

## ***The Ethnogenesis of the Oromo Nation and Its Implications for Politics in Ethiopia***

by EDMOND J. KELLER\*

THE end of the cold war has coincided with, and in some cases fuelled, the politicisation of ethnically based nationalism, particularly in Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. The international political environment had previously been characterised by ideological competition and conflict between the United States on the one hand and the Soviet Union and Communist China on the other. Both of these ideological camps stressed the cohesion and viability of multi-ethnic nation-states, and as a matter of policy discouraged the representation of groups based upon a distinctive ethnic identity,<sup>1</sup> a tendency reinforced in social science scholarship, which often focused on what was described as the process of national political integration.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that it existed and was relevant, scholars generally agreed that ethnic solidarity was different from nationalism in that it did not require the creation of an ethnically pure nation-state. Today, however, the notion of the inviolability of certain internationally recognised entities is being seriously called into question as ethnic groups assert their right to self-determination up to, and including, separation from the multi-ethnic state.

The idea of the nation-state was a product of the French revolution. Originally the term referred to a state based upon and identified with a single ethnic group, a people with a consciously shared language, history, and culture. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of such homogeneous entities had lost its saliency and been replaced by a widespread acceptance of multi-ethnic states which attempted to invent a national identity based on a shared history and culture. Lamenting the 'curse of the nation-state' in Africa, Basil Davidson argues that the widespread European presumption that

\* Professor of Political Science and Director of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Ryan, *Ethnic Conflict in International Relations* (Aldershot, 1990), pp. xix–xxi.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, WI, 1976), p. 72, and M. Crawford Young (ed.), *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, WI, 1993), pp. 21–3.

Africans had no history helped to ensure that the 50 or so states of the colonial partition 'were formed and governed on European models'. He claims that the British not only 'invented' tribes for Africans to belong to, but later turned to building nation-states, 'it being supposed in London that the task had been beyond the capacity of Africans themselves'.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that the most efficient manner in which to cast off the yoke of colonialism was to accept uncritically the notion of a multi-ethnic nation-state, African leaders universally embraced this idea. They set about the business of instilling in their followers the principle of 'dying as tribes and being born as nations'.

Artificially created nation-states in Africa, as is proving the case in parts of Eastern Europe, are not guaranteed to cohere in the face of either a resurgent or new-found sense of the need for an ethnocentric national self-determination. Although it is wrong to assume that nation-building has been completely unsuccessful in Africa, this does appear to be the case, for example, in the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, as well as in Nigeria prior to the Biafran war. Orlando Patterson argues that the reason this project has failed in some places is because very few of these states possessed the needed cultural basis. On the one hand, nationalist leaders proved to be incapable of developing new social myths which could serve as the ideological foundation for the nation-state; and on the other, they based their attempted construction on principles that were alien to Africa.<sup>4</sup>

The historical literature generally treats Ethiopia as a multi-ethnic nation-state founded on an empire-state. It is often referred to as one of only two African states (the other being Liberia) to have escaped the ravages of European colonialism. Moreover, it has been widely assumed that the Emperors who constructed the nation-state between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries succeeded in creating a national identity that was endorsed by the multiple ethnic groups in Ethiopia. However, events since the end of imperial rule in 1974 have proved this not to be the case.

After the overthrow of Haile Selassie, the military junta, known as the *Derg*, was immediately confronted with the claims of several constituent ethnic groups for self-determination, not least since a by-product of the ending of imperial rule was a short-term opening up of the political system. Over the first year of the revolution, society was characterised by a flowering not only of a wide spectrum of ideological

<sup>3</sup> Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (New York and London), pp. 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: the reactionary impulse* (New York, 1977), pp. 81-5.

opinion, but also an upsurge in ethnic nationalism, and the *Derg* tried to hold the empire-state intact through force of arms. Much is known about the civil war begun in the early 1960s against what was perceived to be Ethiopia's violation of the Eritrean people's right to self-determination, as well as the demands of ethnic Somalis living in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. By comparison, little has been written about the claim of the Oromos to self-determination, and the implications of the politicisation of their nationalism for the continuity of the contemporary Ethiopian state.

