuse, abuse, and other elements of dictatorship or autocracy, which was a common trend among the highland Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (see Legesse 2000).

It is neither the objective nor the scope of this study to deal thoroughly with the ethnographic details of the Gada system, the role of its leaders, its ritual practises and initiation procedures (see Legesse 1973, 2000; Bassi 1996; Hinnant 1977). As noted earlier, my emphasis is on the Gada system as a symbolic representation of pan-Oromo identity and solidarity that confront to assumptions of ‘a political artefact of post 1991 development.

An Italian anthropologist, Marco Bassi, describes the symbolic significance of Gada in Oromo ethnic identity and cultural representation this way:

Gada is certainly a very strong symbol of Oromo ethnic identity, but as with many symbols, it may have many meanings. It manifests itself in a wide range of social phenomena, including prescriptive rules, ceremonies, rites, public offices and actual villages. ...Gada becomes a conceptual abstraction, something in which all Oromo are supposed to identify themselves because they recognize it as a root feature of Oromo culture or as a symbol of a pan-Oromo national political identity (as distinct from the Ethiopian national identity) (Bassi: 1996:150).

### **The Qallu institution as identity marker among the Oromo**

Another equally important point of emphasis in our pursuit for understanding the basis of common ethnic identity and solidarity among different Oromo branches is the spiritual institution called the Qallu institution. Legesse sums up the meaning of the Qallu and its interdependence with the Gada system as follows,

The Qallu are the ritual leaders of the Oromo, representing the two great societal halves of the nation, whose shrines are historically associated with the cradle lands of the Borana and the Baretuma Oromo. Oromo pilgrims who come from far and wide honour them; to take part in the octennial ritual called *Muda* (“the anointing”). The Qallu are showered with gifts, and in turn, they give their blessings. They are empowered to oversee the election of Gada leaders but they and their kin are forever barred from holding such office. They may not bear arms or shed blood (2000:100-101).

Once in every eight years a great ritual ceremony used to be undertaken in southern parts of Oromo land (i.e. Arsi and Borana areas) on which many thousands of Oromo pilgrims participated travelling from as far north as Wollo and west as Wallaga and Jimma. Though the practice is radically declining recently owing to different factors such as the pressure from successive Ethiopian regimes and introduction of Christianity, it is still preserved among the Guji and Borana groups and practised among the Wollo and Matcha Oromo slightly in a different form Legesse 2000: 102-103).

From the discussions on the Gada system and the Qallu institution, it is fair to conclude that the Oromo have had sense of common ethnic identity across religious and geographical boundaries. Herbert S. Lewis for example made a concrete observation of the development of Oromo ethnic identity beginning from 1958 all through 1994 among the Oromo communities in Jimma and Ambo (both geographically far apart) and describes it as follows:

There was never any question about identity. That these were Muslims [those in Jimma area], who spoke Afaan Oromo, whose culture was different from the Amhara (Sidama), was never in doubt. .... Everyone knew that he or she had a genealogy that extended back through individuals named Mach'a and Raya, thus relating them to the rest of the Mach'a and the Tulama, the Wollo, Jidda, and Raya Oromo. The ethnonym "Oromo" was not normally used in self-identification because the term stood for those who were not Muslim, and for the time before their ancestors became Muslim, but *there was no question that they knew that they were related by language and genealogical history, and perhaps by custom and culture, to other people in the empire who were called "Oromo" and "Galla"* <sup>12</sup>(1996:40 emphasis mine).

From the above quotes, I would like to make an important conclusion. The fact that the community was a Muslim (in south-western Ethiopia) with sense of self-identification to non-Muslim Oromo in the north, east and south further strengthens our premise that there has been pan-Oromo solidarity and sense of common identity among different Oromo branches across religious and geographical boundaries.

### **Summing up the three cases**

So far, I have tried to demonstrate the basis of ethnic identity among the three groups – the Amhara, the Tigre and the Oromo. No matter how disputed it may be, the Amhara ethnic

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<sup>12</sup> The term "Galla" has been labelled on the Oromo people by the alien Ethiopian rulers and "writers of Ethiopian historiography" including chroniclers of kings and clergymen from the state church, who were equally instruments of conquest, and even Ethiopianist "historians". It designates a derogatory representation of the group as 'primitive, uncivilized, infidel and barbarous'.

identity is rooted in Orthodox Christianity, legendary myth of common descent, ethnocentric view of ‘civilized culture’, common solidarity and self identification to the state. Similarly, the Tigre, who shared similar spiritual affair, cultural practices, and political ideologies of ‘nation building’ with the Amhara until 1889 turned to emphasise elements of difference – the language difference - when they lost the lion shares of power and resources from the newly subjugated regions of the south, up to their presumed domination, discrimination and suppression under the Amhara, and finally took a form of ethnic movement since 1970s.

On the other hand, the Oromo ethnic identity is embedded in common history, shared culture, shared memories of subjugation, suppression and discrimination; common language, home of origin and shared values of tradition. The historical experience of cultural and political domination, economic exploitation and social discrimination under the Amhara dominated Ethiopian empire obviously transformed Oromo self-identity into ethnic movements since 1960s (Lewis 1996: 45).

In short, in contrast to the notion that ethnic identity is a mere construction by the political experiment of the state in post-1991, sense of identity was clearly evident among the diversified ethnic groups in the country long for many decades before 1991. Rather, it should be underlined that ethnic identities, in addition to the objective features of distinctiveness, were fuelled by the creation of the Ethiopian empire and the subsequent ethnic domination before 1991 by the Amhara and later by the Tigre ethnic groups.

## **2.6 The ‘National Question’ and ethnic policy in Ethiopia: The root to ‘Ethnic Federalism’**

If much of ethnic problems in other African countries are rooted in the colonial history of Africa and post-colonial state-building processes, the current ethnic issues in Ethiopia should be understood from the historical antecedents that go back to the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through relentless campaigns of conquest, the continued ‘nation-building’ process engaged by successive governments, and the ethnic hegemony exercised by the Amhara and the Tigre ethnic groups.

During the Europeans’ scramble for Africa in 1880s, the Abyssinian Empire was busy in empire building project launched by its architect, king Minilik of Shawa, the later emperor Minilik II of Ethiopia (Tibebu 1995: xv) with motives of primarily empire-building and resource exploitation. Tibebu even considers Minilik II as “the only black African leader who effectively participated in the scramble for Africa” (ibid). By the conquest, the greater portion

of the country's landmass was incorporated into the empire and gave its present geographical shape and cultural, linguistic, and ethnic compositions by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hameso 2001:74-75). The autonomous states like the Oromo states, Sidama, Gedeo, Walaita, Kaffa, Konso, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella, Ogaden, among dozens of others were subdued to the Amhara hegemony (Vaughan 2003: 106) despite fierce resistance by many of these states against the northern conquerors, as a result of unbalanced military equipment between the two. The end of the conquest was followed by institutionalisation of the northern feudal system of exploitation, massive population settlement from the north on the lands of the subjugated peoples, imposition of Amhara language, religion and other forms of culture at the expense of the indigenous cultures (Tibebu, 1995:44-45, McClellan 1988).

It was this colonial experience which in the later times (since 1960s) enabled the subjected peoples to revitalise their ethnic identity, historical background and traditional values and inspired them to emphasise their distinctive ethnic identification against the Amhara/Ethiopian ethnic identity, culture and historical past (Hameso 2001, Bassi 1996).

Despite the demise of the imperial regime following the September 1974 Revolution, which brought to power the military dictatorship under colonel Mengistu Hailemariam, there was no significant difference as far as the fundamentals of centralism and ethnic domination are concerned (Hameso 2001: 77). The *Dergue*<sup>13</sup> then commenced its policy under the banner of "Ethiopia First" and "Ethiopia or Death" both of which were based on aggressive, militarist patriotism, and ruthless use of force against ethnic and nationality issues (ibid: 79).

### **2.6.1 An Empire under ethnic hegemony**

As the country became a mosaic of nations, nationalities and peoples following the emergence of the modern Ethiopian empire state, which historians clearly put as "black colonialism" (Tibebu, 1995: xv, 40), successive Ethiopian governments have been following suppressive and discriminatory policies. It was the Amhara ethnic group that dominated the country (Hassen: 1996:71). The Amhara language became the Lingua Franca, state-backed Orthodox Christianity became the only legitimate religion in the empire, and all forms of Amhara culture imposed on the subjected peoples of the south as the only legitimate and 'civilized culture' (Tibebu 1995: 44-45). By these times, one has to be "Amharized" to get some privileges. John Markakis supports this argument, when he states; "in imperial Ethiopia for instance, it was easier for a non-Christian, who also did not speak Amharigna, to pass through

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<sup>13</sup> The "*Dergue*" represents a "committee" organized first by the Imperial regime (Hailesillasie I) from the lower military ranks to contain/ suppress the ongoing popular revolt against the regime since 1960s.

the eye of a needle than to enter the charmed circle of power and privilege” (1994:227). Poluha (1998:31) while discussing about realities of access to power in Imperial Ethiopia states that; “...Nevertheless, a person aspiring to power had to be a man who had mastered Amharigna, adhered to [Orthodox] Christianity and had developed a good relationship with a powerful patron”.

Except members of Amhara ruling elite and to some extent the Tigre, all other ethnic groups were left marginal to the political, social, economic and cultural privileges. Rather than becoming a home for diversified groups, the empire became ‘a prison house of nations, nationalities and peoples’. In other words, Ethiopia was considered by the ruling elites as a country of the Amhara ethnic group. To repeat Markakis’s argument,

Understandably, their [Amhara ruling elites] perception of national identity was the mirror image of their ethnic and cultural ego. Thus, the language of Amhara and Christianity became the salient features of Ethiopian nationalism, and the Arab language and Islam of Sudanese nationalism. In Ethiopia no other indigenous language was allowed to be printed, broadcast or spoken in public functions... and the attempts to study the culture and history of other groups were decidedly discouraged (1994:225).

### **2.6.2 The Ethiopian Experiment of ‘Ethnic Federalism’**

Under the earlier sections of this chapter, I discussed ethnicity as analytical concept which is generally understood based on self identification and/or ascription by others as members of a particular group. The disparities between different schools of thought on ethnicity are more, on its analytical meanings in academic discourses than in political context. If one tries to posit ethnicity in a political context, in which political movements, parties and elites manipulate the concept in their pursuit of gaining legitimacy and mass mobilisation, ethnicity goes beyond a simple categorisation of people into ‘this’ or ‘that’ categorical ethnic group. However, even the political aspect itself is not completely devoid of the analytical meanings of the concept. It rather makes use of groups’ inherent attachment as instrument of mobilisation and credibility.

To better understand the principles of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ and its impacts on inter-ethnic relations I will focus on the political manipulability of ethnicity and examine how – beyond the analytical meaning of the concept – the political actors used ethnicity for political mass mobilisation and legitimacy. Under such circumstances, some basic questions may be posed like: what aspects of ethnicity are used for political enterprise? How did/do the ethnic entrepreneurs use the concept in political context? What is/are the final goal(s) of ethnic entrepreneurs in using ethnicity as a political instrument? Who are the beneficiaries from the enterprise?

As Hameso (2001: 57) explains, soon after independence many African countries adopted different ethnic policies in their national constitutional development. While some like Kenya and Tanzania looked for ethnic accommodation, Nigeria promulgated laws that provided for constitutional measures in federalism and regionalism. On the other hand, “autocracy and dictatorship in Ethiopia and despotism in Zaire ruled out ethnicity and ethnic nationalism as recipes for chaos, dismemberment, and instability” (ibid).

In the late 1980s the TPLF systematically read the hearts and minds of the peoples beyond the origin of the Front as a means to achieve political mobilization and legitimacy for power over the whole of Ethiopia. Popular mobilisation in subjugated regions of the south would be an easy task for any political organization that promised an attention to ethnic questions. To this end, TPLF purportedly transformed its political programme from Liberation of Tigray to “democratisation of Ethiopia” when it formed EPRDF in 1989 (Vaughan 2003: 168-170).

Although the TPLF/EPRDF government adopted the most popular approach to the ‘National Question’ as its ideological bedrock, the ideology of ‘nationalities’ right for self-determination’ - the basis of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ in Ethiopia - is not a new political innovation of the party on power. Its root can be traced back to the 1960s ideology of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). The 1960s Ethiopian students politicised ethnicity under the banner of ‘national question’, which was a volatile political issue in the country. Before that time, raising ethnic issues as political alternatives was considered as ‘taboo’ among the Amhara/Ethiopianist ruling elites because it was perceived as a threat to their political supremacy (Gudina 2003:97, Vaughan 2003: 134). The ESM opened the national struggle against the old regime with a new chapter of elites’ involvement and gave it an ethnic dimension complemented with class struggle (Gudina 2003: 73).

An article by a student leader, Wallelegn Mekonnen, who was killed by the imperial regime in 1973 (ibid: 97) in an attempt to hijack an Ethiopian airline, sparked a political bombshell to Hailesillasie’s government by explicitly addressing the ‘national question’ and exposing the Amhara dominance and oppression to the academic and political milieus. The gist of his article reads as follows:

Is it not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian religion is? Ask anybody what is the national dress? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigray!! To be a ‘genuine Ethiopian’ one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity, and to wear the Amhara-Tigre *shama* in international conferences. In some cases to be an ‘Ethiopian’, you will even have to change your name. In short, to be an Ethiopian, you

will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression) (Quoted in Balsvik, 1985: 277).

The article broke the ice of silence on the nationalities' question among Ethiopian Students and discredited the century long illusion of the success of the 'nation-building' project of the imperial regime. Thereafter, recognition of the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination, including secession, became a driving revolutionary force in the Student circles and of the nationalist movements which were its offspring – like the EPLF, TPLF, OLF, EPRP (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party) among others (Gudina 2003: 97-98).

Ethnically based historical injustices by the politically dominant group over the subjugated ethnic groups were exposed and used by these ethnic entrepreneurs. In this regard, the pre-revolution political, historical, economic and social realities of the country provided justification for the relevance of carrying ethnic banners for the elites in the quest for competition over state power, which was seen as struggle for liberation from the century long 'colonial' experience (Tibebu 1995) or national oppression (Gudina: 2003). Ethnicity became an aspect of the political movements behind the major liberation fronts. While EPLF considered the Ethiopian state as a colonial empire and opted for complete independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia, the Tigre (TPLF), who was part of the Abyssinian heart-land, oscillated in their agenda between complete independence for the region and its self-determination within the greater Ethiopian context. Not surprisingly, the OLF refers to the historical suppression of the group under the Ethiopian empire and uses ethnic identity in its mass mobilisation against the successive Ethiopian regimes for the liberation of Oromo people and its right to self- determination.

For the convenience of this thesis in understanding the principles of 'Ethnic Federalism' in the post 1991 Ethiopia in which ethnicity is articulated as a driving force behind the government's economic, educational, political and social policies (Abbink 1997, Gudina 2003), I will limit my focus to the TPLF/EPRDF party – the architect of 'Ethnic Federalism'. It should be noted that, the TPLF political ideology was premised on the centrality of Tigrayan ethnicity. Vaughan's interview with one of the founding members of TPLF also clearly reveals that the Front used ethnic nationalism to mobilise the mass – Tigray peasants and the youths – under the slogan of 'national struggle first' and thus to create a sense of 'imagined community' among the group during its struggle in 1970s and 1980s (2003:164). Both Adhana Haile (1998) and Sarah Vaughan (2003: 163) exemplify language as the basic



element in recreating the boundary of “us” and “them” between the historically similar groups, who shared the same spiritual and political doctrines – the Tigrayans and the Amharas. Even after the establishment of EPRDF under the party sponsorship of TPLF in 1989, the ideological bedrock of its founding party has continued to surface.

As a descendant of the Ethiopian Student Movement, the TPLF was organised on the ideological foundation of Marxist-Leninist precepts of ‘right to self-determination including secession’ and used both options within and outside greater Ethiopia. Be it for democratisation of Ethiopia or liberation of Tigray – and leaving the interpretations for politicians and political scientists whether democratisation of Ethiopia or liberation of Tigray was a genuine programme of TPLF -, it can be argued that ethnic politics enabled the Front to mobilise the mass in its home of birth (Tigray) and was flexibly used according to the political and ideological expediencies of the day. They used the Marxist ideology for local mobilization and ‘ideology of democratisation’ to gain international support, particularly from the United State of America (Gudina 2003:118-119).

### **The 1994 Constitution: a political tool for ethnic entrepreneurs or a guarantee for ethnic groups?**

The TPLF/EPRDF successfully secured government power over the whole of Ethiopia following its hard-won victory over the military regime in May 1991 and the ratification of the Transitional Charter.<sup>14</sup> The Transitional Charter formalised ethnicity and ethnic politics and endorsed the redrawing of the country’s political map along ethno-linguistic divisions<sup>15</sup> (see map on Appendix 2). Though only of paper value, the 1994 constitution ‘granted’ ethnic groups ‘unconditional’ right to self determination up to and including secession. It should be from this context of ‘Formal Ethnicism’ that the current ethnic issues could be understood in addition to the historical past – not as a political construction by the state but from the aspect of formalising this concept in the political agenda of the government for the first time after the birth of the modern Ethiopia.

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<sup>14</sup>Transitional Charter was ratified at the July 1991 Conference held in London where dozens of political parties participated. The Charter established a Transitional government where the EPRDF secured a lion’s share of seats in the Council of Representatives pushing other parties to nominal and marginal corner of power. Anyway, the Charter opened a new chapter in the country’s constitutional history as far as nationality questions are concerned - no matter that the implementation on the ground remains an elusive mission.

<sup>15</sup>The Charter recognised the establishment of 14 ‘self-governing’ regional states namely: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Beni Shangul-Gumuz, Sidama, North Omo, Wolayta, South Omo, Gambella, Harari, Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa as regions 1-14 respectively. However, after 1994, the regions 7-10 were merged together as SNNPR and the number of the regional states was reduced to 9 administrative regions; Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa as federal regions.

Under the context of this thesis, I will focus on Article 39 of the 1994 Constitution, which is the most contested but more remarkable article of the constitution. The constitution in general, particularly Article 39, is central in ethnic questions and in principle, addresses the 'National Questions' by stating that ethnic groups or nations, nationalities and peoples shall have the right to self-government on the territories they inhabit. It goes as follows:

A "Nation, Nationality or People" for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory ( Article 39:5).

The same article, sub-articles 1-3 addresses the nationalities' questions in stipulating that,

- (1) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.
- (2) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.
- (3) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and Federal governments.

This constitution, which recognised ethnicity as a basic instrument of the Ethiopian politics, is under critic and counter-critic from politicians and the academia. The critics range from those who, inspired by its principles but discontented by low or no practical implementations, see the government as failing to respect the very constitutional provisions it ratified, such as some of the Oromo and Southern Peoples' perspective (Gudina 2003) to the Amhara/Ethiopianist perspective that condemns the new ethnic policy as a dangerous threat to national unity.

Here, I seek to give a balanced scholarly presentation of the principles of Ethnic Federalism that is supposed to be a tool for implementing the constitutional provisions both on theoretical level and practical ground. In short, theoretically, Ethnic Federalism is believed to address the questions of decentralisation of power and resources – which by implication would give autonomous power to the regional states. That is to say a right to establish ethnic-based regions and to empower them to exercise their language, to preserve and practice their culture, traditions and history.

When we come to the practical realities on the ground, several inconsistencies and mutually incompatible policies and implementation procedures have been prevailed so far. To begin with, language has been chosen as a basic marker in demarcating ethnic boundaries in the existence of several bilingual communities. Even if it could be possible to categorise ethnic groups in terms of language, there are over 82 languages spoken in the country but the so-called 'Ethnic Federalism' constructed only nine ethno-linguistic regional states.

Another major weakness of 'Ethnic Federalism' in the country is its failure to consider historical realities of the peoples and at least the new demographic dynamics. In countries like Ethiopia where population redistribution or resettlement schemes are prevalent demographic phenomena, it is not uncommon to find indigenous (native) peoples linguistically dominated by new settlers. Taking language as a basic criterion for territorial rearrangement is risky for the indigenous peoples under such circumstances.

Moreover, the new territorial arrangement did not establish a federation of ethnic groups because except Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia and Somali, which have core nationalities that determine the identity of the given state, others have two or more larger groups which need to be balanced, while over 46 ethnic groups were lumped together in SNNPR for administrative fiat (Gudina 2003:138-139). In reality, it was restructured in a way that suits the administrative, political and strategic interests of the government on power. Gudina contends that the ethnically heterogeneous groups of Southern Peoples were made to form a single regional state to counter balance the vast and populous Oromia region surrounding the Southern Peoples. Moreover, the Harari people who number only 9,734 in the Harar regional state – where the Oromo are 68,564 - were given regional status simply for its strategic importance to the government (ibid:139). On the contrary, there are several ethnic groups in SNNPR with significant population number who consistently raise the question of regional status but are not given it yet. Furthermore, in the newly established districts (Abayya and Galana districts) of Borana zone, which were under Gedeo zone until 1995, the Guji were a numerical majority but were kept under the Gedeo zone for administrative and geopolitical reasons.

In short, the principle in the constitution opened the roads for many ethnic groups to demand for self-government, representation and rights over traditional land ownership. However, the contradictory implementation procedures on practical ground have, in many cases, led to inter-ethnic conflicts and conflicts against the state. This will be exemplified in detail in chapter five in relation to Guji-Gedeo case.

Although some suggest “promotion of a group’s language, legal guarantees, equal opportunity as well as cultural and political autonomy” (Hamesso 2001: 98) to rectify past injustices and imbalances perpetuated by unrepresentative state, these promises remained with a paper value in the constitution. The irony is whether the architects of the constitution were ignorant of the implications or introduced it as a political instrument or for genuine transformation of the country’s political scene. It is more likely that the political instrumentality of ethnicity was given a priority over its purposes and implications while drafting the constitution.

