Critical Historiography

Ethnicity as a Hindrance for Understanding Ethiopian History: An Argument Against an Ethnic Late Nineteenth Century*

Brian J. Yates

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* Almost forty years ago Gene Ellis wrote an article entitled "The Feudal Paradigm as a Hindrance to Understanding Ethiopia," in which he argues that while Ethiopian society fits in quite well with general conceptions of feudalism, the feudal paradigm is an *ineffective* lens to understand Ethiopia. I argue that ethnicity is a similar trope in understandings of Ethiopia. The importance of Ellis's article is his critique of utilizing foreign frameworks to understand Ethiopia. In many instances, authors either use foreign concepts of identity or foreign sources to construct identities in Ethiopia that do not correspond to lived historic experiences in Ethiopia. Critiques of Ellis's views emphasize his Eurocentric notions of feudalism, saying that what makes Ethiopia non-feudal is not so much the fact that their society is not feudal as the fact that Ethiopians are not European. Gene Ellis, "The Feudal Paradigm as a Hindrance to Understanding Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 14–2 (1976), 275–295; Legesse Lemma, "Review of 'The Feudal Paradigm as a Hindrance to Understanding Ethiopia,'" *Ethiopianist Notes* 2–1 (1978), 71–73; Gene Ellis, "Feudalism in Ethiopia: A Further Comment on Paradigms and Their Use," *Northeast African Studies* 1–3 (1979), 91–97, where he argues that paradigms in general may obscure more than they illuminate. Donald Crummey seemed to have the last word on the debate arguing that Abyssinian society can be called feudal only with "serious qualification." Donald Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism," *Past & Present* 89 (1980), 115–138, 138.

Brian J. Yates received his PhD from the University of Illinois in 2009 and is presently an assistant professor of history at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Yates has published work in *Journal of Oromo Studies, The International Journal of Ethiopian Studies, North East African Studies, The Journal of Black Studies, and African Identities.* His work has focused on the ethnic and national identities of Ethiopia and the cultural practices that have produced them. He is presently working on a manuscript entitled *The Other Häbäsha: The Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1913*. E-mail: byates@sju.edu

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Abstract: Despite its present ethnic federalism, Ethiopian history has been marked by provincial or cultural identities, which twentieth century notions of identity have obscured. This essay gives three major reasons why ethnicity is not an effective lens to understand Ethiopia's complex history. One, there is no agreement among either popular and academic writers on what ethnic identities in Ethiopia represents, either currently or historically. Two, a focus on ethnicity obscures the rationale behind the actions of the state and key actors during the nineteenth century. Three, an ethnic lens brings much needed scholarly attention away from key moments in the nineteenth century.

Résumé: En dépit de son fédéralisme ethnique actuel, l'histoire éthiopienne a été marquée par des identités provinciales ou culturelles rendues inintelligibles par les notions d'identité du XXe siècle. Cet article donne trois raisons principales pour lesquelles le concept d'ethnicité n'est pas un prisme efficace pour comprendre l'histoire complexe de l'Éthiopie. Premièrement, les auteurs populaires et universitaires ne sont pas d'accord sur ce que représentent les identités ethniques en Éthiopie que ce soit actuellement ou dans le passé. Deuxièmement, l'accent mis sur l'appartenance ethnique amoindrit le rôle joué par l'État ou des personnages-clefs au cours du XIXe siècle. Troisièmement, une lecture ethnique détourne l'attention des chercheurs des moments-clefs du XIXe siècle.

> "Yet remembrance is always a form of forgetting (…) distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums public rituals, textbooks and various artifacts of mass culture – distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals."[1]

Introduction[2]

Haylä Sellassé ruled Ethiopia for most of the twentieth century as a direct descendant of the Hebrew King Solomon. He is generally defined as an Amhara. What is rarely acknowledged is that at the very least one of his grandfathers was Oromo and his mother was Gurage. His wife was also an Oromo. In December 1994, after his successful overthrow of Haile Maryam Mengistu's Marxist regime, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi reorganized modern Ethiopia's provinces into ethnic administrative regions, replacing some of Shäwa and most of Wällo, Bägémder, and Gojjam with the Amhara regional state and combining Wälläga, Arsi, Illubabor, Bale, and Sidamo into the Oromia regional state. These new regions split some historic provinces, combined others, and explicitly argued that Ethiopia's government

[1] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91–4 (2005), 1233–1263, 1233.

[2] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *History in Africa*, and mention the constructive comments that I received at the 2013 NYASA and ASA conferences and the 2015 SERSAS/SEAN conference.

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is best organized along primordial ethnic lines. This ideology fuels an argument and has been a result of scholarship that understands Ethiopia as primarily an ethnic state. Twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship has assumed that since ethnicity has been a central theme during the last several decades, it must have been so in the nineteenth century.[3] Previous iterations of highland states in Ethiopia have been linked by hoe agriculture, Semitic languages, Abrahamic religions, and hierarchal political structures, but have all had significant ethnic diversity and change.[4] Due to its diversity as well as its lack of a colonial experience, Ethiopia is an interesting case to test the view of colonial creation versus a primordial view of African identities.[5] To rationalize an ethnic state, there needs to be a historic antecedent to the static ethnic boundaries of present-day Ethiopia. Accompanying these ethnic reimaginings, two versions of Ethiopia's history were created by scholars largely in the twentieth century and informed by travel narratives of earlier centuries.[6] However, to use Hall's words

[3] Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of Princes, The Challenges of Islam and the Re-Unification of the Christian Empire (1769–1855)* (New York/Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968); Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868–2004* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005); Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989); Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Mohammad Hassen, *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, 1300–1700* (New York: James Currey, 2015). For more on identity and state formation in last few decades, see: Cedric Barnes, "Sovereignty, Identity and Modernity: Understanding Ethiopia," *African Affairs* 408 (2003), 507–514. Most recently, Makki defines the Abyssinian identities as primarily "ethno-religious." Fouad Makki, "Empire and Modernity: Dynastic Centralization and Official Nationalism in Late Imperial Ethiopia," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24–2 (2011), 265–286, 276.

[4] Hoe agriculture is dominant in the highlands of Ethiopia, however there are other types of agriculture that are extensively utilized in the lowlands of modern Ethiopia.

[5] This debate is summarized well in Donald R. Wright, "'What Do You Mean There Were No Tribes in Africa?:' Thoughts on Boundaries and Related Matters in Precolonial Africa," *History in Africa* 26 (1999), 409–426, 420–421. Also see: Carola Lentz, "'Tribalism' and Ethnicity in Africa: A Review of Four Decades of Anglophone Research," *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 31–2 (1995), 303–328.

[6] Especially in James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773* (Edinburgh: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1790); William Cornwallis Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia* (New York: J. Winchester, 1844); Johann L. Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours, during an Eighteen Year's Residence in Eastern Africa. Together with Journeys to Jagga, Usambara, Ukambani, Shoa, Abessinia, and Khartum; and a Coasting Voyage from Mombaz to Cape Delgado* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860). For a summary of the essentialist traveler views on the Oromo, see: Eloi Ficquet, "La fabrique des origines Oromo," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 18–1 (2002), 55–71, 61–64. For a summary of the debate, see: Bahru Zewde, "YaSost Shi Ways yaMato Amat Tarik? (Three Thousand or One Hundred

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presented at the beginning of this essay, "remembering" ethnicity "distorts" and "suppresses" shared historic experiences at the local level. In essence, remembering Haylä Sellassé as an Amhara ignores his descent from other ethnic groups as well as denies his multi-ethnic provincial Shäwan identity.

The first reimagining tells the story of the offspring of the union of Solomon and Maksheda (Sheba), who brought back Judaism (and reportedly the Ark of the Covenant)[7] and statehood to the highlands of the Horn of Africa.[8] Their descendants (the Amhara and the Tigrinyan) have static primordial identities as the permanent leaders of Ethiopia (a name chosen due to its reference in the Old Testament) and God's chosen people.[9] Thus, Ethiopian history for the last three thousand years has related solely the actions of these people in the highlands, while the histories of all other groups are ignored due to the fact that they are less civilized and "wholly" African. In addition, the impetus for advancements in the civilizations in the highlands is rooted in Middle Eastern or European influences.[10] The second reimagining is a response to the focus on literate Christians of the highlands and questions the existence of this state and its civilization and details the histories of Oromo, Gurage, and Omotic groups. They argue that the "three thousand years myth" is a product of Ethiopians (the Amhara and

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Years of [Ethiopian] History)" *Weyeyet,* third series 1–1 (1992), 1–15. When citing *Häbäsha* names, they are historically organized by first name. *Häbäsha* do not have family names. The "middle" name is an individual's father's name. The "last" name is the grandfather's name.

