

3. A brief account of Ethiopian political history

3.1. Introduction

Ethiopia is known as Abyssinia until the 20thC. It is the oldest independent country in Africa. Located in the Horn of Africa, present day Ethiopia is a land-locked state, situated between 33 and 48 degree east longitudes and 3 and 15 degree north latitudes. Having a total population of 73,918,505 people (CSA, 2008), Ethiopia is the second populous (next to Nigeria), and is the tenth largest (covering 1,138,512km² areas) African country; and is bordered with the Somalia and Djibouti in the east, the Sudan and south Sudan in the west, Eritrea in the north, and Kenya in the south. Except in a few urban areas such as the capital city of Addis Ababa, most of Ethiopia's ethnic communities predominantly live in their respective distinct geographic areas. Ethiopia is one of the least developed countries in the world and its economy is based on agriculture, which accounts for 46% of GDP and 85% of total employment. Coffee has been a major export crop. The agricultural sector suffers from poor cultivation practices and frequent drought, but recent joint efforts by the Government and donors have strengthened Ethiopia's agricultural resilience, contributing to a reduction in the number of Ethiopians threatened with starvation. While GDP growth has remained high, per capita income is among the lowest in the world (CIA, 2013).

Ethiopia is a multinational federation which comprises over eighty diverse ethnic groups. The dominant ethnic groups in the country are the Oromo and the Amhara accounting for 34.49 and 26.89 percents of the total population of the country respectively. The Somali, the Tigrians, the Sidama, the Guraghe and Wolayta are some of

the numerically significant others. A great variety of languages, approximately 80 languages with some 200 dialects, are spoken in the country. Ethiopians are adherents of a number of different religions (approximately 40% are Muslim, 40% are Christians, and the remaining 20% are animists and others), yet conflicts because of religion is not known (Alemayehu, 2009:39). Ethiopians are commendable in terms of religious tolerance and cooperation. Peoples of different religion respect one another's religion and also respect and celebrate holidays of other's religion as one's own.

In order to understand the nature of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia, it is important to see the process of the creation of the Ethiopian state. Below I present the three regimes (of modern Ethiopia) ----the imperial, the *Derg*, and the EPRDF, in some details in an attempt to construct a brief but holistic understanding of the historic and contemporary Ethiopia in connection to the affairs of ethnic conflict in the country.

3.1.1. The imperial regimes

Several scholars agree that 'conventionally, the historical foundation of the Ethiopian state goes back at least three thousand years (Alemayehu, 2009; Yishak, 2008; Teshale, 1995; Bahru, 1991; Tadesse T., 1972). Mythology traces the origin of Ethiopia to the days of the Old Testament, and that of its kings of King Solomon of Israel and Queen Sheba of Ethiopia (10thC BC). This legend has been propagated by the church and state since long and helped as an influential source of legitimization by the Ethiopian royal family (Teshale, 1995, Solomon, 1993; Tadesse T., 1972). In fact, the myth conferred upon the Ethiopian kings and emperors the traditional authority of a 'mandate from heaven' and so strengthened and sustained the symbolic relationship between church and

state—the two pillars of state-led nationalism in Ethiopia until the 1974 revolution that ended the imperial regime (Merera, 2003; Marcus, 2002).

Walelign T. (2011) depicts that the Ethiopian Empire state in its long history was limited to the northern and central part of the country where the majority of the people constituted from the Semitic Amhara and Tigre, often referred as Abyssinians. In the long history of the country, what usually referred as ‘Christian’⁵ Kingdom of Ethiopia,⁶ the Amhara of the central highlands⁶ and the Tigray of the northern highlands, played significant role. Simply speaking, Abyssinia historically refers to the orthodox Christian Amhara and Tigrian culture of the today’s northern Ethiopia, which represents the core of the historic Ethiopian state. Thus, the north and central Ethiopia were labeled as the power house of the country. The two Semitic speaking peoples were politically the dominant ones (ibid).

In the northern and central parts of the country, there have existed during millennia kingdoms loosely organized into an Abyssinian empire. Borders between these petty states were not very stable and the struggle to achieve imperial dominance and control over the vast Abyssinian conglomerate was continuous. In general the borders between states or chiefdoms seem to have coincided with the boundaries separating major ethnic groups inhabiting the Abyssinian plateau (Knutsson, 1969:86).

According to Markakis, the modern state of Ethiopia was created by the Abyssinian or Christian highland rulers largely through the twin process of political subjugation and

⁵ The Abyssinians practice mainly Christianity as their religion since early 4thC (Walelign, 2011).

⁶ The Tigrayan and Amhara are generally considered highlanders. They share a common political structure, land tenure system, culture and religion.

economic exploitation in the 19th and early 20thC. Up to that time, the borders of the Abyssinian kingdom enclosed the northern plateau; from Shoa in the south, the Awash river in the east, the bend of the blue Nile in the west, and the high land region beyond the Mereb river in the north (that was to become the Italian colony of Eritrea). Beginning in the fourth century, Orthodox Christianity reigned supreme. Islam was preserved among a minority converted to this faith centuries earlier, and a form of Judaism survived among the Falasha people. Adherents of the last two faiths were barred from holding state office and owning land, and were socially shunned by the Christians. Amharic, the language of the major Abyssinian branch, was the official language and *lingua franca* of the kingdom. Tigray province, however, held fast to its own distinct language and parochial identity (Merkakis, 2003:1).

Menelik, the king of Shoa (1865-1889), began expanding this territory towards the east and west of Shoa already in the 1880s. At the death of Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889), Menelik became the emperor of Ethiopia (r. 1889-1913) with the title of Menelik-II. He expanded his empire through series of conquest between 1890 and 1906 (Henze, 2000). Before the conquest, there had existed independent identity groups (some were even kingdoms) in parts of modern Ethiopia. These parts include today's regional states of Gambella, Benshabgul-Gumuz, SNNPR, parts of Oromia, southern parts of Somali, most parts of Afar and eastern parts of Ethiopia(Kifle, 2007).

