Minority Rights, Culture, and Ethiopia's "Third Way" to Governance

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Abstract: Following a successful armed resistance against a dictatorial state regime, a new government of former rebels took control of the national state in Ethiopia in 1991. Prompted partly by unfolding sea changes in global politics in the early 1990s, the new Ethiopian government pledged to undertake radical governance reform. More than twenty years after the new government took office, contested assessments of its record vis-à-vis its human and minority rights pledge, among other issues, have generated waves of debate, criticism, controversy, and global protests. Based on observations from southern Ethiopia, this article takes an ethnographic look at both the process and the outcome of Ethiopia's experiment with ethnic self-government, with a special focus on understanding the value of minority rights as an ideological construct. Conceptually, the paper attempts to explain a disjuncture between the globally prescribed ideal of human/minority group rights and the realities of governance on the ground.

Résumé: À la suite d'une résistance armée victorieuse contre un régime d'état dictatorial, un nouveau gouvernement formé par des anciens rebelles a pris le contrôle de l'état en Éthiopie en 1991. Motivé en partie par des changements importants en cours dans la politique mondiale au début des années 90, le nouveau gouvernement éthiopien promit de mettre en place des réformes radicales. Ces réformes, souvent classifiées d'expérimentations risquées à cause de l'importance grandissante et sans précédent donnée au principe d'ethnicité comme fondation d'une autorité légitime, sont en cours depuis vingt-et-un ans. En se fondant sur des observations faites en Éthiopie du Sud, cet article fait une étude ethnographique sur le processus et les résultats de l'expérimentation éthiopienne avec la gouvernance ethnique autoproclamée, en se concentrant particulièrement sur la logique de la valeur placée sur les droits des minorités comme construction idéologique. Conceptuellement,

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cet essai essaie d'expliquer la séparation entre l'idéal universel prescrit des droits de l'individu et des minorités, et les réalités de gouvernance sur le terrain.

> 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. (Article 39 [3] of the Ethiopian Constitution)

Introduction

In 1991, at the dawn of a new global era, a young generation of former rebels who had successfully carried out an armed resistance against a dictatorial state regime took control of Ethiopia's national state. Hailed by many Western politicians as promising members of Africa's new generation of progressive leaders, the new Ethiopian leaders pledged to undertake a sweeping reform of the state, proclaiming a fundamental break with the country's long history of centralized authoritarian governance. Among the most "radical" and "pioneering" (Turton 2006) of the new state's approaches to governing a plural nation was the institution of structures of self-government explicitly based on ethnicity—and hence referred to as ethnic federalism—which was based on an official understanding of ethnic groups as identifiable corporate units, each with its own language, culture, history, and geographic territory. This concept was translated into bureaucratic reality through a redrawing of the country's politico-administrative map along ethnolinguistic lines and subsequently the establishment of "self-governing" ethnoregional states that constitute the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). More than twenty years after the new government took office, contested assessments of its record vis-à-vis its human and minority rights pledge, among other issues, have generated waves of debate, criticism, controversy, and global protests.

A recent academic debate between a Norwegian anthropologist (Tronvoll 2008, 2010) and a law faculty member at Addis Ababa University (Assefa 2009, 2011) addresses some aspects of the human rights–centered controversies in Ethiopia. This debate was sparked by a 2007 report of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which concluded that serious violations of human rights along ethnic and racial lines have recently occurred in Ethiopia (CERD 2007:2–3). Tronvoll (2008), despite pointing out a methodological limitation in CERD's approach, basically agrees with these findings and makes a compelling argument about how ethnic identity, while officially proclaimed as the basis for granting constitutional rights, in reality provides the justifica-

tion for political stigmatization and violations of human rights in Ethiopia. Assefa (2009), rejecting both CERD's and Tronvoll's assessments, argues that any possible human rights violation in self-governing regions of federal Ethiopia cannot be deemed ethnic discrimination per se, since almost 100 percent of Ethiopia's ethnoregional states are staffed by natives of the respective regions; thus any supposed perpetrators would belong to the same ethnic group as their victims.

This article attempts to contribute to this debate through scrutiny of the following two questions: In sociological terms, who really are the natives who run the reconstituted state in their respective ethnic regions of Ethiopia? And, more importantly, what concrete outcomes do we see on the ground that are meaningful to ordinary citizens (minority or not) in the way they are governed? The article draws especially on case studies from southern Ethiopia and undertakes an empirically grounded analysis of both the process and the outcome of Ethiopia's governance reform with a special focus on the state of minority rights in the region.[1] It begins by briefly outlining the meaning of minorities and minority rights in the Ethiopian political and cultural context and conceptually connecting this to the larger conversation on human rights and (minority) group rights. This is followed by a historical overview that places the emergence of human and minority rights rhetoric in Ethiopia in the context of the global retreat of Marxism and the hegemonic rise of neoliberalism. The next sections present an ethnographic analysis of how these macro-processes are translated into micro-practices among two "major minority" ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia, followed by a conceptual reflection connecting the Ethiopian ethnography of minority rights and ethnic self-government with theoretical discussions pertaining to culture, power, status, party, and the state in the contemporary African context. The concluding section teases out peculiar tensions (cultural as well as political) among globally prescribed ideals of human and minority rights, the national state's prerogative to govern, and local experiences with the realities of ethnic self-governance on the ground.