[7] The vessel that is according to Judeo-Christian traditions that contains the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses. Possessing this ark provides evidence for these people to be considered God's chosen people.

[8] This story is summed up well and called "the official Ethiopian imperial historiography" in: Thomas Osmand, "Knowledge, Identity and Epistemological Choices: Competing Theoretical Trends in Oromo Studies," in: Susanne Epple (ed.), *Creating and Crossing Boundaries in Ethiopia: Dynamics of Social Categorization and Differentiation* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), 189–212, 193–194.

[9] Most notably in Jeremiah 13:23, Psalms 68:31, and Job 28:19. Miguel F. Brooks, *A Modern Translation of the Kebra Nagast: The Glory of Kings* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996).

[10] The fourteenth century document, the *Käbra Nagast* is key in this ideology. While, later twentieth century scholars have discredited the historic value of the document, it remains a foundation of early twentieth century Ethiopianist works, such as Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians; an Introduction to Country and People* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1960). The following generation focused on the documents generally housed at Ethiopia's churches. This trend in Ethiopianist scholarship is defined as the Church and State school by Alesandro Triulzi in: Alessandro Triulzi, "Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography," in: Wendy James, Donald L. Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2002), 276–288, 277–278.

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the Tigrinyan), the uncivilized, ethnocentric allies of European colonizers, who used their perceived ethnic superiority as motivation and European firearms as the means to carve out an empire from other ethnicities in the Horn of Africa during the "Scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth century.[11] In sum, ethnic identities are created in order to make meaning of a literate Christian state in sub-Saharan Africa or to evidence twenty-first century ethno-national conflict. These identities obscure not only a basic understanding of the Horn of Africa, but also the fundamental moments in its complex and long history.[12]

In this essay, I argue that in the historiography of Ethiopia, ethnicity is defined in a fixed primordial manner, especially in regards to the northern highlands, and creates an inaccurate and – especially with regard to the nineteenth century – an ahistorical way of viewing Ethiopia.[13] Local identities

[11] Examples of this trend include for the Oromo: Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*; Asafa Jalata, *Orumummaa: Oromo Culture, Identity and Nationalism* (Atlanta: Oromia Publishing Company, 2007); Ezekiel Gebissa, "Introduction: Rendering Audible the Voices of the Powerless," *Northeast African Studies,* new series 9–3 (2002), 1–14; Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990); Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880–1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014); Mekuria Bulcha, "The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization in Ethiopia and the Conflict over the Status of 'Afaan Oromoo,'" *African Affairs* 384 (1997), 325–352, 325–326; Hassen, *The Oromo*. Also see for the Tigrinyan or Eritrea case: Alemseged Abbay, "Diversity and State-Building in Ethiopia," *African Affairs* 413 (2004), 593–614, 594; Aregawi Berhe, "The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front," *African Affairs* 413 (2004), 569–592. Patrick Gilkes critiques the Eritrean and Tigrinyan historical reconstruction, which he calls mythology. Patrick Gilkes, "National Identity and Historical Mythology in Eritrea and Somaliland," *Northeast African Studies* 10–3 (2003), 163–187; Patrick Gilkes, "Review Article: Eritrea: Historiography and Mythology," *African Affairs* 361 (1991), 623–628.

[12] This bias is also reflected in the much of the European source material on the era. Irma Taddia writes: "They emphasized ethnicity, and local and regional differences. These observers shared the general European ignorance of the real historical dynamics of African societies." Irma Taddia, "Ethiopian Source Material and Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth Century: The Letter to Menilek (1899) by Blatta Gäbrä Egzi'abehēr," *Journal of African History* 35–3 (1994), 493–516, 507. She argues that the real historic dynamics are national and territorial unity and a secular state that links tradition and independence that transcends ethnicity and where ethnic groups could "live alongside each other in a larger state and have equal importance within it" (Taddia, "Ethiopian Source Material," 508). Also see: Irma Taddia, "Correspondence as a New Source for African History: Some Evidence from Colonial Eritrea," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 157 (2000), 109–134.

[13] Recent works have emphasized a fluidity of identity, but focus on the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and groups in Southern Ethiopia. See: Susanne Epple, "Introduction," in: Susanne Epple (ed.), *Creating and Crossing Boundaries in Ethiopia: Dynamics of Social Categorization and Differentiation* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), 1–15, 4–9.

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and the historic experiences that inform fluid notions of identity are larger factors in Ethiopian history, due to the fact that these identities are less ambiguous than ethnic ones, and local identities give scholars key insights into the making of Ethiopian history that twentieth and twenty-first century notions of ethnicity obscure. In other words, identities that reflect the specific local experiences of Gojjam, Wällo, Shäwa, or Gondar are significantly better lenses into Ethiopian history than the fixed ethnic lens of Amhara, Oromo, or Tigrinyan. Thus, fixed notions of ethnic identity presented in the historiography of nineteenth-century Ethiopia do not reflect the reality, because identities are too fluid, ethnic categories are too contested, and Ethiopia is too heterogeneous for a static ethnic lens to illuminate the major events in this century.

Underpinning an ethnic version of Ethiopia's history are the beliefs that certain ethnicities cannot become Ethiopian, ethnic identities do not change, and the conflicts of the late nineteenth century are primarily ethnic.[14] While some scholars argue for fluid notions of identity, their studies are underutilized in the construction of Ethiopian history.[15] The indigenous primary source material presents a different picture, one where conflicts transcend ethnicity, identities are fluid, and the highland state has incorporated a variety of ethnic groups. Two events in nineteenth-century Ethiopian history, the Council of Boru Méda and the Battle of Embabo, clearly indicate the centrality of local identities informed by shared historic experience in the conflicts and negotiations in the making of modern Ethiopia that resulted in shifts in ethnic and national identities in multiple directions and is reflected in the

[14] Hassen, *The Oromo*, also makes this argument for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

[15] For example, Shiferaw Bekele argues for a class based and ethnically diverse leadership of the Zamana Masafent in: Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections of the Power Elite of the Wara Seh Masfenate," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 15–1 (1991), 157–179, but historians more commonly cite older, less-nuanced works like Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of Princes*. Also, fluid studies on Oromo identity, like Alessandro Triulzi, "United and Divided: Boorana and Gabaro among the Macha Oromo in Western Ethiopia," in: Paul T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996), 251–264; Eirik Odd Arensen, "The Becoming of Place: A Tulama-Oromo Region in Northern Shoa," in: Paul T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996), 210–238 are bypassed for static views of Oromo identity like Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo People* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1999). In this vein, static notions of Amhara identity like Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians* become the standard of not only Amhara identity, but how Ethiopian historiography views the civilization of Oromo.

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experiences, practices, and beliefs of the populations of what becomes modern Ethiopia.[16]

Ethnic Historiography

In Ethiopian studies, identity is contested, but rarely discussed in academic circles. When it is discussed, generally it is in Ethiopian studies conferences or regional journals. The International Conferences of Ethiopian Studies (ICES) are major events in the study of Ethiopia; as such, they set the tone for Ethiopian studies for the next three years.[17] Due to the fact that Ethiopia was not colonized, and the study of Ethiopia is decentered, this is a rare setting for the meeting of American, European, and Ethiopian-based Ethiopianists. The conference proceedings are the backbone of the Ethiopia Studies canon and also the setting for a great deal of discussion on identities. There was little consensus among late-twentieth-century scholars on what defined an Amhara or an Oromo, and this ambiguity has had a great impact on the histories written on Ethiopia. Debates centered on not only the nature of these identities (political, biological, cultural, or social) but also on the substance within these containers. In terms of the Amhara, there is disagreement on whether they are rooted in Yemen or in highland Ethiopia, but some agreement on the defining qualities of the group. With the Oromo, there is some question as to the origins of the group (southern

[16] I argue this for the Ethiopian case, using the term "Häbäsha" that is supra-ethnic. Brian J. Yates, "From Hated to Häbäsha: Oromo Identity Shifts in Shäwa and Wällo," *African Identities* 14–3 (2016), 194–208. Scholars of the Sudan utilized the term "Ta'rib" or "Darfurian" to describe categories that in the case of the Sudan encompassed different ethnicities. See: Heather J. Sharkey, "Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race," *African Affairs* 426 (2008), 21–43, 23; Alex de Waal, "Who Are the Darfurians? Arab and African Identities, Violence and External Engagement," *African Affairs* 415 (2005), 181–205, 187. De Waal's article parallels an earlier article by an Ethiopianist, who raised an important question, "Who are the Shäwans?," arguing for a fluid transethnic identity, but his article had limited impact on the canon, which defines Shäwan and Amhara as synonymous terms: Gerry Salole, "Who Are the Shoans?," *Horn of Africa* 2–3 (1979), 20–30.

