Ethiopia : The Making of a Frontier Society

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Underneath much contemporary writing on Ethiopian history, the notion of internal frontier looms largely as one of the unspoken, and often intractable, riddles of the composite historical experience of the Ethiopian society at large, i.e., one which is often perceived only in its direct political implications for the present, rather than a useful tool of analysis for assessing the internal mechanisms of a 'frontier society' in its making. I believe that a deeper understanding of the current political turmoil in the Horn, which includes a heavy reshuffling of 'ethnic' frontiers and the revival of competing forms of nationalist ideologies, cannot be separated from a prior understanding of how all this came about, namely how a series of widely differing 'contact situations' between two or more groups in the course of time became 'frontiers', i.e., were made to represent both a symbolic and functional divide between ethnic groups holding different political cultural and economic weight in the social economy of the country.

In proposing this view, I must state at the outset that F.J. Turner's basic argument in favour of the American frontier (Turner 1920) is used here only as a very general frame of reference, as the debate on frontier history since then has much expanded (Lattimore 1962; Forbes 1968), and the 'African' frontier has received a certain amount of scholarly attention (Cohen and Middleton 1970; Kopytoff 1987) which now appears in need to be revived in the light of the issues raised here. The following thoughts owe much to Forbes's analysis and to Kopytoff's explanatory model of what 'makes', and 'reproduces', a frontier political culture in Africa.

Ethiopia, it seems to me, is grown out from, and has carved its historical identity in, a multi-faceted frontier society, not only because the 'Abyssinian' polity (Crummey 1980:118) as such endowed itself with fluid borders and an expansion-oriented political culture which implied a constant need to redefine the relationship between the political centre and its outward 'marches' (Donham and James 1986), but also because the various components of Ethiopia's 'museum of peoples' - often perceived in the past as a "prison of nations and nationalities" (Mekuria 1992:7) confronted themselves historically on a daily basis by variously mixing, merg-

ing, incorporating or, alternatively, fighting each other, that is, perceiving and interacting with one another in a constant 'inter-group contact situation' (Forbes 1968:207) which is the typical trait of all frontier societies.

Thus, the study of the various frontier situations which determined the texture of Ethiopia's historical experience, and moulded its 'ethos of domination' (Mekuria 1992:10), is crucial both to an understanding of the basic model of Ethiopia's 'survival' as a viable inter-ethnic polity beyond the external pressures of European diplomacy and western imperialism (Rubenson 1976), and to a closer examination of the opposed representations of ethnic frontiers within the interstitial texture of Ethiopian society. Yet, the very notion of 'frontier' has rarely been analysed in Ethiopian studies although its analytic frame of reference has been explored in the past (see particularly Knutsson 1969; Blackhurst 1980) and has been revived recently (Donham 1986; Triulzi 1988). Let me try to propose here some basic components of what may be called the Ethiopian frontier.

The first trait of a frontier society, whether it belongs to the old or to the new world, is a marked ideology of cultural and ethnic self-appraisal vis-a-vis its surrounding neighbours, something which has been defined a 'frontier cast' or 'frontier- conditioned ideology' (Kopytoff 1987:7). This ideology of self- appraisal is based on the ethno-centred perception of a 'core group' which considers itself a) to be surrounded by large tracts of land politically and physically 'open', or considered to be such (Kopytoff 1987:7-10); and b), to be inhabited by peoples who are thought to be 'inferior' in so far as they belong to a different, and lower, social order.

Historic Abyssinia is said by Donald Crummey (1988:14) to be centred around an 'inherited culture' based on "a hierarchical society, Semitic in speech and Christian in religion". Its core group was the plough-cultivating Tigre-Amhara highlanders (basically Tigray, Bagemder, Wallo, Gojjam and Shawa) who saw themselves as the 'original' settlers and 'God-chosen' people entrusted with the mission to 'colonise' and 'uproot' (*aqanna*) the country, and to 'fertilise' it (*alamma*) with their labour (Berhanou 1971:35).