The Oromos are estimated to comprise 40–50 per cent of Ethiopia's population of more than 50 million, and the purpose of this article is to examine critically their ethnogenesis as well as the impact of their subjugation. I assume that although the Oromo can rightfully trace their history to antiquity, over the years their élites have manipulated the notion of an Oromo ethnicity so as to expand the concept of nation. In the process an imagined community has become an imagined pristine nation-state, comprised only of Oromo, a development that presents a major challenge for the current Ethiopian leadership. A second assumption is that in order to understand the genesis and transformation of Oromo identity and its implications, we must base our analysis in history. Certainly the process of state-building during Ethiopia's first (1974–91) and second (1991 onwards) social revolutions has had a profound effect on how the Oromo people identified themselves.

#### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF OROMO IDENTITY

Ethnic identity has two fundamental dimensions: the subconscious image that individuals have of belonging to a given ethnic group, and their conscious sense of a relationship that is contingent upon the existence of other ethnic groups and the interactions of their own with them. Patterson refers to these as existential and ethnocentric ethnicity, and suggests that the latter came about historically as a result of (i) the emergence of the kin-based hegemonic state; (ii) the recognition by ethnic groups of imagined or real threats from others; and (iii) the growing interactions through trade.<sup>5</sup> With the emergence of the nation-state and the expansion of inter-group trade, political leaders found the need to instil in their subjects a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Where no enemies or ethnic competitors existed, they were invented. Although an

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp. 43–5.

Oromo national identity was initially formed through culture, contact, wars of conquest, and trade, the nation was never co-terminous with a single state.

The origins of the Oromo are not clear. However, those who so identify themselves view their homeland as being the southern highlands of present-day Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries they were already organised into the Berentu and Borana federations, and this was when they began their migratory expansion in all directions. Rather than being a 'pure' ethnic group, some are descendants of individuals who either willingly agreed or were forced to accept a new identity because, as noted by Asafa Jalata, the Oromo historically increased their numbers through the assimilation of other peoples they conquered.<sup>7</sup>

This process was facilitated by a unique administrative system known as *Gada*,<sup>8</sup> which the Oromo claim is a classic example of a traditional African form of democracy. Importantly, however, there was never a single bureaucratic state that governed all Oromo clans and clan families. Legislative, executive, and judicial functions were independent of one another, albeit integral components of a 'nation-wide' system of governance. At any one time, there existed five *Gada* 'parties' or generation groups, and once in the system it took each 40 years to complete the cycle of eight calendar-year periods. At each stage the members were educated in Oromo history, military strategy, law, and governance. Every eight years they moved from one *Gada* level to the next, and a nine-member presidium entering the highest was elected on the basis of adult male suffrage. They were retired after serving as leaders, but continued to act as advisers.

This system of governance is thought to date as far back as 500 years, but by the mid-nineteenth century it had begun to break down.<sup>9</sup> Some have suggested that the *Gada* had simply become outmoded. It had worked among pastoralist Oromo, but was less popular among those who practised mixed farming. Another possible explanation for its decline may have been the replacement of traditional religions with Islam or Christianity, but perhaps the most important factor were the prohibitions imposed by the colonising Amhara.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammed Hassan, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: a history, 1570-1860* (Cambridge and New York, 1990), p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: state formation and ethnonational conflict, 1868-1992* (Boulder, CO, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Asmarom Legesse, *Gada: three approaches to the study of African society* (New York, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Edmond J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: from empire to people's republic* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988), p. 159.

By the mid-sixteenth century the Oromo had penetrated as far north as Shoa and into the core of what was then known as Abyssinia around Begemder and Gojjam. They also controlled the area in the east around the walled city of Harar. It is not that the Oromo were militarily superior to the Amhara; they simply took advantage of an adversary that was being beleaguered by other enemies, some of whom had acquired firearms from the Turks. In battle, the Oromo relied mainly on their numbers rather than on superior military strategy or technology, and at the height of their expansion there is evidence that they occupied as much as one-third of the Abyssinian heartland.<sup>10</sup> They established their own ethnic enclaves, and were to maintain their distinctiveness despite selectively borrowing and adapting a great deal of the surrounding culture to suit their needs and tastes. But in certain instances, where the Oromo penetrated Abyssinian strongholds such as Gojjam and Begemder – usually as prisoners of war or as royal retainers – they were more fully integrated into Amhara society, often intermarrying and accepting the Christian religion. Although their substantial political influence increased dramatically in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, this was immediately followed by the virtual demise of a centralised state in Abyssinia. When the process of reconstruction began in the mid-1800s, the Amhara clearly gained the upper hand. Successive Emperors beginning with Tewodros in 1855, up to Haile Selassie more than a century later, suppressed Oromo ethnic identity.