[17] Bahru Zewde, "A Century of Ethiopian Historiography," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 33–2 (2000), 1–26. Donald Crummey, "Society, State and Nationality in the Recent Historiography of Ethiopia," *Journal of African History* 31–1 (1990), 103–119; Donald Crummey, "Ethiopian Historiography in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century: A North American Perspective," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 34–1 (2001), 7–24. These proceedings are generally published, most recently: Eloi Ficquet, Ahmed Hassen Omer and Thomas Osmund (eds.), *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement,* two volumes (Los Angeles: Tsehai Press, 2016).

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Ethiopia or northern Kenya) and little consensus on defining qualities.[18] Generally, the Amhara are understood among scholars as a fluid social class, but this complexity is not reflected in how this category is used in the writing of Ethiopian history.[19] Thus, it is clear that "Amhara" culture is a key lens, but due to its association with the state and its spread across Ethiopia, it is difficult to delineate Amhara-descended people from those who practice Amhara culture. Also, generally, scholarly attention has focused on assimilation into a static Amhara culture at the expense of the ways in which the other cultures have impacted "Amhara" culture.[20]

[18] See: Harold G. Marcus and Grover Hudson (eds.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 5–10 September 1994* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994); Sevir Chernetsov, "On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara," in: Rolf Gundlach, Manfred Kropp and Annalis Leibundgu (eds.), *Der Sudan in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1995), 17–35; Siegfried Pausewang, "The Two-Faced Amhara Identity," *Scrinium* 1–1 (2005), 273–286; Siegfried Pausewang, "Political Conflicts in Ethiopia - in View of the Two-Faced Amhara Identity," in: Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra and Shiferaw Bekele (eds.), *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, volume 2 (Trondheim: NTNU, 2009), 549–560. Paul T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996); Melbaa, *Oromia.*

[19] For example, Donald Donham, in his wonderful essay to begin the edited collection *Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, defines the Amhara as a social class, but later combines it with a racial identity and states that they are "not markedly negroid." Donald L. Donham, "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History," in: Donald L. Donham and Wendy James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History & Social Anthropology* (Suffolk/Athens OH/Addis Ababa: J. Currey/Ohio University Press/Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), 3–48, 12. More recently Gnamo argues for fluid ethnic identities, but later refers to ethnic groups having a "essence" of culture that has not changed and contributes to "oneness, unity and nationhood." Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 10, 25–27.

[20] An exception is a recent text by Girma Awgichew Demeke that examined the roots of the Amharic language, and he argues that at its origins, Amharic is a Semitic language (he calls this language Old Amharic), but once it became the language of the state, non-native speakers began to utilize this language when speaking to and for the state, thus making it a pidgin language. These new speakers began to shape the language, to the degree that the author refers to it as Modern Amharic. Modern Amharic has many of the elements of the languages that are found in and around the highlands of Ethiopia, including Agaw, Afan Oromo, and Gurage. See: Girma Awgichew Demeke, *The Origin of Amharic* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2013), 2–3. Also for the impact of urbanization in Ethiopia on the spread of Amharic, see: Bahru Zewde, "The Changing Functions of the Amharic Language," in: Bahru Zewde (ed.), *Society & State in Ethiopian History: Selected Essays* (Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 2012), 89–103, 93–95.

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A number of scholars and politicians have attempted to sketch out what an Amhara is, but there are considerable divergences on the nature of this identity. Some argue that it is a cultural identity; however, much of the scholarship indicates that it is solely a class-based identity, devoid of ethnicity.[21] In essence, those in political power became Amhara.[22] Most importantly, it can it be used effectively as a lens to order Ethiopian history?[23] In the primary literature there is only mention of it as a place name, located in the former province of Wällo. The province was once called Amhara, but was renamed after the Oromo clan who conquered it. Early conceptions of Ethiopia gloss over these differences not only to connect Amhara wherever they are found to each other but also to connect them to the historic Aksumite empire of the First Millennium.[24] In other words, to use Amhara as a way to frame Ethiopian history, one must ignore the significant differences between Amhara groups as well as the differences in ancient, premodern and modern Ethiopia.

On the Oromo there is a similar lack of clarity, but in the process of writing the Oromo into Ethiopian history, a common history of the

[21] The first face in the Amhara identity in Pausewang, "The Two-Faced Amhara Identity."

[22] For example, a founding father of Ethiopian history has argued that both the Agaw and the Gafat essentially became Amhara: Tamrat Taddesse, "Processes of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of Agaw," *Journal of African History* 29–1 (1988), 5–18; Tamrat Taddesse, "Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Gafat," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 21–1 (1988), 121–154.

[23] In terms of views of the Amhara, some scholars argue that it is a class in Ethiopia as opposed to an ethnic group. Takkele Taddesse writes in the Ge'ez and Amharic written records of Ethiopia it was understood as plowmen, free people, Christians, mountain people or the ruling class. Takkele Taddesse, "Do the Amhrara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?," in: Harold G. Marcus and Grover Hudson (eds.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 5–10 September 1994* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994), 176–180. Other scholars emphasize the cosmopolitan, military, or political nature of the identities: Sevir Chernetsov, "On the Origins of the Amhara," *St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies* 1–1 (1993), 97–103. Also see the second face of Pausewang, "The Two-Faced Amhara Identity;" Chernetsov, "On the Problem of Ethnogenesis;" Heran Sereke Brhan, "Ethiopia: A Historical Consideration of Amhara Ethnicity," in: Harold G. Marcus and Grover Hudson (eds.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 5–10 September 1994* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994), 767–770.

[24] A notable exception to this trend is Donald Crummey's excellent study of ethnicity during the *Zämäna Masafent,* in it, he argues that when one challenged the authority of a rival due to him being a "Galla," it was generally from one Oromo descended noble to another Oromo descended noble. Donald Crummey, "Society and Ethnicity in the Politics of Christian Ethiopia during the Zemana Masafent," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8–2 (1975), 266–278, 278.

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Oromo was a necessity.[25] The process of making such a history makes use of the traditional Oromo organizing system, the *gada* system, the traditional Oromo religion, *waaqeffannaa*, or the traditional Oromo culture, *orumumma*.[26] These concepts are used as the foundation of a political nation, which was conquered by non-Oromo Ethiopians. In this reconstruction, similar to that of the Amhara, differences, development changes, and internal discrimination are deemphasized to create a nation that, "[i]n fact, Oromo is one of the most numerous nations in Africa, which enjoys a homogeneous culture and shows a common language, history and descent and once shared political, religious and legal institutions."[27] Thus, they argue that the Oromo are historically similar and are linked biologically and culturally, and are therefore a nation.[28] Dominant in the literature on the Oromo are scholars who transfer twenty-first-century political identities to the identities of nineteenth-century Oromo political actors.[29] These political identities possess a singular culture and are unified under

[25] Georg Haneke, "The Multidimensionality of Oromo Identity," in: Günther Schlee (ed.), *Imagined Differences: Hatred and the Construction of Identity* (Münster/New York: Lit Verlag/Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 133–156, 137.