Ethiopia's New State, Minority Rights, and the New Global Moral Order

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 symbolized the beginning of a new global era for the protection of minority rights as a special category of human rights (Ringelheim 2010). This happened more than forty years after the issuing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was prompted by the extraordinary violence against a minority group (Jews) by their own state (Nazi Germany). However, during the intervening forty-one years (1948–89), the international institutions charged with the human rights project focused on developing norms and procedures for guaranteeing universal individual human rights.[2] As a result, during this period the minority question almost disappeared from the international agenda. All of

that would change following the end of the Cold War. In many of the former socialist states that were also characterized by strong nationalist ideologies, formerly self-evident models of the nation-state and entrenched nationalist ideologies were increasingly questioned, as exemplified by the disintegration of Eastern European states such as Yugoslavia under the weight of resistance of groups rejecting dominant national ideologies that were associated with nationally dominant majorities. This was part of a messy global transition from Cold War partisanship, which simply ignored human rights violations committed by the two superpowers and their respective allies, to a new global moral order in which the observation of human rights and the protection of minorities emerged as essential for state legitimacy (see Ringelheim 2010; Raz 2010; Donnelly 2007).

The emergence of a new state in Ethiopia in 1991 and its advocacy of protecting and promoting the rights of ethnic minorities are directly related to these global events and processes. The new Ethiopian state led by the former ethnic rebel Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rose to national preeminence, directly challenging the hitherto hegemonic Ethiopian nationalism. Before it took control of the national state the TPLF had built an ethnomilitary coalition party named the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).[3] After taking control the TPLF/EPRDF instituted what many analysts consider the most minority-rights friendly constitution on the African continent. The most obvious, if not the most celebrated, minority rights bearers, according to the new constitution, are Ethiopia's nations, nationalities, and peoples—or what anthropologists call ethnic groups. The new Ethiopian constitution's provisions on human and ethnic minority rights are in perfect synchrony with the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (also known as Banjul Charter, entered into force in 1986) as well as all major U.N. conventions on human rights. However, as Shaw (2007) points out regarding the African human rights situation in general, the new government's practices fell short of its rhetoric. Most critics of the new Ethiopian government point to the dismal practical realities that do not match what is an elegant constitution on paper.[4]

I do not have the capacity here to present a comprehensive assessment of human rights practices and minority protection in Ethiopia.[5] What follows, rather, is an academic analysis of how minority rights politics work as a form of human relationship. The basic academic question that is asked is: What kinds of social relationships form (or change) in the process of translating an abstract universal moral concept (human/minority rights) into a concrete reality (policy, institutions, and lived experience) in an African cultural context? An immediate operational problem is how to define a minority in the Ethiopian context. A related problem is formulating an appropriate methodology for studying the multiple consequences of the new Ethiopian state's minority rights approach.

In a report commissioned by Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), Tronvoll (2000) makes an important observation that problema-

tizes the definition of minorities in the Ethiopian context. He points out that the largest ethnic group in the country, the Oromo (about 25 million people, according to 2007 census), is politically and socially marginalized and thus might be regarded, politically speaking, as a "minority" group. The Tigrayans, while constituting about 6 percent of the population, currently hold the central power and thus are not classified as a "minority" in this context. Therefore, Tronvoll notes, minorities need to be understood from the point of view of power relations: who has control, and in what context this control is exercised.

While I draw on some of Tronvoll's insights in this article, I conceive of power relations more broadly, developing a multilayered conceptualization of minorities vis-à-vis de facto majorities at various scales of the social plane. In southern Ethiopia, as in much of Ethiopia and Africa at large, minority status is defined not only by ethnicity but also by occupation. Hence, it is important to examine the situation of marginalized occupational minorities living among ethnic minorities. Comparable occupational minorities are found in almost all societies across the African continent, and in many ways their human rights condition is far worse than that of ethnic or religious minorities (see Dea 2003; Freeman & Pankhurst 2003).[6]

Reconstituting the National State: The Ethiopian "Third Way" to Governance

For the last twenty-one years, Ethiopia has been ruled by the ethnomilitary coalition party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Before the TPLF/EPRDF took center stage on the Ethiopian political scene, generations of Ethiopian youth had been engaged in a long-drawn-out struggle to institute a just sociopolitical order. This struggle was unequivocally modernist in the sense that the leaders of the protest almost unanimously rejected the country's age-old tradition of a feudal-like political culture and looked for alternative models from abroad. But the options were limited. For many of these university-educated youth, Marxism appealed as a natural solution to Ethiopia's problems. In this regard, the TPLF/EPRDF was no different from many resistance movements of the time operating across the African continent. Even as late as the late 1980s, the TPLF held up Albanian socialism as a model for Ethiopia (see Berhe 2009). However, by the time TPLF/EPRDF came to dominate the nation's power center, Marxism was effectively dead as a political model and neoliberal capitalism was fast occupying the vacated space. Even then, the TPLF/EPRDF did not join the neoliberalism bandwagon wholeheartedly. Instead, it constructed a peculiar hybrid ideology referred to as "revolutionary democracy," an ideology that underpins EPRDF's "third way" to governance and draws on both neoliberal capitalism and Marxism-Leninism. Over the last twenty years, in media reports as well as scholarly discussions, Ethiopia's governance reform has