The self-appraisal ideology of the Tigre-Amhara ruling groups rested on land possession (Amh: *arrasa/naggasa*, 'to cultivate is to rule', Crummey 1980:122), primacy of occupation (the *restenya*, or owner of land, is literally 'the one who first settled and conquered

it', i. e., the *aqni* or *aqan abbat*) and, not least, an entrenched sense of Christian mission. The Christian thrust of the Ethiopian political tradition gave a marked tone of ideological superiority to the internal frontier: it enhanced and justified the economic exploitation of internal resources, and laid the grounds for the related notion of frontier peoples and their goods as disposable entities.

Thus, as the State grew economically and ideologically, both its internal and external frontiers gradually became the cultural and political divide between civilisation and barbarism, the ideological marker between the law and the absence of law within the Christian realm. So peoples' names (ethnonyms) became synonymous of collective identities as perceived on the 'other' side of the frontier (eteronyms), and thus became operative social categories of cheap labour (Gurage), slaves (Barya, Shanqella), and institutional castes (Wayto). Amda Tseyon, in a soldiers' song ascribed to the XVI c., is depicted as a 'hero' who goes incessantly "to and from the frontier (*wasan*), like water in a canal", appointing border governors and re-establishing his rule to mark the borders of 'his' kingdom. (Huntingford 1965:129-130) Thus the 'frontiers' of the Christian State are seen as the outer limits of the civilised world, the boundaries within which people interact according to God's Law, beyond which lies the domain of the unlawful, the uncivilised, the unfaithful - people physically and culturally perceived, as the Lugbara say, 'upside down'.

This symbolic representation of the frontier rested on both geographical and cultural grounds. Geographically, the Tigre- Amhara complex was based on the highland cultivators' political culture which symbolically localised the 'other' in the arid lowlands of the Northeast and the tropical forests of the Southwest. Culturally, the social 'other' could become part of the collective 'self' only through assimilation and a political practice which has been variously defined as one of 'tributary obeisance' and 'submission' (from the Amh. *ejj mansha* or 'raising the hands', Guidi 1901, col. 498; Crummey 1980:124), or 'institutionalised flattery' (from the Amh. *dej tenat*, 'waiting submissively at the doorsteps of someone', i.e., the flattering of authority figures for personal gains, Mekuria 1992:8). In other words, one could be part of Greater Ethiopia only by sharing its cultural ethos, which was one of domination.

This 'frontier cast' of the dominant culture naturally tended to delegitimise peoples and cultures across geographical and cultural borders, and to obscure ideologically the real contact situation that

all frontier peoples activate in terms of kinship ties, trade, social, economic and political interaction. Therefore the 'frontier cast' determined a peculiarly unilateral double-sided world - as if the frontier had, so to speak, only one side to it.

On the 'other' side, the forcefully-assimilated elements of the Ethiopian polity promptly reacted by squeezing the dominant groups into one symbolic and political category to which they applied the 'ethnic' name of Amhara. The label has been questioned by scholars here and there, but the substance of it as perceived by Ethiopis's subjects was unequivocally stated by Donald Crummey: Since the thirteenth century the Amhara have been "the dominant group in Ethiopia" and are "perceived to be so by its subjects." (Crummey 1980:118-19) Thus the term Amhara, a misnomer from an ethnic point of view, has become a vivid reality in political and sociological terms:

> "The name 'Amhara' defines situationally a 'socio-cultural' rather than an 'ethnic' category, as the term is understood in strict usage. On the ground, in social interaction, this means that any person, whatever his exact origin, who claims to be an 'Amhara' and to whom others react behaviourally as though he were an 'Amhara', is sociologically an Amhara." (Shack 1976:169)