[26] Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance,* 55–56; Tsega Etefa, *Integration and Peace in East Africa: A History of the Oromo Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xiii, 11; Jalata, *Orumummaa*; Mekuria Bulcha, *Contours of the Emergent and Ancient Oromo Nation: Dilemmas in the Ethiopian Politics of State and Nation-Building* (Cape Town: Center for Advanced Studies of African Societies, 2011); Gemetchu Megerssa, "*Oromumma*: Tradition, Consciousness and Identity," in: Paul T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996), 92–102, 92; Asmarom Legesse, *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000). These elements figure prominently in the 1998 edited collection by Baxter *et al.*, *Being and Becoming Oromo.* Gemetchu Megerssa defines an Oromo as one who had an Oromo father, but does define what makes an Oromo father. Gemetchu Megerssa, "*Oromumma*," 94. Osmand, "Knowledge," 197. This idea is criticized for its patriarchy and racism in: Günther Schlee, "Redrawing the Map of the Horn: The Politics of Difference," *Africa* 73–3 (2003), 343–368.

[27] Melbaa, *Oromia*, 8. This view is summed up well in Günther Schlee, "Islam and the Gada System as Conflict-Shaping Forces in Southern Oromia," in: Harold G. Marcus and Grover Hudson (eds.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 5–10 September 1994* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994), 981–989.

[28] Mekuria Bulcha, "Survival and Reconstruction of National Identity," in: Paul T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1996), 48–66, 50–53.

[29] Asafa Jalata, *State Crises, Globalisation, and National Movements in North-East Africa: The Horn's Dilemma* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004); Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*; Melbaa, *Oromia*; Etefa, *Integration and Peace.* For a critique of these works, see: Bahru, "A Century of Ethiopian Historiography," 15–16.

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the Oromo nation. Thus, all Oromo who were a part of the highland state that converted to Islam or Christianity are not Oromo; they are ones who have lost an Oromo identity.

John Wright states, describing a similar case of views of Zulu identity: "Zulu identity was increasingly reasserted as a natural expression of a powerful and long-established group consciousness."[30] Unlike studies on the Oromo, in later paragraphs he argues this view does not take into consideration academic literature on ethnicity, the historic processes that produce identity or the contemporary uses of identity.[31] In the collection *Being and Becoming Oromo*, the Europeans and Americans focused on the differences, while the Oromo scholars emphasized the sameness of Oromo.[32] Later presentations of the Oromo reproduce this sameness. Beside these methodological issues, the centrality of ethnicity obscures both the provincial and cultural dynamics of Ethiopian history. For example, in the nineteenth century, the *Zämäna Mäsefent* and the conquest of Southern territories both are infused in the historiography with a fixed concept of ethnicity. After the eighteenth century, generally, one finds the Amhara and the Oromo on both sides of conflicts.[33] However, the historiography emphasizes inter-ethnic conflict – creating the view that Ethiopian history is defined by conflict between ethnic groups rather than within them.

The *Zämäna Mäsefent* or the Age of Princes is a period where provincial authority triumphed over central authority. In terms of the rationale behind this trend, historians of the late twentieth century offered ethnicity.[34] Also, due to the presentist nature of Ethiopian studies, much of the work on the nineteenth century is not challenged and is reproduced to produce ethnic twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[35] Mordecai Abir writes,

[30] John Wright, "Reflections on the Politics of Being 'Zulu,'" in: Benedict Carton, John Laband and Jabulani Sithole (eds.), *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35–43, 35.

[31] Wright, "Reflections."

[32] Osmand, "Knowledge," 196–203.

[33] Recent scholarship argues for earlier centuries for conflict transcending ethnicity. Mohammed Hassen presents compelling evidence for the Oromo playing key roles on both sides of the conflicts between rival claimants Za Dengel and Susenyos in the early seventeenth century. Hassen, *The Oromo*, 249–285.

[34] Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of Princes*; Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*. An exception is Shiferaw Bekele, "The State in the *Zamana Masafent* (1786–1853), an Essay in Reinterpretation," in: Taddese Beyene, Richard Pankhurst and Shiferaw Bekele (eds.), *Kasa and Kasa: Papers on the Lives, Times and Images of Téwodros II and Yohannes IV (1855–1889)* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1990), 35–62.

[35] For a recent argument on this issue, see: Richard Reid, "Past and Presentism: The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History," *Journal of African History* 52–2 (2011), 135–155.

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"The Galla[36] who invaded Ethiopia were deeply disunited, had no ideology, and were only seeking a better land to settle in."[37] This view defines the *Zämäna Mäsefent* as primarily ethnic, with a decline of the state due to ethnic hatred of the Oromo and their inability to create or use a unifying system like Christianity.[38] This state was resurrected by Kasa (renamed Téwodros (r. 1855–1868), whose rise was a result of God and the unity of the Amhara.[39] These ethnic views of the *Zämäna Mäsefent* are reflected and unchallenged by later historians. For example, Teshale Tibebu writes: "For the Ge'ez civilization to emerge from the night of the *Zämäna Mäsefent*, the light of the 85 year 'intruder' (the Yäjju Oromo ruling house at Debra Tabor) had to be extinguished;" here centralization cannot occur if there are Oromo in charge in "the very heart of Amharaland."[40] This view was partly corrected by interventions by Ethiopian historians Shiferaw Bekele and Bahru Zewde, who argue that the various regional powers worked to control the central state and not destroy it and Téwodros's rise had little to do with Amhara unity or God.[41] Unfortunately, the ethnic categories of Oromo and Amhara are not problematized and the nuanced work of historians like Shiferaw and Crummey is not reflected in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature.

Donald Levine initially furthered the claim of a unity of Ethiopian experience predicated upon pan-Ethiopian cultural practices, historic interactions, and a response to outsiders.[42] His call for a syncretic "greater" Ethiopia has not had a significant response. In terms of Ethiopian historiography, this has two results. One, internal dynamics with the regional centers, such as negotiations and acculturations with the diverse provinces of Gojjam, Wällo, Bägémder, and Shäwa are ignored, resulting in either people

[36] A pejorative word historically applied to the Oromo.

[37] Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of Princes*, xi; Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 53. Later Marcus makes a similar remark about the Oromo South of Shäwa: *A History of Ethiopia*, 64.

[38] Abir, *Ethiopia*, xii–xiii. Also see: Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 53. Marcus refers to the period as "feudal anarchy and mayhem." Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 47.

[39] Abir, *Ethiopia,* xiii; Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 62.

[40] Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896–1974* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 38.

[41] Bekele, "Reflections of the Power Elite;" Bekele, "The State in the *Zamana Masafent*;" Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991* (Oxford/Athens OH/Addis Ababa: James Curry/Ohio University Press/Addis Ababa University Press, 2001), 14.

[42] Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 40. But, Heran Sereke Brhan argues that his earlier work is also framed by static ethnic definitions: Heran Sereke-Brhan, "'Like Adding Water to Milk:' Marriage and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38–1 (2005), 49–77, 50.

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becoming "Oromocized" or "Amharicized."[43] They simply become Amhara or Oromo provinces, when all of them, and their leadership, have significant populations of both of these ethnic groups, reflecting syncretism, not assimilation. Also, the changes during the nineteenth century that occurred in the provinces of Gojjam and Shäwa are argued to be simply the ethnic conquest of Oromo lands by Amhara, ignoring the Oromo on both sides of the conquest.

This view is continued in more recent versions of Menilek's (r. 1888–1913) conquest of territories South and West of Shäwa. In many ethnonational texts, the term *Amhara* is used interchangeably with *Abyssinian* and, later *Ethiopian*.[44] Thus, Menilek's conquest, led by and possessed a significant amount of Shäwan Amhara and Oromo soldiers, becomes an Amhara conquest of the Oromo.[45] Although there are more Oromo-centered texts, an ethnic view of Menilek's Southern conquests is also found in texts that focus on non-Oromo groups. For example, Teshale's Amhara social history views the conquest as the expansion of Ge'ez civilization. While on page 45, Teshale defines Amhara and "Galla" as terms of power and not ethnicity, he predicates modern statehood on the demise of the Oromo.[46] This ideology is furthered by a series of works that craft a unified Oromo nation that was conquered by the Amhara king Menilek in the late nineteenth century.[47] By defining the moment in terms of

[43] Tibebu refers to this process as "a one-way assimilation process into the Ge'ez civilization," in his *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 45. Gnamo states: "Amharanization involved abandoned one's own language, culture, religion, and way of life through conversion to the Orthodox Christian religion, adopting the Amharic language, accepting Amhara culture and its way of life," Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 2. Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 48. For a similar use of the past to evidence an ethnic present, see: Jabulani Sithole, "Changing Meanings of the Battle of Ncome and Images of King Dingane in Twentieth-Century South Africa," in: Benedict Carton, John Laband and Jabulani Sithole (eds.), *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 322–330.