been commonly referred to as the "Ethiopian experiment" (see De Waal 1992; Abbink 2011). Below, I briefly summarize a salient feature of this "third way" to governance—that is, Ethiopia's experiment with ethnic federalism—with a special focus on the issue of minority rights and human rights in general.[7]

When the EPRDF took over the Ethiopian state in 1991, it inherited internal administrative boundaries that were drawn based on administrative history and georegional logic, although ethnicity was always an implicit factor in the previous administrative mapping. Thus, the EPRDF inherited the fourteen imperial provinces that had been restructured by Mengistu Haile Mariam's socialist regime into thirty administrative units (25 administrative regions and 5 autonomous regions) in 1987 (Gemechu 1994). Among core measures of the new government's state reform was the remapping of the country explicitly along ethnoregional lines. Accordingly, the FDRE reconstituted the country into (eventually) nine ethnonational states and two chartered city states. These are, as named and numbered in the new Constitution (Article 47): (1) Tigrai, (2) Afar, (3) Amhara, (4) Oromia, (5) Somali, (6) Beneshangul-Gumuz, (7) Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), (8) Gambela, and (9) Harari. The two city states, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, are exceptions to ethnoregional federalism.[8]

This article focuses on the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), which is the most diverse ethnoregional state, comprising about fifty-six of the nation's eighty or so ethnic groups. This region is really a miniature Ethiopia. The legislative, executive, and judiciary of SNNPR, located in the regional capital of Awassa, are in principle representative of the region's ethnic groups. Unlike in most other regions of the country, no ethnic group here was allowed to set up a separate regional state and thus ethnic self-government is expressed at lower administrative levels such as the zone (county), *woreda* (district), or even *kebele* (peasant association). Whatever EPRDF's motive for promoting ethnic self-government, almost all ethnic groups of the country, with the exception of the dominant Amharic-speaking majority, found the EPRDF's rhetoric of "ethnic rights" appealing, and thus ethnically organized activists passionately mobilized their constituencies in pursuit of the newly advocated rights. However, the EPRDF and non-EPRDF actors disagreed so much on what ethnic self-government meant in practical terms (e.g., which of contending local groups should be in charge of the local governance) that the result was countless violent confrontations, (re)negotiations, and some compromises between various ethnically organized groups and the EPRDF's wings in charge of their respective ethnic territories. In these conflicts, the demands from below were usually presented in the language of rights, including frequent citations of Article 39 of the Constitution (see epigraph). Analysis of these confrontations suggests that part of the problem is that the EPRDF and ethnic minorities (not to mention larger and more organized political parties) interpreted these rights differently, and they have tried to appropriate

human rights language for very different, or even contradictory, ends.

The EPRDF developed its human and ethnic minority rights rhetoric as part of the solution to realpolitik challenges that had to be dealt with after its military victory over Mengistu and his dictatorial regime. In terms of ideology, the EPRDF had to justify its very foundation on ethnicity instead of more "modern" (or more Western) constructs such as liberal democracy. EPRDF's answer to this challenge was the assertion that Ethiopia suffered from both class- and ethnicity-based oppression (as inflicted specifically by the hitherto dominant Amhara) and that it had opted to give more emphasis to the latter (see Aregawi Berhe 2009). Though the EPRDF's conception of ethnic identity is reminiscent of what anthropologists refer to as primordialism, it was presented in a way that appealed to the historically marginalized groups in the country.

If the ideology of ethnic rights had been allowed to run its logical course, the TPLF (the core that dominates the governing coalition), which comes from a minority Tigre ethnic group, could easily have lost control over the national state. As an antidote to this potential peril, the TPLF/EPRDF has blended its primordialist view of ethnicity with an ideology of revolutionary democracy, which the late Prime Minister and chairman of TPLF/EPRDF, Meles Zenawi, explained in the following terms:

> When revolutionary democracy permeates the entire Ethiopian society, individuals will start to think alike and all persons will cease having their independent outlook. In this order, individual thinking becomes simply part of collective thinking because the individual will not be in a position to reflect on concepts that have not been prescribed by revolutionary democracy. (EPRDF Gimgema papers 2001; cited in Berhe 2009:191)[9]

So far this ideology has been very effective in helping the TPLF/EPRDF control the process of state decentralization along ethnic lines, although the exiled former chairman of the TPLF, Aregawi Berhe (2009), compares the ideology of revolutionary democracy to Stalinist views of centralized party control.