‘By 1900, the western, eastern and southern frontiers of Ethiopia were largely established, and both north and south Ethiopia were brought under one political center based in Addis Ababa, destined to become the political and commercial capital of modern

Ethiopia' (Merera, 2003). Thus, the spectacular expansion of Abyssinia in the second half of the 19thC was launched from Shoa, the south most principality of the kingdom. It was master minded by the provincial ruler of Shoa who became Emperor Menelik in 1889, and was completed by the time he died in 1913. 'In the process, the Ethiopia of today was born, its shape consecrated by the boundary agreements made after the Battle of Adwa in 1896 with the adjoining colonial powers' (Bahru, 1991:60). In the eyes of Menelik-II and some historians, the act of Imperial expansion was seen as regaining Medieval Ethiopian territories and unification of the country (Henz, 2000; Andargachhew, 1993). Some writers and most of the nationalist movements in the conquered areas regard it as colonization (Asmarom Legesse, 2000; Bereket, 1980; Markakis, 1987). Today most of these areas have been affected by insurgencies and nationalist armed fronts (OLF, ONLF, SLF, etc) and non armed nationalist movements from several conquered groups (Kifle, 2007).

'In the process of consolidating the Ethiopian imperial state, Menelik engaged in wars of conquest, incorporating various other nations (Oromo, Somali, Afar, Wolayta, Guraghe, Sidama, [Gedeo], etc.) into what was the core of the Abyssinian (Ethiopian) state, comprising mainly the Amharas and Tigrayans' (Keller J. Edmond in Sriram and Nielsen, eds., 2006:19). Following his victorious operation of expansion to the periphery, Menelik sent governors from the center to administer the periphery. They were sent with contingents of their own so that they would establish themselves in the district towns of their respective administrations. Having been unsalaried, the administrators along with their soldiers were maintained by a system which instead of wages allotted each man the over lordship of a number of serfs. In other words, "the land was regarded as taken away

to the crown, some portion is being given to the local chief and people and the rest used to reward or maintain Amhara, and especially Shoa soldiers, officials and notables”(Margery, 1969:295-296).

The wars of expansion and conquest led to the birth of multi-ethnic Empire state under Amhara ethnic hegemony, land appropriation from the indigenous peoples, political domination, cultural marginalization and economic exploitation of the subjected groups. As a result, the independence of various ethnic groups was forcefully taken away, a massive alienation of land from the indigenous peoples was carried out for several decades, the cultures and languages of the indigenous peoples were suppressed and the dominating ethnic group’s culture and language imposed on the subjected peoples. The vanished ethnic groups were subjected to politico-economic domination, linguistic and cultural suppression---all in the name of a ‘nation building’ project by successive Ethiopian governments. Contrary to the claims of the empire builders, what emerged was fully fledged national oppression (Merera, 2003:1). As a result, the subject people were literally reduced to tenants and become victims of national oppression (Alemayehu, 2009: 24). According to Merera, the ideology guiding and shaping the wars of expansion that created modern Ethiopia was interplay of religious, regional and ethnic factors. The religious factor was mainly related to the Orthodox Church whose role was vital in the empire building process. The double missions of the church was to advocate imperial legitimacy, i.e. the sacred ‘mandate from heaven’, and softening the hearts and minds of the people to be God-fearing and law-abiding subjects. The Shoan regional interest had to be dominant; because it was the Shoan Amhara elite whose carrot and stick policy had built the empire (Merera, 2003).

John Hamer suggests the major motives for a southern advance out of Shoa province by emperor Menelik and his forces in the 1890s. These include: an interest in acquiring control over the valuable trade resources of the south (such as gold, ivory, coffee, spices, and slaves); a concern for acquiring more land for an expanding northern (Amhara) population that had suffered from severe famine during 1889-1892; and a fear of the increasing pressure from French, British, and Italian imperialism. Furthermore, Hamer goes on to say that, there was scarcity of resources to establish effective centralized administration over the vast new territories of the conquered south. As a result, the government in Addis Ababa had to rely on a form of indirect rule by creating or working through traditional authorities who were given the title of *balabat*. Since these men were to collect tribute and settle local disputes, indirect rule tended either to reinforce the existing hierarchies or to create them where none had previously existed (Hamer, 1987: 131 and 133). The lands to the south, west, and east that were conquered by Menelik, known as *yeqign agar* (conquered land), today make up all but two of the nine regions of the federal republic of Ethiopia, and are home to about three fifths of its total population. While Abyssinia had been a relatively homogeneous state, the Ethiopian empire was a mosaic of ethnic groups and cultures (Merkakis, 2003).

In spite of this long history of interaction however, ethnicity as material bedrock of Ethiopian politics only appeared on the scene in tandem with the birth of the modern multi-ethnic empire-state in the second half of the 19thC. The political process that was set in motion by the mid-19thC as an anti-thesis to the *Zemene-Mesafinit*⁷ period (the

⁷ *Zemene-Mesafinit* is a period of chronic regionalism. For a century, Abyssinia's ruling aristocracy had bled the county in a civil war, competing for influence over or control of the imperial throne (McClellan, 1988:17).

princes' era) was able to produce, in half a century, a fully fledged empire state. This was a product of a conjuncture of three historical processes---the drive to centralize historic Ethiopia, the drive to expand to the rich lands in the Center-South, and the European drive to carve up the continent of Africa as a whole. Centralization of historic Ethiopia whetted the appetite for empire building. Conquest in turn provided access to immense material wealth that enables the empire builders to build up an increasingly formidable army. The European scramble for chunks of Africa provided opportunities to obtain European weapons, giving the empire builders a decisive edge (Merera, 2003:57-58).

The treatment meted out to the people of the conquered areas of the south varied considerably at the outset, depending on how they reacted to the Abyssinian invasion. Those who surrendered without confrontation were treated calmly; their leaders were integrated into a system of indirect rule and rewarded with grants of land and a share of the taxes they collected from their own people. Those who resisted the invasion suffered greatly. Their leaders were eliminated, often physically, many people were killed and many more taken into slavery, their animals and other possessions looted. Such experiences are part of local history and tend to colour people's political attitude today (Merkakis, 2003:1-2; Marcus, 2002).

The conjuncture of the three drives to centralize historic Ethiopia, noted above, created a fundamentally different Ethiopia with two contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, Ethiopia now consisted of a multi ethnic polity that, jointly, heroically frustrated the ambition of the European colonial powers to annex the country. On the other hand, it led to a century of ethnic and religious domination of one group over the others.

Different scholars portrayed Minelik's expansion in various ways: Teshale (1995: xv) and Knutsson (1969:87) relate it with that of Europeans colonialism in Africa. They argue that although Ethiopia remained as a sovereign state free from external colonial conquest, it had much in common with the colonial experiences in other parts of the continent. In this they are trying to say that Menelik's and his forces took an active part in the scramble for Africa by competing with the French, Italians and British along Ethiopia's borders. Tidy and Leeming (1981: 104) describe it as 'part of African partition of Africa and continued as part of the European partition'.