#### CONQUEST AND THE EMERGENCE OF OROMO IDENTITY

The Oromo consider the latter phase of Abyssinian hegemony as a colonial experience, not least because of its coincidence with the European scramble for Africa and the creation of nation-states based on external models. As a result of the imperatives of Abyssinian colonialism, the nomadic practices of the vast majority of the Oromo were curbed, and they were increasingly encouraged to engage in peasant agriculture. Rather than conserving the surplus of their production for use exclusively within their own communities, they were required to share their produce with alien feudal landlords and local collaborators of the empire-state. In some cases they were forced to adopt the Christian religion; in others they turned to Islam often as a

<sup>10</sup> Herbert S. Lewis, *A Galla Monarchy: Jimma Abba Jifar, Ethiopia, 1830-1932* (Madison, WI, 1965), p. 23.

reaction to the culture of their oppressors. The vast majority of the Oromo came to see the Amhara and the state they represented as colonialists, bent on exploiting and stripping them of their culture.<sup>11</sup>

Haile Selassie maintained a policy of attempting to secure the fealty of the Oromo through the development of alliances with certain leaders, the most favoured being those who chose to become totally assimilated or Amharised, often adopting Christian names. Historically, the Wollega and Shoan Oromo were the most receptive to this approach, but others were assimilated as the Emperor became more concerned with firming up the boundaries of the modern state and its bureaucratic authority in the periphery.

The majority of the Oromo were viewed as mere subjects. They were regularly victims of corrupt administrators and judges, all of whom invariably tended to be Christian northerners.<sup>12</sup> In the distribution of scarce resources, their needs were considered secondary to those of the dominant Amhara groups as a matter of course, despite their great contribution as regards Ethiopia's chief export crops: coffee, oil seeds, hides, and skins. All Oromo areas had become crown lands as a result of conquest, and were used by the Emperor to reward or remunerate those in his service in the periphery. Moreover, peasants and pastoralists alike were saddled with a heavy cash tax burden in an economy that had yet to become market-oriented. After 1855, they found themselves subjects of Amhara overlordship in a world that was now organising itself along the lines of nation-states with permanent and inviolable geographic boundaries.

A profound effect of this experience on the Oromo was the sharpening of their sense of ethnic identity. They did not always accept Amhara hegemony. In fact, sporadic local revolts were endemic throughout the period of Ethiopian colonialism: notably in Azebo-Raya during 1928–30 and in Bale during 1964–70.<sup>13</sup> There is some question as to whether these constituted struggles for national liberation, but the specific objective of the Western Oromo Confederacy of 1936 was independence from Ethiopia: 33 chiefs signed a document that *inter alia* expressed a desire for their region to become a League of Nations protectorate.<sup>14</sup> However, this never took place, and when the

<sup>11</sup> See Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sissai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: the making of a dependent colonial state in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> P. T. W. Baxter, 'Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: the Oromo', in *African Affairs* (London), 77, 308, July 1978, pp. 283–96.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: feudalism and modernization in Ethiopia* (London, 1975), p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> Jalata, *op. cit.* pp. 153–4.

British restored Haile Selassie to his throne, all hopes for an independent Oromo nation-state were lost, not least since no political parties were allowed in Ethiopia.

Clear signs of Oromo nationalist aspirations did not surface again until ca. 1965, when an organisation known as *Mecha-Tulema*, named after two major clans, gained growing support as a self-help association that was also dedicated to promoting self-identity. It was most successful in the south, Arussi in particular, where the Oromo had been relegated to the status of tenants on land that had once been theirs. 'Within less than a year the Association claimed 300,000 members', and while this may be an exaggeration, as Patrick Gilkes suggests, 'the meetings were very well attended.'<sup>15</sup> The leadership comprised educated Oromo who had been 'Amharised' but subsequently rediscovered their culture, deciding to fight for a fair share of the spoils of modernisation for their nation. The point to note is that by the mid-1960s, Oromo intellectuals were demanding first-class citizenship rather than an independent state.

