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DECENTRALIZATION AS A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF CULTURED DIVERSITY: AN EXAMPLE FROM ETHIOPIA

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The Comaroffs, drawing on their field experience in South Africa, have recently written about the impact of globalization, neo-liberalism, and Western-style democracy in indigenous cultures (2004: 188–204). Using one aspect of the changing situation, they focus upon the widespread problem of witchcraft accusations as related to modern jurisprudence in the attempt to join the many forms of African cultural beliefs with the post-apartheid South African nation state. The situation involves the dilemma of combining Western presumptions of universal jurisprudence rights with diverse African imaginings and beliefs which cannot easily be reduced to a homogeneous whole in keeping with a newly established 'freedom reduced to choice: choice of commodities, of life ways, and, most of all, of identities' (2004: 190). As they so aptly express it, the modern state exists to protect 'new forms of property, possession, consumption, exchange, and jurisdictional boundaries' (2004: 192). They propose to solve the problem of widespread accusations of witchcraft by ignoring the belief in supernatural forces and the criminal aspects of its practice by embedding the accusations in civil rather than criminal law (2004: 198–9). This becomes a partial solution to the problem of imposing an external cultural institution on an African way of responding to disruptive community beliefs and behaviour.

In this article I seek to deal with the broader politico-moral issue of the imposition of the neo-liberal nation state upon varying cultural groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Rather than simply grafting the modern to quite differing cultural entities, I am going to propose a more radical form of change: this I refer to as the 'indirect state'. To illustrate the failure of the nation state I take as an example a people with whom I have done field research, the Sidāma, who were incorporated into the Ethiopian nation state at the end of the nineteenth century.[1]

This is not to imply that the problem of the failing nation state is confined to Africa, for, as Geertz has shown recently in his examples

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[1] Several previous authors have referred to the people of Sidāmo: examples include Brøgger (1986), Cerulli (1956) and Vecchiato (1993). At the suggestion of my assistant Hotesso (1983) I use the term Sidāma to refer to the people in general, Sidāmo as an adjective, and Sidāančo for individuals. This article is based on research among the Sidāma in 1964–5 and 1973, and on a short visit to Ethiopia in 1984. I am grateful for assistance from Irene Hamer and our assistant Betana Hotesso. Without financial assistance from the Ford Foundation and the Canada Council the work would not have been possible.

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of failure in Indonesia and Morocco, it is of worldwide concern (2004: 577–93). Attempts to instil inclusive loyalty have not been successful and there is a need to develop means for 'containing' and 'stabilizing' cultural diversity (2004: 583–4). Nor do I mean to imply that the 'indirect state' concept will fit all politico-economic situations in Africa. It may well, however, be a solution in some, most likely where the nation state has historically been imposed by dominant, more powerful, ethnic or colonial powers seeking to undermine and factionalize other cultures.

While the Comaroffs focus upon the contradictions of African beliefs about witchcraft and the modernist state concepts of universal rationality, I am concerned to show how the connection between morality and dispute settlement, as part of Sidāmo culture, was undermined by the indirect rule of the conquest state. Then in the last quarter of the twentieth century the 'modern' state, which replaced what many considered the former 'feudal' state, increased the contradiction between the idea of universality and cultural particularism. This drastic form of external imposition has not been confined to the Sidāma, but has produced similar contradictions among other Ethiopian peoples. As an example I use the Maale, who represent a different socio-cultural system but have experienced similar impositions by the distant state. Finally I suggest the concept of the 'indirect' state as at least a means of ameliorating this contradiction. First, however, it is necessary to begin with a brief description of the lifestyle of the Sidāma, their concept of community harmony as moral order in juxtaposition with gerontocratic authority, and the threat to their beliefs and practices by the 'conquest' and 'modern' states.

THE SIDĀMA

The Sidāma are a Cushitic-speaking people in the Horn of Africa (see Figure 1). Living at a relatively high elevation along the side of the Rift Valley, in lush surroundings, they have over the past 200 years developed a lifestyle quite different from the numerous Cushitic-speaking pastoralists living further to the south along the Kenya–Ethiopian border (Hamer 2003: 195–212). They have in the past and continue in the present to operate a mixed economy of *ensete*[2] gardening (*wese*) and cattle herding, along with a variety of vegetables and, since the 1950s, the cultivation of coffee as a cash crop. As in the past the Sidāma live in hamlets (*kača*), with each household cultivating its own garden and grazing its cattle on surrounding pasture land held in common. The hamlets are grouped into neighbourhoods (*olau*) for cooperative labour such as house building, trail and stream maintenance, and the performance of ritual feasts. Both levels of

[2] *Ensete* produces a non-edible banana-like fruit. People process the trunk and root as food, which has a high caloric yield per land unit and is drought-resistant (Smeds 1955: 38; Olmstead 1974: 15).