As the case during Minilik-II regime, Emperor Haile Silassie-I (r. 1930-1974) ----the last Ethiopian royal leader ----also centralized the state and expanded Ethiopia's civil society as a counter weight to ethnic forces. He fostered unity through the development of a national army, a pan-Ethiopian economy, modern communications, and an official culture whose main feature was the use of the Amharic language in government and education (Marcus,2002:Xvii). The use of Amharic as a national/official language became mandatory in government, education, radiobroadcasts, and newspapers. But the government's promotion of Amharic entailed the suppression of the other major languages, which aroused opposition and accusations of cultural imperialism (Markakis, 2003). Haile Silassie further sought to promote Ethiopia's image internationally as a viable and cohesive multiethnic nation-state. His approach to modernization promoted educated elite---predominantly from the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups---emphasizing education for these groups and largely ignoring the need to build a genuine sense of Ethiopian national identity among the poor and culturally subordinate ethnic groups(of mainly the south, east and west of the country). This shows that, as the case in Menelik's

regime, under Haile-Silassie's government also assimilation policy was intensified to deliberately and systematically change the ethnic identity of the conquered peoples. A key target of the assimilation policy was the elimination of ethnic boundary markers: language, religion, mode of dress and any socio-cultural institution that readily distinguishes the population (Tadesse B., 2004:20). Clay and Holcomb (1986:15) summarized the relationship between the Abyssinians (Amhara and Tigre) and the conquered peoples as follows:

The Abyssinians considered their own culture and religion superior to those of the conquered peoples who lived south and east of them and developed a corresponding ideology of superiority. They strove to Amhanize the conquered peoples through various programs: Amharic was thought in the schools and public use of other language was restricted. Higher education was conditional upon passing exams in Amharic. State support for Coptic Christianity was instituted while Islam was denigrated. The Ethiopian legal code, grounded in ancient Abyssinian texts, replaced indigenous legal systems in the conquered regions. The settlers 'economic and political organizations replaced those of pre-existing polities, which were officially denounced as 'pagan' and 'primitive'. In short, the Amhara created and dominated empire dismantled the pre-conquest economic, poetical, and social systems of the conquered peoples throughout the Cushitic and Nilotic western, southern, and eastern regions.

Once established by Menelik, the idea of assimilating the conquered peoples was intensified by Haile-Silassie's government. Abyssinian moral, norms, values, and beliefs were imposed. Walleigne Mekonen⁸ (1969), a student at HSI University (now AAU) and leader of the Ethiopian Students' Movement⁹ (ESM), in his article entitled '*on the*

⁸Waleign Mekonen was a student at Haile Silassie-I University (now AAU) in early 1960s. He was leader of The Ethiopian Students' Movement (ESM), and was killed in 1973 in an attempt to hijack an Ethiopian airliner (Merera, 2003:97).

⁹The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) was first organized by the students of the then Haile sillassie-I University (now AAU) in early 1960s and later spread to the colleges and secondary schools in the country as a protest against the exploitative feudal system of the imperial regime, which particularly impoverished the rural life. After the mid 1960s the movement was transformed into a radical phase with emerging nationality questions. Inspired by Marxist-Leninist philosophy of National Oppression thesis and the solution provided for this – right to self determination of nations and nationalities including secession – the ESM politicised ethnicity and brought it to the public forum for the first time. ESM played a central role in Ethiopian Revolution of 1974(Asebe, 2007).

Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia’ expressed the situation very clearly. The gist of his article reads as follows:

Is it not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask anybody what the "national dress" is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!! To be a "genuine Ethiopian" one has to speak Amharic, listen to Amharic music, accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity and wear the Amhara-Tigre *Shamma* in international conferences. In some cases to be an "Ethiopian", you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression).... According to the constitution you will need Amharic to go to school, to get a job, to read books (however few) and even to listen to the news on Radio "Ethiopia".

The main purpose of this writing was to incite discussions on the ‘sacred’, yet very important issue---the nationalities---of Ethiopia. The writing as a protest against the exploitative feudal regime well ignited a political bombshell to the feudal regime by explicitly addressing ‘the national questions’ and divulging the national oppression to the academic and political milieus. Before that time, raising ethnic issues as political alternatives was considered as ‘taboo’ among the Amhara/Ethiopianist ruling elites because it was perceived as a threat to their political supremacy.

This writing broke the silence on the nationalities question among Ethiopian students and discredited the century long illusion of the success of the nation building project of the imperial regime (Merera, 2003:97; Yishak, 2008:5; Vaughan, 2003:134). This was well explained in the words of one of other student leaders, Tilahun Takele (1970:53), ‘If we demand freedom of secession for [...] all oppressed and unequal nations without exception we do so not because we favor secession, but only because we stand for free voluntary association and emerging as distinct from forcible association’(Cited in Vaughan, 2003:143). Thereafter, recognition of the right of nations and nationalities to

self determination, including secession, became a driving revolutionary force in the students circle and of the nationalist movements (Merera, 2003:97; Yishak, 2008:5; Vaughan, 2003:134) which were its offspring---like the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF)¹⁰, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)¹¹, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)¹², Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP)¹³ among others.

However, the Ethiopian Students' Movement (ESM) itself was divided on the issue of, 'national question'. Some groups started to contend that the issue that needs to be addressed in the Ethiopian politics was the idea of class struggle, not 'national question'. This debate led to birth of Ethno-nationalist (ethnic based movements) and pan-Ethiopianist (class based movements) political groups¹⁴ (Yishak, 2008:5-6).

¹⁰ EPLF (Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front) was an armed organization that fought for the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

¹¹ TPLF (Tigray People Liberation Front) was organized in 1975 by the Tigrean youths who were discontented with the shift of political power to the Amhara and the subsequent 'suppressions' of the group under the Amhara hegemony. The principal aim of TPLF was liberation of Tigray. As a political strategy to enter into the territories beyond Tigray and as a camouflage to attract the support of the West for political, ideological and financial support, the Front superficially changed its name to EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1989 by creating surrogate parties (PDOs – Peoples' Democratic Organizations) from other ethno-linguistic groups (Merera, 2003; Vaughan 2003).

¹² Founded in 1973 by former members of the *Macha- Tulema* welfare association, the OLF fights for an independent Oromo state and Oromo self-determination. It claims a substantial part of Ethiopia---approximately 600,000square kilometers, roughly half of the country---as 'Oromia'. Its insurgency began in eastern Ethiopia's Chercher highlands, where it had set up a rudimentary administration by early 1977, and was active in Bale, Sidama and Arsi. Following a major *Derg* counter insurgency campaign in Hararghe, it had to abandon its 'liberated areas' and revert to guerrilla tactics in 1979(ICG, 2009:32).