### **2.6.3 ‘Formal Ethnicism’: a viable alliance or divorce with democracy?**

As there were two views on how to analyse ethnic phenomena in Ethiopia (and Africa), there are two contending views about integrating ethnic policies into national political agenda in Ethiopia. The views emerge both from scholars in the field of anthropology, political science and history as well as from politicians. The first group – sometimes referred as the Amhara perspective (Gudina 2003:5) - take the idea that politicised ethnicity is a dangerous move against the ‘nation-building’ process (Teka 1998:118, Poluha 1998). For these groups, if ethnic groups become conscious of their group identity, it grows at the expense of common national identity and plays a divisive role in the ‘nation-building’ project. Poluha (1998) maintains the view that politicizing ethnicity is becoming a challenge towards promoting democracy in Ethiopia. She argues that prioritizing ethnicity promotes group identity and focuses on group rights at the expense of individual right, which is the cornerstone of liberal democracy. Supporters of this view of “divisive aspect of ethnicity” also raise the issue that politicized ethnic identity creates hatred, violence and civil strikes between different ethnic groups. The experiences of ethnic conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia seem to have convinced the scholars in the field even among western academics about the ‘divisive’ nature of ethnicity in African context (Woldesellasia 2001:5). If diversity is seen as a threat to state integration, it can be inferred from the arguments that homogenisation, undertaken through assimilation, is sought as a better alternative. However, Ethiopia’s experiment at assimilating the subjugated peoples of the south has proved to be ineffective, counter productive and self-defeating as evidenced in the last couples of decades.

The second group deals with the positive aspects of ethnicity and considers it as democratisation process, redressing of past injustices and recognition of equality (Hamesso, 2001:91-106). According to this perspective, ethnicity in Africa should be viewed as a unifying tool in the socio-economic, cultural, political and psychological wellbeing of African

peoples. It is undeniable fact that many post independence African states were threatened to disintegration owing to ethnic conflicts of various origins. The irony is that for most of these conflicts in Africa, ethnicity has been portrayed as fundamental cause. Hameso (2001:91-94) strongly argues that ethnicity should take the blame neither for the border conflicts nor for conflicts over socio-economic resources as both of these were by themselves not consequences of ethnicity rather what is to blame is the arrangement put in place. This is to argue that one should not be hastened to blame ethnicity for crisis emanating in such contexts before critically diagnosing the backgrounds behind the scene.

Unlike many scholars with a pessimistic view on ethnicity, Hameso (2001:93-96) critically discusses the social values of ethnicity as providing sense of security, source of trust, certainty, reciprocal help and internal cohesion of the society. In line with this, national integration and ethnicity can be viewed as complementary rather than contradicting concepts. It is fair to argue that many of ethnic groups' demands for autonomy and even secession interconnected with ethnicity depict lack of socio-economic and political justice within a given territorial entity. Whenever a group feels its social institutions, language, symbols and distinct ways of life are threatened with extinction, in fear of injustices in law and order, nepotistic distribution of jobs and services, the location of public institution and imposition of other culture, there is no doubt that the group opts for self-determination, autonomy or even to the extreme level of secession (Hameso 2001: 97-98). Most of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia during the imperial regime, the military regime as well as the EPRDF government are also not excepted from these.

From the above arguments, one can reach on a balanced judgement that recognizing ethnic groups' rights and articulating ethnicity in a political framework does never pose a threat to national unity. As it will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, it is the activation of ethnic differences at the expense of complementary group elements by ethnic entrepreneurs for political instrumentality that gives the destructive connotation to ethnicity. In short, if it was employed for democratic transformation of a society and a state, "Formal Ethnicism" would have served as a complementary dimension to rather than a divorce with democracy.

## **Chapter Three: Setting the Context of the Study**

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### **Introduction**

The Guji and Gedeo peoples are neighbouring communities inhabiting the southern part of Ethiopia. They have a long history of cooperation, interdependence and friendship. Their relationship ranges from sharing adjacent geographical landscape, economic transaction, some cultural practises and intermarriage to the extent of myth of ‘common ancestry’. Most of their members living in vicinities that allow closer interaction are bilingual, fluent both in Afan Oromo and Gede’uffa languages but Afan Oromo is more commonly observed in their conversations. Except for a few physical features such as facial structure, size and structure of nose and hair type that can be noted through critical observation, objective markers of distinctiveness are in most cases not noticeable. Despite such geographical proximities and cultural similarities, their recently experienced unprecedented violent conflict has left enduring suspicion and some sorts of tension between the two groups. In this conflict, neither their historical interdependence nor myth of common ancestry prevented the violent conflict from happening.

In any investigation of inter-ethnic relation, the geographical setting of the groups, economic life, nature of socio-political organization and myths of their history, which I altogether consider here as the context of the study, play a pivotal role in determining the nature of interactions of the groups in any given time and condition. In my study of Guji-Gedeo relations, this chapter gives emphasis to the historical background of the groups as it manifests itself in the later interaction between the two, both harmonious and conflictual.

### **3.1 The Guji**

#### **3.1.1 The People**

The Guji, one of the Oromo sub-groups, inhabit the southern part of Ethiopia, predominantly in today’s Borana and Guji Administrative Zones of Oromia Regional State. According to Oromo oral tradition, myth of pilgrimage centres and written documents, Guji and Borana land is the cradle of Oromo place of origin and reservoir of Oromo culture (Legesse 1973:9). Guji land is bordered by the Borana Oromo in the south, Burji, Koyra and Gamo in the southwest, Arsi Oromo in the East and Gedeo, Sidama and Wolaita ethnic groups in the North

(Negera 2005:1, see map on Appendix 3). Except with the Gedeo, they had long history of warfare with most of these neighbouring groups (Berisso 1994: 312). I will come back to this issue under chapter four of this study.

Unlike their neighbouring Borana and other Oromo groups, which each constitute a single entity, Guji is a confederation of four independent, but by no means exclusive, sub-groups known as Uruga, Mati, Hoku and Alabdu. The latter is in turn a confederacy of two interdependent groups called Halo and Woyestu. Despite their autonomy in their respective territories and right of exercising Gada system under their own leaders, each of these components of the confederation is mutually interdependent. They allied together in times of warfare, help each other during natural calamities and economic crisis, and more importantly conduct Gada rituals together (ibid: 310).

On the basis of agro-ecological division, the four Guji sub-groups occupied three ecological zones. The lowland areas below 1500 meter above sea level were predominantly inhabited by the Alabdu who were in the past purely pastoralists. This section inhabited the western and southern part of Gedeo occupied territories. Uruga and some parts of Mati and Hoku occupied the middle altitude ranging from 1500-2500 meter above sea level. These groups were also engaged in pastoral activities with little agricultural practice. The Northern parts of Mati and Hoku shared similar ecological niches with the Gedeo before the latter's down slope expansion that started in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a highland ecological zone characterized by high rainfall, cold climate and crop cultivation, mainly barley and wheat (Negera 2005:2-3).

Though my focus in this thesis is limited to the Alabdu Guji, which is not so far studied in depth, I give some sketches about the overall Guji as a confederate of the four sections. I concentrate on the Alabdu Guji because it is this group who predominantly exhibited long periods of interaction, interdependence and recently conflict with the Gedeo people.

### **3.1.2 Guji social organization: secular and spiritual world of the Gada**

The Guji people, as common among all Oromo sub-groups, were organized under the Gada system (Legesse 1973). According to Legesse (1973), Bassi (1996:150) and Guji informants, the Gada system is a very comprehensive institution of the Oromo people. No Oromo cultural and historical concepts would be understood without understanding the role of Gada system and the value attached to it by the community. Therefore, I will examine the role of the Gada system in maintaining ethnic cohesion among the Guji as well as interethnic cooperation

between the group and the neighbouring Gedeo. Since the definition of the Gada system has been discussed in the preceding chapter, here I directly focus on its role in shaping the way of life among Guji people.

According to John T. Hinnant (1977), the Gada system was deeply interwoven with the spiritual and secular world of the Guji community. A man's transition from one Gada grade to the next has the implication that the person is assuming new social responsibilities for the coming eight years. Within each stage, activities and social roles are duly defined in terms of rights and obligations to which members would be accountable (Berriso: 311). For instance, the Gada grade from which *Abba* Gada and its advisory officials are elected had political, leadership and ritual responsibilities during its time in office (Hinnant, 1977:126-131). Among the Guji, men who enter into the three consecutive *Yuba* grades after Gada remain in partial retirement but with influential ritual functions. No ritual ceremony would be practised in the absence of a *Yuba* man for blessing (ibid: 131). Joseph Van De Loo, who made a thorough study of the Guji culture puts in his book *Guji Oromo Culture in Southern Ethiopia* that;

The Gada system forms a crucial element of Guji social life as it is able to regulate participation in diffuse governmental procedures as well as to provide for the moral integration of the entire local community and culture. It is centred around the concepts of fertility, repletion, peace, a sense of identity and religious values (1991:18).

The recruitment among Guji into the Gada system is perhaps the basic element in maintaining their 'distinctive' group identity. Descent into either of the Guji sections and pastoralist life (owning as many cattle as possible) are vital criteria for recruitment. Excluded groups are the agriculturalists (Darassa/Gedeo), artisans and craftsmen (ibid: 26). The mechanisms used by Guji as membership recruitment and exclusion of the 'other' fits with what Barth describes as,

A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for the purpose of interaction, they form ethnic groups in this organizational scene (1998: 13-14).

For the groups categorized as not eligible to membership to Guji Gada system, it would be impossible to cross this ethnic boundary. This may be the reason why Legesse (1973, 2000) and Van De Loo (1991) points out Guji and Borana Oromos as the only groups where Oromo cultural traditions are clearly preserved to date.



The role of the Gada system in Guji life manifests itself also in a legal aspect. In case of any dispute between individuals or clan conflict, the cases would be seen first by the local elders (*jarsa biyya*) who are among the last Gada grades and who demonstrated ability of good leadership, tolerance, dignity (self-respect and respect for others), and commitment for peace both during and after their terms of office in Gada grade (informant; *Abba Gada Damboba Gumi*). The issue of dispute settlement is intertwined both in Gada and spiritual institutions. Guji believe in supernatural power called “*Waqqa*”, which literally means both “Sky” and “God”. But it is the second meaning that is attached to their belief. They assume that *Waqqa* lives far above the earth and sent *Qallu*<sup>16</sup> for the people with Gada, law of peace and ways of life. Therefore, it is believed that disobeying any Gada laws and principles of peace (*nagaa*) would create misfortunes upon the person(s) or group(s) (Hinnant: 1977: 33-38). If disputes could not be resolved at *jarsa biyya* level, the offices of *Abba Gada* and his advisors were the highest court of appeal in traditional Guji legal system (ibid: 184). Guji informants from Alabdu Guji, however adhere to the *Qallu* as the highest court of appeal rather than office of *Abba Gada* (Gammade Arado, *Abba Gada Damboba Gumi*).

The *Qallu* institution is recognized by the Gada officials as supreme structure in the system. No *Abba Gada* or his advisors will be legitimate unless they get recognition and blessing of the *Qallu* leader (Hinnant: 1977: 198, informants; Gobbu Roba, Guyyee Wato). Though it seems a sort of “autonomy” given to the *Abba Gadas* of Uruga, Mati and Hoku groups, those of Alabdu are strictly under the control of the *Qallu*. This is perhaps because the very origin of *Qallu* is from an Oditu clan of Alabdu Guji (ibid: 58). According to Guji informants the role of *Abba Qallu* is mainly evident in dispute settlements between the Guji and other ethnic groups. As I will describe later under chapter five, the Alabdu *Abba Gada* refused to perform “*Gondoro* tradition” after the 1995 Guji-Gedeo conflict as he claims that he has no right to adjudicate in inter-ethnic conflicts since this is the authority of *Abba Qallu*<sup>17</sup>. The notion of *nagaa* (peace), Gada laws, respect to and fear of the great *Qallu* as spiritual mediator have all contributed towards social cohesion, orderly life and continuity of the tradition for long.

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<sup>16</sup>*Qallu* institution refers to the spiritual practice among the Oromo and it is believed to have the authority to mediate between man and God. This institution is at the apex of the Gada structure but none of its members assume power in Gada system. The role of *Abba Qallu* (spiritual leader) is adjudicating in inter-ethnic conflicts through *Gondoro* tradition besides its spiritual intermediary roles.

<sup>17</sup> By that time Guji *Abba Qallu* was imprisoned by the government allegedly accused as instigating the war between the groups. Before his imprisonment, he was seriously protesting against injustices committed against the Guji people such as unfair job distribution, unfair and unbalanced distribution of social services, suppression of Guji’s right to self-government etc under Gedeo Zone. *Abba Qallu* died in prison three years ago (informants; *Abba Gada Damboba*, Ayano, Guyyee, Bari Bakako).

Mention has to be made of the social and spiritual function of the Qallu among the Guji. As it has been briefly indicated earlier, Qallu is a religious institution that plays intermediary role between *Waqqa* (God) and man through its mortal representative being, *Abba* Qallu. The spirit joining the messages of *Abba* Qallu with *Waqqa* and back to *Abba* Qallu is called *ayana* (a form of divine grace). My emphasis here is that the intertwined nature of the conflict-regulating body and the spiritual institution develops a kind of fear among the people about consequences of conflicts.

It was this strong value attached to the Qallu institution that made peace making more lasting and binding in the past. The multidimensional nature of this institution seems to have had an integrative function. However, more recently the Gada system has been challenged from varying external and internal factors, which altogether currently reduced its roles to ritual activities in the case of the Guji. The incorporation of the territory into Ethiopian state and the subsequent imposition of Amhara/Ethiopian culture were the major factors behind the decline of the system. John Hinnant argues in his study of “The Gada System among the Guji of Southern Ethiopia” that the assimilative policy of the imperial regimes strongly worked towards eroding indigenous cultural practices, denouncing any of such practises as illegal. They appointed their own patrons in place of *Abba* Gadas, and Orthodox Christianity and the priest instead of the great Qallu (Hinnant: 1977:217-220). In fact, there were also other factors such as the introduction of Missionary activities since 1950s, which undermined the spiritual world of the Guji that was in turn closely related to the Gada system (ibid: 221). The internal challenge was the force of “modernity” among the youth who began to question about the advantage and practicality of the Gada system. Caught between the forces of “tradition” and “modernity” the young generation have more recently become passive participant in the system (informants, Gobbu Roba, Guyyee Wato). Despite both internal and external challenges, the Guji preserved some of their traditional institutions up to this date. In the next chapters I will examine the impact of the decline of this social institution on the Guji-Gedeo relations.

### **3.1.3 Economic transformation of the Alabdu Guji from pastoralist to agro-pastoralist mode of life**

Until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the Alabdu Guji were predominantly engaged in pastoral economic activity. Guji tradition reveals that cattle have strong social and ritual values besides its economic advantage. The social status of a person has been expressed in terms of the number of heads of cattle he owns. The owner of many heads – up to one thousand - is respected and

honoured. In Guji society ease to marriage was/is closely dependent on the level of wealth and honour a person achieves, both of which are determined by the number of cattle one possesses (Berisso: 1994:311). Cattle are paid as compensation for crime. Ritually, cattle are used for sacrificial purposes in addition to serving as food during prolonged ritual ceremonies like initiation ceremonies during transition in Gada grades.

In contrast to the Gedeo where, a person's social status is attributed to the amount of plots of land he owns, cattle conferred social, economic and ritual values among the Guji. However, currently land is also given social and economic value as Guji went through economic transformation from pure pastoralist to agro-pastoralist economic activity. Today the majority of households of Alabdu Guji have two places of residence. The first is a permanent residential home where they keep a few cattle for milk, plough oxen, and small animals like goats and sheep for meat. The majority of family members including old men, women, preschool and school children (although Guji children rarely go to school) live in the permanent home. They grow subsistence as well as cash crops such as, maize, *ensete* (false banana), barley, wheat and *teff* - a crop indigenous to Ethiopia (Jemma, 2002: 28, personal observation). Coffee is the dominant cash crop produced in the area. The second residence is not permanent but where large herds of cattle are kept and a few family members stay with cattle for seasonal grazing. This should be clearly distinguished from nomadism because each household has its 'own defined territory' governed through customary law for such seasonal grazing unlike the communal nature of nomadic life. The amount of pastureland one owns significantly influences the number of herds the person can possibly possess.

One aspect of analysing Guji-Gedeo relations will be from the context of this shifting economic pattern among the Guji. The question posed is whether the shift had created competition between the two over 'common resources' particularly agricultural lands. It enables us to evaluate the validity of the assumption of those who attribute the Guji-Gedeo conflicts fundamentally to competition over scarce resources (Jemma: 2002:1). This will be the task of the next two chapters.

### **3.1.4 Guji-State relation after incorporation**

The Guji people were not exceptional from the other peoples of the south in facing the conquest of the Abyssinian Empire in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Following the conquest, the state employed both direct and indirect systems of administration. In some cases northern settlers and landlords were assigned and in other cases the Guji *Abba* Gadas and Qallu leaders were appointed as *balabats* (local chiefs) (Hinnant 1977:25) in their respective administrative

divisions but the local chiefs were under strong supervision of the Amhara governors who resided at the provincial and sub-provincial levels. The indirect rule itself does not mean that the impact of subjugation was negligible on the Guji social, political, economic and cultural autonomy. Because of the low economic interest of the state in pastoralist economy, compared to the coffee producing regions of the south and southwest, the group was further marginalized and left to the periphery of the peripheries. Concomitant with their unreciprocal relationship with the state, they even blame the state for disrupting their harmonious relations with the Gedeo in many ways.

## **3.2. The Gedeo**

### **3.2.1 Gedeo myth of origin: the group's self-ascription**

Today, the Gedeo are among one of over forty ethnic groups who were lumped together and formed the *Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region* of the new federal structure of Ethiopia. But this does not mean all of the Gedeo people live only in this region. While about 700,000 Gedeo live in Gedeo Zone, there are also about 300,000 Gedeo living in Oromia regional state, particularly in Guji and Borana administrative Zones (Kiphee 2002:22).

The myth of origin of the Gedeo people is full of debates and controversies among the group itself (i.e. the group's self identification) and with others to whom they ascribe allegiances - the Guji. According to information from some written documents and some of my Gedeo informants, the Gedeo people identify themselves to the Oromo ethnic group, particularly to the neighbouring Guji people, in such way that today's Gedeo and Guji people descended from the same ancestor. The myth goes like this:

Long ago, there was a man who had three sons namely Darasso, Gujo and Boro. The descendants of these sons became Darassa<sup>18</sup> (Gedeo), Guji and Borana respectively. [The latter two belong to Oromo ethnic group.] The myth further states that their father wanted to share his properties to his sons according to their interest in a traditional ceremonial procedure of inheritance. When they came to the ceremony of inheritance, Darasso came up with a ploughing pole (*horda*), Gujo came with a stick (*archume*) that is used for herding and Boro came with a rope used for tying a cow while milking. On the basis of the implements they brought during the ceremony, their father blessed them on the symbolic representation tied to a plough pole, a stick and a rope; thus gave agricultural land for Darasso, and cattle and grazing land for Gujo and Boro (informants *Hayicha Dama, Hayicha Qaqqabo*).

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<sup>18</sup>The term "Darassa" connotes a pejorative expression often labelled up on the group (Gedeo) by the Abyssinian rulers. Although some use the two terms interchangeably, others are alert to the implication of "Darassa" and are not happy with the usage of the term. The term Gedeo was officially instituted by the *Dergue* government in 1975 (Jemma 2002:56; informant, Teka).

Oral traditions attest that the descendants of Darasso became agriculturalists while the latter two continued with pastoral activities. This should not be taken for granted as the view of all Gedeo informants since there are also a few with different version. For instance, my informant, Jibicha Borame, who lives in Guji territory married to a Guji woman paradoxically contests the myth of common ancestry and maintains the Guji version of their relationship. Logically it might be presumed that individuals with deep-rooted socio-cultural interaction with the Guji would support the myth of common ancestry.

The basic economic livelihood of the Gedeo people was agriculture. They commonly cultivate crops like *ensete* (false banana), coffee, maize and sweet potatoes. Because of their reliance on cash crops forced by the high demand by the feudal lords, the Gedeo depended on transaction with the neighbouring communities like the Sidama and Arsi for their subsistence (McClellan 1988). Since recently, most of their needs for food supply have been provided by the agro-pastoralist Guji people, who supply both animal and crop products.

### **3.2.2 Incorporation of the Gedeo into Ethiopian Empire**

The Gedeo was one of the autonomous southern states before its incorporation into Ethiopian empire in late 19<sup>th</sup> century (McClellan 1988:9). Unfortunately, like all of the states in the southern region, the Gedeo autonomy could not survive the waves of empire-building project conducted by the northern Ethiopian kingdom. McClellan draws strong similarity between European conquest of Africa and the Abyssinian conquest of the southern states in many aspects. The last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century brought an event that changed the political and geographical map of African states including the present day Ethiopia. The economic motives and exploitative nature of both conquests were similar except the African colonialist introduced a feudal mode of exploitation whereas the European case was capitalist in nature. Another point of convergence is the myth of “Christianizing the infidels” and “civilizing the uncivilized” people/nations. Abyssinian kings trace their myth of origin to the biblical Jewish state, especially as descendants of king Solomon of Israel. Besides their claim of Christianizing the non-Christians of the south, the Abyssinian Christians were considering themselves superior to the others (ibid: 20). As a result, the conquest expressed an ethno-centric sense of superiority, strong economic motives, an empire-building project and aggressive military operation, all of which were common features of colonial conquest in many parts of the world (Tibebu 1995: 40).

After fierce resistance with traditional weapons of war, the Gedeo army was out-gunned, over manoeuvred and finally subdued by the well-equipped Minilik's army in 1895 (McClellan 1988: 22-23). Although it is portrayed that the Gedeo finally submitted "peacefully", the resistance should not be underestimated. In areas of 'peaceful submission', local chiefs were installed but in those of military conquest, northern settlers became feudal lords. The Gedeo faced massive settlement of the Amhara settlers. The conquest seriously affected their socio-economic, political and cultural autonomy. According to McClellan, Ethiopian feudalism or the *gabar* (tenancy) system clearly resembles serfdom and slavery as neither system allow political, social, economic and cultural security for their subjects. Above all, it introduced a patron-client relationship between the Abyssinian settlers and the indigenous people by which all Gedeo people, including the respected *Abba Gada* and its officials, were reduced to the status of serfs and were expected to serve the assigned patrons (1988: 59).

Moreover, the incorporation significantly affected inter-ethnic relationship between the Gedeo and the neighbouring groups, particularly with the Guji. Therefore, it is essential to look at some of the socio-cultural and economic changes that occurred in Gedeoland following incorporation. The reduction of the status of *Abba Gada* to serfdom and decline of the institution by the northern administration left enduring social crises in many aspects. Traditional conflict resolution, which clearly enhanced the cohesion and harmony within the Gedeo and with their neighbouring Guji, was discredited by the Ethiopian administration. Gedeo informants steadfastly describe that following the arrival of the Amhara (Ethiopian) administrators on their land, the ritual ceremonies of the Gada system, the respect given to *Abba Gada* and his councillors, and the *gondoro* tradition significantly declined (informants; *Hayicha Dama, Hayicha Qaqabo*).