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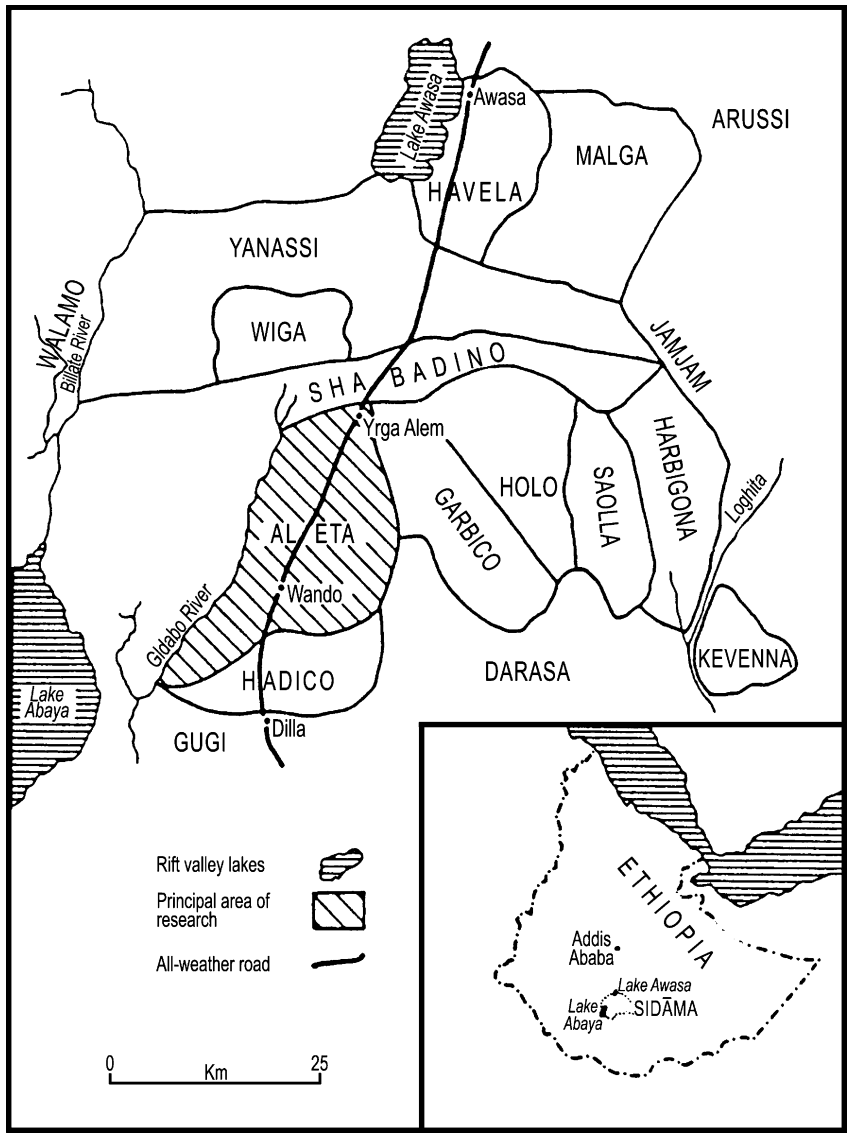


FIGURE 1 The location of the Sidāma people in the Horn of Africa

residence constitute juro-political entities for making policy and settling disputes on a consensual basis. In numbers the Sidāma consist of over two million persons concentrated at an estimated 240 persons per square mile in the 1980s (Population and Housing Census Commission 1984).

The Sidāma are divided into exogamous patri-clans, each headed by a largely symbolic chief (*mote*). The Āletā, however, consist of a cluster of clans who, for historical reasons, are under a single chief (Hamer 1987:

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28–9). Basic to the structure of the jural-political system, however, is the generational class system (*lua*), which crosscuts sub-clan (*bosello*) divisions in the independent clan areas and the clan (*gurri*) divisions in Āletā (Hamer 1987: 79–129; 2003: 196–9). Generational classes not only link all youth to elders, regardless of differing agnatic and affinal ties, but constitute the basis for maintaining the moral code (*halālu*) and implementing community harmony. In the *lua* there are no finely graded age divisions or socio-functional roles, as in so many African age set systems. Rather there are three grades of pre-initiates, initiates, and elders in each of the five classes which change, with elaborate rituals, every seven years. Each new class of initiates acquires a ritual leader (*gaden*) who is selected for his ability as a peacemaker, tangibly symbolized by bodily perfection, character, oratorical ability, circumspection and wisdom. As a man of peace he cannot participate in war or cattle raiding. There is, of course, a minimal occurrence of the latter in present-day affairs. Still, the *gaden* remains one of the two most highly respected peacemakers: not only is he called upon to settle disputes within his *lua*, but he can be requested to negotiate settlements, in cases where elders' councils fail, anywhere in Sidāmoland.

As a social system the *lua* is based on complementary social relations between youth and elders in which the knowledge and wealth of the latter are gradually transmitted to the former in return for their labour, respect and community protection. In this very favourable resource environment the *lua* provides for near optimum exploitation and preservation, in which the whole population is ensured sufficient resources to sustain health and a sense of well being (Hamer 2003: 210–12). Father–son relations in which the former is expected to exhibit a combination of authority and circumspect benevolence constitutes a model for the *lua* structure.

Elders are either real or foster fathers, with the rotation of classes so calibrated that sons (ego) are initiated into the class that follows that of the father when the latter is promoted to elderhood. As a preinitiate, however, ego has been under the temporary tutelage of elders as foster fathers in a third *lua* class. Twenty-eight years later, when ego has been promoted to elderhood, his son will become an initiate in a fourth *lua* following ego's class. Ego's sons' sons will temporarily be pre-initiates in the *lua* class that precedes Ego's father's *lua*. Consequently, a hypothetical ego will be linked on a father-foster father basis to all of the five classes throughout a 35-year cycle.[3]

Settling disputes and policy making occurs in assemblies of elders (*songo*) at the hamlet, neighbourhood and clan levels (Hamer 1987: 113).[4] Decisions can be appealed from lower to higher councils, though if a complainant considers his case sufficiently serious he may go immediately to the highest-ranking council. Concentration of political

[3] For greater detail and a summary of *lua* rituals of promotion, see Hamer 1996: 532–42.