¹³ The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was a radical group that fancied itself to be the proletarian vanguard in Ethiopia, and aimed to oust the *Derg* and replace it with a 'peoples' government'. The top-down management of the revolution greatly distressed the EPRP, whose members were mostly locally schooled or educated abroad.

¹⁴ The ethnic based movements were, the Oromo Peoples Liberation Front (OLF), the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF), and the Tigray people Liberation Front (TPLF), while the class based movements were represented by the Ethiopian people's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM).

The ethno-nationalists claim that the Ethiopian state is an exclusionist one and the oppressed and marginalized groups need to have the right to self-determination to the extent of secession. An extreme version of ethio-nationalist groups is represented by the OLF, which claims that Ethiopia is a colonial empire (Alem, 2003:9). Ethiopian state had ‘colonized’ various ethnic groups in the south, south west and eastern Ethiopia at a parallel time to the scramble of Africa by the west. Hence, they conclude that Ethiopia, just like any western colonial empire, needs to undergo decolonization. At the other extreme, pan-Ethiopian groups, represented by the Amhara elites, argue that history of Ethiopian state dates back to some three thousand years ago. They contend that the state existed for millennia successfully countering ethnic and regional challenges and forging a distinct national identity. They further argue that Ethiopia is a melting pot and a nation state, not a colonial empire. Donald Levin (1974) views the process of creating the Ethiopian state as ‘in-gathering of-peoples’ bound by cultural destiny to union. ‘The debate further triggered the birth of the aforementioned ethno-nationalist and pan-Ethiopianist armed groups’ (Yishak, *ibid*).

Ethnically based historical injustices by the politically dominant group over the subjugated ethnic groups were exposed and used by these ethnic entrepreneurs. In this regard, the pre-revolution political, historical, economic and social realities of the country provided justification for the relevance of carrying ethnic banners for the elites in the quest for competition over state power, which was seen as struggle for liberation from the century long ‘colonial’ experience (Teshale, 1995) or national operation (Merera, 2003). Ethnicity became an aspect of the political movements behind the major liberation fronts noted above (Asebe, 2007). However, the imperial state was founded on an explosive

conjunction of antagonistic class and ethnic divisions that made it inherently unstable. To stabilize it, the Haile-Silassie regime became highly centralized and bureaucratized, and Ethiopia built the largest army in black Africa with material support from the United States. This force was used against ethnic and regional rebellion in Tigray, Eritrea, Ogaden, Bale, Sidamo and Gojjam (Markakis, 2003:7).

Though Haile-Selassie's rule was briefly interrupted with the coming of the Italians (1936-41), in 1941, he restructured the country into 14 *teklay gizats* (imperial provinces), around 100 *awrajas* (imperial sub-provinces) and 600 *woredas*. This new form of modern administrative structure and bureaucracy strengthened the absolute monarchy of Haile-Selassie's régime and the central government (Clapham, 1969:67). Since the liberation of the country from the Italian occupation to the coming of the *Derg*, the feudal regime witnessed several peasant rebellions almost all over the country.

Among these; the *weyane*¹⁵ rebellion in Tigray (in 1943), the uprising of Bale-Oromo (1963-1970), the 1960s peasant uprising of Gojjam, the heartland of Amhara region, another uprising in Wollo (Markakis, 2003), and the revolt of Gedeo peasants (in 1960) were some of the important ones.

In general, the Ethiopian empire was a classic example of what Mazuri called an 'ethnocratic state'. Ethnicity was the political essence of the imperial state, where the allotment of power was on the basis of ethnic lines that gave supremacy to the Amhara ruling class. The class aspect needs to be underlined, because the Amhara peasantry belonged to the dominant group in cultural and psychological aspects only. They had no

¹⁵ *Weyane* was the name of the TPLF radio station, and the name by which the front itself is popularly known in Ethiopia today.

role in the political power as well as economic privileges. Land being the main economic resource in Ethiopia, its control was the base of the imperial political economy. The defining features of that system were the discrimination of the mass of the population from the process of government, and the economic exploitation of the producers by an ethnically defined ruling class (Mazuri, 1975).

By the early 1970s, Ethiopian society was characterized by wide spread discontent. The regime appeared less and less capable of resolving the ever rising problems that confronted it. Previously the emperor had been able to rely on the support of the military, police, church, and bureaucracy to enable him to survive and pursue his 'development' agenda (Keller, in Sriram and Nielsen eds., 2006:22). Situation in the country was deteriorating day after day. At the end, the phenomenon was sparked by natural disaster in northern highland and eastern lowland regions of the country which include Harerge, Bale, Siadmo, and Gamo Gofa.

By 1973, the peasants had exhausted their reserves, sold off their goods to purchase food items, and even eaten seed grain. Desperate and starving, hundreds of thousands left their natal villages and migrated to the towns, where they hoped the government would provide relief. In their reports, fearful provincial administrators obscured the scale of the catastrophe, and in Addis Ababa, officials at first denied the existence of famine and did not even notify the emperor (Marcus, 2002:181). The admittance was forced by the findings of an ad hoc committee of Haile Silassie-I University (now AAU) professors, who traveled to Wello in April 1973 and returned with pictures and a report describing the ruination they had seen (Marcus, *ibid*).

At the same period (in 1973), two main impulsive causes had emerged. First, a disastrous drought absorbed large parts of the country. More than 100,000 people died of malnutrition, disease, and hunger, a tragedy the regime appeared to ignore. Second, urban centers suffered unemployment, inflation, gasoline shortages, and shortages of basic food commodities. Groups such as students, teachers, taxi drivers, and industrial workers pressed the government to respond, but it either ignored them or reacted irresponsibly. Perhaps the most serious threat to the regime surfaced in February 1974 with a series of military rebellion, which became a movement led by a committee of 128 junior military officers called the *Derg*¹⁶. Haile Silassie was overthrown on the 12th of September, 1974. Initially this seemed simply a military coup, but the *Derg* soon developed a well defined ideology and program (socialism) to rule the country (Keller in Sriram and Nielsen eds., 2006:22).