Under the repressive feudal system, tenants had to get permission from their patron (feudal landlord) to participate in ritual ceremonies, which would take several days. It was unthinkable for a Gedeo peasant to get such permission for ritual participation, which was none of the concern of the northern patron. Similarly, to perform religious or Gada rituals required considerable resources in the form of manpower as well as material resources. For peasants under tenancy, with limited income even for family subsistence, it became less likely that they could afford for ritual ceremonies. Moreover, the values given to such practises and their role in day-to-day life of the society kept on declining because people were forced to take their matters to courts rather than to the Gada officials.

In the economic sphere too, the conquest significantly reduced the subsistence level of the Gedeo people by imposing backbreaking tribute on the peasants. As it was common in all the militarily subdued regions of the south the feudal lords were extracting three-fourth of the produce from the tenants (McClellan 1988:59, informants, Jibicha, Teka), who because of poor agricultural technology and uncertainty of climate suffered from low production even for family consumption.

### **3.2.3 Gedeo-state relation and their down-slope expansion: from unique ecological adaptation to sharing similar ecological niche with the Guji**

Historical documents and oral tradition both from the Guji and Gedeo attest that the Gedeo lived on the upper reaches of eastern escarpment of the Rift Valley before their incorporation into the new empire (McClellan 1988: 24). Until late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the two groups occupied different ecological niches and practiced symbiotic economic practices. The initial cause of Gedeo expansion, when seen from Guji and Gedeo perspectives, seems ambiguous but neither of them objects to the reality of the expansion.

The Gedeo perspective reflects the expansion as part of the 'brotherhood' and friendship between the two. For instance, a Gedeo informant, Teka, stated that Gedeo people settled on the land of their Guji in-laws, relatives and friends peacefully. In such a way, the number of Gedeo inhabitants grew over time while the Guji were moving south and westwards with their cattle. An old Gedeo informant, Gosoba Golja who lived over a century, substantiates this idea but stresses on the mobility of Guji pastoralists which in turn gave an opportunity for the Gedeo to settle on and cultivate the fertile land where the Guji kept their animal manure. Another Gedeo perspective considers the expansion as settling on 'unused' and 'uninhabited' land on which the Guji had no customary right to claim. Jibicha Borame, an administrator of Gedeo sub-province during the military regime, for instance strongly contends that the Gedeo occupied 'empty' land.

On the other hand, Guji elders forward slightly different point of view. While they agree to the perspective that Gedeo peasants settled on the Guji land initially came as in-laws and friends, they even interpret this approach differently. There is a myth that Gedeo systematically displaced their Guji friends, in-laws and neighbours. The myth is common among my Guji informants and goes like this;

Whenever the Gedeo visited their Guji friends, whom they intended to displace, they carried seeds of cabbage on their curly hairs. Up on entering the Guji kraal, they scratch

their heads to dispose off the seeds, which soon germinated. The Guji took this as a bad omen to the welfare of their cattle and consider it traditionally polluting for Qallu rituals. Thus, they [Guji] evacuate the kraal to which they would never return. The Gedeo used this mechanism to displace Guji and then occupied the fertile territories of the Guji (Negera 2005:17; informants, Ayano, Areri among others).

In Guji Qallu ritual tradition, there are some crop and animal foods that are strictly prohibited. My informants also mentioned this in relation to cabbage, which is a taboo among the Guji while it is a food plant for the Gedeo. In any case, this “systematic expulsion” through manipulation of cross-cultural differences did not disturb their friendship and harmony by those early days but it enhanced Gedeo expansion to Gujiland.

The issue of defining a pastoralist land as utilized/unutilised; inhabited/uninhabited; occupied/unoccupied is a difficult task. From the perspective of a sedentary agricultural community, land utilization and occupation may be defined in terms of tilling the land, cultivating and harvesting crops from a particular landscape, and in terms of permanent settlement and holding the land for longer period of time respectively. If one tries to apply this definition to an aspect of pastoralists, it creates a contradiction in understanding the concepts because the two have different worldviews. As Hanna Susan et.al (1996) describes, “Views of nature can come into conflict when different cultures interact”. A good case in point can also be the land dispute between the local people in northern Norway and the Norwegian state on the Svartskog (Black Forest), where difference in interpretations of land use and resource management have been evident among both protagonists ( Bjerkli 1996).

In whatever way it might be, it was following the conquest and post-conquest exploitation system under the feudal landlords that massive expansion of the Gedeo and resettlement schemes was undertaken (McClellan 1988: 74). In this regard, Gedeo territorial expansion in early 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen from the perspective of shifting political economy of the state. Since around 1920s, Ethiopia began exporting coffee to external market, which was further enhanced by the completion of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway in 1917. This shift in export item from ivory, rhinoceros horn and leather to coffee not only increased the profit for those who were engaged in the system but also moved the centre of economic and political interests of the state further south and southwest to coffee growing regions like Sidamo, Gedeo, Illu- abba Bora, Kaffa, Jimma, Wallaga, among others. As the system was founded on exploiting the peasants through levying heavy tribute, the Abyssinian feudal lords



had to involve larger number of the subjected people on coffee plantation at the cost of manpower available to the peasants' traditional subsistence economy (ibid: 75).

Despite their familiarity with coffee cultivation, the Gedeo people had serious shortage of land and they were largely confined to the cool high land areas of the eastern escarpment of the Great Rift Valley. McClellan (1988:25) describes this in stating that, "despite shortage of land owing to population growth and increased cultivation of crops, Gedeo could not move down slope areas to unutilised and uninhabited areas because these areas were contested by the neighbouring Guji and Sidama". It was the Gedeo agricultural community who were the target of exploitation through coffee production because the pastoral Guji people's knowledge of coffee cultivation was very marginal. It was under this circumstance that the government-backed settlement of Gedeo people on the lowland areas claimed as traditional Guji land was enforced (ibid:27, informant, Gosoba Golja).

The subjugated peoples used different mechanisms to resist the introduction of northern feudal institution. When armed resistance failed people withdrew from the sphere of influence of regional lords to get breathing time from the heavy taxation. The Gedeo also fled to the inter-ethnic buffer zones and to their Guji friends and/or in-laws from where they got asylum for shorter time. The Guji people gave them small plots of land to sustain their family until they could collect some wealth to pay off the tributes and reinstated to 'their land'. However, many of these new settlers continued to live there and expanded in number as new family members or kinsmen were also added (informants, Gammade, Teka).

Notwithstanding the exploitative nature of the feudal system, the conquest seems to have benefited the Gedeo people in the long term in reducing shortage of land. What should be kept in mind here is as McClellan states,

The Ethiopian conquest helped [directly and indirectly] the Gedeo people to occupy lands far beyond their traditional location; for example, they can be found in areas adjacent to Dilla [now Gedeo Zone Administrative town] and around Qoti (the traditional residence [*Galma*] of the Guji Qallu or ritual leader), and their migration continues west across the Addis Ababa-Nairobi highway and as far south as Agere Mariam [Bule Hora] (1988:27).

The Gedeo expansion to the Guji land was not limited to the downhill expansion of the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The massive Gedeo resettlement scheme, which probably has deep implication for the recent conflicts, took place both under the imperial and the military regimes. In Ethiopia it has been a long used government strategy to use population redistribution and resettlement as a means of deactivating ethnic/nationalities movements. Whenever a certain ethnic group up rises against the state, the successive governments were

using 'drought', 'famine', 'population pressure' and 'land shortage' as excuses in dismantling the population and paralysing the movements. The same strategy has been also employed to counterbalance ethnic questions by mixing groups with different political interests and historical backgrounds. For instance, the resettlement of Amhara people from Wollo and Gondar in Eastern Wallaga by the *Dergue* regime was to cut the rebellion in the north from its source of supply - the people - and to counterbalance Oromo movements in the resettlement areas. Similar was the case of Gedeo peasants' resettlement in the Guji hinterland in 1960 by the imperial regime as a strategy to disunite and weaken Gedeo peasants following an uprising in the same year. The resettlement was made in Adola, Hagere Mariam (Bule Hora) and other Guji territories located far away from the Guji-Gedeo borders. Shortage of land among Gedeo on the one hand and the existence of fertile 'idle lands' in Guji areas on the other hand were taken as pretext for the resettlement (Jemma 2002:65-66, informants Jibicha – Gedeo; Gumi Bimbassa - Guji). Hussien Jemma specifically mentions the resettlement pattern in that,

...Following the termination of the conflict [the 1960 Gedeo uprising] Haile Sillassie's government announced that there was an idle land in Guji territory and declared that everybody in Gedeo was entitled to take 1/4 of *gasha* (1 *gasha*= 40 hectares) from this excess land. Such a declaration opened the door for the Gedeo to occupy the Guji land.... There was thus uneven resource distribution as both the government and the Gedeo felt.... (2002:66).

As the root of the 1990s conflicts was entrenched in the past government policies of resettlement and amalgamation of different ethnic groups for political purposes both under the past and the current regimes, I will return to the reaction of the Guji to resettlement policy and the relation between the two from 1960 to 1991 in the next chapters.

### **3.2.4 Gedeo social organization and some cultural practises**

Like their neighbouring Oromo community and the Sidama people, the Gedeo social structure was founded on the Gada system. A long history of social interaction among different groups in the region, and harmonious relationship between some of them enhanced the sharing of some cultural elements. Traditions say that the Gedeo people borrowed the Gada system from the Guji Oromo with whom they had a long history of cultural, economic and political relations, and geographical proximity. According to the oral tradition, Gedeo learnt the Gada system from the Guji Qallu in the following manner:

The Guji Qallu named Woma first started Gada. Gedeo admired it, believing it to be a proper way for people to elect their leaders, but the Guji were unwilling to teach the rituals to the Gedeo. Finally, two Gedeo men, Fifu and Dacho, disguised as women

slipped secretly into Qallu's Compound [*galma*] and were granted asylum from the angry Guji. He then taught these 'men' the secrets of Gada. These two men later returned home, only to dispute between themselves who should be the first Abba Gada. A contest between the two, Fifu and Dacho was held to resolve the conflict. [...] Only Dacho was able to accomplish a miracle and became Abba Gada. ...Since that time, miracles have been associated with Abba Gadas (Cited in McClellan 1988: 28).

The above myth indicates three important aspects in this context of Gedeo Gada system and Guji-Gedeo relations. It tells us the reverence which the Gedeo traditionally had for the Guji Qallu and as will be seen in the next chapter in more detail, the similarity between the Guji and the Gedeo models of Gada system. Besides, it indicates the "shared" nature of Gedeo *Abba* Gadaship among Gedeo clans - the position of *Abba* Gada remains in the hands of one of the two senior clans while that of *ja'ilaaba* [deputy] is given to one of the two junior clans (McClellan 1988:28).

In the Gedeo Gada structure, a man passes through eight Gada grades in his lifetime all through *lumasa*, *sida*, *raba (dori)*, *luba*, *yuba*, *guduru*, *kolullu*, and *schewadje* which represent childhood to old age respectively. The terms of the grades range from eight to ten years. The three consecutive grades, *raba*, *luba* and *yuba* are very important in one's life cycle as the person plays significant roles in the society in economic, political and military leadership and ritual practices (Hailu 2004: 7). *Luba* is the grade in power among which the *Abba* Gada and other officials are recruited. Like their Guji neighbours where *Abba* Gadas are elected by *ya'a* councils - councils selected from different Gada classes - (Hinnant 1977:184-186), Gedeo *Abba* Gada is also elected by *ya'a* council selected from the *luba* grade but the other officials are elected by the assembly of the *ya'a* council called *songo* (Hailu 2004: 10).

Among the Gedeo, the Gada hierarchy is divided into eight. The apex of the hierarchy is *Abba* Gada followed by *ja'ilaaba*. The third position in the ladder is shared equally among three territorially based administrative branches as *Suubbo roga* (for highland), *Deebbota roga* (middle lowland) and *Riqata roga* (lowland) areas of the Gedeo land. *Jalqaba*, *Hulati hayyicha*, *Baxxetti hayyicha*, *Murra* and the Gedeo society are the next orders where the society is at the base of the ladder (ibid: 11-13). Theoretically, the term of an *Abba* Gada in office is eight to ten years (McClellan 1988: 29) but now it seems to have passed beyond ten years.

Nevertheless, despite this well structured social organization and all positions with their respective responsibilities, McClellan simplifies the Gedeo Gada system to be mainly a ritual practice overlooking its political, military and economic functions even in the past

(1988: 28). The time of McClellan's fieldwork might have directed him towards such conclusion because under the imperial and the military regimes, it was hardly possible for peoples of southern Ethiopia to freely exercise their socio-political and cultural traditions since they had neither freedom nor the economy to undertake such practises. I am not here contending about the decline of the system and its values among the society but Gedeo oral tradition clearly indicates about the political, economic, and military roles of the Gada system in the past in addition to its ritual functions. Informant Hayyicha Qaqabo Shota, for example, was the traditional leader of Gedeo peasant uprising in 1960 against the state when the Gedeo people rose in protest to the exploitative land policy of the Hailesillassie's government. He clearly explains about the role of Gada structures in mobilizing the people against the state and sharing responsibilities in all hierarchical positions. With very unbalanced war equipment between the two antagonists, the Gedeo killed 68 government army and surrogate officials while the latter killed 86 Gedeo peasants, a small number considering the state's level of military power. This clearly tells us the role-played by the efficiency of the Gada system in military mobilization and leadership.

### **3.2.5 Some changes in Gedeo social life**

In any quest for understanding the dynamics in Gedeo-state relation and changes in relations with its neighbouring Guji, a change in two important social areas need to be addressed here. These are religion and education. Traditionally, "Gedeo believe in *Mageno*, the one and only one Supreme Being" (Kiphee 2002: 27). As briefly outlined above, the Qallu plays an intermediary role in Guji spiritual world but in the case of the Gedeo, though they recognize the role of intermediaries between *Magano* and man, this authority is vested on elderly men and women (ibid). However, this did not prohibit Gedeo peoples' adherence to the Guji Qallu during big ceremonies in providing gifts.

The indigenous religion of the Gedeo was challenged and threatened from two contradicting processes which had implications in transforming the society within a few decades. These were orthodox and protestant Christianities. The empire-building project of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had three central architects playing complementary roles. The first was the Emperor(s) and the royal families who supplied the psychological and material weapons for the second architect, the army. The nobility and the army had to be followed and backed by the spiritual blessing of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its priests. It was a tradition for the Orthodox priests to follow the army during the conquest so as to demobilize the indigenous people by preaching words of 'peace', 'harmony', 'cooperation', and 'submission'

which neither the church nor the nobilities practice themselves. Following the introduction of Orthodox Christianity, the Gedeo were systematically denied of their right to practise their original religion (informant, Gosoba Golja). It seems it was an indication of resistance and resentment against the Orthodox Christianity that quite a large number of Gedeo embraced Protestant Christianity that was introduced to the Gedeo land since 1950s. Today Protestants are 43.2% while followers of Gedeo traditional religion are 24.6% (Kiphee 2002: 27).

Missionaries used the existing context - lack of education, discontent of the people to the rulers, etc - to their advantage by opening schools to Gedeo children and teaching about equality before God of all human races, of all nations, of all men and women, all of which were appealing to the oppressed Gedeo (ibid: 28). As it will be seen later, the awakening of the people had both short term and long-term implications in their relationship with state and Guji people respectively. In the short term, it provoked, awakened and enlightened the people to question about their existence under feudalist administration for over half a century. This led to land right questioned by Gedeo peasants, and the catastrophic 1960 Gedeo peasant uprising against the state (Kiphee 2002: 28-29, *Hayyicha* Qaqqabo). In the long run, access to education by the Gedeo have reversed and transformed their relation with Guji somewhat from horizontal to vertical relationship.

Under the Ethiopian administration, particularly since the last decade of the imperial regime, the Gedeo were involved in the economic and administrative systems. According to Guji informants, educated Gedeo were given some posts both during the last years of the imperial regime and the *Dergue* government, which enabled the Gedeo to develop a sense of 'powerfulness' compared to the Guji. This will be elaborated in detail in chapters four and five.

## **Chapter Four: Guji-Gedeo Relations: Ethnic dichotomies and complementarities - similarities in difference**

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### **Introduction: what tied these groups together?**

In the preceding chapter, I presented the empirical materials about the groups' myth of origin, basic economic livelihoods, settlement patterns and subjugation to, and relation with the Ethiopian state. In this chapter, I will try to discuss the roles of these contexts in inter-ethnic relations, boundary maintenance, ethnic dichotomization and complimentarization, and the role of the state in shaping the nature of inter-ethnic interactions in the case of Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups.

Aspects of Guji-Gedeo relations are contradictory but very crucial in my analysis of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations. It is important because today, there is a growing tendency among scholars and pro 'state-building' politicians to suggest that ethnic difference perpetuates conflict between groups (Aseffa 1996; Jemma 2002:17). Guji and Gedeo were engaged in series of conflicts with their neighbouring groups such as the Sidama, Arsi and Borana. The Guji in particular are still portrayed as a strong warrior group and are therefore feared (Van De Loo 1991:16). It should be noted that the Guji share significant markers of ethnicity such as language, religion, shared memory of history, similar traditional practices and even common psychological make up with the neighbouring Oromo groups of Arsi and Borana - as common among the whole Oromo sub-groups (Baxter 1991:9) - to a larger extent than what they do with the Gedeo. Nevertheless, these shared commonalities could never curtail long history of warfare between these same groups. On the contrary, the Guji have had more harmonious and friendly periods of interaction with the Gedeo who may be considered 'distinct' on the basis of such criteria. This raises a serious question and it challenges a view that ethnic difference perpetuates conflict while it creates harmony among those who share similar elements of ethnic markers.

It is also another paradox to uncover the fact that Gedeo allied with Guji whenever the latter fought against the Sidama, the group with which the Gedeo shares closer linguistic affinities and other cultural practices (McClellan 1988: 28). So it is imperative to know what tied the Guji and the Gedeo together. While seeking answer for this question, it is important to assess the following possible factors that can explain the period of peaceful coexistence of the groups.

## **4.1 Deconstructing the myth of common ancestry: when group membership is denied**

The myth of common ancestry of the two groups has been told and retold specially among the Gedeo elders. However, there is no common consensus between the groups under study on the authenticity and legitimacy of the myth. As it has been indicated in chapter three, the Gedeo identify themselves as descendants from a common ancestor with the Guji but the latter denies the provenance.

Gedeo informants forward different rationalizations about their claims to 'brotherhood' and seniority of Darasso in the family of Darasso, Gujo and Boro. For instance, it is said that in any common ceremonies, such as drinking milk, *boka* (honey wine used for ceremonies), blessing and crossing a bridge, the first share would be given to Gedeo – the respect usually given to elder brothers (informants, Tekka, *hayicha* Qaqqabo).

My fieldwork experience among the Gedeo also helps to substantiate the group's inherent self-identification to the Guji. My Gedeo field assistant/translator made an appointment with a Gedeo elder, *Hayicha* Qaqqabo Shota for interview. We met him on his way to his home. The first question he asked my assistant was about my ethnic background. *Hayicha* Qaqqabo clearly told my assistant that he would never discuss even a word about the Gedeo people with a non-Gedeo person. This might be linked to the current conflict between Gedeo and non-Gedeo ethnic groups. I understood some of their conversations, though it was in Gede'uffa language. My immediate feeling was that the old man would react even more negatively if he knew I am from the Oromo. This feeling was related to the context I am studying - the conflict between the two. When he was told I am an Oromo, *Hayicha* Qaqqabo responded in a very different manner from my expectation. He said, "*Oh! He is our brother! Let's go home then....*" He asked me in Afaan Oromo, which he speaks well, to tell him frankly if I were an Oromo. He asked me to swear, and I swore. After I told him my ethnic background, he began the discussion with great enthusiasm.

On the contrary, Guji informants claim that the myth of common origin is groundless although some of them agreed that their forefathers transmitted such a myth to the later generations. For example, the views from a few of my Guji key informants are shortly presented as follows:

Elders, simply depending on the ancient friendship, some of them involved in intermarriage, and lived together with the 'Darassa' for long, used to assert that Guji and 'Darassa' are brothers. These elders - many of whom are not alive - failed to trace

how the two 'distinct' groups became brothers. She<sup>19</sup> [Gedeo] had her own language, practiced different religion - Christianity is introduced recently and preachers said all are brothers - , and in the past she lived on the highlands, and below the highlands lived the Guji. She had her own boundary and we too. We searched so much but we could not uncover it. She did not have Gada until borrowed from us. Look the Borana, the Arsi, even you [the ethnographer], we are all the same, we speak the same language; we are all Oromo. (Group interview with Gammade Idema, Gumi Bimbassa, Areri Tuba, and a church elder at Guangua district).

At this point it should be noted that primordialists and instrumentalists argue differently as far as ethnic group membership is concerned. According to Sarah Vaughan, while primordial thoughts consider both who and what the collectives are and whether the individual/group claiming membership fits to the basic 'markers' of distinctiveness of that collective, instrumentalists assert that ethnic group membership is socially constructed through collective conventions - what the collective thinks (2003:55-56). Nevertheless, Vaughan concludes that ethnic membership is a result of being included by the group and the criteria for one to be incorporated as a member or rejected from membership are matters of convention unaffected by lists of 'natural' or 'real world' distinguishing features. The writer goes further contending "categories are in the eyes of the beholders, the collective and its members, and not in the nature of the objects or features categorized" (ibid: 61-62).

In line with the above argument, but different slightly in a manner, my point of departure is that membership of a group is premised on the group's 'agreement'. Claiming to be a member without recognition from the group to which the claim is made, does not necessarily lead to one's inclusion into the group. Though there must be basic grounds for inclusion and exclusion of an individual or a group, which are basically primordial in nature, membership is at the same time socially constructed. To put it differently, membership is determined by *what the collective thinks about the 'other' and who the 'other' is*. Now, let me elaborate this on the basis of specific examples linked to why and how Gedeo's commonality with Guji is denied. As indicated in the preceding chapter, Guji conservatively focus on descent, economic livelihood (cattle herding as basic requirement for group inclusion) and customs for eligibility to Gada membership, which is in turn indispensable in demarcating group boundary. Conventional selection mechanisms are thus related to the group's basic 'markers' of ethnic identity (self image). Here I suggest that both what the collective thinks,

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<sup>19</sup>When they refer to Gedeo, the Guji often use the pronoun, 'she', which implies Guji's view of the group as 'weak' and 'simple' in contrast to their 'pride' to their own ethnic identity. Despite their symmetrical relationship, the Guji had some signs expressing the group's 'superiority' over the neighbouring groups, particularly the Gedeo.



and what and who the members of the collective are, equally determine membership of an individual or a group. By implication, cultural features of the ‘other’ are significant for their being recognized or rejected.