[4] In Āletā there is an inter-clan council, the Āletā *songo*.

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power in the elders constitutes the Sidāma as a gerontocracy (1987: 112–28).

The *songo* is conducted with a great deal of decorum interspersed with metaphorical and moralistic tales which ease the tension in times of disagreement. It is very much like what Fernandez likens to a riddle or argument that cannot be solved simply by applying legal rules, but involves examining the whole context in which conflict has arisen (1987: 47–8). So it is not the simple act of pushing a boundary to claim more land, or disputing land given to one claimant in a previous generation, but what this means to the whole self-worth of the individuals involved. It relates also to the larger problem of maintaining harmony in the community as a whole.

If a dispute creates potentially serious community divisions there is always an attempt to reconnect the recalcitrants not only with the living elders, but also with the dead elders. Both sets of elders represent the harmonious whole idealized in the moral code of *halālu*. The latter term is broadly translated as 'the true way of life' to which all Sidāma should conform (Hamer 1996: 520–30). It is often loosely used in the course of council (*songo*) debates as truth in the presentation of evidence. Beyond the realm of disputation, however, it refers to the importance of mutuality, abhorrence of greed and envy, the expression of good will, and the importance of generous hospitality in the treatment of guests. Present-day contexts of these attributes are made specific in the goal of preserving community cohesion by condemnation of fabrication in exchange, taking the money or possessions of another, twisting the words of a person for personal gain, failure to repay debts, and practising sorcery. The specifics of *halālu* may change with time and context, as interpreted by the elders, but always with the intention of maintaining communal peace.

Violation of the moral code can usually be determined by the evidence and admission of wrongdoing. Admission of violation is the ideal, to be followed by the elders imposing a small fine. The size of the latter is usually negotiable with the elders and, when paid, reinstates the offender within the community. Should he deny wrongdoing and insist the decision is unfair, despite the evidence, the elders will impose ostracism (*sīra*), which in effect turns the individual into a non-person. People literally avoid him, refusing to work, socialize, or eat with him. The formal imposition of *sīra* will be followed by the admonition '*halālu* and *Magāno* (creator) will follow you'. This is the severest of all possible curses: that the creator will cause the culprit, his wife (or wives), children, and/or cattle to sicken and die. It is only at this point that the supernatural replaces the realm of rational discourse in a final attempt to restore social harmony.[5]

[5] Women and children do not participate in the *songo*. Should they have grievances, however, any elder they may select is obligated to present their case to the council for discussion and judgement. Consequently they also participate, even if indirectly, in maintaining civic peace.

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None of this is meant to imply that in the past or in the present the people have been free of conflict. Indeed, Sidāmo mythology presents numerous tales of warfare between clans, and old men still talked in the 1960s and 1970s of clan boundary skirmishes before the Second World War. Mythology also shows betrayal and disputes between brothers, clearly in violation of the norms of *halālu* (Hamer 1987: 24–5, 35). Nevertheless, in the opinion of the elders as well as a large segment of the youth, harmony is usually restored – and my personal observations and recording of conflicts in 1964–5 and 1973 have tended to substantiate their assumptions (Hamer 1972: 236; 1980: 95–106). I found that the largest number of disputes involved boundary violations, followed by sorcery complaints, and finally violence between individuals and groups. The high frequency of sorcery accusations is similar to what the Comaroffs observed as resulting from modernization in South Africa. Sidāma, however, remain able in the context of the *songo* to ostensibly satisfy complaints by cursing sorcery in the name of *Magāno* (creator).

The greatest upheaval, however, came with conquest by the Amhara and incorporation into the Ethiopian state in 1894–5. Emperor Menelik II imposed a form of indirect rule over what is now southern Ethiopia (Hamer 1972: 41–3). Imperial rule created contradictions which, along with increasing population and land shortages, have led to changes in the form of delicts and policy violations. Still, the councils continue to function, elderhood authority still commands respect, and the code of *halālu* remains important.[6]

ETHIOPIAN INDIRECT RULE

The process began gradually with the late-nineteenth-century conquest of the south, evolving slowly into increasing control by the Ethiopian state in the 1930s (Hamer 1987: 131–47). Much of this hegemony was the indirect result of Menelik's desire to establish a buffer against European colonialism, as well as an interest in gaining new agricultural and mineral resources. Because of their superior weaponry the Amhara[7] northerners rather easily conquered the Sidāma. Initially there was a system of tribute in produce from every clan to the Emperor, as well as corvée labour (*gabbar*) for support of the occupying soldiers. Since the conquered lacked money for taxes they were required to provide labour for individual soldiers. The latter also appropriated land left vacant by Sidāma who fled the occupation. The labour tribute was later transferred to northern settlers to cultivate coffee. By the 1920s, however, the *gabbar* system was seen as having limited value in encouraging productivity. Consequently, northern settlers were left with rights to acquire land only in developing coffee plantations.

[6] Since my publication on Sidāmo ethnography, I am told that *halālu* is even discussed in government-run elementary schools (personal communication from Seyoum Hamesso).

[7] The Amhara were then, and until the 1974 Revolution continued to be the controlling ethnic group in the 'modernizing' Ethiopian state.

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The *gabbar* system for the descendants of Menelik's soldiers, however, remained until the Italian occupation (1936–41), but by 1912, as more cash became available from the coffee trade, the land was divided into taxable units (*gasha*). By this time the northern landowners were in a position to afford cheap labour provided by the Sidāma. As the world market in coffee emerged, by the middle of the twentieth century, the northerners gained control of the coffee trade. Their dominance only gradually declined with the emergence of Sidāmo self-help associations in the 1960s and the revolution of 1974 (Hamer 1987: 148–9; 230–3; 1980: 89–109). Still, the vast majority of Sidāma continued to rely primarily upon the subsistence practices of herding and *ensete* gardening.