3.1.2. The *Derg* (Military) regime (1974-1991)

The *Derg*, immediately upon ascending to power on 20 December, 1974 issued its Declaration of Socialism, which foresaw a one-party state, public ownership of the main sectors of the economy, and collective agriculture. The document reveals the necessity of national unity and equal opportunity for all ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. Yet, the government needed a popular support and national consensus in order to mobilize men and material to confront the worsening situation of the military in the northern part of the country, in particular in Eritrea. To win/gain the hearts and minds of the majority of Ethiopians, the *Derg* conceived a radical land reform to remedy the land expropriations

¹⁶ *Derg* means 'committee' in Amharic. In this writing *Derg*, Mengistu Haile-Mariam's regime/government, and the military regime /government are used interchangeably.

that had occurred during the imperial regimes. Fulfilling the revolution's leading motto, *Land to the Tiller*, the *Derg* destroyed the political economy of land lord-tenant relationships and the development of capitalistic agriculture in the country (see proclamation, No. 31/1975). On 4 March, 1975, the *Derg* nationalized all rural land, gave rural households usufruct right as many as ten hectares, and founded peasant associations(PAs) as a new mass organization and as the lowest level government structure(Marcus, 2002:190-'91). Through the 1975 rural land proclamation, the *Derg* abolished the *neftegna-gabbar* relations, and it was said to be the major contribution of the *Derg*. The proclamation was so radical in that it completely altered the landlord-tenant relations and made the rural people free landholders. Since then, the rural masses have become 'owners' of their land, labor, and produces (Desalegn, 1984).

Following this, the *Derg* also changed the then language policy (the supremacy of Amharic language) and attempted to reverse the trend by dropping Amharic as a necessity in schools for non-Amharic speakers. The new policy recognized several widely spoken languages in specific areas—such as *Oromiffa*, *Tigrigna*, *Wolytigna*, and Somali—for use in schools at lower levels. For example, in Addis Ababa the languages noted above, as well as the language of Afar was used in radiobroadcasts and literacy campaigns. Nevertheless, Amharic remained the language of government, and anyone who aspired to a national role had to learn to speak and write Amharic. In April 1976, the *Derg* publicized its Program for the National Democratic Revolution (PNDR), which recognized the notions of self determination for nationalities and regional autonomy. To this effect, the *Derg* created the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities in 1983

to develop administrative and political proposals to accommodate all the country's major nationalities.

The *Derg* regime promised to address the 'national question' through a Leninist model. Through the program noted above, 'National Democratic Revolution', the principle of national self-determination was declared. The program promised, in principle, the rights of each nation and nationality to develop its own language and culture. This seems a departure at least in theory from the assimilation policy of the imperial regimes to the accommodation of ethnic groups. However, as soon as it consolidated its power, the *Derg* abrogated the 'national question' declaration and began to label and advocacy of national rights as '*tebab biheretegninet*' ('narrow nationalism'). This reversed the *Derg's* ethnic accommodation policy to the policy of assimilation (Tadesse B., 2004:21).

'Though the revolutionary upheaval of 1974 ended the country's imperial regime, the new military regime however, having assumed state power by taking over the leadership of the revolution from the popular forces, could not resolve the deep-rooted ethnic conflict via its top-down approach' (Merera, 2003:1). In most cases *Derg* retreats from what it promised/proclaimed initially. This made the regime to lose trust both by the rural masses as well as urban dwellers, as a result of which nearly at the same time different rebellion groups (Eritrean People Liberation Front, EPLF; Tigray People's Liberation Front TPLF; Oromo Liberation Front, OLF,etc) all over the country involved in armed struggle to over throw the regime.

Still another challenge to the *Derg* regime was founded by the intelligentsia in urban areas, particularly in Addis Ababa and in the capitals of the provinces as well as in most

of the big cities all over the country. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) sought a state based on elections and popular authority. The party theoretically accepted the right of nationalities to secede from Ethiopia, but it had an interest to see the empire's peoples build a state based on respect for cultural autonomy (Marcus, 2002:194). However, the military's Red Terror or killings by the *Derg* against the EPRP members, and the counter killings by the EPRP members against the *Derg* officials and party members aggravated the ethnic cleavages among the country's population. 'The result was the decimation of the cream of one dynamic generation and a devastating civil war that led to Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia in 1993 and a host of other ethnic related problems in the rest of the country' (Merera, 2003:1).

Besides the revolutionary declarations of ethnicity and nationalism, there happened another development during this period which contributed to awaken and reinforce ethnic sentiment among the population. Very important in this respect was the mass literacy campaign which was the dispatch of thousands of high school and university students and teachers to the countryside at the end of 1974, in an officially sponsored drive to explain the objectives of the revolution to the peasant masses. Literacy was part of the 'student campaign', as it became known. For reasons of efficiency, it was decided that literacy would be taught in indigenous languages in areas where Amharic was not widely spoken, while elsewhere it was considered wasteful to use a second language. A consultation process involving university lecturers and officials of the ministry of education recommended the use of five languages ---*Amharigna*, *Tigrigna*, *Oromiffa*, Somali, Afar--and teaching material was produced in these languages in the Geez alphabet used by both *Amarigna* and Tigray. The 'student campaign' lasted until mid-1975 and set the

pattern for the mass literacy drive conducted in the 1980s. Fifteen languages were used this time; Amhara, Tigray, Oromo, Tigre, Somali, Afar, Sidama, Kambata, Wolayta, Hadya, Kaffa, Gedeo, Kunama, Saho, Silte. These were believed to cover 93% of Ethiopia's population (Markakis, 2003:15).

Obviously the literacy campaign had a stimulating effect on ethnicity. Language is one of the key markers of ethnic identity, and the manifestation of vernaculars in written form had a diverse impact. The writing of a native tongue is the verification and justification of an ethnic identity that it is distinct and different from others. Writing homogenizes the use of a language that can vary significantly in oral form. As a result, standardization strengthens and brings together the group that shares a language, and offers criteria that have come to be accepted as the best indicator of one's ethnic identity. Evidence of stimulating effect of what amounted to linguistic emancipation in Ethiopia was the study of ethnic histories and cultures that became the fashion at the time, the appearance of publication devoted to previously subordinate ethnic groups, as well as the coming up of musical, theatrical and dance performances to the front stage with ethnic themes (Markakis, *ibid*).

However, the *Derg*, using socialism as a passport to power, initiated a 'regional autonomy' approach by introducing some superficial changes in the direction of decentralizing the Ethiopian state but in practice it remained top-down and despotic. Not surprising, the end result was further crisis that ended in the most devastating civil war the country had ever known (Dawit W., 1989; Bereket, 1980; Merera, 2003). Though the *Derg* posed Marxism-Leninism as its people's rescuer and envisioned their prosperity and happiness within the socialist motherland that it was building for the so-called broad

masses, in practical terms it was ideologically driven state determined to eliminate any competing civil society or ethnic activity.