To reiterate what Barth (1998: 14) states as “the features that the actors [ethnic groups] recognize as significant” for categorization, are fundamentally important in inclusion or exclusion of the ‘other’. However, Barth’s argument itself swings between the two schools of thought in this case. From the argument, it can be inferred that membership in a group is socially constructed but at the same time gives a room for ‘significant markers of distinctiveness’, what he calls “those which the actors themselves regard as significant” to influence the admission process (ibid: 14).

As Banks (1996:47) describes, “the contents of ethnic identity versus the boundary” is one of the ‘polar extremes’ between which ethnicity has oscillated. This debate was sparked by Fredrik Barth (1969) whose introduction to the collection of essays *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* set a preference to focus not on the cultural ‘contents’ of ethnic identity, but on the boundaries that define the group. Though my objective is not primarily to pose critics against Barth and his colleagues, it is essential to critically evaluate the justification of Barthian concepts of ‘boundaries’ versus ‘content’. In contrast to their lip service to ‘ethnic boundaries’ rather than ‘cultural contents’, the contributors to the volume, including Barth himself, devoted place to listing the very cultural contents they claim they give less emphasis. For example, in his study of “Pathan Identity and its Maintenance” Barth (1998: 119-120) discusses the role of some ‘objective’ features like descent (common ancestor), religion (Islam), custom, language, hospitality and seclusion in Pathan identity and its maintenance. Gunnar Haaland, another contributor, writes in his article on “Economic Determinants in Ethnic Process”, about Fur-Bagarra relationship in Sudan, that Fur-Bagarra identities were categorized by styles of life (sedentarized versus nomadic, consumption patterns, house type – hut versus tent –, communal activities versus individualized life etc (1998: 66-67)). Similar focus on cultural contents is observed from the works of Knutson who emphasizes on religion, economic life, and descent as basic ‘markers’ of ethnic identity among the Arsi in southern Ethiopia. He goes further to primordial ties of ethnic identity in stating, “To be an Arsi is to be born one, to be brought up like one, and live like one” (1998: 90).

In short, my position is that there is a strong relationship between ethnic boundaries and the ‘contents’ of ethnic identity and I argue that the boundary and the substance of ethnic identity are intimately interwoven. In our specific context, as it will be detailed later in this chapter, ‘cultural contents’ played a central role in creating dichotomies between the Guji and

Gedeo and was thus used as criteria for inclusion/exclusion of members, and boundary maintenance mechanisms.

Coming back to the myth, the views from Guji and some non-Guji informants provide us a different version. They see it as Gedeo's need for protection, as a mechanism 'constructed' by the Gedeo as a tool for expansion and as an extension of the myth of Darasso's adoption to the family of Guji. It is also argued that the myth of brotherhood was possibly fabricated by the Abyssinians – from the myth of adoption - as an administrative strategy so as to conglomerate the groups together.

The arguments associated with the need for protection rely on the premise that Guji were/are well known strong warriors with effective military operation under the Gada system and are thus feared by their neighbouring groups. Despite their territorial autonomy, the four Guji sections were and still are firmly united in times of any external threat. On the other hand, Gedeo was militarily weak and poorly organized relative to its neighbouring rival groups, the Sidama and the Arsi. According to the supporters of this view, it was a logical calculation for the Gedeo to ally itself on the side of the stronger group, the Guji, who was also in rivalry with these other groups.

The other three assumptions can be seen together. Some Guji elders agree that the family of Gujo and Boro, ancestors of Guji and Borana respectively, adopted Daraso. In Oromo culture, there was a well-known mass adoption tradition, in which a clan or even a larger group would be adopted through a tradition of *guddifacha* - literally adoption (Legesse 2000: 7). Legesse draws a distinction between Amhara and Oromo systems of assimilation in that while the Amhara never recognize the culture of the assimilated groups, the Oromo were indebted to the cultural practices of the assimilē. If the claim of Darasso's adoption is accepted, Guji's conservative nature might have had its role in leaving the 'adopted' group (i.e. Darasso and his kinsmen) unassimilated to Guji culture. Therefore, there is a hypothesis that this myth of adoption was gradually changed into brotherhood and was used by the Gedeo as narrowing the differences in their quest for land in Guji villages and by the Abyssinians as administrative strategy by lumping the groups together for ease of administration (informants, Kedir, Habtamu, Warqu – non Guji, the church elder, Gammade Idema – Guji).

But currently, politically conscious Gedeo individuals recognize the Guji version of the relationship claiming that Gedeo is a distinct group in contrast to its neighbouring groups including the Guji, whom Gedeo elders claim as 'brothers'. On the balance, Gedeo ethnic identity seems to have been shaped by the Guji in such a way that the latter's denial to

Gedeo's membership made the Gedeo to revitalize or reactivate a distinctive self-image and image of the 'other'. However, it also seems that this 'reinvention' and readjustment of ethnic self-image goes in line with the changing circumstances in and around the Gedeo economic and political situations.

When viewed from inside, by the early days when they considered themselves threatened by their neighbours and in considerable shortage of land, the group identified itself to the Guji, who was believed to resolve the aforementioned immediate needs. But, according to the views of the above Guji and non-Guji informants, the Gedeo self-representation shifted sooner after the members of the group got access to education through which they entered the state's administrative apparatus since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sense of 'powerfulness', 'security' and 'self-reliance' emerged gradually as both political and economic challenges were relatively secured. Since then, the Gedeo developed a sense of 'distinctiveness' in their ethnic self-image in contrast to the Guji. Likewise, Eller and Coughlan (1996:48) pinpointed that "when a group (an ethnies) *experiences opposition to incorporation into a wider society* or comes under explicit threat or attack, ethnic feeling is generated" (in Hutchinson and Smith 1996 - my emphasis). To sum up this idea, whatever the validity of the myth might be, it has strong implication in the historical coexistence between the groups.

## **4.2. Economic Interdependence**

In the past there had been deep-rooted economic interdependence and trade transaction between Guji and Gedeo peoples without which the very existence of the groups would be jeopardized. The conflicting relationship with their neighbours alienated both Guji and Gedeo from the others. For example, in times of wars, the only trade transaction between Gedeo and Sidama was through women (McClellan 1988:104, Berisso 1994). More importantly, by those early times, except the eastern Guji (Mati and Hoku), Gedeo did not share similar ecological niches with the Guji, which in turn limited the possibility of competition over resources. As indicated above, the Alabdu Guji occupied the hot lowland area of the Rift Valley to the west of the Gedeo. Crop cultivation was not adopted by the Alabdu whereas animal husbandry was very rare among the Gedeo.

It is imperative to discuss the dynamics in the relationship between Guji and Gedeo in two phases, first when the groups exploited separate ecological niches with different but complementary economic activities, and later when both the ecological and economic boundaries were blurred.

The first phase of interaction, which is traced back to pre-down-slope expansion of the Gedeo, was characterized by engagement of the two groups in complementary economic activities. While the Gedeo were confined to the cool highland areas of the eastern escarpment of the Rift Valley with predominantly *ensete* cultivation, the eastern Guji shared similar ecological niche but mainly engaged in cattle keeping and cultivation of crops which were rare among the Gedeo. Gedeo's relation with the eastern Guji was harmonious because despite their adaptation to similar agro-climatic zone, the former depended on the latter for crop products like wheat, barley, *teff* and animal products. Moreover, the eastern Guji used to trek across Gedeo land to western Guji to mine earth salt for their animals from the shores of Lake Abaya (McClellan 1988:27). The western Guji on the other hand, exclusively occupied lowland areas and engaged in pastoral activity.

The second period in the inter-ethnic relation between the two groups began when the Gedeo expanded down-slope crossing into the inter-ethnic buffer zone. This was following the advent of Ethiopian administration in the region and the introduction of coffee production around 1920s. With that, the ecological demarcation that separated the groups was removed and increased the degree and frequency of their contacts. Since the direction of the Gedeo expansion was to the west and then south, the core of this study will be on Alabdu and some parts of Uruga Guji sections.

It may be presumed that the new trend changed the nature of coexistence between the two groups. However, the removal of the geographical boundary did not disrupt their harmonious coexistence in a short run. Complementary interdependence continued for a few decades until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Guji turned to agro-pastoral economic life.

The feudal mode of exploitation under the Amhara landlords indirectly enhanced trade transaction between the Gedeo and the Guji. The Abyssinian feudal lords and settler patrons, who were assigned over the Gedeo peasants by virtue of their Amhara ethnic origin, were not familiar with *ensete* - the staple food of the Gedeo peasants. In addition, it had no market value outside the southern regions where it was/is commonly cultivated and consumed. As a result, they were not happy to expropriate *ensete* products from the tenants through tribute. This forced Gedeo tenants to exchange the *ensete* products to commodities in high demand by the patrons - livestock and livestock products - through complex trade transaction with the Guji (McClellan 1988: 67-68). Even after coffee production was intensified among the Gedeo, the demand of the *naftagnas* (northern settlers) for these products did not change completely.

### **Did Guji economic transformation change the mode of relationship?**

As already discussed above, the Alabdu Guji underwent economic transformation around 1950s. Since then the Guji continued cultivating all types of crops that the Gedeo used to supply them in the past. Although their dependence on the Gedeo in demand for agricultural products substantially decreased, Dilla and Wonago markets remained significant centres for the Alabdu to sell their agricultural as well as livestock products (informant Jibicha Borame). However, this does not mean that the level of interdependence was kept at equilibrium as in the past. The Gedeo needed the Guji for more reasons than the Guji need the Gedeo. Besides Guji's being source of supply of livestock and livestock products for Gedeo people, the latter depended on their Guji friends and relatives to keep their cattle.

At this juncture, one may deduce that their similar economic activity and exploiting the same ecological niche might have transformed their long history of coexistence into conflict owing to competition over meagre resources. But the reality on the ground was different. Logically conflict over resource emanates from scarcity of resources under utilization, which in turn leads to a need to control the scarce resources. However, seen from the historical and political context of the period, neither the Guji nor the Gedeo people had right to control the 'scarce' resources. Both groups were landless tenants under the feudal system. Informants from the two groups agree that none of them had any right over the land because land was exclusive property of the *naftagnas*, (informants, Jibicha Borame, Bari Bakako). However, this does not mean that there was no land pressure and implicit competition over resources. What was not in place was overt competition and conflict to control resource bases.

The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, which ousted Hailesillasié's government and its feudal system, provisionally reversed the century long landlessness of the peasants in subjugated regions including Guji and Gedeo territories. However, the "Rural Land Nationalization Proclamation No.31/1975" once again removed the rights of the peasants over their traditional customary land (Merera 2003, Jemma 2002). The Nationalization of rural land outlawed collective possession of land by the peasants and put the land under absolute control of the state. By the proclamation, the Gedeo who were seen as *kessumma* (guests) on Guji land achieved equal footing with the indigenous Guji and got equal legal rights to the resources. Once again, like the case under imperial regime, the Guji lost the moral and legal basis for considering the Gedeo as guests and to claim collective right to their traditional land (Jemma 2002: 68). However, it should be noted that in spite of grievances on the part of Guji, there was no violent conflict between the two ethnic groups during the military regime either.

### **4.3 Cultural practices as inter-ethnic connectors and disjuncture**

Guji and Gedeo cultural values have played vital roles in creating friendly relationships between the groups for a long period in their history. Members of both groups participated in some common ritual practices like the Gada, Qallu and the *gondoro* rituals. On the other hand, recruitment to and some restrictions on the cultural practices separated the groups rather than integrating them. Though there are several ways in which traditional practices and cultural manifestations serve as inter-ethnic connectors and disjuncture, I will focus in this study only on the Gada system, the Qallu institution, intermarriage, and the ‘myth of curse’ and *Gondoro* tradition.

#### **4.3.1. The Gada systems and the Qallu Institution**

As the Gedeo Gada system was borrowed from the Guji system through the already existing cultural links between the two, it shares some functional and structural similarities with that of the Guji. Both systems were founded on age-set and genealogical structures (Hinnant 1977, Hailu 2004, McClellan 1988).

Both systems also share similarities in the role of women, as both are exclusive of women except in some ritual ceremonies, and in their participation in conflict resolution. Guji-Gedeo cultural convergence is also revealed in the Qallu institution. The Gedeo people paid tribute and gifts to the Guji Qallu during its ritual ceremonies. In addition, the Guji Qallu has been recognized by the *Abba Gadas* of both groups as a legitimate ritual leader for *Gondoro* tradition (informants, *Abba Gada Damboba Gumi, hayicha Dama*).

Nevertheless, the Gada system and its practice more dichotomized the groups than what it integrated them. Above all, the recruitment into the Gada system and to different posts in the Gada structure is different.

Among the Guji, membership in the Gada system largely depends on descent from either of the Guji clans and exclusive pastoral activity in the past. From this principle of recruitment, it is fair to infer that eligibility to the Gada system, which is a strong manifestation of Guji and/or Oromo ethnic identity, was from the inside criterion of the collective i.e. more of the objective marker’s of ethnicity have been emphasized but currently both self identification and ascription by the group are also important among the Guji.

On the other hand, membership of the Gedeo Gada system has nothing to do with a person’s social status and economic activity but a person should be member of the Gedeo

clans or adopted to either of the clans to acquire membership in the Gada system (*Abba Gada Aga Birbo, Hayicha Dama*).

Unlike the Guji Gada whose role never cross into the religious boundaries, the Gedeo *songo* (council of elders) - assisted by the *hayichas* (a lower rank in the Gedeo Gada power structure) - plays spiritual as well as secular roles both in mediating between man and god through traditional prayer called '*qexala*' and in adjudicating between individuals or groups during conflicts respectively (Hailu 2004:10).

Among the Guji the spiritual authority is vested in the Qallu institution and the office of *Abba Qallu* is considered as the apex of the Gada structure even though the office does not have any power share, except adjudicating inter-ethnic conflict in a ritual form. Except occasional visits of the Gedeos to Guji Qallu rituals and their recognition of its legitimacy in *gondoro* tradition, their belief has been different up until the introduction of missionary activity in the regions in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, which to some extent blurred the religious boundary between the groups (informants, the church elder in Guangua district and Gizaw).

#### **4.3.2. Inter-ethnic marriage**

In the horn of Africa, inter-ethnic marriage is considered as one of the mechanisms for enhancing inter-group cohesion (Ocholla-Ayayo 1998:87). Marriage relations may have been among factors that contributed to Guji-Gedeo harmonious relations until recently (Berisso 1994:313, informants, *Hayicha* Qaqqabo, Teka). On the other hand, restriction on intermarriage increases the dichotomy between groups as the Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups evidence it. As it has been discussed so far, Guji-Gedeo relations are full of divergent views among the groups concerned. Also regarding inter-ethnic marriage, views oscillate from limited and unilateral flow of marriage relations (views of many Guji informants), to common and bilateral intermarriage between the two groups (views of almost all my Gedeo informants).

#### **The Guji perspectives on intermarriage with the Gedeo**

According to the Guji marriage custom, marriage arrangements are often conducted between the Guji clans (Hinnant 1977:89). Marriage to and from alien groups is seen as violating the customs but not absolutely prohibited (Negera 2005:19; Jemma 2002:64; informants Ayano, Gammade). In Guji traditional marriage arrangements there are also several customs and preconditions to be met before the final agreement between the two families. Van De Loo (1991: 81) discusses the importance of consulting *kayo* (omens) before final selection of a

marriage partner among the Guji. On his way to the girl's home, if a boy comes across circumstances like " a bird singing first on the right side of the road and then crosses to the left, a woman with empty jar, somebody digging a hole, or people fighting, he may as well consider his quest fruitless"(ibid). If these and many similar 'obstacles' are observed, the boy will have to give up his quest and look for another girl, and no progress would be made in the process of selecting a partner for marriage. It would be the role of the boy and his families to carefully interpret the *kayo* and its implications. Another more important procedure to be fulfilled in marriage process in Guji community is one's ability to afford bride wealth, which is offered in kinds - commonly heads of cattle (informants, Bari Bakako, Areri Tuba).

When asked about their views many of the Guji informants insist that there was and still is limited level of intermarriage. The Guji claim that a few Guji women marry to Gedeo men but Guji men traditionally rarely marry to Gedeo women except after the introduction of Christianity. It was also suggested that only the poorest Guji men marry to Gedeo women, as they may not afford bride wealth to get Guji women (Jemma 2002:64, informants Guye, Bari Bakako).

The first and perhaps this to some extent convincing explanation is related to bride wealth. It is clear that the Gedeo were and still are agriculturalists with limited number of cattle. In this respect, it seems logical that Gedeo men could not afford bride wealth – in terms of heads of cattle - to get Guji women. The second explanation is linked to the ethnic self-image of the Guji and their image about the Gedeo. Marriage among the Guji is, in principle, conducted between members of equal social status. In fact, there is no social hierarchy among the Guji but there are 'caste' groups living in the community who are seen as inferior. The Guji never marry with these groups. Likewise, as they consider the Gedeo as 'despised' groups, the Guji seem unhappy to select marriage partners from the group both for their sons and daughters (Jemma 2002:64; Hinnant 1972:201, 205; informants Gammade Idema, Gammade Arado).

The views of the Gedeo informants are straightforward. They claim that economic, cultural and social interactions have contributed to bilateral marriage arrangements between the two. *Hayicha* Qaqqabo Shota, a 98 years old Gedeo informant, was asked about how Gedeo men were able to afford bride wealth for marrying to Guji women. He responded that the kind and amount of bride wealth largely depends on the agreement between the two families of the couples.

However short it has been, my fieldwork experience gave me an understanding that there are some truths in both versions. In the day-to-day interaction between the groups and



from the reflections during interview periods, it has been easy to conclude that the Guji stereotypically represent their Gedeo neighbours as ‘despised’ groups. From this perspective and other sources of information that reveal the value attached to a person’s prestige in marriage arrangement, it seems convincing that the level of intermarriage between Guji and Gedeo has been limited. In addition, except for those who are Christianized, the belief in omens, which had different contextual interpretation among the two, have had its own restrictive impact on intermarriage between the two. Moreover, bride wealth in the form of heads of cattle could be possible impediment for Gedeo men to marry to Guji women.

The Gedeo perspective however, works more for the recent marriage relationships when some of the traditional customs were abandoned as a result of the introduction of Christianity, ‘urbanization’, and monetization of commodities and Guji’s familiarity with cash economy, which would substitute bride wealth in kinds.

Connected with intermarriage – however contested it may be – there are important questions to be raised in relation to identity of individuals through marriage across ethnic boundaries. Fredrik Barth once argued in this respect that “Ethnic distinctiveness persists regardless of flow of personnel across ethnic boundaries” (1998:9-10). To this end, I will consider the preservation of ethnic identity among Gedeo men who married to Guji women and settled in the villages of their in-laws after marriage. Rather than integrating them to the Guji customs and lineages, the Guji consider these Gedeo men as *kessumma* (guests). This label is an important dichotomizing marker between the wider Guji society and the Gedeo who lived within Guji hinterlands. Among both Guji and Gedeo, lineage is patrilineal. Women often adopt their husbands’ customs and traditions. But for Guji women, their Gedeo husbands’ settlement at Guji homesteads enabled them to maintain their Guji identity, except those who might be taken to Gedeo territories. In fact their children will adopt the Gedeo lineage. On the other hand, Gedeo women married to Guji men adopt the culture and social values of their Guji husbands.

#### **4.3.3. The ‘myth of curse’ and the *Gondoro* tradition: belief as an instrument of inter-ethnic cohesion**

In the preceding chapter, mention has been made of the Guji’s relation with its neighbouring groups. Except with the Gedeo, the Guji have had a long history of conflict with the Borana, Sidama, Arsi and others (Hinnant 1972:110,150,181). Before directly moving to why conflict was minimal between Guji and Gedeo, let us look at a few of the motives of Guji warfare with its neighbours. In his article “Warfare among the Guji of Southern Ethiopia”, Berisso

(1994:318-321) argues that the Guji had waged wars mainly for defensive and economic purposes. Killing of an enemy man for revenge or for personal or group prestige were secondary motives (ibid: 321). There had been a long tradition of killing big game animals such as lions, elephants, rhinoceros and buffalos, as well as enemies, and both economic and social values were attached to this tradition. A Guji man who succeeded in killing either of these animals or an enemy would be honoured and respected. Besides its social prestige, the action had also economic importance for the killer. His clan members would give him cattle and other gifts for the killing, and some parts of the animals had great market value. Last but not least, the prestige as well as economic gains enhanced marriage possibilities (ibid: 320-321).

Taking the above ideas as starting points now let me return to the question, “Why was it the case that conflict between Guji and Gedeo was very limited unlike their conflicting relations with their neighbours?” On the balance, issues related to Guji-Gedeo relations reflect more of divergence than convergence. Thus, it seems academically fair and methodologically sound to examine divergent views in a pursuit to arrive at balanced conclusion.

While Gedeo informants raise brotherhood, intermarriage, economic interdependence, justification that ‘Gedeo never sheds blood’ and ‘fear of ancestral curse’ as fundamental reasons for the strict prohibition of homicide and/or conflict between the two groups, the views of Guji informants ranges from those who accept the Gedeo’s claim – with the exception of the ideas of brotherhood and ‘Gedeo never sheds blood’ – to those who argue that Gedeo never fulfil either the economic or the psychological motives for Guji’s warfare. To reiterate this last statement, according to this view, Gedeo were so ‘despised’ and ‘poor’ that killing a Gedeo man would not provide social prestige and economic values for the killer. It is argued that women would insult a Guji man who killed a Gedeo as a ‘weak’ killing. The informants confirmed that a Guji man would anoint his hair with butter and celebrate upon killing big game animals and/or Amhara, Sidama and Wolayta but not Gedeo. Secondly, cattle raiding, for which much of Guji warfare was waged, was less likely as Gedeo were poor in cattle husbandry.

Whether this happened from the brotherhood perspective or Guji’s view of the Gedeo as a ‘simple’ and ‘despised’ group - as the Guji often argue - remains unclear. However, even if the Guji’s claims are true, it indirectly contributed to the coexistence of the groups. Rather, seen from economic aspect of Guji warfare, it seems likely that Gedeo’s agricultural nature, which increases their complementarities more than competition on the one hand, and the

group's lack of large herd of cattle for raiding, on the other hand, might have contributed to peaceful coexistence of the groups.