It wasn't until 1955 that Ethiopia acquired a national constitution and a façade of parliamentary democracy, though the Emperor continued to control the legislative process until the 1974 revolution. In the early stages of monarchical indirect rule prominent elders were, with the nominal approval of the elders' councils, appointed servants (*koro*) of the government. These men became responsible for the collection of land taxes and the establishment of small claims courts, with limited fines, as an alternative to the elders' councils. The *koro* were expected to cooperate with the police in bringing offenders to these government-sponsored courts. Clan chiefs were given the Amharic title of *balabat* and encouraged to cooperate with government administrators. Old Sidāmo elders in the *koro* position often told me they tried to encourage disputants to take their complaints to the *songo*, so as to avoid future entanglements with the Amhara court system.

In 1931 the Fatha Nagast, which had previously constituted the legal code of the Amhara, was officially declared the law of the Ethiopian state. The implementation was interrupted by the Italian invasion of 1935. As occupying authorities the invaders sought to recognize and support varying systems of ethnic and cultural groups within Ethiopian state boundaries. Then in 1956 a new Penal Code, similar to that of many nation states at the time, was established. This code established civil rights provisions, but with power to set sanctions and rules of procedure left to the state. Later, the Civil Code of 1965, unlike the 1956 law, provided some leeway for local courts to privilege 'customary law' in establishing 'restitutive' rather than 'punitive' sanctions (Singer 1972: 484–93). Government officials, such as the *koro*, acquired the right to encourage conciliation and arbitration analogous to the consensual decision making of the Sidāmo *songo*. In practice, however, officials seem to have become increasingly indifferent to the small claims court of the *koro*, desiring rather that the latter concentrate their efforts on support for the criminal courts. This conflict, attributed largely to the ambiguities of the codes, and the continuing gap between the Western-style central government system and the Sidāmo way of life, may have contributed to the survival of the *songo* and the code of *halālu*.

Another important matter was the lack of commitment by the government to Enlightenment ideals, basic to the juridical-political structures they were seeking to impose. The loyalties of government

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personnel prior to the 1974 revolution were primarily to personal ambitions and ethnic identity as Amhara. Thus there developed two separate moral systems, one based on maintaining community harmony and the other on obtaining self-advantage.

Curiously, one of the threats to indirect rule by the government was the establishment in the 1960s of Sidāmo voluntary associations (*mahabar*) (Hamer 1987: 183–217). These were directed toward modernizing and revitalizing mutuality in production through establishing sanitary water systems, cooperative shops in the countryside, and the building of communities accessible by road. *Mahabar* were controlled by elected committees structured like elders' councils with 'resource persons' provided by the Ministry of Community Development. The latter served only as advisers to association committees and, according to my observations, were more controlled by than controlling of the latter. A subtle source of opposition came from associations developing into new communities as they sometimes gained jurisdiction over several *gasha* of land. Consequently, they took over the tax-collecting functions of the government-appointed *koro* and his assistants, eroding some of the often-resented authority of the latter. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Sidāmo candidates for the Ethiopian Parliament found a new means of consulting public opinion. The association committees helped to create a bridge between themselves, the people, and the government authorities in the national capital. Ironically, northern merchants and non-Sidāmo townspeople considered these politicians to be plotting against the government.

THE 1974 REVOLUTION AND BEYOND

In the early stages of the revolution the old government of Emperor Haile Selassie fell apart as a result of famine neglect in northern Ethiopia, teacher dissatisfaction with education policies, and numerous labour disputes in the national capital. When the Emperor was slow to respond the military opted to take power, gradually creating committees that evolved by 1974 into a central coordinating group known as the Derg. By mid-1974 the Derg had deposed the Emperor. This at least is how the early events have been portrayed by a Western-educated southerner (Hotesso, personal communications).

Clapham suggests that the old Ethiopian state under the Emperor succeeded in some modernization of the economy, but was ineffective politically (1990: 241–3). The revolutionary government did succeed partially in increasing literacy, villagization, and military mobilization, but failed in encouraging adequate food production to feed the nation, even though agricultural change had been a high priority. In the end whatever surplus was extracted from the peasantry went primarily to support the state, military activities, and presumably new agricultural and industrial investment possibilities. Moreover, the policy of using force to promote state unity in the long run only increased resistance. In Clapham's opinion the revolutionary state in general was inadequate

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in itself to effect 'development'. The attempt to control as often as not slowed production and fostered resistance (1990: 243). Gradually the new Ethiopian state used Marxist-Leninist ideology as well as military power to gain total control (Pausewang 1994: 209; 213–15). At first small food producers throughout Ethiopia were pleased with land reform by the Derg, along with the establishment of new local associations and a seeming emphasis on decentralized control. But as the urban population began to increase the central government became more insistent on fixed low prices for agricultural produce to feed the urbanites. Also, a large army was drafted for defensive and offensive actions. By the 1980s, it seems, peasants everywhere were complaining they had lost control over local affairs.