[44] Ezekiel Gebissa, "Introduction: The Oromo in Ethiopian Studies," in: Ezekiel Gebissa (ed.), *Contested Terrain: Essays on Oromo Studies, Ethiopianist Discourses, and Politically Engaged Scholarship* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2008), 1–20, 3; Mohammed Hassen, "Conquest, Tyranny and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A Historical Assessment of Human Rights Condition in Ethiopia, ca. 1800–2002," in: Ezekiel Gebissa (ed.), *Contested Terrain: Essays on Oromo Studies, Ethiopianist Discourses, and Politically Engaged Scholarship* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2008), 23–66, 25.

[45] See: "Ya Ras Gobana Tarik" ("The History of *Ras* Gobana"), unpublished manuscript found in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa. *Ras* Gobana was a key general in Menilek II's army and he led many of the early campaigns South, East, and West of Shäwa.

[46] Teshale, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 39, 47–48.

[47] Melbaa, *Oromia*; Bulcha, *Contours*; Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*; Etefa, *Integration and Peace*.

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ethnicity, it presents both warring entities as ethnic, static, and eternally in conflict. For example, Donald Levine's extraordinary work *Greater Ethiopia,* which attempts to meld the various ethnicities into one unit, still employs ethnicity. He writes, describing why Ethiopia was able to defend itself against colonial aggression: "[T]his process was disrupted but then revitalized by the Galla, who both stimulated and participated in the national resurgence and provided a certain amount of social cement to connect the many people at the periphery of the empire."[48] While Levine correctly observes the situation in terms of defense of Ethiopia, the fact that he uses ethnicity obscures the changes among the Oromo and the cultural shifts in the state, as well as replicating historic views of the Oromo as enemies of the state and at best replicators of an "Amhara" system. These definitions make cultural exchanges unimaginable, identity shifts inconceivable, and conflict over anything other than ethnicity impossible.

Menilek's southern conquests claimed lands beyond the centuries old frontiers to the south, west, and east into the Oromo Gibe states as well as the states of other southern groups. Recently, scholars have put an ethnic rationale behind the conquest.[49] In this task, the Oromo groups are simplified and homogenized, as are the Amhara, who are unified to systematically oppress the Oromo. Here, the various meanings of the term "Amhara" are especially important. While it is invoked in both indigenous and foreign sources, this term could mean a *näftäñña* (literally "one with a firearm") a Christian, a northerner, or one who speaks Amharic. None of these definitions points to a specific ethnic group. In essence, while many of the scholars successfully condemn the ethnocentric views of many past historians, they do not challenge the ethnic categories of Oromo, Amhara or Tigrinyan. Adding to this ethnic view, they argue that European intervention is key, as the sole reason why the Ethiopians (solely the Amhara and the Tigrinyan) were able to conquer the Oromo.[50] Once conquered, the Ethiopians treated the Oromo as second-class citizens.[51] Mohammed Hassen writes:

> Menelik's unbridled ambition to exploit "the green and lush Oromo lands and their boundless commodities (gold, civet, ivory, and coffee) and [their] prosperous market" was the primary motive for his empire-building

[48] Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 87.

[49] Melbaa, *Oromia*; Etefa, *Integration and Peace*; Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*; Gebissa, *Contested Terrain*; Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*.

[50] Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 8–10, 53. Melbaa, *Oromia*, 46. Asafa Jalata, "The Cultural Roots of Oromo Nationalism," in: Asafa Jalata (ed.), *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998), 27–49, 29. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance,* 142–147. Later texts emphasize that the conquered were unrelated to the conquerors, see: Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 119.

[51] Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 11.

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> venture, which resulted in one-sided mass killing of the Oromo. And the Abyssinian soldiers were uninhibited in their killing because the Oromo were different from them in terms of language, custom, culture, way of life, and political philosophy.[52]

This passage argues that Abyssinians cannot include the Oromo; that the two are different in every way; and that Menilek's conquest was ethnic in nature. It concludes that the ultimate goal was to destroy Oromo culture.[53] What is not acknowledged is that the *näftäñña* were commonly Oromo themselves or that subsequent Shäwan centralization impacted all ethnicities, including the Amhara.[54] Those who cannot be ignored are written off as traitors or crazy in order to give evidence as this conquest as wholly an Amhara one.[55] This view gives the image of Ethiopia as an ethnic nation and suggests that if one is not "Amhara," one cannot be Ethiopian. This distortion ignores the Agaw, Oromo, and Muslim contributions to the state and makes them impossible. For example, it cannot recognize that Oromo groups led Ethiopia during the *Zämäna Masefent* or that the bulk of the "Abyssinian" soldiers at Adwa were at least partially Oromo, because it would produce a multi-ethnic Ethiopia.[56] This presentation would force one to admit that the conquest was not solely ethnic; that these identities

[52] Hassen, "Conquest," 28. The quotation is from Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Merlin, 1975), 4.

[53] Hassen, "Conquest," 32. Other scholars, such as Bahru Zewde, describe an economic motive to the conquest: Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 60–62.

[54] Kofi Darkwah argues that this process began in the eighteenth century. R.H. Kofi Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire 1815–1889* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 14. For an example of centralization of the Northern provinces, see: James McCann, "The Political Economy of Rural Rebellion in Ethiopia: Northern Resistance to Imperial Expansion, 1928–1935," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18–4 (1985), 601–623.

[55] Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 71. Melbaa, *Oromia*, 56. Brian J. Yates, "Christian Patriot or Oromo Traitor? The Ethiopian State in the Memories of Ras Gobäna Dače," *Northeast African Studies* 13–2 (2013), 25–52; Schlee, "Redrawing the Map of the Horn," 355; Gilkes, "Review Article," 624. A more useful term would be Northern Ethiopian, but this term is not often used Ethiopian historiography. For its use, see: Hermann Amborn, "The Contemporary Significance of What Has Been. Three Approaches to Remembering the Past: Lineage, Gada, and Oral Tradition," *History in Africa* 33–1 (2006), 53–84, 56.

[56] Jalata writes that the Yäjju and Wällo Oromo converted to Islam in order fight incorporation into Christian Ethiopia. Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 71. Also see: Mohammad Hassen, "Islam as a Resistance Ideology among the Oromo of Ethiopia," in: Said S. Samatar (ed.), *In the Shadow of Conquest: Islam in Colonial Northeast Africa* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1992), 79–114. Gnamo does not even mention the Oromo in his discussion of the *Zämäna Masefent* and argues it was a time of intra-ethnic Amhara violence. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance*, 116.

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are fluid; and that the Oromo, Muslims, and other non-"Abyssinians" have contributed to Ethiopian history and its syncretic culture.[57]

The Council of Boru Méda

While the *Zämäna Mäsefent* and the conquest of the Southern territories are pivotal moments in the ethnic (re)telling of Ethiopia's histories, in the creation of modern Ethiopia, the Council of Boru Méda and the Battle of Embabo play more central roles in Ethiopia's history and illuminate the importance of culture and place in conceptions of Ethiopian phenomenon. Historically, a major issue in Ethiopian politics is conflict over religion, not solely between religious groups but also within religions.[58] Ethiopian Christianity has a dynamic tradition of internal developments. These developments reflect historic experiences at the local level as well as pre-Christian highland traditions.[59] These religious schisms spilled over into politics due to the lack of primogeniture and the ways in which leaders made themselves legitimate. Rival claimants would implement a different orthodox view to rationalize rebellion against the status quo, and in return they would lavishly support the churches that created these views. Ostensibly there was a unity, at least among orthodox Christians, but under the surface, the conflict and localization that defined the *Zämäna Mäsefent* outlasted and was strengthened by Téwodros's harsh rule in the mid-nineteenth century. It is in this context that Yohannes IV (r. 1871–1888) called for the Council of Boru Méda, to unify Ethiopia politically through one orthodox Christian sect.