Because of its strong symbolic cultural significance and as a 'belief' serving as inter-ethnic bond, I will give a few explanations on the 'myth of curse and the *Gondoro* tradition'. The 'myth of ancestral curse' to happen on anyone who commits homicide against the other – Guji or Gedeo – is commonly told and retold by elders of both groups. The 'myth' goes like this:

Long ago, Guji and Gedeo elders made mutual oath to avoid homicide and any kind of conflict against each other. They pledged to keep their oath forever and to transfer it to their offspring/generations. The elders passed an enduring curse on anyone who transgresses the oath. However, in case of unconscious and/or uncontrolled loss of life in the hands of someone else, the curse had to be removed through complex purification process called the *Gondoro* tradition (informants, *hayicha* Qaqqabo, *hayicha* Dama – Gedeo; Gammade Aredo, *Abba* Gada Damboba Gumi - Guji).

The informants expressed their deep belief in the myth in that breaking the curse leads to fatal consequences like paralysis, leprosy, misfortunes in life and even death. Whatever the reliability of the 'myth', it may have a crucial implication in our context as minimizing the possibility of inter-ethnic conflict between the two groups.

### **The *Gondoro* tradition**

"*Gondoro*" is a common term both in Afan Oromo and Gede'uffa languages with the same meaning. Literally it implies declaring or concluding something or an event not to happen again. The tradition has complex ritual procedures and strong symbolic representation of purification of the 'curse' and reconciliation of conflicting individuals/groups. The *Gondoro* tradition is performed not only as a mechanism of purifying the 'curse' from the guilty but also as a method of conflict resolution. Through the ritual processes, the guilty and his clans would be reconciled with the relatives and clan of the offended. The tradition works both in resolution of inter-personal as well as inter-group conflicts.

**Procedures:** in the case of homicide committed by one or some individuals on one or more member(s) of the other group, the transgressor with – Guji or Gedeo – seeks shelter with *galma*-Qallu. Beginning from the day of the crime up until the Qallu officials arrange for reconciliation with the family and clan of the deceased, which may range from few months to a year, the transgressor lives at *galma*-Qallu. There would be a series of prohibitions on his day-to-day activities, as he would be excommunicated from his groups, not allowed to get his hair cut, limited contact with family or relatives etc.

Qallu officials send delegations to the clan leaders, *Abba* Gada and other Gada officials belonging to the deceased. Both *Abba* Gadas arrange a specific day and place for the tradition where families and relatives of the guilty and the deceased appear, on their part accompanied by their respective Gada leaders and local elders.

For the ritual ceremony of the tradition, the Guji provide a bull or a sheep while the Gedeo provide *boka* (local wine made from honey). Before the process of slaughtering sacrificial animal is started, the guilty appears in front of the public getting his hair shaved and his body and clothes washed by the 'caste' group called Watta (potters). After this, guided by the blessing and 'cursing' procedures performed by Guji Qallu, the two Gada leaders or members of Gada officials pour the blood of the animal and the *boka* on the heads of both parties. Pouring the two parties with blood and *boka* symbolizes the purification of the 'curse' from the guilty and his family. Another symbolic process is breaking a bone of the sacrificial animal. The two parties hold each end of the bone and the two *Abba* Gadas break the bone by the blunt edge of the knife through its opposite side to its sharp edge. Bone-breaking symbolizes removing (breaking) the hostility between the groups. The next step is making them to eat and drink together, which represents reconciliation and restoration of friendship. Finally, the *Abba* Qallu concludes the ceremony by blessing the peace to be durable and at the same time cursing any attempt of retaliation/avenge.

There is no compensation in money for the crime but excommunicating the transgressor from social life until the time of the reconciliation is regarded as punishment. A strong punishment would be elongating the time of the *Gondoro* ceremony as there is a belief that some misfortunes then would happen to the family of the guilty or to the transgressor (informants, *hayicha* Dama, *hayicha* Qaqqabo, Guyyee, and *Abba* Gada Damboba).

Similar ceremonies will be undertaken for conflicts encompassing the larger groups but it differs in that the first step is ending the conflict before the reconciliation or purification process. Among Guji and their neighbours, there is implicit convention that prevents killing women at war. As a result, women play an important role in peace-making processes in the region (Berisso 1994: 316). Whenever conflict occurs between the groups, elders – the initiative may be taken either by Guji or Gedeo - send five old women to the war front where they stand at the middle of the fighting groups and shout. Following the shouting of the women both groups hold down their arms. The women then cross to the opposite territory and talk with old men. They return with five old women who also discuss with the elders of the other side. Finally elders communicate to their combatants to stop fighting and sit for reconciliation. What makes this slightly different from the ceremonies connected with

homicide is the participation of representatives from all clans of both groups. The number of animals slaughtered and amount of *boka* prepared differs as well. In this case, elders from their neighbouring ethnic groups would also be involved.

Despite the decline of the Gada system and the value attached to the *gondoro* tradition by the institutionalization of the Amhara court system, people still recognize its importance and the influence of the ‘curse’ if the purification process is not undertaken. In local areas where the tradition was/is linked with the belief of the society, people never ate and drank together since the 1995 conflict as they do not recognize the legitimacy of the *gondoro* tradition performed under the auspices of the government with less/no consultation of culturally eligible traditional leaders like Guji *Abba Qallu*.

When asked about the effectiveness of the ‘modern’ court system and the traditional mechanism of conflict resolution in making long-lasting peace, informants responded that, “in the court system a transgressor stays for some years in prison and comes back. After that, families of the deceased take revenge by killing him. But in *gondoro* tradition, people fear the ‘curse’ if they violate the oath they make during the ceremony” (informants Bari Bakakko, *hayicha Dama*).

#### **4.4. Ethnic self-image and image of the ‘other’**

A group’s self-image and its image of the others represent basic dichotomizing aspect in ethnic groups’ categorization. Likewise, the nature and degree of stereotypical representation of the ‘other’ influences inter-ethnic interaction. In dichotomized and/or conflicting groups a presentation of self and the other cannot be fully understood from the groups’ front-stage performances alone. As Berreman (1962) describes, it is also played at the back-stage performances of our subjects.

Both Eidheim’s (1971) study on Sami-Norwegian population relationship and Saugestad’s (1972) study on Protestant-Catholic relations in Northern Ireland are instructive in this regard because the studies provide us with knowledge about the groups’ front-stage and back-stage performances in reflecting about self-image and image of the ‘other’.

My Guji and Gedeo subjects reflect both covert and overt expressions about their self-image and image about the other group. For reasons difficult to uncover, the Gedeo informants were very careful to conceal both images of themselves and about the Guji. On the contrary, the ‘curtain’ between the front-stage and back-stage performances of my Guji informants was very transparent. At this point we, my informants and I, tried to employ

different mechanisms to protect and enter into the back regions respectively. As Berremann stated,

An ethnographer is usually evaluated by himself and his colleagues on the basis of his insights into the back region performances of his subjects. His subjects are evaluated by their fellows on the basis of the degree to which they protect the secrets of their team and successfully project the image of the team that is acceptable to the group for front region presentation (1962:11).

I succeeded to cross to some of the back-stage information through my field assistants who seemed to ‘share’ and ‘know’ similar ‘secrets’ of the group. I came to understand that the Gedeo have self-images as ‘peace-like group’, ‘never shed blood and even never eat and drink with those who shed blood’, ‘industrious’ and ‘self reliant’ as opposed to the Guji whom they presented as ‘war-like’, ‘blood-thirsty’, ‘poor in cooperated social life’, ‘no permanent settlement and hence less legitimacy to claim for rights over land’. The Gedeo’s self image as a non-violent and peace-like group is also included in the scanty information we find about the group. Kiphee (2002:30) for example argues that Gedeo strongly discourage violence and even excommunicate those who commit violence.

Guji informants overtly – but not often in public presence of Gedeo audiences – express their self-image and their image about the Gedeo. The Guji present themselves as “brave, proud, strong group, wealthy [in cattle], superior culture [referring to the Qallu institution, which the Gedeo do not have and ‘better’ Gada system]” compared to the Gedeo whom they portray as “coward, unconfident, weak and simple at war, poor, inferior cultural traditions [they often refer to the story that Gedeo borrowed the Gada system from the Guji]” (informants Gizaw, the church elder at Guangua district, Gammade Idema among others). Hinnant (1972:77-94) also describes similar ethnic self-image reflected by the Guji and their views about the Gedeo.

My emphasis is not on contents of these stereotypes but on their implications in creating boundaries by dichotomizing the differences. More importantly, the covert images of self and of the other overshadow the alleged similarities and strengthen the differences. I argue that these ethnic self-images and images of the other – whether covertly or overtly expressed – contributed their share in dichotomizing the groups’ ethnic identities and helped them to maintain ethnic boundaries in their long history of interaction in spite of flow of personnel across ethnic boundaries.

#### **4.5. Summing up: linking economic and cultural determinants to ethnic identity**

Although ethnicity and ethnic difference have been portrayed as causes of many of the violent conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa (Abbnik 1997: 159), ethnic homogeneity also does not guarantee peace and stability in the region. Two examples from the Horn of Africa suffice for this argument. Somalia is noted as Africa's ethnically homogenous state. However, ethnic 'homogeneity' could not prevent Somalia from its current tragic political turmoil. Similarly, when one explores the historical relationship between Guji and Gedeo in comparison to Guji and Borana – both Oromo branches – it clearly indicates that belonging to common ethnic root did not assure peace between Guji and Borana. Therefore, what matters is whether the political machinery in place plays the role of instigation or 'mediation' in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations in accordance, according to the state's political, administrative and economic strategies.

In the case of Guji-Borana relation for example, because of their occupation of strategic geographical landscapes around Ethio-Kenya borders, successive Ethiopian governments used divide and rule policy so as to make the groups preoccupied in intra-ethnic warfare rather than creating a common front against the state.

In this regard, Guji-Gedeo harmonious relationship should be understood from two dimensions. First, instead of perceiving the groups as 'ethnic ones', this study suggests approaching the issues from the perspective of both dichotomies and complementarities. Second, the dynamics of their relationship could only be understood from the context of state's intervention into local interaction for its interests.

So far I have discussed Guji-Gedeo relation in myth of origin, political allegiance, and economic and cultural spheres. However, I would like to stress that none of these elements of relationship were uncontested. My emphasis is that each piece of common understanding on the contested and contestable forms of relationship contributed to peaceful and friendly coexistence of the two groups. Their myth of 'common ancestor' (however contested), economic interdependence (no matter how unbalanced it might be), intermarriage (however much disputed), myth of prohibition on conflict and homicide (however varied the views might be) and the common *Gondoro* tradition altogether contributed to ethnic complementarities. At the same time, the contestability of their relationship enabled them to maintain their ethnic boundary in their long history of interaction.

Investigation on the authenticity of the myth of common origin of Guji and Gedeo calls for thorough anthropological, historical and archaeological studies, which is difficult to deal within the limited scope of this research. But it seems that Darasso – probably at clan level – was adopted to the family of Gujo and Boro, as discussed above, through the *guddifacha* tradition. The justification for a myth of brotherhood poses a serious question about the linguistic differences between Gedeo and other Oromo branches, including the Guji. While all Oromo branches stretching in the vast territories of Ethiopian empire from south to north and east to west speak Afan Oromo and understand each other very well (Baxter 1991:9), the Gedeo speak a different language despite their geographical proximity even with the Guji. Guji’s contention of their relationship only as neighbours, on the other hand, is also less satisfactory seen from much of their common customs and traditions.

It should be noted that today overt signs or diacritical features of ethnic identity are not so distinctively observable among members of the two groups. Except in the hinterlands where inter-ethnic contacts are limited, members of both groups living in adjacent vicinities are bilingual in Afan Oromo and Gede’uffa languages. Language proficiency is no more a ‘marker’ of distinctiveness in these areas. Moreover, in most cases, both worship the same God and even attend the same or similar protestant Churches. As I observed during my fieldwork and from my previous experience about the groups, rather than these objective features, subjective elements of self-identification and ascription by others are central to group categorization. This also justifies the argument that ethnic boundaries are not fixed but changing.

In the study of Guji-Gedeo relations, treating the issue as a pure horizontal inter-ethnic relationship is overlooking the role played by the state all throughout more than a century since their incorporation into the Ethiopian empire. For the convenience of this study, I divide the role of the state in terms of ‘positive’ and negative roles. The state’s economic interest in the region indirectly increased trade transaction and contacts between the two. On the other hand, the intervention of successive Ethiopian governments in local inter-ethnic relations negatively affected the coexistence between Guji and Gedeo peoples and gradually but surely led to the disastrous conflict of 1995/98.

The Guji consider themselves as being victimized by the Gedeo who, according to their views, backed by the state systematically pushed, and later on ‘attacked’ them on the very land the latter were ‘given’ through friendship (Jemma 2002: 68). My Guji informant used a common Oromo proverb while explaining the situation; “*yoo barri hammaate waraanni abbaan qare, abba qala jedhama*”, which literally means, paradoxically when



circumstances become worsened, it happens that a man is being hurt by the very spear he himself sharpened (my own translation). This refers to the Gedeo who were sheltered in Guji villages, became in-laws and got land from Guji and but later turned their backs against their 'relatives'.

The Guji's economic transformation and increased number of Gedeo settlers on Guji land, particularly after the 1960 resettlement scheme, intensified pressure on 'common' resources. Even in those times of land pressure, the reaction of the Guji was mixed. The reaction had somewhat positive elements because of the undeniable cultural bonds and historical interdependence between the groups. In addition, the Guji considered the Gedeo as *kessumma* (guests) with no fear that the latter would claim for landownership. The other aspect of the mixed feeling was their fear of the central government. Although they were not happy with the new arrangements of resettlement schemes, they had no right to raise their claims because neither the imperial regime nor the military government was ready to listen to the voices of the marginalized groups like the Guji. Therefore, the issue of right over traditional land and question of self-government were waiting for appropriate political environment among the Guji in pre-1991 periods.

## **Chapter 5: The Guji-Gedeo conflicts of 1995 and 1998: questions of territorial integrity and self-government**

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### **5.1 Background of the conflicts**

Under chapter two of this thesis, I have discussed about the mismatches between the promises of ‘Formal Ethnicism’ and the implementation of ‘Ethnic Federalism’. Regardless of other possible causes of inter-ethnic tensions in the post 1991 period, the ‘new experiment’ of ethnic policy played central role in most of the conflicts. In this regard, the Guji-Gedeo conflicts of 1995 and 1998 would also be analysed from this context.

Although the causes of the conflicts are contentious among political bodies, researchers and the conflicting groups, there are some facts that can not be denied and are helpful in investigating the complexity behind the conflict. Just from the onset, I would like to emphasize that any attempt of examining the Guji-Gedeo conflict as a mere inter-ethnic conflict separately from the state’s administrative and political policies becomes incomplete.

It is better to note the shifts in territorial rearrangement by successive Ethiopian governments and its impact in dividing members of the same ethnic group while merging distinct groups together. In the Guji-Gedeo example, during the imperial regimes and until the last years of the military government, both were under the same administrative province – the then Sidamo Province. However, in the last years of the military regime (in 1987) some parts of Guji inhabited territories were included under the then Gedeo sub-province of the Sidamo Administrative region while the larger portion of the Guji territories remained under Borana administrative region (Jemma 2002:3). The new territorial restructuring put in place by the EPRDF regime followed the military regime’s structure and provided territorial administrative limits for the Gedeo keeping the status quo. In this manner the Guji were divided between two regional states – Oromia and SNNP regional states in 1992.

Both Gedeo and Guji informants agree that the Guji were deeply dissatisfied with the new arrangement and felt that they were dominated by the Gedeo on ‘their own land’ and separated from their fellow ethnic ones – those in Borana zone of Oromia region. The Guji claim that they were excluded from the administrative, educational and employment opportunities in the Gedeo zone on the pretext that they were poorly educated. The Gedeo were better educated and thus dominated the administrative positions both during the military and the current regimes. I have discussed in the preceding chapters about Guji’s ethnic stereotypes about the Gedeo as socially and culturally ‘inferior’ to their group. The political

dynamics in the country, differential state policies and access to education by the Gedeo significantly reversed the traditional roles and put the Guji under the administrative power of the very group they demoted in the past.

Many Guji informants reflect their deep discontent of being dominated by the Gedeo, whom they welcomed as ‘guests’ some 40 years back. The Guji in the Gedeo zone felt that they were politically dominated, culturally uncertain, territorially isolated from their ethnic members and economically powerless with regard to their own resources. Concomitant to this, their fellow Gujis who joined the Borana zone of Oromia regional state seemed to have entered an era of cultural revival, ‘right of self-government’ and economic ‘autonomy’. Putting differently, while the sense of “them” from the Gedeo side was a push factor, the ethnic self-identification, “us”, from the other Oromo side was a pulling force to the Guji who were under the Gedeo administrative zone.

These discontents and disaffections culminated between 1991-1994 when the Guji began to appeal to the federal government for the right to territorial integration and self-government according to the Transitional Charter and Constitutional provisions put in place. The irony is the response from the federal government who - against the constitutional provisions it enacted - refused the Guji’s right to self-government and territorial integrity with their fellow members (informants: Gamade Idema, Gumi Bembassa). The informants emphasise that they appealed to the office of the then Prime Minister but in vain. Dissatisfaction of the people grew to an increased demand to self-government, exercising their own language, culture and traditions, particularly following the promulgation of the new constitution in 1994.

The Guji’s presumed or real feeling of domination by the ‘aliens’ on their ‘own homeland’ had intensified the divergence between the two in the fragile political atmosphere of the time. As Smith (1991:182) puts it, “A major tenet of the current theory is that majority/minority status and the resultant power associated with such status are significant determinants of ethnic identity development” (cited in Jemma 2002: 70). In the case of Guji-Gedeo relation, the new majority/minority status created by the state structure and power distribution is not a primary cause for identity development – as identity already existed among the group - but it rather ethnified the political environment around the two.

From point of view of the Gedeo, the move of the Guji was seen as ambition for controlling resources, as a move towards separation from the old tradition of friendship and ‘brotherhood’. To further elaborate the above points, Gedeo informants perceived Guji’s claim as a check on Gedeo’s access to resources, which they consider as surplus in Guji

territories. Moreover, the Gedeo suspected that the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was a driving force behind the questions raised by the Guji. It is clear that the Ethiopian government perceives any popular movement from the Oromo community as being instigated by OLF. The informants also seem to have been obsessed by the government propaganda during the conflict. But some Gedeo informants agree to the real discontent of the Guji and even relatively marginal positions in the new power distribution. This group of Gedeo informants suggest with regrets that a fair distribution of power and resources for members of both groups within the Gedeo administrative zone could have solved the problem.

As far as the reaction from the politicians was concerned - as mentioned somewhere above - politically speaking, the 'People's Democratic Organizations' (PDOs) fabricated by the TPLF around 1990 are not capable to make decisions of their own. As Merera Gudina contends, they were the mouthpieces of the TPLF/EPRDF party programme rather than resolving local conflicts at local level in accordance with the realities on the ground (2003:123). Had it was not been for their surrogate existence, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) would have had a different stance from the Gedeo People's Democratic Organisation (GPDO) in such contending issue between Guji and Gedeo peoples. Ironically, both the Oromia and SNNPR politicians came up with similar agenda of keeping the status quo against Guji's claim for self-government and territorial integrity.

## **5.2 A contentious referendum as the triggering factor for the 1995 conflict**

Popular discontent and strong demand for self-government among the Guji forced the federal government to carryout a referendum in 1994. At this point, it should be underlined that both Guji and Gedeo peoples were not geographically separated in the disputed vicinities. They rather lived together in different numerical proportions. The referendum could be made according to different criteria: if a certain contentious or disputed Peasant Association was adjoined by one of the two regional states (Oromia and SNNPR) in  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its directions, it would automatically be put under that particular regional state. This is termed as settlement patterns<sup>20</sup>. The second strategy is 50% + 1 formula<sup>21</sup> where - in principle - the inhabitants

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<sup>20</sup> According to settlement pattern formula, if a disputed territory is bounded by either of the regions in  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its territorial borders, it would be automatically put under the region that bounds it in three directions. For example, if territory 'A' is bounded by region 'X' in the North, South and West and by region 'Y' in the East, it would be included into region 'X' without any vote.

<sup>21</sup> The 50%+1 formula is a crude minimum numerical majority, which is larger only by one than the maximum possible minority, 50%-1.

would be given a right to vote either to remain under Gedeo zone or to join the Borana zone of Oromia region.

However, neither of the two designed formulae recognised the customary right of the groups' over the land they traditionally inhabited. It also did not take into consideration the resettlement policies by the previous governments by which the number of Gedeo inhabitants on Guji customary land was proliferated. In short, history was deleted from the principles designed to resolve inter-ethnic tensions and neither was the role of sacred cultural places taken into account.

Be it as it may, a joint conference was held in Awassa – the administrative capital of SNNPR – in 1994 to discuss on the principles and methods of implementing the referendum. To make the process more complex, the claim by each group was counter attacked by the other side and contributed its role in intensifying the tension between the two. For instance, the Guji, based on their historical and traditional relations to the land, claimed the territory as far west as Dilla town, including Wonago, Yergachefe and Kochore districts (See Map on Appendix 4). This was a bitter pill for the Gedeo to swallow. Both accused one another as expansionist. Gedeo politicians for instance contend that the land the Guji claim was empty when they settled on it and others argue that following the 1975 Rural Land Reform Proclamation by the military regime the ownership of land belongs to the government; and thus the Guji had lost collective right to the land by then (Jemma 2002: 82).

Guji informants maintain the view that the Gedeo brought Guji's lack of educated manpower as an excuse to keep the group under their jurisdiction but according to my informant, Gammade Arado, Guji in turn alternatively stated "we can invite our educated Oromo from Wallaga, Shawa, and Arsi and so on, if Guji gets right to self-government". Once again, the reference to ethnic division in "them" and "us" was clearly revealed by the Guji's preference for the Oromo from thousands of kilometres away rather than the neighbouring Gedeo for administrative and other social service provisions.

In any case, the 'referendum' was carried out in March and May 1995 in some contended districts – *Wonago*, *Yirgacheffe*, *Kochore* and *Hagere-Mariam* districts. Disagreement emerged between both contenders on the implementation processes of the referendum. For example, one of my key informants – who was an OPDO representative at *Wonago* district by the time of the referendum and the conflict –described the event as follows:

The referendum was in principle designed to be conducted by fair and free votes of the peoples concerned in the contentious Peasant Associations. By the so-called referendum, four Peasant Associations – *Harooressa*, *Ciccu*, *Oddo* and *Wonago* - were incorporated to Gedeo zone while *Guangua* and *Oddo-Miqe* were dissociated from the

Gedeo zone and joined Borana zone. Except in the case of *Haroressa*, where the Gedeo are in fact the majority, the other cases where the Gedeo ‘won’ the referendum were flawed. At *Ciccu* for example, Guji inhabitants were intimidated by the Gedeo forces not to identify themselves as Guji. Other ethnic groups were bribed to vote on the side of the Gedeo in areas like *Oddo*. Although the Guji demanded the principle that exempts a territory from 50% +1 if it is bordered by one of the regional states by  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its directions, in the case of *Wonago* - where the *galma* Qallu [the sacred Qallu compound] is located - the Gedeo insisted on the majority vote and thus it went to Gedeo zone.