In the introduction to his edited volume, David Turton (2006) provides a useful summary of Ethiopia's brand of federalism, comparing it to other federalist systems around the world. Despite some serious debates among the contributors to this volume, most agree on two points: federalism was the best (in fact the only) solution to Ethiopia's (ethnic) diversity problem, and Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has been a success thus far. The theoretically oriented chapter by the Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka, who compares Ethiopian federalism to that of Canada, Belgium, and the U.K., indicates that federalism in these Western countries could address the minority problem without an ethnic component only because, unlike in Ethiopia, there was no security fear by the respective central governments that ethnic/national minorities might cooperate with a neighboring state.

This was not the case in Ethiopia, whose central government has not "desecuritized" ethnic minorities such as the Somalis in the Ogaden region and still is wary about giving them real autonomy. Other analysts (e.g., Milkias 2010; Clapham 2002) seem to echo Aregawi Berhe and place the Ethiopian federal experiment closer to the Soviet model, although such comparisons better explain the final outcome of this process, especially after the 2005 election, than the process itself.

Abbink (2011:598) identifies four phases through which the Ethiopian federalism has evolved over the last twenty years: phase one (1991–2000), represented as a period of transition and stabilization, democratic opening, political self-definition, and liberalization; phase two (2000–2003), a period of nationalist reconfiguration and reaffirmation of the ruling party resulting from the 1998–2000 Ethio-Eritrean war and internal TPLF division; phase three (2003–5), in which the EPRDF broadened its reach by creating and incorporating regional EPRDF party elites beyond the TPLF; and phase four (2005 to the present), which has been devoted to building the "developmental state." According to Abbink, only in the first phase did the government show a genuine interest in instituting a just social order along with building a functioning state bureaucracy. Many observers, including Abbink, suggest that in the current phase of the EPRDF's evolution, as the rhetoric of developmental state policies (manifested in the form of mega hydro dams, resettlement, massive land lease to foreign investors, etc.) takes center stage, ethnicity and minority rights are, at best, pushed to the background. Still, the experiential aspect is worth taking a closer look at. Thus, below I provide a brief ethnographic account showing how the macro-process of state reform was translated into a bureaucratic reality in the SNNPR.

Ethnography of Ethnic Self-Government: Experiences from Southern Ethiopia

The SNNPR did not exist as a politico-administrative category until a few years into EPRDF's redrawing of the country's internal map. When the EPRDF first introduced the idea of ethnoregional units, what eventually became SNNPR was divided into five ethno-states numbered regions 7–11. EPRDF subsequently amalgamated these five states into one mega-ethnoregional state. This was partly a reaction to an opposition group called Debub Hibret (Southern Union), which started using the category "southern union." However, Debub Bibret did not call for the EPRDF's style of merging the five regional states into one amalgam controlled by the ruling party. The transition never went smoothly, and both the creation and governing of this region have been mired in violent confrontations between the EPRDF and variously organized groups demanding an actual realization of their constitutional rights for ethnic self-government (see Dea 2010; Aalen 2008; Vaughan 2006).

With a population of 16.9 million, about 21 percent of the country's overall population of 82.4 million (CSA 2011), SNNPR is the third largest ethnoregional state in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. As noted, SNNPR is home to almost two-thirds of the country's minority ethnic groups. All of these groups (ranging from about 3 million Sidama to about 70 or so Birale/Ongota) are deemed ethnic minorities vis-à-vis larger groups such as Oromo (25 million; 2007 census) or Amhara (20 million; 2007 census). While there are complex internal variations among the SNNPR ethnic groups, a common feature of the societies is a traditional division of labor or status stratification, described by many researchers as a caste-like social organization consisting (in Weberian terms) of "high-status groups" and "low-status groups." Traditionally, only the high-status groups could own property (land and livestock), hold political office, and become warriors, whereas low-status groups worked as iron workers, potters, tanners, and so on. The EPRDF's policy of ethnic self-government prompted, among other developments, the reemergence of individuals from traditionally high-ranked status groups as politically, economically, and even ritually dominant in their respective ethnic territories. By contrast, the lower-status groups became, in a sense, even more marginalized than they had been before. Thus the right of occupational minorities was actually threatened by the EPRDF's declaration of ethnic self-government rights, and in many cases the situation of occupational minorities actually worsened during the EPRDF era (see Dea 2003; Pankhurst & Freeman 2003). As Eisenberg and Spiner-Halevey (2005) point out, effectively addressing the rights of minorities living within minorities is a challenging undertaking even in Western democratic states. Interestingly, however, the new Ethiopian state has turned the minority rights challenge into a useful political resource. The two case studies presented below highlight some aspects of EPRDF's imaginative instrumentalization of ethnicity and minority rights rhetoric as part of its governance strategy.

Ethic Self-Government in Dawro

Dawro is an agricultural society located immediately to the west of the Omo river and about 500 km (about 310 miles) southwest of the capital, Addis Ababa. At the time of EPRDF's takeover of the country in 1991, the Dawro population was over three hundred thousand, thus qualifying the inhabitants to be considered as a "major minority." Equally important, Dawro had a centralized political system run by a *kati* (king) and a reasonably developed administrative system based on status stratification whereby the society was divided between the high-status group *Malla* and the low-status group *Hillancha*. The Malla, who constitute the local majority, include the Dawro royal clan of Kawka and more than one hundred other clans (landowners, warriors, and political leaders). The Hillancha comprise occupation groups such as smiths, potters, tanners, and hunter-gatherers called the Manja).