In sum, the vivid policies and programs to answer the ‘questions of nationalities’ were never well realized and armed resistances to the regime escalated after its promulgation. The regime attempted to suppress opposition by pledged comprehensive reforms and even announced in 1990 that it was deviating away from its socialist development strategy. However, torn by bloody coups, uprisings, wide scale drought, and massive refugee problems, the rule of the *Derg* was finally ended on May 28, 1991 by coalition of rebel forces, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

3.1.3. The EPRDF government and ethnic federalism

Since the centralization project started in the 19thC, successive regimes that ruled the country perpetuated ethnic oppression and marginalization under the guise of nation building endeavors. The nation building project in due course generated its own antithesis by stirring sense of ethnic nationalism among the elites of different groups and thereby begot secessionist armed national movements. The wide spread armed struggle across the country resulted not only in the overthrow of the military government that ruled the country for about 17 years but also marked the end of the era of the unitary state that lasted for about a century. When the EPRDF came to power as a new government, the change was not merely of political power; it also ushered an absolutely new perspective into the political landscape of the country by re-engineering the Ethiopian state on an entirely new foundation.

The federal principle, which aims at achieving both self rule and shared rule (Elazar, 1987), greatly attracted multi-ethnic states as a means of managing their ethno-linguistic diversities. In view of that, the federal government of Ethiopia intended to decentralize power and resolve the ‘nationalities question’ by accommodating the country’s various ethno-linguistic groups (Assefa, in Turton ed., 2006:131). To this effect, the federal constitution was introduced in the mid of 1990s, against the background of a widely held skeptical view about federalism, both at home and in Africa at large. The pursuit of political unity and territorial integrity at the expense of ethno-linguistic and religious diversity has been a leading goal of African governments. This has had its costs. Military and one-party rule and the systematic suppression of human and political rights have often been rationalized as necessary means of safeguarding unity. Yet ethnic diversity has not been banished. On the contrary, there have been bitter wars for secession and ethnic conflicts amounting in some cases, to genocide. In general, however, an attempt to build political unity that denies diversity survives in most of African countries. Under this context, Ethiopian experiment of ethnic federalism, thus, stands as an exception, or perhaps even an advance, against the prevailing trend on the continent (Assefa, *ibid*).

The federalization system of Ethiopia is introduced as a response to the exacerbation of ethnic relations accompanied by a long period of centralization attempts. ‘It is also aimed to accommodate various concerns of ethnic based liberation movements whose coordinated attacks resulted in the overthrow of *Derg’s* regime’ (Jeong, 2006:100). What make the solutions offered by multi-national federalism relevant to Ethiopia is the long-standing demands for managing the problems emanating from diversity in Ethiopia--- problems of unequal development of groups and inequitable social and political relations

(Alemayehu, 2009:83). It is also believed that the process of rebuilding and reorganizing state power in Ethiopia on the basis of ethnic federalism is predicated on, and intertwined with the need to establish a lasting peace, build democracy and advance the socioeconomic development of Ethiopia's nations, nationalities and peoples. The aim of the federal arrangements is not only to enable ethnic communities to maintain and promote their distinctive collective identities and their particular style of life, it is also directed at building one political and economic community for the promotion of the common interests of Ethiopians in a mutually supportive manner(Hashim, 2010:27).

However, theoretical discussion on the utility of federalism as an instrument of managing ethno-linguistic diversity reveals two contending perspectives. Many scholars increasingly advocate the use of federalism as an option for multi-ethnic states, which have been plagued by inter-communal conflicts and tensions (Osaghae, 1996; Watts, 1998; Horowitz, 1985; and Andrias, 2003). On the other hand, there are a number of scholars who doubt about the use of the federal device to managing ethno-linguistic diversity/conflict (Cornell, 2002; Merera, 2003; Girum, 2011).

Osaghae (1996) argues that the most popular purpose of federalism is its utility as a solution to the problem of governing multi-ethnic, multi racial and multi religious countries, especially those described as deeply divided. Similarly, Watts (1998:12) notes how the federal option was popularized when forces of integration and separation were at odds with each other in many of the post-colonial multi-national states at times of interdependence. Watts further states that despite some criticism pertaining to the sustenance of multi-ethnic/multi-national federations, the process for well over a century

of the federation of Switzerland, where most of the cantons are distinct and internally homogeneous in terms of language or religion, and the reorganization of the states within India and Nigeria along primarily linguistic and ethnic lines, which occurred sometime after the federation in order to assuage internal pressures suggest that in certain conditions, federations based on distinct ethnic or national units can be sustained and may help reduce tensions. Watts went on to say that there is yet no evidence that any other form of political organization has successfully reconciled political integration and territorially based ethnic diversity for any extended length of time except by the imposition of force (Watts, 1998:16).

Similarly, Young (1994:13) contends that ‘no other political system offers better opportunity for large and culturally divided societies in the contemporary world other than the federal arrangement’. Professor Andrias Eshete in his paper presented on the first National Conference on Federalism, Conflict and Peace Building (May 5-7, 2003 in Addis Ababa) assesses the utility of federalism in Ethiopia. In that paper he states the following:

....The achievement of peace paved the way for a transition to democracy. The recognition of the equality and autonomy of ethnic communities is an important step in the passage to democratic rule. It is a check on the abuses and excesses of political power. Ethnic federalism erects a barrier against the forcible transfer of state power. Federative arrangements furnish public spaces and practices for the effective exercise of the rights and freedoms of self-government by ordinary citizens throughout a largely rural society. Since all stable multinational democracies are federal, it is not surprising that ethnic federalism ushers transitional democracy in Ethiopia...Ethiopia’s federalism has removed ethnic contest from the national political agenda. Admittedly, ethnic conflict is possible in regional states with significant cultural pluralism... (Andrias, 2003:28-32).

According to Jeong, one method to regulate ethnic conflicts or other identity differences is to mute conflicts among groups by rearranging relations between the central state and

sub national communities (Jeong, 2006: 98). By doing so, federalism serves as one of the structural techniques in conflict regulation. Together with electoral reform federalism may well be used to reduce ethnic tensions/conflicts by ‘proliferating the points of power so as to take the heat off a single focal point’, particularly those aimed at controlling the political center by providing political and economic resources for competing ethnic elites at regional and local levels (Horowitz, 1985:598-‘9). It is also said that federalism serves as a device of managing ethnic diversity or conflict in that it makes culturally diverse political society less heterogeneous through the creation of more homogeneous constituent units on condition that regional boundaries of the federative units much the boundaries of the relevant national, ethnic, religious or linguistic communities, i.e., a ‘federal society’ then federalism may be an effective harmonizing device (OLeary, 2001:281).