The informant was asked about the reaction of the two groups to the results of the ‘referendum’. He responded that both were unhappy with the results; while the Guji condemned the principle itself, the Gedeo were disappointed with their loss of the two votes – particularly Guangua, which is closer to Dilla town.

Meanwhile, while another conference was going on in Dilla town in spring 1995 to discuss on how to proceed with the referendum, conflict erupted first in Wonago district and then escalated to other disputed territories. As a result, the conference was suspended. The two sides accused one another about who first ignited the fire of conflict.

According to Guji informants, it was the Gedeo who initiated the fighting, since they were dissatisfied with the incorporation of some territories into Oromia regional states (Jemma 2002: 71-72, informants, Gumi, Gamade, Gizaw). They also claim that a Gedeo man killed one of the Guji individuals who were mobilising the people for the referendum in *Oddo-Miqe* as revenge to their defeat at the referendum. This incidence, according to their views, escalated the fighting in different areas within a few hours, including Hageremariam district, which is located far south of the origin of the fighting. They still insisted that the Guji tolerated the injustices committed – political marginalisation, unfair employment conditions, and unequal representation in administrative structure - just because their elders emphasised on the past friendship and still some of their women married to Guji men and vice versa. Thus, “we”, the informants claimed, “we did not have any aggressive feeling to hurt them”.

On the other hand, the Gedeo accused the Guji *Abba Qallu*<sup>22</sup>, who was then appointed as a Deputy Administrator of Gedeo zone, as instigating the conflict between the two. This accusation against the *Abba Qallu* led to his imprisonment as a political prisoner in 1995 and his death in Awassa prison few years later. Guji informants also state that the government

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<sup>22</sup>Guji *Abba Qallu* was the spiritual leader of the Qallu institution, who according to the Qallu principle, would not be allowed to participate in administrative activities – which were the roles of the Gada officials – during the heydays of the Oromo Gada system. The ascendancy of the Ethiopian administration disrupted the tradition by appointing Qallu leaders in administrative positions. In this way, the Guji *Abba Qallu* was appointed as Deputy Administrator of the then Gedeo zone until his imprisonment in 1995.

*deceived* the spiritual leader by paying him a salary in return for his service as Deputy Administrator of the zone until 1995. The *Abba Qallu* felt disappointed by the injustices committed against his people and began to challenge the Gedeo politicians. As a result, they waited for an excuse to eliminate him from the political/administrative field even before the outbreak of the fighting (informants, Gammade Idema and the former OPDO representative at Wonago).

Moreover, according to Hussien Jemma, the conflict in Hagere Mariam district was further agitated by the Gedeo's further demand for referendum in all the Peasant Associations where their people exist in larger number – a demand which was contrary to the principle of settlement pattern formula (2002: 75). In Hagere Mariam district, fierce clashes broke out between the two in April-May 1995. To add fuel to fire, the federal army intervened between the two to stop the fighting but in vain. What rather happened was that the Guji became furious with the federal army and began shooting at them because they suspected that the federal army sided with the Gedeo (ibid: 76-78). Eventually, military intervention 'ended' the war but the number of loss of human life is not exactly known.

The way that the war ended had its own implication on the later relationship between the groups. Unlike the traditional conflict resolution practice employed by the groups in the past in bringing durable peace, the 1995 war was 'resolved' by the military force. However disputed it was, there was also the so-called '*gondoro*' tradition conducted under the auspices of the government. Both Guji and Gedeo informants and government officials have different views about the '*gondoro*' ceremony conducted after the 1995 war.

According to the Gedeo informants, the people accepted the *gondoro* ceremony, which was conducted by representatives from both groups, in accordance with its traditional ceremonial procedures. Some government officials from Oromia and SNNPR sides share this view.

On the contrary, the majority of Guji informants and some informants from administrative office in Abbaya district of Borana zone contend that the *people did not legitimately accept the gondoro ceremony* since it was undertaken under pressure from the government without mutual consensus between the conflicting groups. The former OPDO member, who was entrusted to enforce the *gondoro* practice, confirmed strong government intervention and pressure on the peace process. He stated "the majority of Guji people were unhappy with the process because they felt they lost their land by a referendum that they consider as unjust and unfair. But they had no option rather than accepting the peace process; otherwise, they would be indiscriminately labelled as anti-peace and imprisoned".

Guji informants also claim that they were not represented by legitimate Guji elders. Their main contention is connected to the imprisonment of *Abba Qallu*, who was culturally the person most eligible for the ceremony. The Guji *Abba Gada*, Damboba Gumi, for example refused to carry out the *gondoro* ceremony because he believed that he was not legitimate person to conduct the practice on behalf of *Abba Qallu*. The OPDO official also told me that after the refusal of *Abba Gada* Damboba, he was ordered by higher officials to bring another *Abba Gada* from a different Guji clan for the ceremony, but the people demanded the release of the *Abba Qallu* instead. On the other hand, the official further pointed out “some people, mostly the Gedeo, were happy because they had relatives from both sides and they were in fear of further loss of life and destruction of properties”.

Whatever the allegations may be, the 1995 war had several implications on the Guji-Gedeo relationship. Above all, it broke the centuries’ long harmonious coexistence between the two. Sadly, neither historical interdependence, myth of common origin and friendship through inter-marriage nor the belief of ‘curse of homicide’ could prevent the conflict from happening in 1995. One may ask “why did the group fail to employ the traditional method of conflict resolution before it escalated out of control?” It is important to see this question from two dimensions. Firstly, it should be noted that successive Ethiopian regimes discredited and downgraded the indigenous institutions in the subjected regions of the south, including the Guji-Gedeo conflict resolution mechanism. As a result, the values given to such practices declined over time. Secondly, the post 1991 political climate in the country clearly politicised ethnic differences and opened for ethnic groups to emphasis elements of dichotomies rather than complementarities. For that matter, as discussed in the preceding chapter, Guji-Gedeo relations were full of dichotomies, divergent views and myths on which the groups could not reach on common consensus. It became easier for such fragile relations to transform into tensions and conflicts with the introduction of inflammatory political elements of ethnicity.

Another significant implication of the 1995 war and the way it ended was that it complicated the peace process. Just following the outbreak of the fighting, the Guji *Abba Qallu* was imprisoned accused of instigating the conflict. In Guji-Gedeo indigenous method of conflict resolution (the *gondoro* tradition), the role of *Abba Qallu* was paramount. With the imprisonment of the spiritual leader, both the reputation of the *Qallu* institution as well as the spiritual leader became discredited. Without a legitimate *gondoro* ceremony, the fear of the ‘curse of homicide’ was less present in the minds of the people. In addition to this, the Guji



consider the imprisonment of their Qallu leader in the hands of the Gedeo<sup>23</sup> as the latter's transgressing the respect for the spiritual leader, the Qallu institution and Guji-Gedeo traditional cultural ties. To make the matter worse, the death of the spiritual leader in jail further aggravated the Guji people's discontent with the Gedeo.

The 1995 Guji-Gedeo war had brought suspicion on the part of the government about involvement of external force into the conflict. The Guji's reaction against the government armies seemed to have convinced the government politicians that the Guji were supported by the Oromo Liberation Army. The allegation seemed to have influenced the position of the Oromia regional state politicians. The contentious territories became areas of government's geo-political interest. Guji informants from the top administrative structures in Abbaya district describe the issue – as the view of the government - not only as a question of territorial claims but also as a politically sensitive, insecure and fragile region, which demanded strong protection from being breeding space for 'external force'. Thus, the government seems to have inclined to a policy of keeping these 'sensitive' regions under the administrative jurisdiction of the Gedeo since the presumed threat was from the Oromo forces.

By the years following 1995, it became politics of gaining more territory or loss of it, and using any possible means to win the game and defending one's own rights of territorial integrity from encroachment. As it will be detailed below, while it seems that the Gedeo were engaged in the politics of winning the game possibly through majority vote, the Guji turned on defensive side against the envisaged territorial dismemberment. It was this conflict of interest among the two groups and the different options preferred as recourse from the government that precipitated the 1998 more devastating war between the once friendly neighbours, Guji and Gedeo. It seemed more likely that after the 1995 conflict the government also developed geo-political and administrative interest on the disputed territories.

### **5.3 The 1998 conflict**

The fundamental cause of the 1995 Guji-Gedeo conflict was neither resolved nor relinquished but was rather postponed to erupt whenever the political environment would be ripened. Nevertheless, the nature and dimension of the issue was changed all through 1995 to 1998. The Gedeo, whom the so-called 50% +1 'referendum' seems to have benefited compared to

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<sup>23</sup>Though it is said that *Abba* Qallu was imprisoned by the federal army, the Guji consider it as Gedeo's tactical missions against him.

the Guji, began to push for the revival of the referendum in 1998. But it should be underlined that the initiatives were taken by the politicians rather than the concerned ordinary people. The concurrence of geopolitical importance of the region for the central government and the economic interest of the Gedeo over the Guji inhabited territories was reflected at this conjunction.

The irony is that neither the federal state nor the regional states learnt from the counterproductive 'referendum' of 1995. In spring 1998 both authorities of Oromia and SNNP regional states proposed a referendum as a lasting solution for the inter-ethnic tensions between the groups (Jemma 2002: 80). To this end, a joint conference was held at Dilla in spring 1998 to enlighten the people about the 'necessity' of the revival of the referendum on 50%+1 formula. By this time the Guji strongly protested against the idea and consistently emphasised the fact that the referendum ended in 1995 with casualties for which they blamed the government.

In contrast, the Gedeo politicians and authorities from both regional states rigidly insisted on the viability of the referendum, which they described as a matter of government policy not to be subjected to objection (ibid). Supporters of the referendum had different understanding about the reality on the ground. While the higher authorities from the two regions were driven by political loyalty to implement the policies of the federal government, which they consider as unalienable, the Gedeo politicians argue differently from what the higher authorities claim.

As I discussed earlier, some Gedeo cadres consider the Gedeo settlement on Gujiland as '*terranullius*' arguing that it was idle and empty land during the settlement. Similarly, other Gedeo cadres argue for equal footing of both Gedeo and Guji inhabitants to the land as the Proclamation No.31/1975 removed collective right of the Guji over the land. In any case, both perspectives nullify Guji's claim for collective customary right over their traditional land.

It should be from such convergence of geopolitical interest of the state and economic interest of the Gedeo politicians on the one hand, and to the contrary Guji's strong demand to territorial integrity and defence to their land right on the other hand, that the 1998 Guji-Gedeo conflict would be understood. Despite the Guji's strong protest to the idea of the referendum at the Dilla Conference, the authorities opted for another conference to implement the so-called referendum. On July 7, 1998 they held a similar conference at Hagere Mariam town, in Borana zone. Informants from both groups steadfastly described that the Guji condemned the government policy of 50%+1 formula referendum as a step against their territorial integrity and violation of their constitutional rights – which grants group's right to self-government on

the territory it inhabits – and maintained the opinion to defend their land in whatever ways. It was at this stage that some provocative a speech by an authority from the Oromia regional state on the conference further ignited the already existing suspicion and discontent among the Guji. According to the field report by Jemma (2002: 80), a representative from Oromia regional state was reported to have provocatively defended the policy stating, “If the Guji were against the intended referendum, they could go to the jungle and fight”. It would not be difficult to imagine the implication of such ‘suggestion’ both on the group concerned and the message it conveys about the position of the government in resolving inter-ethnic tensions.

Against the views that portray the causes of Guji-Gedeo conflict fundamentally as resource competition, the ordinary Gedeo – who were supposed to compete for resource control according to this perspective – opposed the intended referendum and claimed for a harmonious coexistence of the groups (ibid: 80-81). It can then be argued that it was a political game by the political elites on the one side and a question of right to territorial integrity and self-government by the Guji as the opposite sides of the game.

Irreconcilable interests of the two protagonists – the government and the Guji people, darkened the probability for peace. It was unfortunate for the ordinary Gedeo to be sandwiched between the two and became victims of the event. Here I do not mean that all Gedeo settlers in Hagere Mariam district were innocent and indifferent to the cause but the fire was ignited more by the political elites than the peasants.

A single incident was enough to explode the volatile tension. That was what happened following the death of a Gedeo cadre by Guji farmers at Killenso-Makkanisa after the unsuccessful joint meeting on July 15, 1998 (ibid: 88-89). The Guji did not target the Gedeo peasants, but the government cadre, whom they believed as provoking for the revival of the referendum. One wonders if this conflict is then fairly labelled as ‘inter-ethnic conflict’ and its prime cause as resource competition. A bloody war was fought for a few days that claimed the lives of hundreds or thousands of people and significant destruction of properties. Informants from both groups stated that the Gedeo were more affected by the war than the Guji.

It is not uncommon to experience discrepancy in the report of causalities after such conflict owing to its political implications. While the information from the Oromia regional authorities reduces the number of human loss to a few hundreds, the Gedeo politicians reported it as many as 2000 to 3000. Some Non-Governmental organizations also reported that about 3000 people lost their life by the war (UNDP: 1998). The war had profound short term and long-term implications. Unlike the 1995 conflict the federal army was ‘unable’ to

control the war until local elder men and women from both conflicting groups, and the neighbouring ethnic groups intervened between the fighting groups for cease-fire.

One fundamental question is “why did the arms from the government military fail to stop the conflict whereas the local elders, without such modern armament managed to restore peace”? The point is that human mind is not ready to easily accept what is imposed upon it from above. According to this view, the elders have strong social and cultural values attached to them and thus are powerful in contrast to the government army whom the societies consider as ‘alien’ force intervening with a power that is not internalised by the actors.

#### **5.4 The post conflict relations**

The post conflict relationship should be evaluated on the basis of the resolution of the conflicts and whether the fundamental causes were resolved or not. The basic question to be asked is, “is it the government imposed peace formation or the one initiated and internalised by the groups that leads to enduring peace?” In addition, “in what context can conflict be said to have been resolved; when the war ends or when causes of war are resolved?”

It seems that internally initiated and recognised peace formation sustains inter-ethnic relations more peacefully than the top-down approach of ‘peace formations’. My point of analysis will also be from this perspective. The 1995 conflict for example, ended up by the military intervention. Without resolving the fundamental question of the groups by the time - fair and free territorial rearrangement - the government opted for process of ‘peace formation’, which the Guji in Wonago district reject as illegitimate both from the practical means used and intended goals desired. They argue that no peace formation would be legitimate unless the root causes of the conflict are resolved. Practically, they saw it as violation of the principles of *gondoro* tradition as the practice would only be conducted by Guji *Abba Qallu* in cooperation with the two *Abba Gadas*.

Coming back to the post 1998 period, informants are divided in their views. There is a common understanding that the 1998 conflict ended by intervention of elders. Unlike the 1995 case, government authorities also recognised the role of traditional methods of conflict resolution through the *gondoro* practice. The Guji *Abba Qallu* was brought from the jail to perform the blessing on the ceremony and taken back to prison up on completion of the ceremony (informants Hayicha Dama, *Abba Gada Damboba*).

However, the issue is that both groups perceive the situations differently. In Hagere Mariam district, the Guji seem to have been relatively happy with the suspension of the

referendum, which would have divided large amount of their land and people from the main Guji area. On the contrary, the advocates of the referendum were not happy with their unsuccessful mission as it rather became counter-productive and destructive claiming the lives of people and considerable properties.

On the contrary to the cases in Hagera Hariam district, the Guji in Wonago district of Gedeo zone and the newly established districts (Abaya and Galana districts of Borana zone) are deeply discontented in many ways with the results of the ‘referendum’, which still influences the interaction of the groups in these districts. According to the views of Guji informants from these territories, the ‘referendum’ did not serve its aim fairly. In addition to the territories they claim to have been incorporated to the Gedeo zone through intimidation and flaws, they strongly claim for the incorporation of the Qallu compound (*galma*) into Wonago district. My informant from Abaya district administration has the view that the *galma* Qallu was unfairly included into Wonago district because it represents the sacred place of the whole Guji clans. He further explained an ongoing question by the Guji people for the return of this sacred place to their territory. Shortly, there are some signs of disaffection among the people though the overall social interaction is peaceful.

To investigate the socio-cultural aspect of post-conflict relations, as the preceding chapters detailed the decline in Guji-Gedeo symmetrical relations were linked to Gedeo’s access to education, administrative positions, and government backed resettlement schemes, which seemingly reversed their symmetrical socio-cultural relationship. Moreover, the roles of indigenous conflict resolution and political allegiance in maintaining their co-existence between the two groups became no longer important with the institutionalisation of the Ethiopian administration in the regions. Although the pre-conflict dynamics made it so fragile, it was not until the recent conflict that elements of dichotomies are activated.

My Gedeo informants in Wonago district generally maintain the view that the post conflict relationship is peaceful, harmonious and friendly. But, said one of my informants, “but the Guji are still greedy of land and do not want the Gedeo in their territories, which may probably change the current peaceful coexistence”.

On the other hand the Guji turndown the assertion of the Gedeo informants claiming the latter’s lack of consistency in respecting the old traditional relations and cultural values. According to their views, the Gedeo consistently showed less respect to the traditional practises of conflict resolution since their participation in the Abyssinian administrative system. This divergence seems to have been more evident since the conflict in 1990s. To substantiate this argument, there was a concrete case happened on 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2006 in

Wonago town at a joint conference between the two groups organised by government authorities. According to the participants of the conference, it was “a confidence building conference” organised by authorities from both Gedeo and Borana administrative zones. It can be inferred from the objective of the conference – ‘confidence building’ - that the post-conflict relations have not been harmonious. My informant, one of the top officials of Abaya District Executive Administrators, pointed out the existence of mutual suspicion, theft, confiscation of property and social insecurity in many rural areas adjoining the groups.

Coming to my point, the Guji saw the conference as an event where the Guji-Gedeo cultural relations were practically reversed. They claim that while it would have been the Guji *Abba Qallu* who is culturally eligible to bless and open a conference of ‘conflict resolving’ or ‘confidence building’ ceremonies like this, it happened that priority was given to Gedeo *Abba Gada* who later gave the stage to Guji *Abba Qallu*. Gedeo informants maintain the view that Gedeo *Abba Gada* was rightly given priority on the premise that Gedeo is senior to Guji. On the contrary, while some Guji informants contend even seniority of Gedeo as discussed earlier, others view it differently. For these latter informants, ‘peace formation’ is related to *gondoro* tradition where the practice should be conducted by the Guji *Abba Qallu* and then followed by the two *Abba Gadas*. The authorities from Abaya district described about the disappointment of Guji participants on the incident and they calmed down their Guji fellows in fear of the revival of the conflict.

Politically speaking, while the 1995 war suspended the question raised at the time, it became loose-win game at the end of the 1998 war. Apparently, the Gedeo cadres and representatives of Oromia regional state - by implication, the government - who advocated for the revival of the referendum lost both the means and the ends desired. Neither pieces of land nor was war won by the protagonists of referendum as the other group resisted it. On the other hand, there is still deep-rooted discontent among the Guji in Abaya district on the question of the sacred *galma Qallu*.

The major implication of the war is the activation of a dividing boundary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ between the historically coexistent, economically interdependent and culturally complementary groups. The conflict demonstrated the potent force of ethnicity in that many of the Guji and a few members of other Oromo branches who were far beyond the disputed territories were believed to have participated in the war.

In the post-war periods the two groups developed sense of suspicion, mistrust and at least covert antagonism. It seems that both groups developed the thinking that “blood is thicker than water”. According to this proverb, no matter how strong harmonious relationship

may exist between groups of different origin, the relationship cannot be enduring. In fact, this is in contrast to the historical coexistence of the two groups regardless of their differences. This new thinking complemented to the political instrumentality of dichotomization used by the cadres broadens the already existing elements of ethnic dichotomization between the two groups.

Under conditions where ethnic questions are suppressed by the heavy hand of the military, particularly in the case of the 1995 war and with continued economic interest of the Gedeo politicians in the Gedeo inhabited territories of Guji land, the prospect of future relation seems dubious. In such existing conflicts of interest where lasting resolution failed to be given, 'appropriate' political atmosphere seems to ignite the tension unless handled cautiously.

However, commitment on the part of the educated, local elders, religious leaders and government authorities from both sides could no doubt help to revitalize the past harmonious coexistence and strengthen the peaceful relationship between the two ethnic groups.

## Chapter Six: National Discourse on Ethnicity and Local Inter-ethnic Relations in Ethiopia

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### 6.1 Ethnicity in the Contemporary Political Context of Ethiopia

In the preceding chapters, I have discussed the perspectives on ethnicity both in the academic and political contexts. I have argued that ethnicity is a *slippery* concept, which is susceptible to different contextual interpretations. It can be *constructive* as well as *destructive* and *silent (passive)* and/or *active (alert)* under different conditions. It is a potent force but can be easily manipulated. It may be used by political elites as instrument of mass mobilization, by elders as a bond for group cohesion and by ‘ethnocentric elites’ as a mechanism of exclusion of others in resource and power distribution.

The manifestations of ethnic identity should also be understood as situational group characteristics rather than fixed or innate phenomena. In this chapter, I will return to an analysis of the multidimensional aspects of ethnicity in contemporary Ethiopia, which I introduced in chapter two, and also look at the related concept of indigenes in an African context.

When employed for a positive transformation, ethnicity can be constructive in such a way that it enables ethnic groups to develop a sense of belonging, security, freedom, equality and trust to the state, which otherwise would be seen as ‘irrelevant’. The cumulative effect may lead to national integration, a sense of unity in diversity; and peaceful co-existence between diversified groups. Or the contrary; if ethnicity is used as a medium of political manipulation, instrument of domination, appropriation of resources and exclusion, it precipitates ethnic antagonism and conflict between the dominant and the subordinated groups, which ultimately gives the negative connotation to the concept.