As many Ethiopianists have noted, the Ethiopia that Emperor Yohannes IV desired was one without the various Christian sects that had been the bane of unity and stability at least since the seventeenth century.[60]

[57] For example, see: Bulcha, *Contours*, 69–72, especially Figure 1 on page 72.

[58] For the Gondarine era, see: Laverle Berry, "Factions and Coalitions during the Gonder Period, 1630–1755," in: Robert Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 431–444. For the *Zämäna Mäsefent*, see: Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 47–66. For an extended discussion of the Gondarine period, see: Laverle Berry, "The Solomonic Monarchy at Gonder, 1630–1755: An Institutional Analysis of Kingship in the Christian Kingship of Ethiopia," PhD thesis, Boston University (Boston, 1976).

[59] Donald Crummey, "Church and Nation: The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church (from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century)," in: Michael Angold (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 457–487; Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2012).

[60] Berry, "Factions and Coalitions;" Ephraim, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*; Crummey, "Church and Nation;" Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

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In terms of rebellion, a challenger could simply invoke one of the competing sects of Christianity or Islam to rationalize their efforts. In historically Muslim Wällo, Yohannes IV planned to stem conversions to Islam, while in Shäwa he wanted to destroy the Sost Ledat[61] sect that played a significant role in the religious scene. Lasting for two months, the Council was designed to settle doctrinal conflicts in the Christian areas by designating one national religious sect of Christianity for all the population to follow. This edict included Muslims, members of the Jewish faith, traditionalists, and adherents to other denominations of Christianity. According to Menelik's chronicler, the edict issued at the Council's conclusion declared:

> We are your apostles. All this used to be Christian land until Grañ ruined and misled it. Now let all, whether Muslim or Galla [pagan] believe on the name of Jesus Christ! Be baptized! If you wish to live in peace preserving your belongings become Christians. (…) Thereby you will govern in this world and inherit the one to come.[62]

This edict did not threaten natural death, rather a social death of sorts. Most Ethiopians measured their wealth in terms of land, and to lose this land would cost unconverted Muslims dearly. Second, it stated that the converted would govern in this world, which simultaneously endears those who convert to the central state and severs independent sources of legitimacy, such as Islam or competing sects of Christianity. Therefore, the two *Imam*s of Wällo, *Abba* Wa'taw and Mohammad Ali, whose legitimacy had been evidenced by descent and Islam, were baptized and refashioned into *Däjamach* (*Däj*) (a military title below *Ras*) Haylä Maryam Menilek and *Däj* Mikaél Yohannes.[63] When a non-Christian was baptized he also received a godparent.

[61] Sost Lidat translates into "three births" and refers to the doctrine that Jesus had three births, "(…) by the Word, by the Virgin Mary and by the Holy Ghost at the time of Baptism." Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, 135.

[62] The "Galla" term in this statement refers solely to traditionalists due to the fact that many Oromo were Muslim and Christian. Guèbrè Sellassié and Maurice de Coppet (eds. and trans.), *Chronique du Règne de Ménélik II, Roi des Rois d'Éthiopie* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1930), 156. The translation is by Richard A. Caulk, "Religion and the State in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10–1 (1972), 23–43, 24. Also see: Hussein Ahmad, "The Chronicle of Shawā: A Partial Translation and Annotation," PhD thesis, University of Birmingham (Birmingham, 1981), 68–69.

For a similar edict which gives the consequences of not converting to Christianity and the conversion of *Abba* Wat'aw to the Christian *Däj* Haile Maryam.

[63] Guèbrè Sellassié and De Coppet, *Chronique*, 157–158; Asma Giyorgis and Bairu Tafla (ed.), *Asma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Shawa* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1987), 677–687; Caulk, "Religion and the State," 24. Caulk describes *Abba* Wat'aw's conversion as solely politically.

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Haylä Maryam (*Abba* Wat'aw) was granted Menilek as a godparent, while Mikaél (Mohammed Ali) became Yohannes IV's godson.[64] This strategy reconnected Muslim- and Oromo-descended, but Amharic-speaking Wällo princes to the central state, religiously, politically, and familiarly.[65] In addition, it tied Menilek II and Yohannes IV to those rulers and to Wällo in general. With this connection in mind, Yohannes established the city of Dessé as the capital of Wällo, and Menilek more fully invested in his previously established city of Wära Ilu, also in Wällo. Finally, it also rendered ineffective the largely Shäwan *Sost Lidat* sect, which curtailed the religious rationale for a potential rebellion by Menilek.

After the Council of Boru Méda, the seeds of modern Ethiopia, began to sprout through a continuation of some of Téwodros's modernizing policies and a re-evaluation of some of his unproductive ones.[66] Yohannes fostered a beneficial relationship with the church, provincial leaders, and the population, and was able to defend the country against all foreign invaders.[67] Wällo was central in this strategy, which began as Yohannes enticed Wälloyé leaders to submit to him and convert to Christianity. Menilek's chronicler states:

> King Menilek, having announced to all the people of Wällo, spoke to them in a friendly way in these terms: "Now, by baptism and by communion, you became similar to me, you will govern this terrestrial world, and, by the mercy of Jesus Christ, you will be worthy of kingdom of the heavens. Use all of your strength for Christianity."[68]

In this passage, the chronicler states that the Wällo elite became "similar" to Menilek and as such would govern in Ethiopia. Politically, Wällo was still split. Menilek's rights to Wällo were recognized through his vassal Haylä Maryam, but *Däj* Mikaél was a vassal of Yohannes. In the years after the

[64] Domenico Brielli, "Ricordi Storici dei Uollo con Note di C. Conti Rossini," *Studi Etiopici (Raccolta da C. Conti Rossini)* (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1945), 78–110, 108; Guèbrè Sellassié and De Coppet, *Chronique*, 157–158.

[65] One additional note, godparentage was taken seriously to the extent that one could not marry between the families of godparent and godson. In hindsight, it worked out great for Mikaél who was not allowed to marry within Yohannes's family but was allowed to marry into Menilek's family and did, fathering Menilek's heir, Iyasu II.

[66] For some of these policies, see: Donald Crummey, "Téwodros as Reformer and Modernizer," *Journal of African History* 10–3 (1969), 459–469.

[67] See: Zewde Gabre-Selassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*; Donald Crummey, "Orthodoxy and Imperial Reconstruction in Ethiopia 1854–1878," *Journal of Theological Studies* 29–2 (1978), 427–442, 439–442.

[68] Guèbrè Sellassié and De Coppet, *Chronique*, 158. Unless otherwise noted all translations were done by the author.

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Council, Mikaél continued to attach himself to Yohannes. He accompanied Yohannes on a few campaigns and was rewarded for his loyalty and accomplishments with the title of *Ras* (a title just below that of king) in Gondär several months later.[69] This council created a unified Christian community, but also brought in the Wällo nobility completely into the Ethiopia's patronage system, and not just as clients or members, but as patrons, under the direct authority of the *Nägus* (King) or *As'e'* (Emperor). For Wällo, it unified the elite under two nobles, both converted Christians and godsons of Yohannes and Menilek. While it was a religious council, its significance lies in its political restructuring.[70] Once a symbol of disunity, Wällo became a center of a united country as evidenced by many important nineteenth-century events in Wällo, including the aforementioned Council of Boru Méda, the Treaty of Wuch'ale,[71] and the meeting of the provincial armies that fought at Adwa, in Wära Ilu.

With the problem of Wällo worked out, the Shäwan challenge was also resolved by the Council of Boru Méda. At this time, Yohannes was still significantly better armed than Menilek, and after some initial negotiations Menilek submitted to Yohannes bearing a stone and Yohannes crowned him *Nägus* of Shäwa on 16 March 1878.[72] Gäbra Sellassé writes that Yohannes in his edict stated, "I am now reconciled with my brother, Negus Menilek," and continues:

> The 18 of Magabit, As'é [Yohannes] gave his crown to As'é Menilek[73] (…) we are one and we reign under the same crown, it is necessary to agree that this crown did not bring hopelessness to King Menilek. In addition to the glory and honor since it [the crown] came down divinely and without

[69] Brielli, "Ricordi Storici," 108. Mikael accompanied Yohannes in Tigray and Shewa. He also bestowed *Ras* on the hereditary leader of Gojjam, Adal.