Against the above statements, some scholars contend that federalism, when modeled on the basis of ethno-linguistic diversity, will tend to be anti liberal and anti-majority, prone to conflicts and fragmentation, and frustrate countrywide free mobility of citizens (Cornell, 2002; Watts, 1998). As witnessed in the experiences of ex-communist federations, in federal politics, every constitutional conflict could easily turn into an ethnic conflict with fatal consequences. Designing federal arrangements on an ethno-linguistic basis is also noted as a factor that could foster ethnic mobilization, increased secessionism, and even armed conflict. Even, as Ronald Watts observed, while the socialist federations, which were established following ethno-linguistic diversity, have fragmented, there were secessionist tendencies that could undermine the federal systems in such countries as Canada, India and Nigeria (Watts, 1998:16).

As we observe from the above arguments, divisions mark theoretical discussions on the utility of federal device as an instrument of managing ethnic diversity/conflict. But what matters is each country has its own objective realities that determine as to whether federalism works/goes well with it. It is not possible to prescribe this or that system of managing ethnic diversity from outside. However, political architects and policy devisers need to take into serious account such factors as historical, political, socio-cultural and economic realities of the country in question.

The Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) is one of the forebears of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), after taking power in May 1991, organized and led the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). The process of transition from unitary to a federal system was carried out in two phases. The first phase (decentralization) occurred during a 1991-1994 transition period, and the second phase began in 1994 (adoption of federal constitution). The most significant development in the initial transition was the adoption of the Transitional Period Charter (TPC) which proclaimed fundamental human rights and guaranteed the rights of each ethnic community in Ethiopia to self determination. The transitional government also established two parallel systems of government, the central government and the regional/national self-governments. The second phase of devolution process, the new constitution was adopted in 1994 and it provided the necessary political stability to Ethiopia's ethnic communities so that they share political power and exercise self-rule (Hashim, 2010).

The EPRDF government first sought to demonstrate its intent to address in an effective manner many of Ethiopia's past problems, including the grievances of ethnic and religious groups who claimed to have been historically oppressed (Keller, in Sriram and Nielsen eds., 2006: 37). Interestingly, the TGE charter puts a high premium on human rights and guarantee of equality. Article 2 of the transitional charter gives recognition to the right of nations, nationalities and peoples' to self-determination, including the right to independence (TPC article 2, 1991). This strong assertion in the charter demonstrated the commitment of the transitional government to ethnic rights and decentralization of state power. This process of decentralization was further elaborated by Proclamation No.7/1992 for establishing regional self-governments. Accordingly, 14 national regional self-government entities, whose borders were determined based on the settlement structure of nations, nationalities and peoples, were established. Hence, the transitional charter formalized ethnicity and ethnic politics and endorsed the re-drawing of the country's political map along ethno-linguistic divisions (Temesgen, 2011). However, the inclusion of the right to succession under article 2(c) of the TPC (1991) gave rise to controversy when the article was invoked by Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) to secede Eritrea from Ethiopia through a popular referendum held in 1993.

'The constitution of FDRE, ratified in December 1994, came into effect following federal elections in mid-1995' (Vaughan, 2003:29), and the right to self-determination got constitutional status. In view of that, the right to self determination has two aspects: internal and external aspects. As per article 39(2-3) of the federal constitution, the internal aspects of self-determination constitute five major rights. Every nation, nationality and people' in Ethiopia has the right to: 1) to speak, write and develop its own

language; 2) to express, develop and promote its culture; 3) to preserve its history; 4) to a full measure of self government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits; and 5) to equitable representation in state and federal governments. The constitution emphasized the rights of ‘nations, nationalities, and peoples’ to preserve their identities and administer their own affairs. The decentralization process has created federal system of government based on ethno-linguistic criteria. Thus, federalism is believed to make it possible for ‘nations, nationalities, and peoples’ to exercise self-rule within the framework of greater Ethiopia. ‘While the extent of which ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ in Ethiopia have achieved self-rule is debatable, the EPRDF government seems to have moved from assimilation policy to accommodation, at least in theory’ (Tadesse B., 2009:21).

According to the federal constitution of Ethiopia (Article 53), the legislative function is divided between two parliamentary chambers ----the House of Peoples’ Representatives (HoPR) and the House of Federation (HoF). The House of Peoples’ Representatives, the lower house, is comprised of representatives elected every five years (Article 54) and is charged with passing federal laws (Article 55). The House of Federation (HoF), the upper house whose members are appointed by ethnic groups or regional councils (Article 61:1 and Article 61:3), is charged with interpreting the constitution and allocating revenues derived from joint federal and regional state tax sources and subsidies that the federal government may provide to the regional states(Article 62:7). The HoF manages ethnic relations by settling conflicts or misunderstanding that may arise between states, and making decisions on claims to self determination, including secession(Article 62:6, and Article 62:3).

On the whole, on the face of it, the 1994 federal constitution seem to ensure decent future for Ethiopians. 'It provides for a federal multi-party system of government based on ethnicity and language' (Marcus, 2002:242). Clearly the Constitution includes and expresses all of the liberal democratic characteristics of what today we would expect to find in a new federal model of state organization. It also has incorporated within it the conceptual and organizational principles typical of what we might expect in a new multinational federation (Burgess, 2009). Some even say that constitution making that recognizes the sovereignty of the people (ethnic groups) as a step towards democratic transformation in Africa (Hamesso, 2001). However, the structure of the federation, its institutional powers, functions and relationships, and the inclusion of such liberal democratic norms, processes and procedures do not automatically guarantee that constitutional practice follows in this way. The constitution should go along with good bureaucratic practices and commitment on the part of the states at different levels to genuinely put into effect the recognition of cultural identities clearly labeled in the constitution. While this type of ethnicity-based federation, experimentally used in Ethiopia, has been admired for abolishing an excessively centralized state, it has some weaknesses.