When the EPRDF sent its agents to reconstitute the state in Dawro sometime in the summer of 1991, the traditional Malla elite had just organized itself into a local political party called the Dawro National Democratic Movement (DPDM). This form of organizing was not unique to Dawro; many ethnic groups in the country had established ethnic liberation fronts in the years before the EPRDF came to power.[10] Wherever the EPRDF found such independently organized ethnic parties it opted to assert its own legitimacy by establishing a competing satellite party. These EPRDF wings are generally identified by their "trade mark" PDOs (People's Democratic Organization): examples are the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Woliata Peoples' Democratic Organization (WPDO), and the Gamo-Gofa Dawro Peoples' Democratic Organization (GGDPDO). The EPRDF carefully recruits suitable individuals in each ethnic territory to establish and lead their respective PDOs, which are charged with discrediting and eventually dismantling the more culturally and socially entrenched political groups. The TPLF/EPRDF strategy thus introduced new dynamics to local political contestations by taking advantage of local cultures of stratification and sources of dissatisfaction.

In Dawro, the EPRDF quickly moved to establish GGDPDO to counter the independent DPDM. To lead the new party the EPRDF appointed a schoolteacher named Atnafu (not his real name), who came from a traditionally low-ranked status group of iron forgers, a caste that is symbolically revered for its association with iron and fire but otherwise discriminated against across the African continent (see Todd 1977). The EPRDF expected Atnafu to fill the role of a local representative who had some local legitimacy but who would by and large depend on the central government for his position. In effect, Atnafu became the new governor of Dawro. He had the power to hire, fire, promote, and demote people in the reconstituted state bureaucracy, and he used the resources of the central government (political backing, money, army, vehicles, etc.) to undermine the more autonomous Dawro party. After his success in Dawro, he became an appointed official in the next higher level of the state bureaucracy, the North Omo Zonal administration, and he was later posted to a much higher office at the state council of SNNPR, which governed about 10 million people at the time. It was a phenomenal political success for Atnafu to "represent" his *Biher* (ethno-nation) at the regional governing council. In short, as a leader of the Dawro ethnic group at that historical moment, Atnafu led the social construction of an alternative Dawro elite but still in the name of the Dawro right for representation and ethnic self-government. For the EPRDF to ally with people like Atnafu in opposition to locally more dominant Malla leaders appeared to be progressive, but it was not democratic, because the DPDM leaders had the overwhelming majority Dawro support.

Ethnic Self-Government in Wolaita

Like Dawro, the Wolaita society is an agricultural society that had a strongly centralized political system. But to the EPRDF, the Wolaita posed somewhat different challenges. With a much larger population of about 1.3 million at the time, a strategic location along major transportation and communication routes, and a sizable number of well-educated members spread across the country, the Wolaita seemed to be in a better position than many such "major minorities" to take advantage of EPRDF's rhetoric of minority rights. The Wolaita People's Democratic Front (WPDF), which had been in existence at least since 1989 (Aalen 2008), took part in the EPRDF- organized transitional charter and occupied the two seats in the EPRDF's transitional parliament representing Wolaita. But like the DPDM, WPDF had been founded and led by prominent and well-educated Wolaita elite. Among prominent leaders of WPDF was the late Mulu Meja, an accomplished politician and lawyer who was the son of a prominent religious and political figure, a Member of Parliament during the Haile Selassie regime, and one of the two Wolaita representatives in the EPRDF transitional parliament. In this case, in order to combat the perceived (or imagined) challenges posed by the independent Wolaita party, the EPRDF appointed Tefera Meskele, a high school graduate, former soldier in the EPRDF army, and former prisoner of war, to create the Wolaita Peoples' Democratic Organization (WPDO).

As WPDO moved quickly and aggressively to become the only legal representative and governing party of Wolaita, tension ran high between WPDO and WPDF. WPDO deployed a series of punitive political and administrative measures such as firing or suspending WPDF members and supporters from their civil service jobs or using intimidation tactics (see Dea 2010). Eventually the WPDO almost managed to eviscerate WPDF, and out of this process Tefera emerged as the leader of the new governing Wolaita elite in the area. Tefera was then rewarded with a promotion as secretary of the SNNPR council, the second most powerful position (after the president) in the regional state government.

Tefera's position within the EPRDF weakened in the late 1990s, at which point the EPRDF took a radical measure of linguistic and political amalgamation involving four major ethnic groups (Wolaita, Dawro, Gamo, and Goffa) and a number of smaller ethnic groups in the region. The outcome was a new linguistic (and potentially new ethnic) group referred to as WoGaGoDa, with the name derived from the first syllabus of each group. Although all the groups did have political and cultural histories that should have qualified them as "major minorities" entitled to a measure of ethnic self-government, that right had not been granted until that point. The creation of WoGaGoDa was thus understood as adding insult to injury, and it sparked a furious resistance, especially in Wolaita, where an ad hoc movement was organized to demand a separate self-governing state (region or zone) for the Wolaita.