Under different circumstances, then, ethnicity manifests different characteristics. In most cases, the primordial markers of ethnicity remain ‘*silent*’ or ‘*passive*’ until activated by some external or internal forces. It is more often the activation of its ‘*silent*’ characteristics that justifies action rather than ethnicity itself. I have tried to present this process in a figure (see Appendix 1). Likewise, it seems difficult to consider the facade of ethnic identity as something rigid without considering the situations or contexts under which the actors use the concept. Nevertheless, the situational approach to ethnic identity should be distinguished from



the constructivist view in that the former activates the '*silent*' features of ethnicity but their manifestation would depend on differences or changes in situations. For example, the 'revitalization' of Gedeo ethnic identity among the observant Gedeo individuals does not mean that 'markers' of ethnic identity have been newly constructed. Rather, Guji's 'refusal' to Gedeo's claim to ethnic communality forced or pushed members of the latter to activate already existing elements that would reflect the difference between the two groups.

While some contend ethnicity as a colonial construction in African countries (Johnston 1998:137), others portray it in Ethiopia as a recent construction by the state since 1991 (Aseffa 1996, Teka 1998). Both in Ethiopia and other African countries however, many fail to distinguish between analytical and the politicized dimensions of ethnicity. Colonial administration in Africa politicized ethnic identity in different ways. However, it is simplistic to assume that 'Tutsi' and 'Hutu' – as categorical ascriptions – were just constructed by the colonial system in Rwanda. Rather, German and later Belgian administrations' discriminatory policies of 'empowering' the Tutsi over the Hutu (Johnston 1998:135-136) could more likely have politicized their differences. As I have already argued, ethnicity in Africa predates slave trade and colonialism and should not be simplified just as a new construction.

While discussing "Ethno-politics and the State – Lessons from Uganda", Byarugaba (1998:181) attributes the emergence of 'ethnocentrism' to colonial administration. Although the writer emphasizes ethnicity as a factor in creating parochial sentiments among groups, an important remark is that colonial and post-colonial administrative systems facilitated the activation of ethnic dichotomies that existed from before.

In the case of Ethiopia however, the post 1991 political environment can neither be seen as a cause for construction of ethnic identity nor a cause for politicized ethnicity among the diverse ethnic groups in the country. The three brief case studies of the Amhara, the Oromo and the Tigre of chapter two demonstrate that ethnic identity is rooted in social organization, history, religion and traces of common origin. Nevertheless, the development of a Tigrayan ethnic identity – as distinct from the Amhara - may be argued as a new activation of some elements of commonalities that were still present in 1970s (Vaughan 2003:158-165).

Against the notions of constructivist views, I argue that ethnicity in Africa in general and particularly in Ethiopia is evident as a juxtaposed existence – primordial and instrumental elements characterizing the concept in different contexts.

Attachment to common background, traditions, customs, religious practices, and language affinities is a strong cohesive force among ethnic groups in Africa. At the same

time, it is the assumed or 'real' primordial group characters that ethnic entrepreneurs (political elites, religious advocates, traditional group leaders) use for their intended enterprises.

In Ethiopia political elites used markers of ethnic identity such as language, history, tradition, and common memory of oppression in their pursuit for their political mobilization. In this line of argument, Olufemi (2001:79) contends, "While ethnicity remained a critical medium for the manipulation of power by the dominant class and constituencies, ethnic structures [identities] have also emerged as a critical rallying point of resistance to oppressive and corrupt regimes". From this argument, it can be inferred that political ethnicity manifests itself in two forms: as a strategy to manipulate ethnic groups for political mobilization and legitimacy, and as a response to oppression. The current reality in Ethiopia shows example of both forms. While the political entrepreneurs (elites in power and some opposition politicians) use politicized ethnicity as an instrument to gain popular support, there are also situations where ethnic politics emerges from the groups against oppression and in quest for self-determination. The politicized ethnicity among the Oromo and some groups in southern nations and nationalities display the latter form of political mobilization.

I have stated that ethnicity could be both constructive and destructive. Putting themselves inside the political lens, some writers passionately denounce the policy of articulating ethnicity in the political programme as a dangerous destructive 'virus' to national unity or state-building project in Ethiopia. Tegegne Teka (1998) and Hizkias Aseffa (1996) are among the core proponents of the 'destructive' connotation attached to ethnicity.

Aseffa (1996) strongly contends that formalizing ethnicity and addressing ethnic issues will not be a remedy for the conflicts in Ethiopia, which he considers as a problem emanating from socio-economic inequalities rather than ethnic issues. He further defies right to self-determination as it may lead to disintegration of the state through secession of member nations. Similarly, in his article "Amhara Ethnicity in the Making", Teka emphasizes that "While we recognize the existing realities and emerging ethnic identities, we should at the same time pave the way for a collective identity, i.e. a pan-Ethiopian identity.... We may not do any good to society if we continue to organize people in groups – by the language they speak, the culture they share, or the race they belong to" (1998:118). According to the above quotes, the writer suggests that 'common language' and 'culture', and the creation of artificial homogeneous group would be a means to achieve the end - pan-Ethiopian identity.

However, this becomes in contrast to the United Nations' *Human Development Report*, which states, "Long thought to be divisive threats to social harmony, social choices like these - about recognizing and accommodating diverse ethnicities, religions, languages

and values – are *inescapable feature* of politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (UNDP 2004: 1 my emphasis).

I am not arguing that ethnicity has no destructive elements. My contention is that both sides of the concept should be examined contextually before denouncing it. As Julius O.Ihobvnbere argues,

In Africa, ethnic identity by itself has never posed a problem to human survival. ...But it is only the activation of such identity in the struggle to expand political spaces, displace others, appropriate resources, monopolize power, or engage in extra-legal agendas that has given ethnicity and ethnic politics its negative connotation (2001:69).

Likewise, when identity claims or ethnic questions are denied, ignored, suppressed or marginalized, communities design alternative strategies to engage a repressive state (ibid). Many of ethnic conflicts in Africa were fought against top-down political and administrative policies, which were initiated by regimes imposing ‘nationhood’ and citizenship at the expense of different respective cultures, histories, group political loyalties and traditions. Ihobvnbere (2001:70) further contends that loyalty to the state is usually converted to ethnic loyalty when the former fails to provide basic economic or social services and becomes ‘irrelevant’ to the groups.

Currently, it is not uncommon to come across the views of leaders and politicians from many parts of Africa labeling ethnicity as a cause of inter-ethnic conflicts, underdevelopment, and failed democracy. Frank E. Muhereza and Peter O. Otim (1998:191) quoting Museveni (1997:90) – the Ugandan President - stated that “Tribalism [ethnicity] was the greatest single tool by which ignorant opportunists destroy the unity and strength of un-politicized groups”. Museveni claims also that the causes for Uganda’s socio-economic underdevelopment and political decay are entrenched in sectarianism [ethnicity] (ibid). Although Ethiopia and Uganda experienced similar political histories of military rule in the last couples of decades, and currently are under leadership of ex-guerrilla fighters who assumed state power by the force of a gun rather than a ballot box, the regimes in Addis Ababa and Kampala, in principle opted differently as far as ethnic policies are concerned.

Back to the argument, it seems that under circumstances where a state suppresses the culture, language, identity, history, and political and economic rights of ethnic groups, the groups’ sense of loyalty to the state would be reduced and they may opt for self-determination. Regardless of all its failures, the state blames ethnicity and ethnic politics for any failed policies, mortgaged economies, and unsuccessful nation-building projects. Critically, one may ask if it should be the state or ethnicity that takes the blame for any

instability and failure related to this. It is the socio-economic and political motives for which ethnicity is activated and deployed that hold the implications of threat to, and/or the promotion of, national unity, stable inter-ethnic relations and rational politics. In short, ethnicity can be a potent destructive force when it is activated and misused for a group or elites' political agenda at the expense of others. Even in such case, the responsibility lies on the shoulder of ethnic entrepreneurs rather than 'ethnicity' itself.

On the constructive side, recognizing ethnicity and ethnic diversity can be regarded as reversing hegemonic rules of ethnic domination and discriminatory language, culture and political policies. Some writers suggest constitution making that recognizes the sovereignty of the people, articulates ethnicity, language, identity and the centrality of nations, nationalities and peoples (ethnic groups) as a step towards democratic transformation in Africa (Hamesso 2001:91-106 and Ihovnbere 2001 75-76). It is in line with this suggestion that the above mentioned *Human Development Report* emphasizes on a need to recognize diversities in a pursuit to economic and political transformation. It goes as follows;

Policies recognizing cultural identities and encouraging diversity to flourish do not result in fragmentation, conflict, weak development or authoritarian rule. Such policies are both viable, and necessary, for it is often the suppression of culturally diversified groups that leads to tensions (UNDP 2004: 2).

I strongly agree to the above quotes but, particularly in the case of Ethiopia, I would like to go beyond such recognitions and emphasize the need for good bureaucratic practice and commitment on the part of the state to genuinely put into effect the recognition of cultural identities mentioned in the constitutional provisions.

## **6.2 The convergence between ethnicity and indigenusness in Africa**

If ethnicity and ethnic questions are among the most contested and contestable concepts in academic as well as political discourses in Africa, indigenusness can be fairly labeled as an even more contested, complex and inconveniently sidelined concept. On the balance, both ethnicity and indigenusness became victims of the post-colonial ideologies of 'nation-building', which gave African leaders an ideological impetus and political ambition towards creating a 'unified' state at the expense of their member groups.

While the definition of indigenous peoples is ambiguous at international level, the case in Africa is more difficult and challenging (Saugestad 2001:303). The working definition of the concept, indigenous peoples, is the one adopted by UN Special Rapporteur, Martinez Cobo that focuses on priority in time, historical continuity between the current occupants and

their ancestors, experience of marginalization, suppression and subjugation, and self-identification and identification by others as members of distinct cultural group (see Cobo 1986, Kingsbury 1998:419-420).

The nature of military ‘decolonization’ of colonial powers from Africa, in which colonialists no longer physically remained on the colonized land, adds to the intricacy of the concept. As Saugestad (2001:304) puts, this circumstance laid a premise for African politicians to claim all Africans are indigenous or reject the international definition as irrelevant to African context. In any case however, both perspectives overlook the existence of dominant-subordinate relationship between politically dominant, socially privileged and economically powerful national groups, and the historically marginalized minorities in different parts of the continent.

As it is true for ethnicity, indigenesness in Africa should also be understood from a relational approach between minorities and the state. Unlike in other parts of the world where colonial settlers remained on the colonized lands, as a result of which clear distinction between the two would be visible in terms of cultural, economic and political privileges, it is the internal state-minority asymmetrical relations that further marginalized indigenous peoples in Africa.

When one tries to draw lines of convergence between ethnicity and indigenesness on the conceptual contours of Africa, particularly in relation to the views of politicians and perhaps the academia, they share many similarities. As I have argued in this study, ethnicity has been labeled with negative connotation and denounced by ‘pro-nation-building project’ politicians and scholars. Regardless of its integrative and complementary roles in national unity, African leaders blindly attribute ethnicity to conflict, ‘counter-democratic’ movements, underdevelopment and political decay. Similar views are being reflected as far as recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples are concerned.

The report by Professor Sidsel Saugestad on the processes of the court case in Botswana reflects prevailing views of African leaders about and its impact on indigenous peoples’ movement in the continent. Botswana’s Minister of Foreign Affairs made a declaration about the UN Declaration on the Rights for Indigenous Peoples at the meeting of the African Union in Addis Ababa (January 2007), which reads as follows:

The declaration, as currently drafted, shows that, far from correcting past wrongs, it instead poses a serious threat not only to our sovereignty and territorial integrity, but to peace and stability of our respective countries and the continent at large. ... [and] provides an opportunity for Non-Governmental organizations to meddle in the internal

affairs of sovereign states in the guise of promoting human rights. A number of countries, including my own, are already facing this challenge (Saugestad 2006)<sup>24</sup>.

In short, despite the rising demands for ethnic and indigenous rights among different groups in the continent, the two concepts are inconveniently sidelined by many national politicians and the academia.

### **6.3 ‘Formal Ethnicism’ and Inter-ethnic Relations**

Under this section, I will return to the impact on inter-ethnic relations policy of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ based on the approach of ‘Formal Ethnicism’. The constitution proposed the ‘centrality’ of ethnicity, the past centrist and unitary state structure was restructured along ethno-linguistic lines, leading to another important concept of our analysis – Ethnic Federalism.

I have suggested that if the objectives of ethnic entrepreneurs were genuinely to address ethnic questions, ensure justice and transform the state and the society along democratic lines, politicized ethnicity by itself would not have disrupted inter-ethnic relations. However, I argue that, theoretically, the ideology of Formal Ethnicism is not a cause for inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in the country. Rather, it is the contradiction between its theoretical principles, the covert position of the state on the policy and its practical implementations that have had profound implications on local inter-ethnic relations.

For impartial judgment, it is imperative to examine the explicit and implicit state policies, its self-contradictory nature in the formulation of ethnicity and the realities on the practical ground. In contrast to the Machiavellian view that “the end justifies the means”, it appeared that the means obstructed the end in the case of TPLF/EPRDF’s controversial political philosophy of ethnic mobilization. I have described the success of the TPLF in mobilizing the Tigrayan mass during 1970s and 1980s using the group’s ethnic characters (language, history, traditions and common memories) as political instrument. In the Tigrayan case, the Marxist-Leninist understanding that “you can mobilize (indeed even define or create) a community more effectively and get it engaged in its own political development if you can mobilize it from inside; that is, with its own members, in its own language, using its own cultural traditions and knowledge system” (Vaughan 2003:170) worked effectively.

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<sup>24</sup> Publication of the journal is in 2006 even if it included a manuscript submitted by Saugestad in 2007.

When the TPLF/EPRDF controlled the state power in 1991, they presented a new and controversial Stalinist thinking regarding the mobilization of the diverse ethnic groups in the country. According to this notion,

The criteria for ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ [and hence their mobilization] are objectively and externally identifiable, and verifiable independently of the views of their members” (ibid). [Vaughan further argues that] the latter thought resulted into the notion that a vanguard party may legitimately grant self-determination to a community from outside, *defining and prescribing the ethnic criteria of the group and demarcating its geographical borders*” (ibid, emphasis mine).

The implementation of ‘Formal Ethnicism’ through ‘Ethnic Federalism’ had to confront these competing and mutually incompatible urges – to prescribe from above, or to facilitate from within the groups in question. It should be noted that ethnicity is an aspect of self-identification by members of a group and/or ascription by the group recognizing the members while ‘excluding’ non-members. However for a third party, prescribing ethnic groups and their criteria for identification– be it a political party or whatsoever – would be difficult to internalize by the groups prescribed. This is apparently evident in the Ethiopian Experiment. By recognizing mother-tongue language at some regional levels and by creating affiliated political parties (PDOs) along ethnic lines, key ethnic entrepreneurs attempted to mobilize the diverse ethnic groups from within. However, by defining language as a basic marker of ethnic boundary and demarcating the geographical borders enclosing the groups, they reserved the authority to grant the right to ‘self-determination’ from above. More than 46 ethnic groups in today’s SNNPR were simply lumped together by the vanguard party for administrative fiat, assuming ‘common’ ethnic identity.

The contradictory elements apparent in the TPLF/EPRDF political thinking have obstructed the visions of democratic transformation in the country’s political system. Although the explicit policies of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ grant ethnic groups’ right to form self-government along ethno-linguistic lines and self-determination up to and including secession, there are covert forces, which hinder the implementation of these policies and impede relationship between ethnic groups and the state as well as inter-ethnic relations.

In a real sense and for a critical observer, the Ethiopian state is still centrist and committed to ‘unity’. As Gudina (2003:141) and Vaughan (2003:170-171) contend, the regional states are nominal state structures with basic sources of power (budget, authority etc) controlled by the federal state. Gudina further contends that the regional states simply implement the instructions from the cadres of the federal state (2003:124).

Another important aspect to be noted is the political, administrative and geopolitical priorities reserved for the state while restructuring the federal system. In contrast to the constitutional provision that self-government, including “the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in State and Federal governments” (FDRE Constitution 1994: Art. 39.3), several ethnic groups were put under the jurisdiction of other groups, while others were given a status of region or zone irrespective of population number, but to serve the interests of the state.

Two examples further substantiate manifestations of implicit ‘integrationist’ policies and prioritization of geo-political interest in the implementation of the so called ‘Ethnic Federalism’. The first, which can be considered as an early challenge to the self-contradicting policy of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ was the Guji-Gedeo case. I will return to this case below.

Another illustration of the divergence between the principles of ‘Ethnic Federalism’ and the implementation of ‘Formal Ethnicism’ is Wolayta – one of the multiethnic groups in today’s SNNP regional state. Following their incorporation into the Ethiopian empire in 1894 by Minilik’s conquest, the Wolayta people were culturally stigmatized, and politically, socially and economically excluded from the empire state (Abraham 2003:44). The early years of the Transitional Government (1991-1995) inspired optimism among the group as they were given a regional status of self-government. Unfortunately, their optimism soon evaporated as the region was amalgamated into the SNNPR in 1995. To make the matter worse, a new language policy was introduced in North Omo zone – to which Wolayta was included – with the aim of creating an artificial hybrid language known as WOGAGODA<sup>25</sup>, a mixture of four different languages. In addition to their discontent with the territorial rearrangement, the Wolayta people saw the language policy as an attempt to ethnic homogenization and destruction of their language, culture and identity (ibid: 46).

The Wolayta integration and the language policy created public discontent and disaffection, and culminated with a riot in October-November 1999, claiming the lives of many civilians. After strong popular protest and riot the group was accorded a status as administrative zone and the authorities cancelled the counter-productive and ill-planned language policy. According to Abraham (2003:47), the Wolayta case demonstrates the centralized (top-down) policy and limited local autonomy as basic features of the current ethnic-based federal arrangement in Ethiopia. Both the Guji-Gedeo and Wolayta cases reflect

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<sup>25</sup>The name of the artificial hybrid language was derived from the first two letters in the name of the respective nationalities: Wolayta (WO), Gamo (GA), Gofa (GO) and Dawro (DA). But these four nationalities have very limited level of language affinities and share only a few other objective as well as subjective markers of ethnicity.



the self-contradictory nature of 'Formal Ethnicism' and 'Ethnic Federalism'. The impacts of these incompatibilities on local inter-ethnic relations in the country are quite adverse.

## **6.4 Reassessing Guji-Gedeo conflict**

As already discussed elsewhere in this study, the Guji people in today's Galana and Abaya districts of Borana zone were put under the Gedeo administrative zone against the demands of the group for self-government. It was this top-down approach of 'prescribing and defining a group and demarcating its geographical borders' that resulted into the disruption of the quite harmonious relations between the two groups in 1990s.

In the preceding chapter, I have tried to shed some light on the contending perspectives on Guji-Gedeo conflicts of 1990s putting it both in the context of local interactions and national policy of ethnicity. In the following sections I will try to examine the Guji-Gedeo conflicts beyond resource competition and look at local realities in the context of heightened tension that may be caused by ethnic politics in the country.

### **6.4.1 Beyond resource competition**

Inter-ethnic conflicts in post-1991 Ethiopia are often viewed according to a 'resource competition thesis', which is in turn attributed to the new state structure (Aseffa 1996, Teka 2004, Jemma 2002). According to these views, ethnic-based geographical demarcation divided ethnic groups between different regional states and limited their access to common resource areas (Abdulahi 2004:4).

Tegegne Teka (2004:2) and Hussien Jema (2002:1) portray the Guji-Gedeo conflicts as fundamentally caused by competition over resources following the new state restructure. In this analysis, I have tried to show that the conflict was not fundamentally a rivalry over resources nor was caused by the state restructure's dividing the two groups between different regional states. I do not reject the existence of some elements of resource competition and impacts of 'Ethnic Federalism' but I approach them from a different perspective.

As it is true for many ethnic conflicts in other parts of the country, the Guji-Gedeo conflict was a brainchild of the mismatches between the promises of 'Formal Ethnicism' and its immaterialized realities. As it has been shown earlier, in contrast to the constitutional provisions of rights of ethnic groups to self-government, the new arrangement *divided the Guji* between Oromia and SNNP regional states. Here comes the insufficiency of the 'resource competition theses' that relies on a division of Guji and Gedeo between the two

regions (see Map Appendix 2). Had it been a rivalry over resources owing to the border rearrangement, the conflict should have emerged between the Guji in Oromia region and the Gedeo in the SNNPR, and by implication between the two regional states. But what happened was that the Guji in the Gedeo zone were discontented with their marginal status in the political, economic, educational and administrative systems in that zone. The Guji also felt that they were separated from their fellow Gujis who joined the Oromia regional state.

The conflict was complex, intricate and multidimensional in nature. It can be seen as a question of gaining and maintaining self-government and territorial integrity among the Guji. When seen from the perspective of the Gedeo, it was a reaction to keep the status quo of geographical border and the resource basis accorded to the zone in 1992 and an attempt to expand its frontiers, particularly after 1995. On the side of the federal government, especially after 1995, it became an issue of geopolitical interest where it considered the Guji inhabited territories as a 'breeding space' for Oromo Liberation Army. As a result, it seemed to have planned to keep the purportedly 'insecure' districts under the sphere of influence of the Gedeo administration to reduce the free movement of the alleged threat (interview with a government official at Abaya district). This left the Oromia regional state authorities sandwiched between their political loyalty to the TPLF/EPRDF government and ethnic identity. Though a few managed to maintain both loyalties to the party and ethnic identity by wearing different 'hats' according to contexts, the influential authorities were reported to have been influenced by their loyalties to the party at the expense of their ethnic identity.

In contrast to the notion that simplify Guji-Gedeo conflict as a competition over scarce resources, I argue that it was rather a resistance against the Marxist-Leninist thought of 'creating, defining and prescribing an ethnic group, and demarcating its geographical borders from outside independently from the views of its members'.

#### **6.4.2 Local reality in the face of heightened ethnic politics in Ethiopia**

The institutionalization of 'Formal Ethnicism' and the ethnic based political mobilization launched by ethnic entrepreneurs after 1991 tempted many groups to try to regain their human and democratic rights after a century of ethnic domination. As stated above, the new system also emphasized ethnic differences and associated political, economic, social and educational affairs with ethnicity. Therefore, the post 1991 political climate both opened demands for several groups and closed the door against such demands, the implication of which is rising ethnic conflicts.

A dialogue with my Guji informants helps to bridge between the different contexts before and after 1991. When asked why they did not raise questions of self-government on the disputed territories during the military regime, they stated that “the government policy of that time did not give rights to any ethnic group to administer its own territory but this government [EPRDF] ‘provides’ the right to self-government to every ethnic groups; thus we want it to be implemented” (informants, Gammade Arado, Ayano Halake).