At first the Sidāma had a favourable impression of the Derg as some of the land that had been taken by northerners was returned to them, but they soon discovered that all of their land was being claimed by the new socialist state (Shanqo 1996: 8). There followed increasing control through the conscription of youth and taxation, without any opportunity for opposition. All resistance was put down by military action. On a more personal level, meanwhile, the higher officialdom of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in Addis Ababa seem to have been suspicious of a Sidāmo member of the WPE Central Committee. This played into local antagonisms and longstanding jealousies between Sidāma at the local level. When an acquaintance of the suspect was mysteriously murdered, there was a carefully arranged outpouring of public animosity against him, information of which was forwarded to the capital (Hotesso 1998: 10–11). The Derg party officials then approved a formal accusation of murder against their colleague, who was summarily arrested and imprisoned. This episode indicates that even within the WPE those at the top of the party, who were largely Amhara, tended to distrust other officials of high rank but different ethnicity. Such a lack of respect fed into local ethnic conflicts and jealousies that only served to support their suspicion, thus creating conflict rather than cohesion at both levels.

In general, however, it was the over-centralizing practices of the Derg government, along with military defeat in Eritrea and the loss of Soviet support, that led to the collapse of the 1974 revolution. In 1991 it was replaced by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led by Meles Zenawi. The 'liberators' in this umbrella army were dominated by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF). At first they encouraged southern Ethiopian nationalities to form their own parties and develop programmes for dealing with economic, political and social issues (Shana 1997: 11–17; Forrest 2002: 199). Perhaps an awareness of the significance of such ethno-cultural diversity initially influenced the TPLF to favour cultural decentralization. Indeed the Federal Democratic Republic, as the new state came to be called, drafted and approved a new constitution in 1994 (Vestal 1999: 92–100). The preamble to this document suggests the government should be based on socialism and respect for ethnic divisions. One of the principles, Article 8 (1), goes so far as to indicate that sovereign power emanates

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from ethnic groups, and a bill of rights indicates the importance of legal, religious and personal freedom. This seems to have been largely ignored, however, when, in order to discourage opposition, the EPRDF began undermining other political parties attempting to participate in the 1992–4 and 1995 elections (Vestal 1999: 96–7). Nor, for all the words about rights and freedom, do individuals own more than what they produce; their only rights are as tenants, as the government is vested with total control of land and natural resources.

In terms of government institutions power is vested in the central government with a Council of People's Representatives elected by all the people and a Federal Council of 'nations, nationalities and peoples' elected by state councils (Vestal 1999: 99). The court system to protect the people and sanction legislation of these councils is structured in a Judicial Administrative Commission that is vague about how judges are appointed and removed. This implies that the executive branch of the government is the authority in control (Vestal 1999: 100). Thus the constitution is such that the EPRDF, or whatever party controls the government, is the real authority. Indeed, Meles implied as much in the 1997 Congress of the EPRDF by indicating that the party will not be reconciled to peoples 'opposing' or violating the constitution (Vestal 1999: 191–2). So the structuring of what in the West has been interpreted as a nascent democracy has been established without any real debate or questioning by ordinary people from the many differing ethnic groups that make up the new Federal Democratic Republic.

As one Sidāmo scholar has suggested, the danger in the centralized control of the EPRDF, even though it is a form of hegemony brought by Africans rather than Europeans, is that it negates cultural differences by defining decentralized decision making as inefficient and dangerous.[8] It doesn't fit decision making in the modern world, which the EPRDF considers should take precedence over collective and individual ethnic identity. As such, the procedures of the post-revolutionary government become analogous to the old imperialism of indirect rule. Moreover, these 'autocratic tendencies' have been generally accepted in the West because the head of government, Meles Zenawi, has been supportive of Europe and the United States in controlling drugs and terrorism (Henze 2000: 336, 341, 396–7).

At the level of everyday life, at least, for the Sidāma there was originally hope for improvement, with respect for their way of life and a more consultative relationship with the central government (Hotesso: personal communication). There were soon indications, however, that the TPLF believed the meetings of the elders' *songo* were tantamount to plotting against the new government; and this reaction renewed local hostility and fears of hegemony. Interestingly the moral system of *halālu* remained as a widely accepted set of beliefs and was for the first time included in the curriculum for school children in grades one to six. In addition the Sidāmo language, rather than Amharic, was permitted in

[8] See Hamesso 1997, Chapter 7.

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these grades. Possibly this was kept as part of the government's original agreement to encourage decentralization along ethnic lives in Ethiopia.

There is also an indication that Sidāma have accepted a form of the Comaroffs' concept of 'Afro-modernism' through reinterpretation. This has been the reaction of the Sidāma to the denial of autonomy by the pre- and post-revolutionary governments. Their response has been that of revitalization, attempting to link historic forms of powerful spirit possession to crisis situations, as a means of melding old forms of power to combat threatening hegemonies from outside Sidāmo culture (Hamer 1977: 399–413). In the past it was persons with unusually powerful spirits who could heal vast numbers of people experiencing the trauma of unexpected historical events. Now, however, it is charismatic Christian or Muslim healers who attract disillusioned youth who have lost hope after military service during the revolution. Alternatively, they are persons beginning to question some of the old forms of subsistence production and deference to the authority of the elders.