The first phase of Wolaita resistance against WoGaGoDa was strictly civil and peaceful; it was led by eight Wolaita elders who presented their questions to the government bureaucracy from the then existing zone up to the Prime Minister's office. When the elders were consistently turned down and the government pushed ahead with implementing WoGaGoDa, a series of violent demonstrations began. People from all walks of life (students, teachers, businesspeople, religious leaders, and ordinary peasants) took part in this resistance, all citing the constitutional provision of the right to self-government and to use one's own language. This resistance culminated in the burning down of a government office, the breaking free of two teachers who had been imprisoned for opposing WoGaGoDa, and a general breakdown of law and order in Soddo town (the symbolic and de facto administrative center of the Wolaita), which led to several deaths and the destruction of property. The government deployed special army units but eventually backed down, gave up the WoGaGoDa policy, established separate zonal-level politico-administrative structures for Wolaita, Dawro, Gamo, and Goffa, and allowed them to use their respective languages to run their own governments.

The WoGaGoDa turmoil seemed to be a turning point in the evolution of EPRDF's practice of ethnic self-government in the region. In the wake of the turmoil, EPRDF dismissed some of the early local vanguards of its revolutionary democracy such as Tefera and Atnafu and formed a new alliance with culturally and socially more credible ethnic agents. Thus in Wolaita the EPRDF appointed as the president of the newly established Wolaita zone the late Firew Altaye, the grandson of a prominent *Fitawrari* (a powerful political title during Emperor Haile Selassie's regime) who, not surprisingly, came from a prominent Wolaita clan of Hizia. By all accounts, Firew was probably the best choice for the position at the time. However, it is also true that he came from a high-status cultural category and in earlier EPRDF's practices would not have been appointed president of the Wolaita zone, at least partly because of his strong social and cultural capital. In Dawro, a similar pattern emerged. By the time of the highly competitive 2005 parliamentary elections, the EPRDF, in anticipation of a serious electoral challenge from the opposition parties, was allying itself with the most prominent local families. For example, Damene Darota, a graduate of the best agricultural university in the country and a member of the local majority of the Malla (in fact, he comes from the Dawro royal clan of Kawka) was appointed Dawro zone president.

The Political Value of Minority Rights in the Struggle for Power: A Conceptual Reflection

Perhaps a logical entry point to a brief conceptual reflection on the empirical material presented above is Weber's (1978) explication of the interaction (or relationship) among status groups, party, and state. For Weber,

modern political parties are organizations that acquire or influence social power not on the basis of "value-rational" action, but through instrumentally rational means. What counts in this environment, as Gane (2005:220) explains, is not the intrinsic rationality of power, but rather the instrumental struggle for "political control." From this perspective, we might interpret EPRDF's advocacy of minority rights not simply as a moral action meant to stop an ongoing injustice (just "doing the right thing"), but as an instrumentally rational action of "mining" the political value of minority rights in the context of changing global and national contexts.

Drawing a bit more on Weberian insights also suggests that modern political parties, while becoming increasingly instrumental in their value orientation, do not simply replace status groups in the competition for power. Rather, status groups continue to exist as the fragile but "enchanted" "other" of associative (or communal) structure. Thus, what we see in places like Dawro and Wolaita and across the nation is that the EPRDF, despite its initial assault on some aspects of tradition (via the rejection of traditionally powerful groups and the promotion of people from low-status groups), opportunistically co-opted traditional structure. The resultant state is characterized by an unresolved tension between the traditional structure of status stratification and rationalized party/state structure. At the lowest level of the analytic scale being considered here—the context of everyday interactions between a person from a marginalized occupational group and a local state agent from a high-status group—there is an unresolved tension between party/state structure and traditional (status) structure, which manifests itself in a number of ways, including as unanswered minority rights questions. It is also important to note that while the minority rights rhetoric has served as an important political tool for the EPRDF—giving it legitimacy before the international community, a public image of morality, and the opportunity for divide-and-rule tactics—the various minorities have also passionately embraced and employed minority rights language to demand fulfillment of institutionally enshrined rights.

There are global parallels to this pattern. Wilson (2006) notes that over the last sixty years since the issuing of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights have been advocated and appropriated by a bewildering array of actor groups including liberal individualists, conservatives, national states (including nondemocratic ones), NGOs, major political parties, liberation movements, and representatives of ethnic and religious minorities. In Ethiopia, the official version of the human and (minority) group rights narrative was introduced by a former liberation movement cum national government. Assefa (2009) is factually right when he states that almost 100 percent of federated Ethiopian states are staffed by the natives of the respective regions. However, this type of statist view denies the reality that these societies of ethnic minorities, like most other societies, are constituted of multiple voices. The EPRDF's approach has effectively taken a unitary view of ethnic minorities and tried to silence

any contending voice within an ethnic minority. But these voices are never totally silenced, and thus they have continued to push the state beyond the EPRDF's rhetoric and beyond what the EPRDF/state was willing or prepared to concede. What we have witnessed in this process is the idea/ideology of minority rights mediating political contestations in new ways.