The most prominent leader of *Mecha-Tulema* was Tadesse Biru, a former general in the Ethiopian police force and the territorial army. He was from a Shoan Oromo family and had established himself firmly in Amhara culture. In fact, his origins were not apparent to many until he began to champion the cause of his people. Tadesse Biru appeared at public rallies in southern towns, delivering speeches critical of governmental policies towards Oromo areas and encouraging the people to demand their just due. He carefully linked his appeal to the dignity of a culture that, he emphasised, was being destroyed at the hands of the Amhara. By late 1966, Haile Selassie's régime had become alarmed at the growth in *Mecha-Tulema's* popularity, and called for the arrest of its top leadership. The association was banned shortly thereafter: Tadesse Biru was tried and condemned to death, a sentence that was later commuted to life in prison.<sup>16</sup>

*Mecha-Tulema* was significant for several reasons. From the perspective of the Government, it was a clear sign that the commitment of assimilated ethnic élites was not assured. Their affinities for a newly invented Oromo nation with a right to self-determination seemed stronger than their allegiance to the multi-ethnic Ethiopian nation-

<sup>15</sup> Gilkes, op. cit. p. 225, states that the Mecha Oromo Self-Help Association was founded in 1967, whereas according to Asafa Jalata, 'Sociocultural Origins of the Oromo National Movement in Ethiopia', in *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* (New Brunswick, NJ), 21, 2, Winter 1993, p. 73, it had been in existence since 1963.

<sup>16</sup> Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: empire in revolution* (New York, 1978), p. 91.

state. It was also an indication that such sentiments could not be suppressed merely by forbidding political parties. The movement sensitised the Oromo to the importance of their own national culture as well as to the contradictions in the emerging politico-economic system.

There was no serious militancy in these areas, apart from the Bale revolt, until the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was founded in 1973, dedicated to the 'total liberation of the entire Oromo nation from Ethiopian colonialism'.<sup>17</sup> The OLF claimed to be more a progeny of the primary proto-nationalist resistance of the Oromo than of *Mecha-Tulema* or past uprisings. It began an offensive against the Ethiopian authorities in Hararge Province in 1974, but sustained activities did not occur until 1976, after the collapse of the imperial régime. The OLF subsequently spread its activities to Wollega in the west.

#### REVOLUTION AND THE CONCEPT OF AN INDEPENDENT OROMIA

Haile Selassie's efforts systematically to co-opt disgruntled ethnic leaders was doomed to fail as soon as it became apparent that under his gradual 'Amharisation' strategy their groups would not be integrated as equals or allowed to share power in any meaningful way. Amhara culture was implicitly presented as the defining trait of the 'Ethiopian' nationality. In other words, the state was at a fundamental level based in the Amhara language and the Orthodox religion. To a certain extent the Emperor was successful in his efforts, but because Ethiopia was held together mainly by the hegemony of Shoan Amhara and other ethnic élites who had been assimilated into 'Ethiopian' culture, the myth of a unified multi-ethnic nation-state, held together by consensus, never became a reality for large segments of subjugated peoples such as the Eritreans, Ogaden Somalis, and the Oromo.

The legacy of Haile Selassie to the makers of the 1974 revolution was, among other things, the unresolved 'nationalities question'. The *Derg* attempted to down-play the problem by introducing a new social myth based on the principles of 'scientific socialism', which holds that ethnicity is not a legitimate way of organising people since they need to be grouped into mass formations based upon their socio-economic rôles and positions. Concurrently, the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities was established in order to draft a new constitution that would further enhance the legitimacy of those in power. But first the military-based régime attempted to deal with ethnically based

<sup>17</sup> 'Oromia Speaks: an interview with a member of the Central Committee of the Oromo Liberation Front', in *Horn of Africa* (Summit, NJ), 1980, p. 24.



opposition by smashing its opponents. It stepped up the war in Eritrea in 1975, and resoundingly repulsed the efforts of ethnic Somalis to separate the Ogaden from Ethiopia between 1977 and 1978, while temporarily suppressing Tigrean and Oromo opposition.

Subsequently, the *Derg* came to feel that it could not preserve Ethiopian unity through force alone, and that it needed an aura of legitimacy for its rulership. In 1984 it created the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), and in early 1987 a set of hybrid proposals for a Marxist-Leninist government that contained features similar to those found in the Soviet Union and Romania was submitted to the general populace for endorsement, and reportedly received overwhelming support. The new constitution established the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE), with a strong President and an 835-member *Shengo*.<sup>18</sup> In an obvious effort to diffuse demands for ethnic self-determination, this national assembly, in its first session, approved the creation of 24 administrative and five so-called autonomous regions – Eritrea, Assab, Dire Dawa, Tigre, and Ogaden.