[70] For the religious changes, see: Crummey, "Orthodoxy and Imperial Reconstruction."

[71] This treaty was intentionally mistranslated by the Italian diplomat, Antonelli, which played a large role in events that culminated in the battle of Adwa in 1896. Sven Rubenson, *Wichale XVII: The Attempt to Establish a Protectorate over Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1964).

[72] Asma and Bairu, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 655–673. According to Gäbra Iyasus *Ras* Darge, *Ras* Gobäna and *Däj* Garmame wanted to fight Yohannes instead of paying tribute: Luigi Fusella (trans.), "Il Dagmawi Menilek di Afawarq Gabra Iyasus (part 1)," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopic* 12–1 (1961), 11–41, 27. It also important to note that Yohannes was significantly better armed due to his defeat of the Egyptians at Gundat (1875) and Gura (1876), which gave him a significant amount of firearms to add to amount that the British gave him in 1868. Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 42, 52–53; Richard A. Caulk, "Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 13–4 (1972), 609–630, 614–619.

[73] It is a common practice to refer to the subject of the chronicle as a King or Emperor, even before he obtained that title.

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> interruption from Menilek I to Menilek II, besides, it seems that As'é Yohannes did not have anything else to give him that was worthy of him, because the king's house overflowed with horse, mules, gold and money. King Menilek having given abundantly all these things to As'é Yohannes, the army and the people said that this one [Yohannes] not having anything to give had made him [Menilek] present his [Yohannes's] crown. Finally, it was a gesture that appeared to mean: one day it is you that will take my crown.[74]

While chronicles are generally vehicles of legitimacy, the chronicler gives an accurate rendering of this event. Menilek ended Shäwan independence and schemes on becoming emperor in exchange for the ascension as emperor of either his son-in-law or himself upon the death of Yohannes. Later, Yohannes made *Ras* Adal of Gojjam, *Nägus* Täklä Haymanot[75] and gave him the right to make two *Ras*es. Menilek was allowed to keep part of Wällo, but *Ras* Mikael (Mohammad Ali) remained in charge of the other part and reported directly to Yohannes. Menilek then named two *Rases*, his uncle Dargé and Gobäna.[76] In addition to Menilek's submission, Yohannes empowered the nobles of Wällo and Gojjam, endearing them to him, which further cemented his authority throughout the empire. In sum, the Council of Boru Méda, constructed a single Christian interpretation, set up the imperial succession for Menilek II, created two Kings (*Näguses*), multiple *Rases*, and the political hierarchy that existed well into the twentieth century. This council produced a national culture that produced a path for all ethnicities to become a part of the state as well as marginalizing those of all ethnicities that did not follow Yohannes's preferred sect of Christianity. This council also legitimized provincial authority throughout Ethiopia, including the multi-ethnic ruling classes of Bägémder, Gojjam, Wällo, and Shäwa. Therefore, the provincialism of *Zämäna Mäsefent* ended, not with the iron fist of Téwodros, but with national, political, and religious institutions that recognized the multi-ethnic ruling class and unified them through religious conversion. This moment transcends fixed primordial notions of ethnicity. An enduring ethnic lens obscures this fact.

[74] Guèbrè Sellassié and De Coppet, *Chronique*, 143, 157–158.

[75] Historically when many Ethiopians received a high title like *Nägus* or *As'e*, they changed their names. For example, Emperors Yohannes and Tewodros were given the name Kassa at birth. Also see: Girma Getahun (ed. and trans.), *The Goggam Chronicle* (Oxford: British Academy, 2014), 160 for Täkla Haymanot's actions upon his appoint of King of Gojjam and Kaffa.

[76] Bairu notes that Gobäna was the first without royal blood to obtain the title of *Ras*. Bairu Tafla, "Ras Dargé Sahlä-Sellasé, c. 1827–1900," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13–2 (1975), 17–39, 27. For more on Gobäna, see: Bairu Tafla, "Three Ethiopian Portraits: Ato Asma Giyorgis, Ras Gobana Daci and Sahafi Tezaz Gabra Selasse," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 5–2 (1967), 133–150; Yates, "Christian Patriot or Oromo Traitor?"

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The Battle of Embabo

In many facets, the consequences of the Battle of Embabo crystalized many of the outcomes of the Council of Boru Méda. Ethiopia's boundaries have always been fluid, and expansion into the frontier has been a major avenue for provincial powers to increase their authority at the center.[77] In Shäwa, during the 1860s and 1870s, Menilek was expanding the Shäwan state in the north through his base in Wära Illu and his Wällo allies, Wärqitu and her step son, Mohammed Ali. He also began to grow his base beyond his Mänzé[78] roots to the south and the west, attempting to solidify a Shäwan base for further expansion. In this task, he relied upon Shäwan allies with whom his grandfather had relations, including many Mächa and Tulama Oromo who largely comprised and led his armies.[79] As they began to move west, they came into conflict with a Gojjamé force, which were doing a similar thing from a Gojjamé base using neighboring peoples as a springboard into the west.[80] As earlier argued, ethnicity is at the center of understanding Menilek's conquest, but the expansions of Täkla Haymanot and Menilek were both predicated upon alliances that transcended ethnic lines. The situation of two provincial armies in conflict over delineating frontiers created an avenue to crystalize Yohannes's political structure.

This event was the Battle of Embabo in 1882, between *Ras* Gobana and *Nägus* Täklä Haymanot, the vassals of Menilek and Yohannes, over the agriculturally rich Omotic-speaking province of Kafa. The conflict began with a theft of tribute. Menilek's leading general *Ras* Gobana's forces met with those of *Ras* Däräso, Täklä Haymanot's general, who just returned from obtaining tribute from neighboring areas.[81] Gobana used his reputation and the size of his army to threaten Däräso into giving this tribute to him.

[77] Alessandro Triulzi, "Ethiopia: The Making of a Frontier Society," in: Preben Kaarsholm and Jan Hultin (eds.), *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 1994), 235–245.

[78] Menilek's dynasty is rooted in this small region in the Northern part of the historic province of Shäwa.

[79] Marcus refers to them as "Oromo participants in the Shewan process of expansion." This statement, while accurate, also implicitly removes the possibility for these participants to become Shäwan. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 65.

[80] Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia,* 61–62; Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 79–80. In *The Goggam Chronicle*, however, a different rationale is given, the men of Gojjam were responding to the cruel "Galla." Getahun, *The Goggam Chronicle*, 146–150. The chronicle later notes that after the "Galla" were defeated, they were integrated into society through the practice of godparentage.

[81] Teshale notes that *Ras* Däräso was also of Oromo descent and another of a long line of Oromo figures at the court of Gojjam. Teshale, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 38. *The Goggam Chronicle* makes no mention of either the ethnicity of Gobana and Däräso.

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Däräso, emptyhanded, returned to Täklä Haymanot, who understood the significance of this act in terms of the potential Kaffa conquest, and instructed Däräso to confront Gobäna. Täklä Haymanot would not get involved unless another *Nägus* was involved. *Nägus* Menilek, however, did get involved, precipitating the conflict that ended with a Shäwan victory and the capture of Täklä Haymanot. After Täklä Haymanot was captured, Yohannes interceded, freed him, and punished Menilek by taking Wällo.[82] Part of the province was given to Yohannes's young son Araya Sellassé (1870–1888) already promised in marriage to Menelik's daughter Zäwditu (1876–1930). The other part was still administered by Yohannes's godson, *Ras* Mikael. His elevation as leader of Wällo was questioned by Menilek who said:

> Soon again, when you said, "I have taken Wollo [Wällo] and wish to be its Apostle," I said that I would only be sorry if you were to give it to Ras Mikael, while I would be pleased to hand over the province to Your Majesty. When it was given to Ras Araya, I told myself it had gone into the family [Menilek's daughter was married to him], as the saying goes, "When the calf milks the cow it only returns to the stomach," and was therefore pleased. However, soon you gave it to Ras Mikael[83] while I had requested Your Majesty not to do so. I am only saddened by the fact that the love which binds us together grew cooler rather than warmer as time went by.[84]

Here, Menilek clearly understood that without Wällo, he could not contend with Yohannes for supremacy of Ethiopia, even with thousands of firearms from France and Italy. His letter outlines not only the importance of Wällo, but also the significance of *Ras* Mikaél governing it. In that, Mikaél was not just one of Yohannes's vassals, but rather a man who needed to be respected as the sole leader of a politically, economically, and militarily important province.