Wilson (2006) counsels that ethnographers can be more sensitive to the vicissitudes of political contestations that take place in the language of rights if they do not assume in advance that human rights are either governmental "ethics of power" or a grassroots emancipationist "weapon of the weak." By closely examining two decades of the making and unmaking of ethnic self-government in Ethiopia, this article adds a temporal dimension to Wilson's suggestion. Thus, if one looks at the story over the twenty-year period, one observes how the changing political fortunes of individuals and groups help explain the rhetorical switching between group rights as an instrument to redress injustice (when invoked by resistance movements including the TPLF/EPRDF when it was a rebellion movement) and minority rights as an instrument to maintain state power (when used by the EPRDF as a governing party that controls the national state).

Analyses of human and group rights politics usually proceed by identifying the victims and the perpetrators, or the dominated minority and the dominant majority. As the Ethiopian ethnography illustrates, categorical identification (of the dominated and the dominant; perpetrators and victims of rights violations) can be misleading, since the same individual or group of individuals can belong at once to different categories. In Dawro, Wolaita, and many other Ethiopian societies, members of marginalized occupational minorities experience rights violations committed by the locally dominant group (or a local majority) buttressed by local/ethnic cultural institutions. For the local majorities in places like Dawro, who are themselves ethnic minorities, it is the state, by commission or by omission, that perpetrates rights violations. On a global scale, many African states, often justifiably, accuse Western governments and institutions of colonial, neocolonial, imperial, or hegemonic interference with their right as sovereign polities to be self-governing. It is partly as a mechanism to curtail a potential Western intervention that many African governments interpret the "people's right to self-determination" stated in the U.N. and African charters of human rights to mean the "African state's rights to govern its population." What is at stake here is how the language of human and group rights is appropriated in the context of local, national, and global power relations (see Cohen, Hyden & Nagan, 1993).

A well-known but empirically much less explored theme in debates on human rights in Africa pertains to understanding the effect of power differentials within each society and the African cultural response to the emerging global language of human rights. An-Na'im and Hammond (2002) maintain that African cultures are the most important variable affecting the entrenchment of human rights in African societies. On the one hand,

this suggests that African cultures, like many cultures elsewhere, sometimes get in the way of realizing the rights of some segments of the society such as minorities or women. On the other hand, the statement may also suggest that sustainable realization of human rights on the ground requires that African cultures nurture human rights in their own terms rather than being dictated to by international conventions or Western powers or even their own national state. However, An-Na'im and Hamond's article and their edited volume fall short when it comes to providing an empirical analysis of how power differentials within African societies influence the development of human rights in Africa.

The preceding ethnography is one analysis of power differentials (relations of power as mediated by the language of rights) within an African society. The ethnographic description of what has unfolded in Wolaita and Dawro as they grappled with the policy of ethnic self-government is in fact a probe into the cultural processes inside two Ethiopian societies that have been trying to make cultural and political sense of the Ethiopian state's torrent of new policies. The story is quintessentially global, national, regional, and local at once. Slightly twisting the Deluezean logic of deference and repetition (Williams 2003), perhaps we can talk of what has been unfolding in EPRDF's Ethiopia as a form of repetition (of previously used governance strategies) but with important differences. One clear indicator of this is the matter of who, in sociological terms, has come to dominate key power positions—national, local, and in between. The EPRDF calls itself a revolutionary party. The pattern of power practices emerging at the beginning of EPRDF's third decade in power suggests patterns that are similar to those seen in many other historical situations, including the French, Russian, Chinese, and Ethiopian socialist revolutions, in which the revolution abandons its early vanguards as soon as men from prominent families regroup themselves to (re)emerge as the new elite in the reconstituted state structure. Atnafu and Tefera, young men from modest social backgrounds, and many others like them, presided over a vicious local power struggle against political groups led by senior men from prominent social backgrounds, such as high-status groups and royal clans. The young pawns of the revolution wholeheartedly supported the new government, and at least temporarily enjoyed considerable rewards. But eventually they had to make way for the (re)emergence of the more entrenched elites in possession of more social and cultural capital, both of which are necessary for governance once the dust of revolution settles. This seemed to be the case especially in Wolaita and Dawro in the wake of the WoGaGoda rebellion. In the 2005 parliamentary elections in Dawro, candidates from the high-status Malla group emerged as elected Dawro leaders (see Barata 2011). I am not suggesting that they were not perfectly qualified candidates. But this was an example of the EPRDF's willingness to abandon its ostensibly universal moral principle of promoting the rights of all minorities when faced with electoral challenges. All indicators are that rather than this being an iso-

lated case of oversight, this was a manifestation of the narrow instrumental value of EPRDF's minority rights rhetoric, in the sense that minority rights are dispensable if they do not have an instrumental political value.