Secondly, a global view of the frontier involves the recognition of its being not just a fixed border *line*, but rather a complex multiplicity of frontier *situations* which must be analysed in detail because it is their very making, and the resulting symbolic representations and institutional arrangements they produce, which determine the particular 'frontier cast' ideology both within the expanding polity and its new dependants, and the nature of their socio-economic and political 'contacts'. Such contacts may go to the extent of modifying or reshaping the very identities of the social groups involved which may 'disappear' or 'become obscured' either due to conquest, forced assimilation or annihilation, or to a more gradual process of re-adjustment of one's own identity through intermarriage, acculturation or incorporation. In the last case, the 'frontier' itself may disappear in time, or it may continue to exist because it is no longer seen as a barrier or threat to the established order and its collective ethos, or because its continued existence may be considered functional to the economic or political welfare of the dominant group. In such case it tends to become an internal frontier, an immediate area of

functional services in terms of physical or human resources for the dominant centre.

The reaction to these markedly different frontier situations greatly differ: from 'withdrawal from contact' (e.g., migration) to amalgamation (when two or more groups gradually merge into one). In actual practice, the result is often a social hybrid out of which the main culture group(s) survive intact or dominant in the new social order, while the lower ones become incorporated in the social body as junior or marginal partners. Ethiopia's rich historical experience presents a varied set of examples of each contact situation, from the totally obliterated minor groups at the frontiers of the Christian polity (the Barya and Cunama, the various anonymous *shanqella* 'ethnies' living at the borders, etc.), to the *internal* pockets of ethnic resistance and repression (such as the Falasha, or the Gumuz of Metekkel), to the partly integrated and acculturated Tulama Oromo, or the forcefully incorporated western Mecha, or the southern Oromo, Sidamo and Omotic-speaking groups.

Karl Knutsson, analysing inter-ethnic relations of the Arsi Oromo of Lake Zwai in southern Ethiopia, after their pasture lands had been assigned to 'veteran Amhara and Shoa Galla soldiers in the armies of Menelik' at the turn of the century, has outlined a set of ethnicised responses to the increased pauperisation of the area based, in his own words, on 'highland superiority and Arsi inferiority'. Of this 'highland complex' were part not only veteran Amhara soldiers but also the 'Shoa Galla', i.e. Tulama Oromo, farmers themselves who, although they did "not identify themselves as Amhara", they did "dichotomise the lowland cattle people from themselves and act towards them as do the Amhara" (Knutsson 1969:92)

The new 'contact' situation thus resulted in a series of changing identities and various survival strategies: the traditional rivalry between the Oromo Arsi and the Sidamo Laki of Zwai islands over the control of the shore land was increased, and the Laki eventually had to withdraw to their islands. Only a few pockets of Laki agriculturists were made to return to the lake shore territory and could do so only by 'completely adopting' Arsi economy and style of life. A new 'ethnic' border, previously non existent, was created between the Arsi and their northern Oromo neighbours, the Jille, who were now forced to compete for scarce resources in 'the same type of ecological niche.' Finally, the 'Shoa Galla' themselves, by adopting the assimilationist strategy of Amharisation, only partly

succeeded in their strive for ethnic identification: (Knutsson 1969:98)

> Amharisation does not mean... that there is a complete change of a person's ethnic status. There is definitely a loss in his original ethnic identity. It will be said about him that he is not 'Galla any longer', he likes to be 'like Amhara'. But he will nevertheless not be accepted as Amhara either by his original group or by the Amhara. He has lost part of his ethnic identity without gaining a new one.

Knutsson's analysis raises a crucial point in border ethnicity in Ethiopia, particularly the fluid and movable boundaries between such groups as the Tulama and Wallo Oromo or the Gurage Soddo and their Amhara and Oromo neighbours in southern Shawa and Gurageland respectively. The limited literature on the topic (Fecadu 1972, Morton 1973, Shack 1974, Blackhurst 1980) insists on the strong hybridisation of these groups with Amhara culture, and Haberland (1983:533) speaks of the Tulama as 'Amhara using Galla language'. Yet, even in such cases, one is reminded (Knutsson 1969:98) that "to act the part of a *poor* Amhara" is of little avail in the Ethiopian context since it is part of the Amhara ethnic status to be strongly connected "with economic and political superiority"; and Blackhurst (1980:64) has noted conflictual ethnic identities among the Tulama migrants in Bale who appear to "have made no effort to assimilate themselves completely into Amhara society." It is mainly out of these strongly-assimilated groups that have come the 'gobanas' (Oromo 'traitors') of recent political jargon, such as the OPLO political group who is supporting at present the Tigrean-led coalition Government in Addis Ababa.