From the onset, the EPRDF government has been blamed by many for its inclusion of the *secession* clause in the federal constitution. EPRDF has adopted, as its ideological bedrock, ethnic-based federal model around Marxist Leninist principle of the right to self determination of nations, nationalities and peoples', includes secession as one in a series of approaches to 'national questions'. 'It is often said that the EPRDF took its ideas of ethnic federalism from Stalin's theory of nationalities, and sought to adopt them in

Ethiopia at the very same time they were being decisively repudiated in Eastern Europe’ (Kymlicka, in Turton ed., 2006:54). According to Sarah Vaughan (2003:170):

Marxist-Leninist understanding of the so-called *national question* incorporates two contradictory elements in thinking about ‘nationalities’ and their ‘self-determination’. The first is the (laudable and demonstrably true) idea that you can mobilize (indeed even define or create) a community more effectively and get it engaged in its own political development if you mobilize it from the inside; that is, with its own members, in its own language, using its own cultural traditions and knowledge system, etc... This is clearly in tune with the social-constructivist position. The second element of Stalinist thinking is not: this is the view that the criteria for the establishment of ‘nations, nationalities, and peoples’ are objectively and externally identifiable, and verifiable independently of the views of their members. It is this component of Marxist thought which has resulted in the notion that a vanguard party may legitimately grant self-determination to a community from the outside, in that process identifying and prescribing the ethnic criteria to define the group, and demarcating geographical borders around it. Both strands are clearly apparent in EPRDF thinking. They can be interpreted as reflecting mutually incompatible elements of primordialism (the notion of the intrinsic ‘naturalness’ of certain nations and nationalities, and corresponding idea that a ‘correct’ map of their location can be drawn up) and of instrumentalism (suggestive of the political mobilization and construction of a malleable ethnic identity).

In fact, as stated above, self determination¹⁷ and the option for secession are used by the EPRDF’s government as an attempt to accommodate the claims of nationalities (Vaughan, 2003; Merera, 2003; Burgess, 2009; ICG, 2009). But the principle of secession is an extreme form of the right to national self-determination and it is an outdated fashion traced from the socialist-communist thinking. ‘There is no other constitution of a democratic nation that has a clause stating this right’ (Abbink, 1997: 167). Three of the only federal systems to ever grant constituent units the formal right of secession----

¹⁷In fact the right to self-determination got recognition during the *Derg* in its ‘program for the National Democratic Revolution’ (PNDR) issued in April 1976. ‘According to this program, ‘the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded to the right to self government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs’. That is, a nationality within its environs has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic, and social life, to use its own language and elect its own leaders and administrators to lead its internal organs’ (Markakis, 2003:11). However, the *Derg* soon faced challenges from the Eritrean nationalists, who demanded political independence, and from radical students and intelligentsia, who demanded a ‘people’s government’ and from Somali irredentists.

Yugoslavia, the USSR and the Czechoslovakia had just fallen apart (Kymlicka, in Turton ed., 2006:54; Alemayehu, 2009). According to Alfredsson, not all national groups seek an independent state. Instead of insistence on full independence, minority groups, regionally clustered, can be granted self-governance to control matters of direct relevance to them. Self control of regional groups over their internal affairs, short of independence, allows the protection of dignity, identity and cultures by placing minority groups on an equal footing with the rest of the national society (Alfredsson, 1996:72).

During the transitional period, claims of all ethnically defined groups for self determination in the South had been encouraged by the EPRDF's rhetoric of 'liberating the oppressed nationalities' (Vaughan, 2003). This was evidenced by organizing five regional units in the areas comprising today's SNNPRS during the transitional period. They were organized following Proclamation No.7/1992 that established 14 regional entities at a national level. As a result, those ethnically defined groups within these five regional states also gained a status as zones or special *woredas*. The transitional period administrative organization of the South managed to satisfy the basic self governance aspirations of hitherto marginalized and peripheral ethnic groups (Aalen, 2008). This honeymoon of the transitional period, however, faded away when the five regional units of transitional period were unilaterally mixed into one federated unit---the SNNPRS. In the imperial as well as the *Derg* regime, however, the southern region was not at all unified area in economic, cultural or political terms (Abbink, 1998). Thus, there is no any historical, geographic, linguistic and other reason to lump together 56 ethno-linguistic groups in a single federated unit. The amalgamation of these five regional units into one

federated unit has continued to be one of the controversies among some politicians¹⁸ and source of grievances against the existing political order in the South today (Temesgen, 2011).

The fact that the FDRE constitution vests sovereign powers with the nations, nationalities, and peoples of the country(Article 8:1) and that all nations, nationalities, and peoples have equal representation in the HoF, which is vested with the ultimate power to interpret the constitution leads, in the final analysis, to improved inter-ethnic relations and better conflict management prospects. Besides, the establishment of overarching conflict management institutions like the ministry of federal affairs has contributed a lot in the conflict management efforts in the country. However, the constitution has provided only for formal conflict management procedures that may occur between regional states and not for those conflicts that may occur within *regional* states(see Article 62:6). No provisions are available to accommodate the autonomy and self-administration of minority ethnic groups that were located in multiethnic constituent units.

In sum, as we discussed in this chapter, Ethiopia is a nation of ethnic diversity. Now a federation, the country was previously a unitary and centralized state. Historically, Ethiopia was never colonized but was under imperial rule until 1974. The subsequent military rule was unitary, highly centralized and authoritarian as a result of which short lived, and was deposed by the EPRDF in May 1991. Though Ethiopia was never colonized by foreign power, it cannot claim to be exception to the phenomena of

¹⁸When it comes to implementation of self-determination in the South, how dare they group over fifty six nationalities into one region---is it the will of the people, really? If they were consistent, they would have created a northern region too, then. How could Hareri become a region with its small population, when the southern nationalities with its millions have been merged into one? (An interview with one of the government officials, quoted in Aalen, 2008:123).

attempting to create a nation-state, as most other African countries have done. Following the imperial intrusion in the horn of Africa in the closing of the 19thC, emperor Menelike of the Amhara had expanded the kingdom of Shoa, which was one of the loosely associated kingdoms of the Abyssinia Empire, from present day north central Ethiopia to the south. As a result of the conquest and expansion, modern Ethiopia was created and emerged as a unitary state. After a long period of political evolution and restructuring, Ethiopia has now built a federal political system that is organized on the basis of the recognition and institutionalization of the right of nations and nationalities to self determination, ensuring the quality and unity of its diverse ethnic communities.

‘Despite the undoubted achievements in the fields of education, health services and over all infrastructure developments in the country, the EPRDF government increasingly fails to resolve the *national question*’ (ICG, 2009:29). Even some say that ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has not yet borne any measurable fruit. This is due to the limited human and material resources available for it, and to continuing poverty and underdevelopment (Keller, in Sriram and Nielsen, eds., 2006: 39). The success of Ethiopia’s experiment with multi-national federalism depends on the ruling party’s willingness and ability to extend and consolidate the democratization process, reduce poverty, ensure a sustained economic growth and securing popular participation. With this backdrop of the historical as well as the current regimes of Ethiopia, before delving into the core of the research—cordial and conflictual relations of the groups-----we first need to look at the milieu of the Gedeo and the Guji locales.