Conclusion

This article has sought to shed an ethnographic light on the complexity of a political process in which political movements that are deeply entrenched in cultural traditions of hierarchic power draw inspiration from and/or have had to respond to the exegesis of democratic governance and human rights to attain or maintain power. The article focuses on describing ethnographically how a distinctively conceived hybrid notion of minority rights was unleashed as part of governance reform and how variously situated individuals and groups have reacted to it. As might be expected, the Ethiopian encounter with human and ethnic minority rights is a messy and contested process. But the article suggests that the new Ethiopian state's official incorporation of human and especially ethnic group rights into its governance principles has inspired a new form of political contestation mediated by the language of human rights.

The analysis questions any categorical conclusion pronouncing the Ethiopian experience simply a success or a failure. Political participation (perception and response) as well as the outcomes of this process are substantially different for differently situated persons and groups. A commonly observed pattern in the case study area was that the new government's ethnic group rights for self-governance began by marginalizing traditional ethnic elites when they challenged the new government, and then it switched into selectively embracing parts of the traditional ethnic elites along with opportunistic mobilization of their cultural institutions as a way of garnering support for the new ruling party. Culture in this process was condemned as the villain of rights violation and served as the core criterion for granting rights.

From the material presented, one can also glean that a form of confrontation of cultural models of power underlies the Ethiopian struggle with human and group rights. When the EPRDF opted to appoint Atnafu from a traditionally non-office-holding cultural category of persons to represent the Dawro ethnic group, it effectively challenged an aspect of the Dawro cultural model of power in which mostly men from the category of Malla (local majority) contended for political office. At that point, EPRDF employed a progressive universalist approach to human rights. However, EPRDF's ideology of revolutionary democracy explicitly challenges some aspects of the Western liberal cultural model of rights built around the individual as a core rights bearer. The continued unease in this interactional space brings to the surface not just the interconnections but also the unresolved tensions among local, national, and global structures of power. Invoked in such an expansive interactional space, the human rights language has served, albeit unequally, both power and its subjects.

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Notes

1. This article draws on field research I conducted in Dawro and Wolaita between 1995 and 2006 for three different projects. These were my doctoral dissertation project supported by the University of Bergen, Norway, my postdoctoral research project funded by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, and a research project entitled "Contested Power: Negotiating Traditional Authority in Modern Elections in Ethiopia" supported by the Norwegian Center for Human Rights. In addition, as a native southern Ethiopian, as well as a researcher who has continued research interest in the region, I have been keenly following all major developments in the region. Thus in this article I have also presented some information that I came across outside these projects.
2. As Merry (2003) recounts, the American Anthropological Association (AAA), in its 1947 statement, rejected the proposed Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the ground that it universalized a Eurocentric idea of the human individual as the only bearer of human rights. Partly responding to similar critiques, the U.N.'s conceptualization of human rights broadened over the years to include group rights such as the rights of women, indigenous people, and ethnic and religious minorities. Perhaps partly encouraged by this, the AAA in 1999 officially embraced the international human rights regime with a caveat:

"AAA founds its approach [to human rights] on anthropological principles of respect for concrete human differences, both collective and individual, rather than the abstract legal uniformity of Western tradition" (AAA 1999).

3. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a coalition party constituted of the founding and dominant core ethnic party named the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and three other ethnic parties, namely the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Southern People's Democratic Organization (SPDO), and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). In addition to these formal members of the national governing coalition, the EPRDF has affiliate members (informally referred to as "sister parties") operating in the ethnic territories of Afar, Somali, Gambela, and Beni Shangul regions.
4. See Gudina (2003); Pausewang (2002); Tronvoll (2006); Aalen (2008).
5. For reports specifically focusing on the human rights conduct of the new Ethiopian government, see the Web sites of (to name but few): the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, the U.S. Department of State, the European Union, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Norwegian Center for Human Rights.
6. In centralized African societies traditionally organized as a kingdom or chiefdom, the marginalization of occupational minorities comes close to the situation of Dhalits (untouchables) in the Indian caste system (see Dea 2003).
7. As the EPRDF consolidated its grip on power, the subject of human rights appears to be increasingly reclassified as what Desalegn Rahmato (2008) calls an untouchable or unsafe scholarly topic. Perhaps that is why scholarly works written by Ethiopian researchers examining issues pertaining to human and minority/group rights are rare, while Ethiopia figures frequently in the reports of international organizations (U.S. State Department, the E.U., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, etc.) in relation to human rights violations.
8. For a useful comparison, see Suberu (2006), which compares Ethiopian federalism with that of Nigeria and points out that, unlike in the Ethiopian case, Nigerian authorities sought to avoid any correspondence between ethnic boundaries and federated state boundaries.
9. The article was finalized before the news of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's death on August 20, 2012, was announced by the Ethiopian government. While Meles's death is obviously a very significant historical event, his departure has not (yet) had any bearing on the main argument of this article.
10. To name but a few, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), the Wolaita People's Democratic Front (WPDP), and the Ogaden National Liberation Movement (ONLF).