[82] *The Goggam Chronicle* gives another view of the events, it states that Gobäna invoked Yohannes's name to extract the tribute. Yohannes sent a letter instructing Täklä Haymanot not to fight, but this letter was stolen by a rebel. Täklä Haymanot, who did not receive the letter, was winning the battle against Menilek's troops, until Menilek brought in his hidden Wällo troops under the command of Mas'ewot (*Abba* Wat'aw's mother). Täklä Haymanot was tricked and captured by another Gojjamé, *Ras* Mängäsha Atikäm, who was in the service of Menilek. Getahun, *The Goggam Chronicle*, 160–163. This view may provide rationale behind Yohannes's taking of Wällo from Menilek.

[83] Ironically, Mikaél would marry another of Menilek's daughters, Shäwarägga. Also, Menilek escaped from Tewodros's fortress Maqdäla with help from Mikael's adopted "mother" Wärqitu.

[84] King Menilek to Emperor Yohannes, Ent'ot'o, 10 T'ir 1881 (17 January 1889) translated in "Appendix C" in: Zewde Gabre-Selassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, 269.

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The battle of Embabo restructured Ethiopia in profound ways. First, Yohannes took direct control of Wällo, which increased his strength and, more importantly, he took this Northern province from Menilek. At this point, Menilek continued to conquer to the South, West and East, but played a limited role in events in the North. While in the Ethiopian political structure, Täklä Haymanot and Menilek were equals, Menilek had significantly more wealth, firearms and territories. In addition, his victory at Embabo swayed the balance of power in the western Oromo territories bringing most of Wälläga, Illubabor and Jimma under Menilek's control. Menilek's general, *Ras* Gobäna continually pushed West past the lands of the Gurage and the Mäch'a into the Gibe States, and obtained tribute from many of these territories. The Gojjamé defeat at Embabo, checked their progress and Gobäna claimed the Wällägan territories under the Gojjamé *Nägus*' control. Bahru writes: "It ensured Menilek a steady source of revenue to strengthen his political and military position in his ultimate bid for the throne. In short, the Battle of Embabo made Menilek the only serious candidate for the succession to Emperor Yohannes IV."[85] This would only be serious when Yohannes passed away, but it was foreshadowed at Boru Méda.

While taking away Wällo pushed Menilek away from Yohannes, how did Yohannes endear Menilek to the state? The Shäwans, independent throughout most of the nineteenth century and located in southern part of the empire, were cut off from many developments in the north. One of the developments was the extensive intermarriage between the Northern houses.[86] In Shäwa, there were marital connections between Shäwan groups that resulted in cultural, social, and political alliances between the various groups in the province.[87] Initially, Menilek forwarded his imperial claims by conquering Wällo, which, again, he lost due to his actions at Embabo. However, after the consequences of the Battle of Embabo, Yohannes solved this problem by marrying a highly born Northerner, T'aytu Be'tul to Menilek II as a Northern spy.[88]

[85] Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 62. It is also important to point out that this historian is not considering Araya Sellassé as a successor due to his death. Bairu Tafla notes that Täklä Haymanot's loss to the Mahdists at Sarwäha and his subsequent desertion to Menilek's side also contributed to this fact. Bairu Tafla, "Two of the Last Provincial Kings of Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 11–1 (1973), 29–55, 40–41.

[86] Bairu Tafla, "Marriage as a Political Device: An Appraisal of an Social Aspect of the Menelik II Period (1889–1916)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10–11 (1972), 13–22; Heran, "Like Adding Water to Milk."

[87] Asma and Bairu, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work,* 600; Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire*, 17, fn 44.

[88] Ahmad, "The Chronicle of Shawā," 95; Guèbrè Sellassié and De Coppet, *Chronique*, 193–207. Also Marcus notes Yohannes imposed the marriage so he could have a spy at his court. Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1844–1913* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 72.

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This political marriage renewed ties to the North, but contracted Menilek II's power in this region of Ethiopia. First, T'aytu had earlier marriages that attached her to the previous emperors. She was highly born on both her mother's and father's side, and her Northern roots gave Menilek instant legitimacy in these areas.[89] Her former secretary eloquently expressed her role in the success of Menilek's Ethiopia, when he wrote:

> The kingdom of Abba Danaw [Menilek's horse name "Justice"] from when Taytu entered it was large and it became wider, it was rich and it became richer, it became more prosperous. Wayzero Bafana lived rebelling and striving to demolish and discredit the kingdom of Menilek. Instead Taytu Bet'ul lived and she will [continue to] live sustaining him with her suggestions and strengthen him with her own strength.[90]

The importance of marriage alliances was also seen in the marriages between Menilek's and Yohannes's children, and after the death of Yohannes' son, between Menilek's relatives and regional elites.[91] Thus, the Battle of Embabo crystallized Menilek II as the successor to Yohannes; relegated him to the southern territories, unifying the northern territories under one leader; and made Wällo the center of this modern state. In the West and South, Täkla Haymanot's allies became Menilek's as he pushed further south and west, and with these changes to his territories, the center of his kingdom became increasingly Southern, literally and figuratively.[92] These measures tied the patrons of all Ethiopian territories to each other and maintained a political structure that centralized authority under the emperor, planned for a fluid transition upon Yohannes's death, and ensured that loyalty between nobles was due to opportunity to increase their authority within the state. These events created the modern multi-ethnic Ethiopia that was able to defend itself at Adwa.

[89] Richard A. Caulk and Bahru Zewde (eds.), "*Between the Jaws of Hyenas:*" *A Diplomatic History of Ethiopia (1876–1896)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 283. He argues that Menilek used her ties and generosity to the priests of these areas (Gondar, Semén, and Bägémder) as a way to stop rebellions.

[90] Fusella, "Il Dagmawi Menilek," 35. In addition, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a widespread syncretic tradition of referring to Ethiopian military elites by the name of their horses as opposed to their birth names. This name was preceeded by the Afan Oromo term, *Abba*, "lit. owner of," and emphasized a quality of the leader, such as, in the case of Menilek, justice. For more on horse names, see: Richard Pankhurst, "The Early History of Ethiopian Horse-Names," *Paideuma* 35 (1989), 197–206; Yates, "Hated to Häbäsha," 204.

[91] Heran, "Like Adding Water to Milk." For the marriages of Menilek II's ancestors, see: Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire*, 17, fn 44.

[92] Schlee, "Redrawing the Map of the Horn," 353–355.

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Conclusions

The concept of ethnicity is a hindrance to understanding Ethiopia, due to inconsistencies in defining ethnic groups within Ethiopia, the lack of evidence of fixed ethnic identities, and ethnic conflict during the nineteenth century. The quest to infuse Ethiopia's history with ethnicity obscures the significant events and motivations in Ethiopia's history. Frameworks that take into consideration local dynamics, such as shared historic experiences that produced syncretic beliefs, practices, and identities are more productive in understanding and presenting Ethiopian history. This is due to the fact that, in Ethiopia, identities are fluid, conflict transcends ethnicity, and Ethiopia possesses a syncretic culture. While different groups have led states in the highlands, there are many things that link them. These elements include hoe agriculture, extensive intermarriage, the Ethiopian Orthodox church, and the use of Amharic for political expression.[93] These are central components of the state, not fixed notions of ethnicity. Clear definitions of what defines these ethnicities are lacking, and to ascribe historic change strictly to ethnic interactions obscures not only the motivations of the state and its actors, but also the events that created the modern state. Donald Wright argues for other possibilities, including family, class, or provincial identities in precolonial Africa.[94] These other types of identities free understandings of political actors from ethnic motivations and also correspond more directly to the historical realities of nineteenth century Ethiopia. Thus a local lens utilized to understand Ethiopian phenomenon is a significantly more illuminating path to understanding a multi-ethnic Ethiopia past, present, and, hopefully, future.

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[93] Notable exceptions include *Jabarti* (Amharic speaking Muslims) and *Beta Israelites* (Jewish Ethiopians).

[94] Wright, "'What Do You Mean There Were No Tribes in Africa?,'" 417–420.

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