Despite this gesture, such ethnically based opposition movements as the aforementioned OLF, the Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) stepped up their military activities and began to engage in some co-ordinated operations against the *Derg*. Significantly, Ethiopia had only been able to maintain its hegemony since 1977 with a massive amount of military assistance from the Soviet Union. However, by late 1988, the latter was rethinking its relationship with a number of African states, and the leaders in Addis Ababa were informed that their external support would be phased out. The beginning of the end for the *Derg* was an abortive coup in May 1989 because in the process the army began to collapse from within: whole units defected, taking their arms and equipment with them to the side of the opposition forces. Over the next two years, the TPLF and its umbrella organisation, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), came to control the whole of Tigre and large segments of Wollo, Gondar, and Shoa, while the EPLF took over all but the major towns in Eritrea.

After the Ethiopian revolution had collapsed so decisively on 25 May 1991, the EPRDF moved quickly to set up a transitional government.<sup>19</sup> The national conference convened in July 1991 resulted in the

<sup>18</sup> Edmond J. Keller, 'Politics and Government', in *Ethiopia: a country profile* (Washington, DC, Library of Congress, 1993), pp. 401–93.

<sup>19</sup> See Edmond J. Keller, 'Remaking the Ethiopian State', in I. William Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: the disintegration and restoration of legitimate authority* (Boulder, CO, 1995).

signing of a Charter by the leaders of some 31 political movements, the establishment of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), and the creation of an 87-seat Council of Representatives. The largest number of seats, 32, was reserved for the EPRDF, followed by the OLF with 12, but no political organisation from the formerly dominant ethnic group, the Amhara, was a signatory to what had been agreed in the Council. The Charter *inter alia* asserted the right of all Ethiopian nationalities to self-determination: the identity of each would be preserved, and each would have the right to govern its own affairs within the context of a federated Ethiopia. In addition, local and regional administrative units would be defined on the basis of nationality.

However, the EPRDF's conception of the right to self-determination does not mean Ethiopian nationalities can opt for complete autonomy. In fact, the object of the new régime seems to be to create conditions which primarily facilitate its own statist control. Although the EPRDF is the most organised among the political movements, and indeed the only one with a national following, it could not hope to rule without forming a coalition government. Given that it has a Tigre and Amhara core, the EPRDF has created or co-opted political support from other ethnic groups.<sup>20</sup> By virtue of being the incumbent party, with broad alliances, it is able to neutralise possible threats from opposition parties mostly based on ethnic affinities. For example, the EPRDF has promoted the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), which has its base of support in some of the same areas as the OLF.

After Ethiopia's second revolution in 1991, the leadership of the OLF expressed a willingness to co-operate with the EPRDF as long as it could share power and be guaranteed inalienable rights for the Oromo. But although given 12 seats in the Council of Representatives, as well as membership in the Transitional Government, the OLF soon began to doubt the commitment of the EPRDF to uphold the rights of the Oromo as full citizens of Ethiopia. When the OLF found that it was not able to register its own candidates in some areas that were being administered by the OPDO, it became convinced that the EPRDF was committed to the same strategy of 'divide and rule' as had been pursued by previous régimes. The OLF was told to leave the coalition government after deciding to withdraw from the electoral contest. A 'low intensity civil war' followed, which left the OLF severely

<sup>20</sup> For example, 43 out of the 53 members of the Supreme Council of the EPRDF in 1994 belonged to the predominantly Tigrean TPLF and the predominantly Amhara Ethiopian People's Democratic Movements, according to Oromo Liberation Front, US Office, 'Oromia', May 1994, p. 16.

weakened, with its leaders reportedly being 'unwilling to renounce violence in principle before existing imbalances are corrected'.<sup>21</sup>

In December 1993, all the major opposition groups, including the OLF, the All-Amhara People's Organisation (AAPO), and the Southern People's Democratic Coalition (SPDC), took part in a conference for national peace and reconciliation. Although the ruling régime allowed the event to occur, some participants from outside the country were arrested when they arrived at Addis Ababa airport, and others were subjected to official harassment. Moreover, the EPRDF did not participate in the conference and did not accept any of its resolutions, let alone the main demand for power-sharing.