Even in the late 1980s both young and old Sidāma sought out Christian and Muslim charismatic healers to revitalize both mind and body through exorcism and healing (Vecchiato 1993: 181–90). But it was not until the 1990s that this search for well-being led to the establishment of separatist, fundamentalist churches in which the new leaders sought to mix healing with personal interpretations of the Bible, condemning the old Sidāmo beliefs and rituals as 'satanic'.[9] These new institutionalized forms, still adhering to some of the old meaning of personal healing, constituted charismatic cults in which the leaders sought to replace the elders as mediators in conflicts and crises. As such they were very attractive to the disillusioned youth seeking refuge from the secular modern world they had sought to establish in the revolution.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm of the new Ethiopian government for ethnic political autonomy, elderhood authority and the *songo* continue to function in the countryside, beyond the main roads (Hamer 1996: 549). Furthermore, a recent study of a clan (*gurri*) area near the provincial capital of Awassa indicates that 'traditional alternative dispute mechanisms', though 'weakened' from neglect in many parts of Ethiopia, have survived largely intact among the Sidāma (Ayke and Feleke 2004: 13–31). Leading dispute mediators such as the Mote and Woma, as well as various levels of elders' councils, function much as they have in the past. Ayke and Feleke indicate that a complainant still has the 'moral obligation' to take a dispute to the elders rather than a government court. While they acknowledge that the severe sanction of isolation (*sīra*) is less successful than in the past, because communities are not as cohesive, the traditional advantages of keeping disputes within the kinship system, the low costs of the process, and the importance of restoring social harmony are more favourable than the adversarial court system. Nevertheless, the elders' councils have no government recognition and are virtually ignored by the various state institutions.

[9] Personal communication from Seyoum Hamesso. See also Hamesso 1998: 122.

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COMPARISON WITH OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

The Sidāma, however, are not alone among southern Ethiopians in resisting the imposition of the nation state. Donham has provided evidence for a partially similar experience among the Maale (1990; 1999). They are a hierarchical rather than an egalitarian, gerontocratic, society like the Sidāma. There is a king who has traditionally led clan chiefs in the performance of fertility rites. The latter are the centre of Maale ritual life, just as mourning rituals constitute the focus of Sidāma spiritual endeavours. But the Maale inhabit a more remote highland area than the latter, nor have they been as economically important to the nation state.

In the period between the Italian invasion and the 1974 revolution there was a shift in control from the king with his ritual power, labour tribute, and control of trade to northern traders and landowners (Donham 1986: 93). Overall, this was a time when a group of powerful Maale chiefs, northern landowners and traders opportunistically aligned themselves with one another and the authorities of the imperial state to gain political advantage. By contrast, the Sidāmo chiefs lacked the authority to grant land or political favours to others. The one exception was the Āletā Mote, with the government title of *balabbat*, who received large amounts of money and labour from the clans of Āletā under his authority (Hamer 1987: 138–40). When, however, he sought to gain further influence with the Amhara he was challenged by all the clan councils (*songo*) and the peasantry. But he died in the 1950s in the midst of the conflict, which led the Āletā people to believe that he was being punished by the creator (*Magāno*) for attempting to ignore the elders and the moral code of *halālu*. The choice of a successor remained contested, with various factions even seeking support of the Emperor, until the 1974 revolution.

Thus, because of their equalitarian, gerontocratic, social framework all the Sidāmo elders belonged, and for the most part continue to belong, to one inclusive group in the generational class system (*lua*). This was very different from the hierarchical Maale structure which encouraged segmentary competition over time among kings and chiefs, while the Amhara rulers, when convenient, utilized this system alongside the bureaucratic power of the state (Donham 1986: 94–5).

The impact of the 1974 revolution upon the Maale seems to have had both similarities and differences as compared with the Sidāmo experience. Donham indicates that ten youthful converts to the Protestant Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) constituted a vanguard group in supporting the revolution (1999: 152–8). They conceived the implications of Marxism-Leninism to be promoting ideas of learning and modernism in opposition to 'primitivism' – and a very similar emphasis had originally attracted them to the doctrine of the SIM. By the 1980s, with the formation of peasant associations, these were being led by young people who before the revolution had formed their own work groups separate from the traditional groups to which most of the Maale still adhered. By contrast, Sidāmo Christian converts,

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regardless of age, continued to work with traditionalists both before and after the revolution. Moreover, the self-help associations pioneered by Sidāmo Christians before the revolution were always established with non-Christians, the latter ultimately being in the majority in many of the new *mahabar*. And when the revolutionary cadres sought to collectivize the pre-1974 associations, the Sidāma resisted to the point of refusing to work in the newly established gardens (Hotesso: personal communication).

In general, the Maale opposed the activities of the 'red guard' in respect to labour practices and during the revolution; even though some new forms of work groups emerged, many people carried on with traditional *malo* labour (Donham 1991: 188). Continuity of this traditionally important form of community labour, Donham has suggested, was an indication of misunderstanding or a rejection of revolutionary principles and organization.

An important similarity between the experiences of the Sidāma and the Maale in the revolutionary period was the distrust and patronizing attitude of government officials. Unlike the Sidāma incident, it did not lead to the imprisonment of a local supporter of the regime, but to a disparaging insult. It involved a young Maale man who became one of only ten Workers' Party of Ethiopia members who was admitted to full party membership, rose through the ranks as chairman of a peasant association, and held a sub-district and ultimately important district office in the WPE bureaucracy (Donham 1999: 155–9). Though he remained a loyal supporter to the end of the revolution, he was never sure of the trustworthiness of those who held higher offices above him and insisted on rigid enforcement and narrow interpretation of the party handbook. His suspicion became aroused when they accused him of keeping a mistress in violation of the rules. It was well known that this was a common practice for young Maale men, often far removed from their wives and homes on official government business. As a consequence he was reprimanded, forced to write an apology to officials in Addis Ababa and, as he saw it, treated like a common 'criminal'. In effect, as Donham explains, the Maale party members were continually under the surveillance of non-Maale officials always looking for the 'smallest deviance from party guidelines [which would be] reported to superiors at higher levels in the hierarchy'. These two (Sidāmo and Maale) experiences both indicate the distrust evinced by a distant state administration towards local-level ethnic leaders, even when they were members of the WPE.