Although there are many controversial perspectives on Guji-Gedeo relations, the many commonalities enabled the group to live together as distinct and complementary entities until the differences were activated by ethnic entrepreneurs. I discussed in this thesis that the myth of common origin of the Guji and the Gedeo remained contested. Tracing back to the bonds that tied the groups together for long such as belief in ‘curse of homicide’, the *Gondoro* tradition, the Qallu institution, some shared elements of the Gada system, political allegiance, economic interdependence and other traditional practices – no matter how contested they were – it is more likely that these elements of complementarities sustained the groups’ coexistence more than the belief in common origin.

On the other hand, ethnic boundaries between the two groups were maintained all through their interaction by the members’ self-identification and ascription by others as distinctive from the members of the other group. Put differently, besides the presence of objective elements of dichotomization as markers of ethnic distinctiveness, the subjective aspects of self-identification and ascription by others enabled the groups to maintain their respective ethnic boundaries. The strong interaction between the Guji and the Gedeo peoples and the presence of flow of personnel across geographical and ethnic boundaries through economic and cultural practices confirm Barth’s argument that “interaction in such a social system [inter-ethnic interaction] does not lead to its liquidation [of the elements of distinction] through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence” (1994:10).

Inter-linked to persistence of dichotomization is whether or not it had led to tension between the groups. Against the primordialists’ notion that sees inherent ethnic dichotomies justifying action, the change in Guji-Gedeo relationship was not fundamentally attributed to primordial ethnic differences. The changing relationship must also be understood by the role played by the state. The state-backed settlement schemes of the Gedeo people on Guji customary land, the institutionalization of the Abyssinian administrative system at the expense of traditional institutions, differential educational opportunities for the Gedeo and the Gedeo people’s access to the administrative apparatus have had profound implications in

reversing the horizontal or symmetrical relationship between the Guji and the Gedeo in favor of the latter.

However, it was not until mid 1990s that the gradual decline of the relationship between the once friendly neighbors changed into antagonism and culminated with the 1998 bloody war. The new political experiment in Ethiopia, which articulates ethnicity as a political instrument, is central in the change of Guji-Gedeo relation to open conflict. Against the views that attribute the conflicts to the principles of 'Ethnic Federalism', the study shows that the reality lies rather in the mismatches between the paper value of 'Formal Ethnicism' and 'Ethnic Federalism' on the one hand and the reality on the practical ground in implementation of the policies on the other hand. Similarly, it should not be construed as if the new state policy created an ethnic boundary between the two, which might be presumed as creating sources of conflict. The new system put in place rather politicized the existing difference and added a dimension of exclusion of 'them' from 'us', which overshadowed the elements of commonalities and magnified the differences.

To sum up the central point of this chapter, the manifestation of various features of ethnicity is highly situational and ethnic identity takes different forms based on the changing conditions. While the '*silent*' form of ethnic identity is a general social characteristic, the '*active*' phase manifests itself through activation by some agents or advocates of ethnic groups. In this regard, while the historical antecedents in Ethiopia laid a foundation for activation of ethnic identity, the 'new experiment' of ethnic policy formally drew geographical as well as ethnic boundaries between the diverse ethnic groups. It is this national discourse which has had recent repercussion on inter-ethnic relations at local levels.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

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Three major themes have been addressed in this study. The first theme deals with the different thoughts or perspectives on ethnicity at a general level and particularly in African context. In this regard attempt has been made to transcend the commonly thought ‘polar extremes’ of primordial and instrumentalist paradigms. A second central theme is how groups maintain ethnic boundaries despite interaction and flow of personnel across the boundaries (Barth 1969). The study integrates both perspectives of boundary maintenance and group dichotomization and complimentarization by focusing on Guji-Gedeo cases to validate this point. The third important theme is the interrelation between ethnicity, state’s policy on ethnicity and ethnic conflict. Each of these themes will be summarized below.

### 7.1 Contextualizing ethnicity beyond academic discourse

This study suggests that approaching ethnicity only from the perspectives of the existing thoughts, which focus more on its analytical rather than politicized contexts, would not enable us to fully comprehend the concept in contemporary African context. It also argues a possible bridge between the positions on ethnicity, which many see as mutually incompatible theories.

The salience of ethnicity in contemporary African politics, particularly in Ethiopia is linked to the emergence of politicized ethnic identity and its manipulability by political elites. It is this new dynamics of ethnic identity that moved the concept beyond its implications in the academic discourses. In Africa, politicized ethnicity emerged in parallel with colonial and post-colonial political systems. Likewise, this study has argued that any attempt to understand politicized ethnicity in Ethiopia becomes incomplete if seen separately from the historical evolution that shaped the modern Ethiopian empire. It would be better understood in the context of the birth of the empire and the subsequent political domination, economic marginalization, social subjugation and stigmatizations exercised by the Amhara ethnic group for about a century, a period that historians refer to as the only black African colonial rule over the black.

It was in the 1970s and 1980s that many political organizations or liberation fronts emerged with a central theme of liberating their respective ethnic groups from the Amhara rule and ensuring rights of self-determination to the groups within the greater Ethiopian context and/or up to creating independent states. Although the ultimate goals of these

movements were different on the basis of their historical relationship to the empire, the common element of almost all ethnic-based political movements was their reliance on ethnic collectivities as a basis of mobilization underlining elements of group differences in contrast to ethnic 'others'.

In a quest to understand the politicized ethnicity in contemporary Ethiopia, three contradictory forces should be singled out. The first one is the ethnic entrepreneurs holding political power under the Tigrayan elites who strive to maintain the status quo of power exercise under that ethnic group's sponsorship of 'right to self-determination' to the remaining several dozens of ethnic groups. A second centrifugal force in the country's ethnic politics is the one attempting to drive towards reversing the system to the period of Amhara supremacy, which was dismantled in 1991. A third is the historically subjected ethnic groups who still raise questions of self-determination within and/or outside the Ethiopian state. Each of these forces has two potential or 'real' enemies against its political goals. The intricate nature of these forces has obstructed visions of democracy in the country, disillusioned the peoples' optimism and made the country to be seen as a 'prison house of peoples' rather than a home of diversities in the eyes of the subjected groups.

## **7.2 Does ethnic dichotomy perpetuate conflict?**

My study indicates that distinctive groups to a considerable extent maintain their ethnic boundaries regardless of interaction, interdependence and even flow of personnel across ethnic and geographical boundaries. The mechanisms of boundary maintenance differ from group to group on the basis of their culture, tradition, religion, political and social organizations and so forth. As I discussed in this study, the Guji emphasize descent, economic activity as well as subjective self-identification and ascription by members as basic criteria for eligibility into the Gada system, which in turn signifies group membership.

Nevertheless, boundary maintenance should never be seen as a direct corollary of exclusion of the others. An important point of emphasis, particularly in Guji-Gedeo case is the dualism of the relationship as group dichotomization and complimentarization. The study demonstrates that Guji and Gedeo peoples are different in many aspects but at the same time share some elements of commonalities, which enhanced their coexistence for a long period in history.

Be it from essentialist thought or the ambitions of post-colonial African leaders in their pursuit to 'nation-building' projects at the expense of their ethnic members, ethnicity has

been branded as a cause for the 'evils' in the continent (Abbinik 1997: 159). While western media and even sometimes the academia portray ethnic conflict as a continuation of 'tribalism' and as 'irrational' emotional reflections of African ethnic groups, African politicians denounce it as instigated by 'narrow nationalists'. Ironically, both notions ignore the place of some forces like the state itself in ethnic conflicts.

The diverse ethnic groups in the Ethiopia, particularly in the southern part, lived in fairly harmonious coexistence for centuries tolerating their differences but complementing their similarities. This tells us that ethnic differences are not inherently causes of conflicts by themselves in Ethiopia. As Udogu describes relying on Barth, "the identification of another person as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgment.... In this respect, ingroup-outgroup dichotomy emerges but this division does not necessarily hamper inter-ethnic relations based on mutual interests" (2001:18). Group categorization is a normal social phenomenon and does not inflict group antagonism by itself as illustrated by the Guji-Gedeo case. Nevertheless, this does not mean that ethnicity is not a potent force in creating hostilities and conflicts between dichotomized groups. Rather, once activated for political or economic motives by ethnic entrepreneurs as a medium of exclusion of the 'other', ethnicity becomes a potent driving force by which the actors begin to justify actions.

In short, the link between ethnicity and conflict can be summarized as follows: ethnic conflict may emerge when ethnic identity is activated as a mechanism of exclusion, when ethnic questions are ignored or suppressed by the state, when ethnicity is used as a political instrument by ethnic entrepreneurs and when elements of complementarities are overshadowed by differences. To elaborate the last phrase, elements of similarities are sometimes outshined by differences as a result of external influences (religion, administrative system, 'modernization' etc.) and competition over resources.

In this study I have also tried to establish a balance sheet between the views of those who claim 'Formal Ethnicism' as a threat to national 'unity' and those who see it as a step towards democratization of the state and the society in Ethiopian politics. In addition, I have examined the concept of 'Formal Ethnicism' and its impacts on interethnic relations. I have argued that the theoretical principles of 'Formal Ethnicism' are altruistic in granting democratic rights to ethnic groups and would not be a threat to national unity. Rather, failure in its implementation and poor bureaucratic functions related to it may lead to discontent among groups, which in turn perpetuate their demand for self-determination even up to secession.

The current challenges in the country are better understood as following from the state's failure to keep its promises. In line with this argument, Gudina (2003: 140) contends, "the EPRDF paper policy of decentralization and practice of centralization has thus created more problems than solutions to the inter- and intra-ethnic contradictions".

Currently, it seems to be two pairs of mutually incompatible forces of ethnic politics operating in the country. In the first pair, is ethnic politics as instrument of political support exercised mainly by the ethnic entrepreneurs with political power who strive to maintain the current status quo conflicts with politicized ethnic identity emerging as strategy of groups' self-defense among the diverse ethnic groups, who began to question the inconsistencies between the paper value and practical reality of current policies.

The second contradiction is the top-down approach of defining and prescribing 'a group', and the one aimed at mobilizing, organizing, even creating a group from inside. Both approaches are used alternatively in accordance with the state's political, administrative and geo-political interests.

### **7.3 A way forward?**

To move in the direction of democratic transformation and effective bureaucratic functions, the state should be able to solve these incompatible forces of ethnic politics. Above all, it should be positively responsive to politicized ethnic identities now emerging as a group's self-defense. For instance, clashes of interest occur when a certain group raises questions of self-administration, rights to language, culture and so forth against the implicit policies of 'ethnic homogenization' of the state. In addition, ethnic entrepreneurs with political power should advocate a paradigm shift from top-down approach to mobilizing and empowering a group from inside. Political elites may succeed in creating 'artificial' ethnic boundaries and/or broadening the divergence between dichotomized ethnic groups, it is however more difficult for a 'vanguard' party to create sense of commonality among ethnic groups who intrinsically identify themselves as different from the others.

So far, the potentially effective indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution have been excluded from the conventional statutory methods. Conventional laws and the internalized traditional methods of conflict resolution do not communicate with one another. While the local people consider the statutory system as alien, local (indigenous) methods are ignored as 'primitive' and 'traditional' by the state. In order to benefit from the traditional methods and to create a meaningful link between the two systems, the state should work



towards integrating the indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution into the conventional legal system. Recognizing, empowering and promoting traditional elders and their institutions would enable to achieve this ultimate vision.

The study also shows that it is time to consider a paradigm from below in an attempt to create more harmonious inter-ethnic relations. By paradigm from below, I mean recognizing the traditional knowledge of the people and integrating it into the 'modern' state structure both in administrative, legal as well as educational systems.

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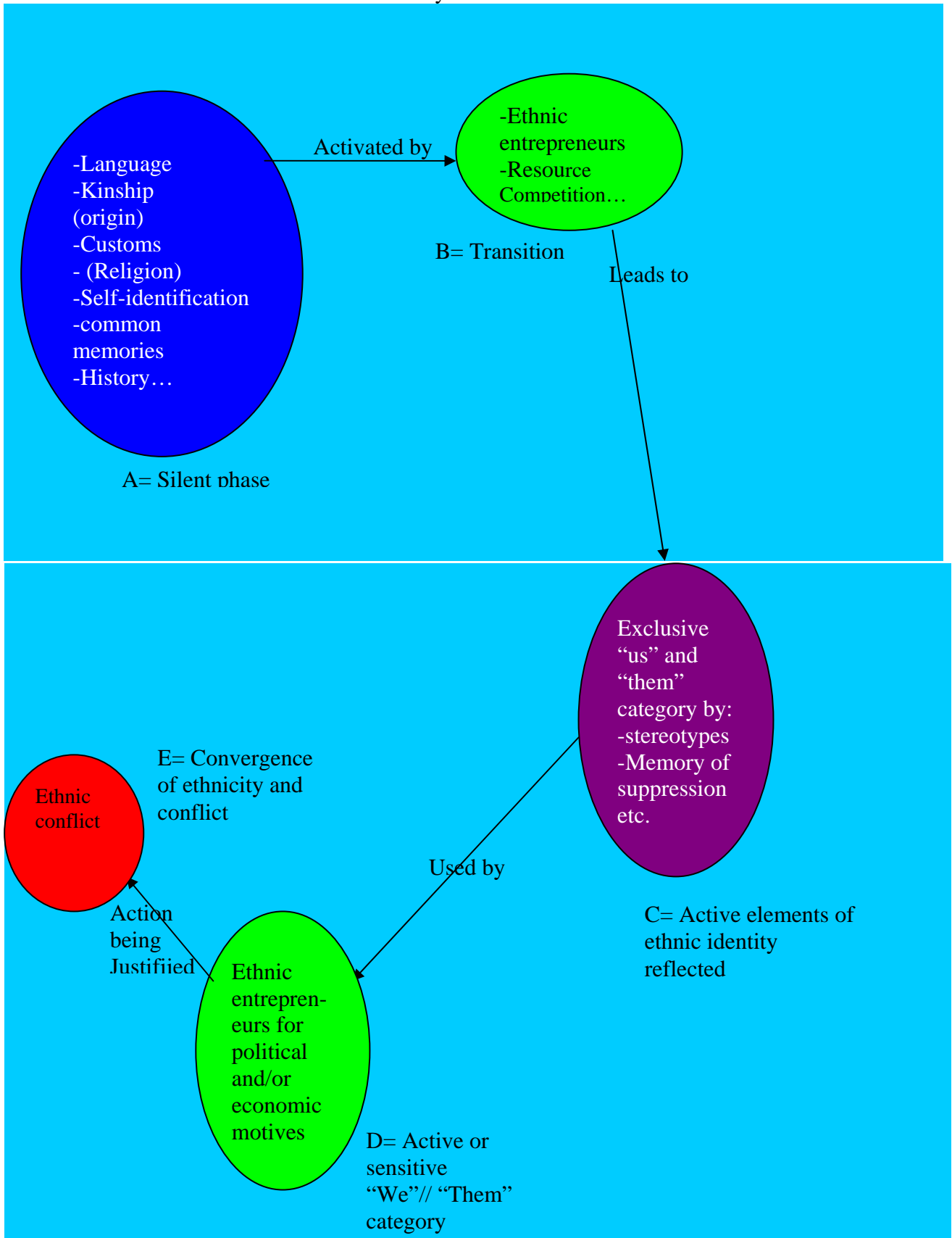
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Appendices

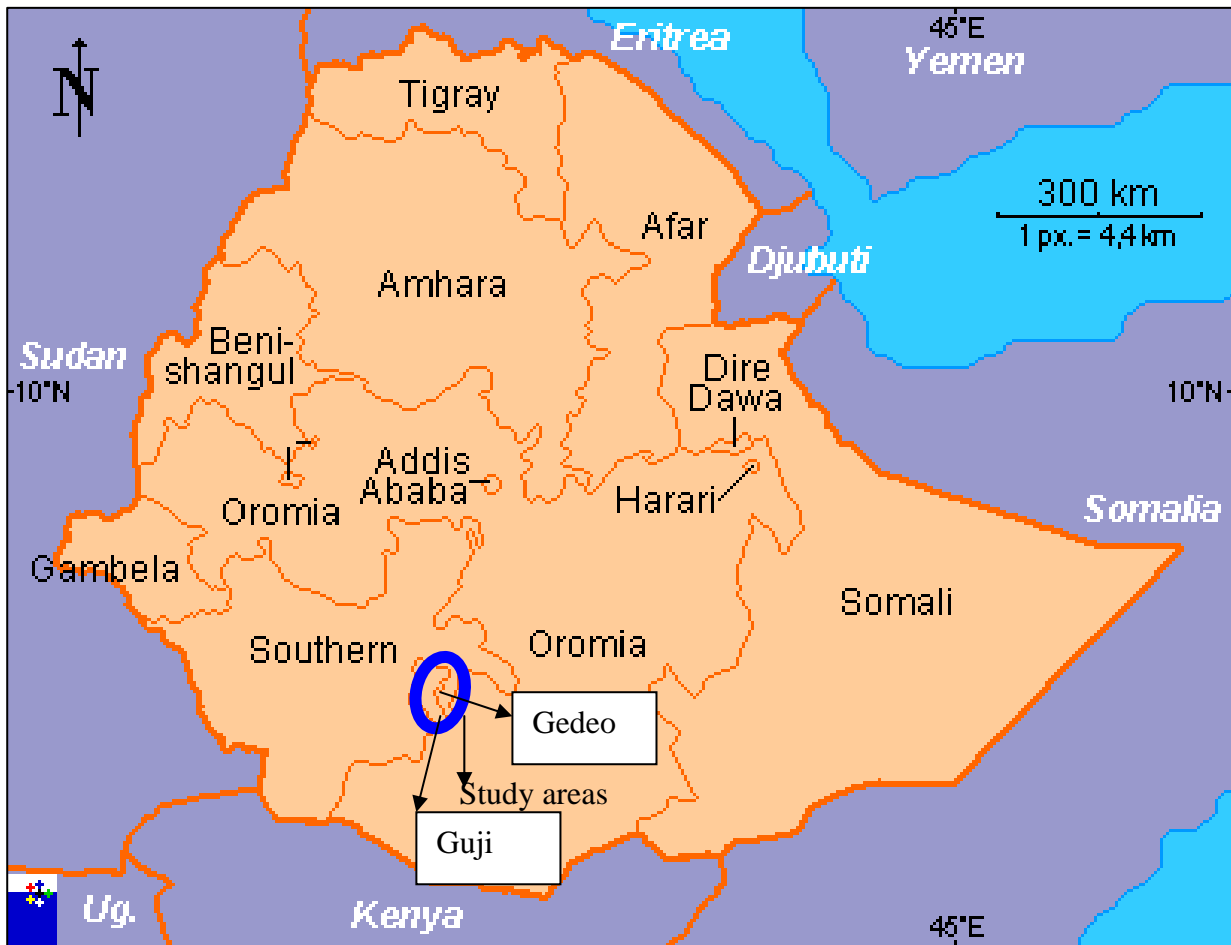
Appendix 1

A Model on 'Silent-Active' Phases of Ethnicity



Adopted from the arguments in chapters two and six of this thesis.

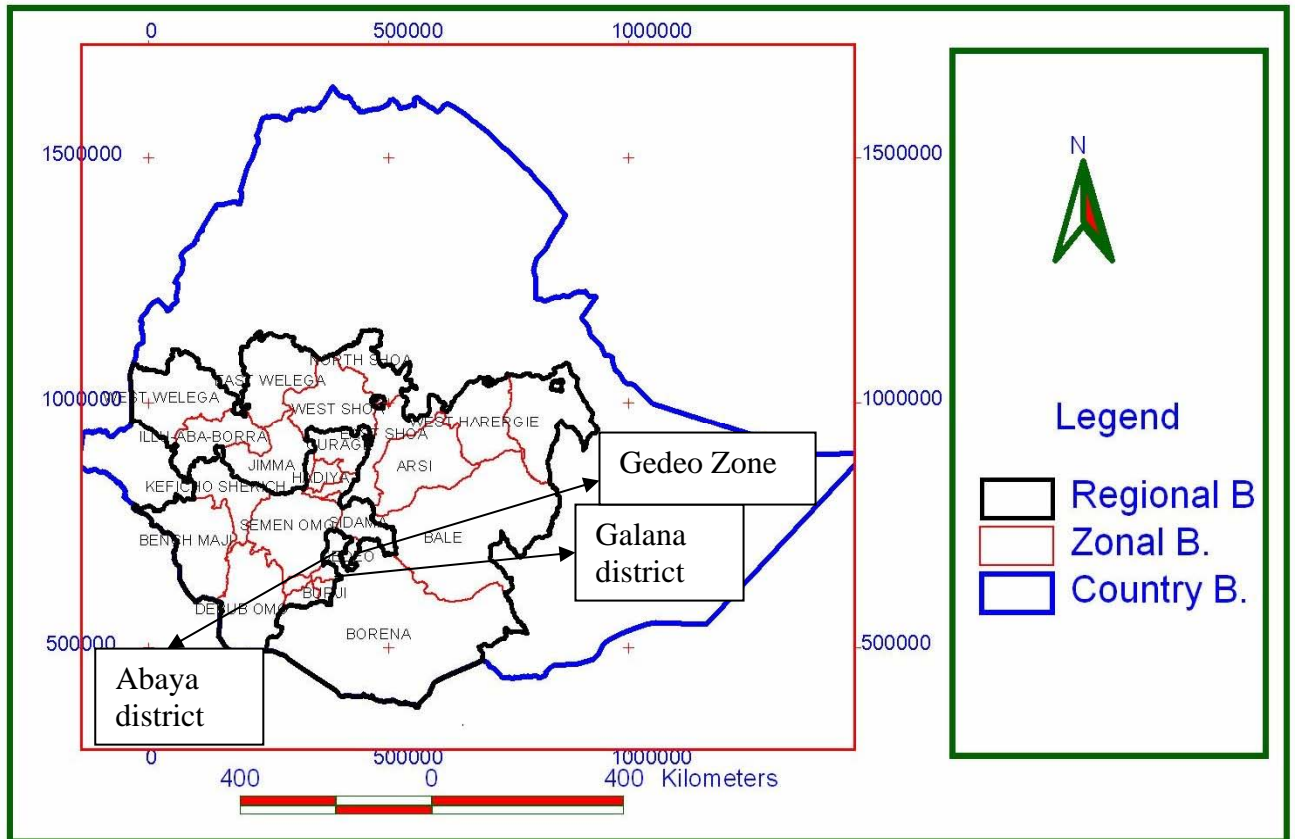
**Appendix 2**  
**Map of Regional States of post-1992 Ethiopia**



Source: [http://fotw.net/flags/et\(.html](http://fotw.net/flags/et(.html)

### Appendix 3

#### Map of Administrative Zones in Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional States where Guji and Gedeo are located respectively





## Appendix 4

### A Map demonstrating the location of Gedeo and its districts in SNNPR