Thereafter the SPDC, reorganised into the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia, vigorously attempted, as did the OLF, to no avail, to halt the constitutional process until the political system was truly open and all-inclusive. Neither of these organisations contested the June 1994 elections for the Constituent Assembly whose members eventually ratified the draft constitution which had previously been debated in the Council of Representatives. According to Siegfried Pausewang, the author of the report on the elections made by Norway's small group of observers:

Neither those voters who went to the polls without knowing why, nor those who did not go because their political leaders boycotted the election, are likely to accept and cherish this document as their democratic constitution. All major political groups in Ethiopia agree in principle that the document is well designed – yet they lack confidence in its impartial application. The political climate of uncompromising confrontation reigning in Addis Abba today inhibits the development of such confidence. The election must thus be understood in a political context of distrust.<sup>22</sup>

Be that as it may, the EPRDF-dominated régime seems bent on winning the acquiescence if not the wholehearted endorsement of the Oromo at the expense of the OLF, and has gone out of its way to build a base in their region through the OPDO. This strategy was evident when the Council unanimously elected Negasso Gidada as President of the newly formed Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in August 1995. Although it is the Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, who holds primary executive power, the Head of State is more than a mere figurehead, which suggests that a conscious effort is being made to win legitimacy for the new Government among the Oromo.

<sup>21</sup> Siegfried Pausewang, *The 1994 Election and Democracy in Ethiopia* (Oslo, Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, November 1994), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

## PROSPECTS

Although many Oromo have come to expect that they will finally be able to establish their own nation-state, others prefer to take their chances with Greater Ethiopia. How many will co-operate with the EPRDF? Whether the decision is to oppose the ascendant régime through constitutional or military means, a lack of unity works against the OLF. Moreover, the notion of the right of the Oromo to self-determination outside of the context of Ethiopia does not have widespread international support. There is no historic nation that can serve as the basis for the modern Oromia that the OLF continue to demand – see Map 1. Instead, contemporary Oromo national identity is the product of the Ethiopian colonial experience and the persistent fight for citizenship rights within the context of a multi-ethnic nation-state. The reason the notion of an independent Oromia seems to have become so salient for some Oromo is because they fear continued repression and exploitation at the hands of yet another Ethiopian régime. A recent cross-national study of communally based conflicts presents evidence that in many instances ethnic tensions are most likely when certain groups perceive discrimination or exploitation in the context of state formation.<sup>23</sup>

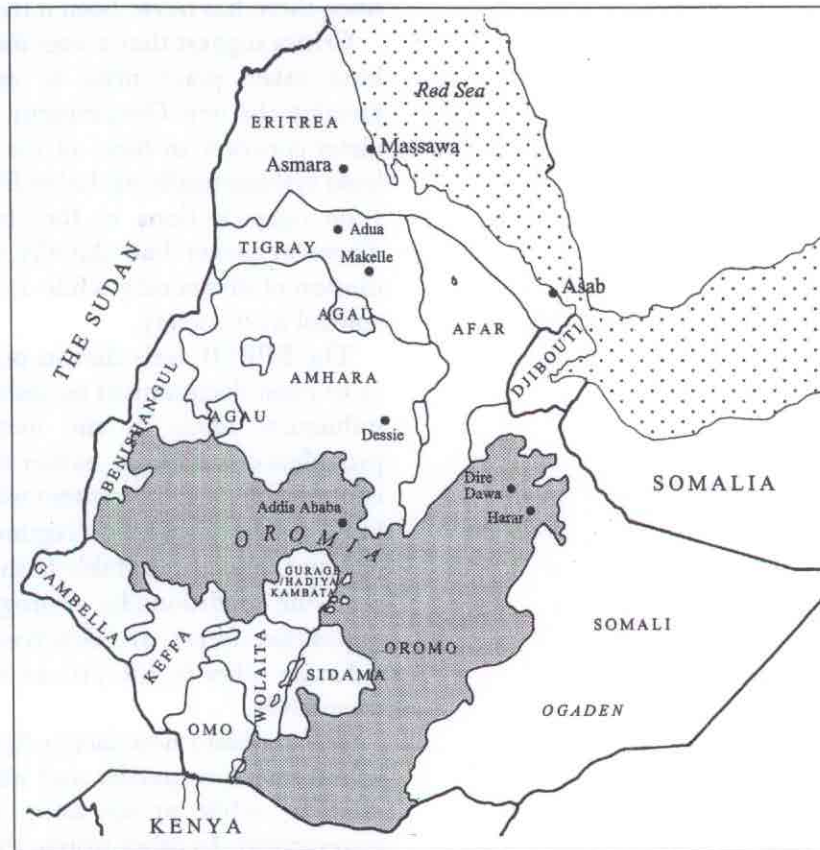
The military option would seem to be the least viable because the OLF does not have the weapons and popular support that it would take to renew the armed struggle. The option of trying to secure citizenship rights through constitutional means is bound to be frustrating, not least since the EPRDF is likely to make it difficult for any viable opposition to develop. It is difficult to say how much support exists for the OLF since the organisation has voluntarily exited the political system, as well as being repressed by the EPRDF and its OPDO supporters.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the only real chance of success in opening up the Ethiopian political system, for not only the Oromo but other marginalised groups as well, is the formation of a coalition to challenge the EPRDF behemoth. Success in democracies comes through coalition of minorities rather than ethnic hegemony.