As he looked at the changes wrought by incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire and the upheaval of the revolutionary period (1974–90), it was evident to Donham that there have been both epochal and historical changes in the Maale socio-cultural system, but that these have not been so 'far-reaching' as to eliminate much of the old way of life (1991: 218). There were changes in the authority system and some of the work patterns, but kinship and household relations persisted. As he was to suggest later, '"traditional" structures were not so stable nor "revolutionary" changes so far reaching' (1999: 218). There have

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been different changes as well as continuities for the Sidāma. Many of the persisting institutions such as community work groups or the political aspects of gerontocratic authority, like traditional kinship and household arrangements among the Maale, provided the Sidāmo people with a sense of identity. For both groups those who controlled the nation state – whether in the monarchical or the revolutionary period, and for the Sidāma under the post-revolutionary government too – continued to distrust and to manipulate local attempts at self-expression.

Sufficient time has now elapsed, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, to see if the situation in the Federal Democratic Republic has begun to change. More research has been done on the government's concept of federalism to discover how the process is proceeding. A legal scholar, Assefa Fiseha, has found that the sharing of power between the central government and newly created ethnic states in the south has not been achieved (2006: 158–9). The latter generally lack any real autonomy and what connectedness there is shows little 'institutional competence'. It is his view that the central government continues to control these ethnic enclaves, contradicting the principle of federalism and making it nearly impossible to allocate responsibilities. Perhaps this is why the political philosopher Kymlicka goes so far as to suggest that Western-style federalism does not fit Ethiopian circumstances (2006: 58). Another researcher, Sarah Vaughan, finds that the difficulties are attributable to the failure of the EPRDF to understand the meaning of ethnicity due to its inability to separate objective and materialist concepts from the basic issue of identity. It is essentially a failure to understand the meanings different peoples attach to themselves. For outsiders, such an understanding requires a knowledge process that takes time to acquire, and requires considerable monetary expense.

Two long-time Ethiopianists, anthropologist David Turton and Africanist Richard Clapham, perhaps offer the most profound overall summaries of the federalism issue. Clapham begins with the proposition that peoples with differing cultures are more interested in what 'divides' rather than what 'unites' (2006: 231). Therefore, some sort of federalism becomes the only alternative. But the Western assumption upon which federalism is based assumes the acceptance of 'liberal democratic values', which hardly fits the Ethiopian historical experience. The EPRDF idea that nationality and ethnicity can be separated from the political has not been realized in the attempt to create separate ethnic states in southern Ethiopia (2006: 234–7). Rather, this form of ethnic federalism has become a 'prison house' in which seemingly the original guarantee of independence has become politically impossible, and the emphasis has shifted from national to a degree of territorial autonomy. This is to be seen in the focus on *wereda* administration rather than the ethnic autonomy implied by the EPRDF constitution. He uses the Gambella and Oromo experiences as examples of the continuing disputes over boundaries and national language imposition in federal governance, despite the allowance of indigenous languages in schools and everyday social discourse (2006: 239). Administration and political processes remain grounded, as in past history, in the practices and

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beliefs of northern regimes. So in the final analysis this remains contrary to federalism ideals, where 'bargaining and compromise' have to be privileged over 'political uniformities'.

Turton brings these problems together rather more succinctly (2006: 27–9). He explains that one difficulty has been the tendency of the EPRDF to assume that a major cause of conflict involves historical repression rather than the vast socio-cultural divisions within the previous imperial and revolutionary nation states. A second problem involves placing emphasis on land ownership, but under the jurisdiction of particular groups which seek to exercise hegemony over less powerful ethnic entities. Third, there is the issue of central government insistence on political control through ethnic 'puppet' alliances, ignoring other authentic opposition groups. In this short article it is impossible to catalogue resistance, whether imposed by powerful ethnic groups or nation states, in all parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, two examples from Kenya and Zambia must suffice. Material from these two societies suggests that divisions between those who have committed themselves to modernism and persons still living according to old traditions are not beyond reconciliation.

Cliggett, for example, shows how Gwembe Tonga in Zambia use remittances, though small in material amount, in forging 'strategic alliances' for the future in struggling with the uncertainties of modernism (2003: 543–52). While some migrants to towns may ignore the importance of such bonds and many, given their low standards of living, are ambivalent about giving, most recognize the symbolic rather than tangible significance of the exchange. The latter consider it a means of retaining deep-felt emotional ties to their old way of life, which in the long run remains their only form of security.

In Kenya, among Samburu pastoralists, the difference between town and village may be less tenuous than among the Gwembe Tonga. The old symbolic role of elderhood authority remains significant in finding compromises to bridge politico-economic differences (Lesorogal 2003: 531–41). The elders in a dispute discussed by Lesorogal use high-ranking connections with the nation state to maintain harmony and justice in the rural area. It is a situation in which a minority supporting change through 'development' seeks to undermine elderhood authority.

In these few examples there is evidence of much activity, especially among the Sidāma and Maale, to protect indigenous beliefs and practices in opposition to the imperial, revolutionary and post-revolutionary impositions of nation-state rule. Then there is the struggle of the urban Tonga to make alliances which are at least representative of their old village way of life, and of the Samburu to preserve elderhood authority. It is clear that many, if not most, Africans are caught in a struggle to save much of their old way of life in opposition to Western modernism – the latter being represented by the concept of the nation state and economic globalization. Though contemporary societies are a mixture of the influence of Western modern and the traditional, it is the latter that provides people with a sense of identity and security. Unlike Westerners they do not accept the nation state as a dominant part of

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their identity; rather they prefer being able to decide what aspects of modernism they can accept without losing their sense of self. That a nexus with the past is as important to them as the future is to Westerners has been well documented by Horton in his comparisons of Western and African beliefs about order in the cosmos (1997: 221–306).[10]

DECENTRALIZATION AND THE INDIRECT STATE

For the Ethiopian peoples I suggest a reversal of 'indirect rule', whether of the colonial form or that of indigenous centralized rule such as the Amhara, the Marxist Derg, or the Tigrean-dominated post-revolutionary government. All of these external forms of hegemony were based on coopting traditional leaders who historically respected the consensual decision making of their own people, but gradually became go-between subordinates for protecting the power of the state.

To overcome this problem I suggest replacing the compelling centralism of modernism so that it is indirect and suggestive rather than direct and controlling. The emphasis should be on decision making at the local level. For example, policy and dispute settlement would be grounded in the local community. In the case of the Sidāma this could continue to be through the neighbourhood, lineage and clan, with a council of leading elders and traditional leaders such as the *mote, woma* and *gadena* (the generational class leaders) at the ethnic level. Delegates from the latter might then conjoin with similar leaders of other ethnics from the various provinces. What is important is that delegates at higher levels be selected from participants at lower levels according to consensual ideas about respect and ability. Policy decisions made by more inclusive groupings would then have to be returned to lower levels for approval and/or renegotiation. Disputes, however, as is generally the present case, could be appealed from the lower to be settled at the higher levels, not neglecting the principle that disputants must both accept the final solution.

Very important is the problem of negotiating and overcoming conflict between differing ethnic groups. Clashes are almost inevitable given diverse lifestyles creating variable interests which will tend to diverge. These disagreements can only be dealt with by negotiation between leading elders and officials at the ethnic level. As in disputes between individuals, when consensus can't be reached through negotiation it must be appealed to the provincial council. It may even be necessary for an appeal to go to the state council. In that case the decision must be sent back to the lowest level, where the dispute originated, to see if the agreement reached is acceptable there.

This is of course a system of personalized decision making that lacks the 'project efficiency' orientation so important to the specialized, administrative, officials of Western nation states. It is, however, a form

[10] See also his earlier articles in *Africa* (Horton 1967a: 65; 1967b: 165–6).

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of policy discussion and dispute settlement that involves most people at all levels of society. Certainly it slows the process of continuous change, which is presumably so important in the Western form of governance. Nor is it calculated to encourage the speed of labour appropriation and mass consumption so popular in the modern world. But the Sidāma and many other African peoples are accustomed to a personalized universe in which behaviour is guided by a ritually structured moral code, overseen by the consensual guidance of elders. This is in contrast to an impersonal, manipulative, majority-rule system of governance that has prevailed in the nation state. The generosity and support which is the ideal, if not always the reality, of African social interaction is protected by the elders as guardians of the moral code. In the nation state generosity and support tends to be reinterpreted as bribery and corruption where there is no consensual group of arbiters for good and evil, rightness and wrongness.

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ABSTRACT

The failure of the nation state in sub-Saharan Africa has been a topic of great concern in recent years. In this article I explore in detail the historical experience of one ethnic group in the Horn of Africa, the Sidāma, and show how the nation state has had a comparatively negative effect upon another group in southern Ethiopia, the Maale. For the Sidāma, historic disparagement by the state, though discouraged by the present Ethiopian government, is shown to continue into the present in regard to dispute settlement and policy making by the elders. The Maale, though different in culture and social structure, experienced similar distrust and disparagement in Ethiopia's revolutionary period (1974–91). In the case of the Sidāma, indications are that this has continued into the post-revolutionary period of state-sponsored parliamentary democracy.

As a solution I propose the 'indirect state' as a means not simply of maintaining the past culture of the Sidāma, but also of encouraging the people to originate change for themselves. Rather than institutional edicts being imposed from above by the nation state, the people will, in conjunction with other ethnic groups, negotiate both vertically and horizontally to reach consensual agreements for change.

RÉSUMÉ

L'échec de l'État-nation en Afrique sub-saharienne est un sujet de grande préoccupation depuis quelques années. Dans cet article, l'auteur étudie dans le détail l'expérience historique d'un groupe ethnique de la Corne de l'Afrique, les Sidāma, et montre comment l'État-nation a eu un effet relativement négatif sur un autre groupe du Sud de l'Éthiopie, les Maale. Pour les Sidāma, le dénigrement historique par l'État est encore pratiqué en ce qui concerne le règlement des conflits et les prises de décision par les anciens, même si le gouvernement éthiopien actuel le décourage. Les Maale, bien que différents par leur culture et leur structure sociale, ont fait l'objet d'une méfiance et d'un dénigrement comparables au cours de la période révolutionnaire de l'Éthiopie (1974–91). Dans le cas des Sidāma, des éléments indiquent que cette situation s'est poursuivie dans la période post-révolutionnaire de démocratie parlementaire d'État.

En guise de solution, l'auteur propose "l'État indirect" comme moyen non seulement de maintenir la culture passée des Sidāma, mais également d'encourager les individus à engendrer le changement pour eux-mêmes. Au lieu de se voir imposer des décrets institutionnels par l'État-nation, les individus négocieront, tant verticalement qu'horizontalement, pour arriver à un accord consensuel pour le changement, en liaison avec d'autres groupes ethniques.

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