Haile Selassie had mistakenly promoted the hegemony of Amhara culture masked as 'Ethiopian' culture in order to create a multi-ethnic

<sup>23</sup> Ted Robert Gurr (ed.), *Minorities at Risk: a global view of ethno-political conflicts* (Washington, DC, US Institute of Peace Press, 1993), pp. 5–6.

<sup>24</sup> See Ben Barber, 'Coming Back to Life: will the Oromos' cultural revival split Ethiopia?', Washington, DC, August 1994. This freelance journalist quotes a young Oromo as saying, 'When the OLF had a regional office here, it was very popular. Now it's closed down. Now people are even afraid to speak of the existence of the OLF organization. Oromos fully support the OLF. But we are afraid to say it. I'm sure people will support it in an election.'

MAP I  
The 12 Ethnically Based Administrative Regions of Ethiopia



There is reason to believe that a similar map was used in 1992 by the OLF when negotiating with the Transition Government of Ethiopia to illustrate their claim that the then proposed new region of Oromo should be granted independence status as Oromia.

nation-state, which as a result was held together by force and co-optation rather than by widespread consensus that all constituent groups were integral and equal parts of the Empire. The current Ethiopian leaders appear to be bent on tackling the 'nationalities question' by organising politics around ethnic affinities,<sup>25</sup> and in the process risk the possibility of creating an untenable system of government. Some observers claim that the decision taken by the

<sup>25</sup> See Samuel Huntington, 'Political Development in Ethiopia: a peasant-based dominant-party democracy?', Report to US AID/Ethiopia, May 1993.

Transitional Government to follow ethnic borderlines when breaking up Ethiopia into 12 regions (plus the two autonomous towns of Harar and Addis Ababa) is destined to polarise the country further, not least since there has never been a tradition of such ethnically based regions.

Critics suggest that a negotiated power-sharing arrangement should have taken place prior to establishing the Federal Republic and forming the new Government. Organisations that might have offered views contrary to those of the EPRDF and its supporters had either been systematically excluded from the constitutional process before the June 1994 elections, or they had wilfully decided not to participate. Those in power had skilfully structured politics so as to present the illusion of democracy while at the same time maintaining tight statist control over society.

The EPRDF feels that its position is strong enough either to ignore or to resist disorganised opposition groups, particularly if they have no influential allies in the international community. The external providers of assistance, rather than pressing for meaningful democratic contestation, appear content with the prospect of better governance. As long as the Ethiopian régime is reasonably transparent, efficient, effective, and accountable to the donors themselves, they seem ready to relax the conditionality of progress towards democracy. Consequently, opposition forces are deprived of what had once been potentially valuable allies in the process of opening up more political space for themselves.

The problem now facing Ethiopia's leaders is to demonstrate their commitment to parties and administrative decentralisation based on ethnicity while at the same time trying to avoid ethnically based government. In other words, the political pact that currently forms the basis of the régime should be broadened and made more inclusive. This conceivably could be achieved by a retreat from statism and a concomitant genuine commitment to sharing power with the most significant ethnic groups in the country.

Given the complex realities of the current situation, the most likely route for satisfying Oromo national aspirations will be within the context of the Ethiopian Federation. In the short term, the creation of confidence and the building of trust will no doubt be slow. But it is not unreasonable to expect that as the imperfections of ethnically based politics are worked out, and as economic development begins to touch all national groups in what they feel is an equitable manner, ethnic tensions will be reduced. If so, will there be a growing perception among the Oromo that they are no longer the victims of discrimination and relegated to positions of second-class citizenship?