Thirdly, from a historiographical point of view, the frontier model does affect the very production of historical knowledge for the simple reason that each frontier has always at least two histories being narrated or written which spectacularly correspond to its two sides. Thus only rarely there is but one frontier history; more often there are several ones. In fact, whenever there is only one, the likelihood is that this one (as is frequently the case) reflects only the history of one side, the side who has 'won' to the expense of the other. It is the winning side, most often, which literally 'makes' the history. This one-sided version of past events is often of the heroic type (see 'Amda Tseyon's 'glorious victories'), is strictly 'political' ("For the last fourteen hundred years, the only Gauls, apparently, have been Kings, ministers and generals", complained Voltaire

already in the XVIII century), and is 'unilinear', i.e., manichean and grossly partial, in the sense indicated by Marshall Sahlins:" Heroic history proceeds more like Fenimore Cooper Indians (...): each man, as he walks single-file along the trail, is careful to step in the footprints of the one ahead, so as to leave the impression of One Giant Indian." (Sahlins 1983:519)

In this sense, though 'unilinear' in approach, the production of frontier history is often 'differential' in prospect, in so far as it requires and postulates an uneven distribution of historical consciousness: history-making in all societies, whether expressed in spoken words or in writing, is yet another sign of power, a historiographical confirmation by those who have won that they can, after winning, proceed to rewrite 'make') history, *their* history, as *the* history of the period. Royal chronicles are often documents of this kind, but the ethno-centred mechanism of self- appropriation of the past is a universal procedure of ideological justification which goes well beyond royal chronicles (Lewis 1975). The written statements by Oromo western rulers drafted after their areas had been incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire-State at the turn of the century, were also put down, significantly 'in paper', to extol their own groups at the expense of others (Triulzi 1988a, 1990), as do the oral traditions of non-literate groups across the various frontiers under examination here.

The Amhara-Oromo dispute, in particular, is now kindled and fought not just in the political arena but in the historiographical field as well. The appearance in 1990 of Mohammed Hassen *The Oromo of Ethiopia* and the heated debate that followed (Marcus 1992, Admasu 1992, Mohammed 1992) showed the limits of historical objectivity whenever confronted with high-tempered professional or ethnic ideologies. To be fair, the 'unilinear' approach in Ethiopian historiography has implied the consistent suppressing or diminishing in the country's official history of its culturally and politically marginalised peripheries. The Oromo of Ethiopia were seen by Ethiopian chroniclers and by a host of national and foreign agiographers as contributing nothing to the country's civilisation (Ullendorff 1960:76), essentially a 'foreign' people who were said to have 'invaded' Ethiopia after Gragn's inroads in the mid-sixteenth century.

The blunt of this argument, which was uncritically reiterated by Ethiopian historiography until recently, is now being challenged by Oromo scholars in search of a more pregnant historical identity. But

frontier history seems to take its toll on both sides of the contested territory, and Oromo scholars now speak of the Oromo and the 'Abyssinians' as two "different peoples with different histories". Thus, reversing the old distortion with a new one, the Oromo are now described as 'indigenous' Cushitic- speaking peoples whose ancestors "have inhabited most of the parts of what is now Ethiopia for thousands of years" while the 'Abyssinians' are people of "Semitic stock whose ancestors migrated from the Arabian peninsula to Africa during the first millennium B.C. and settled in the northern part of the region." (Mekuria 1992 : 5)

An OLF postcard titled "The collapse of Menelik II's statue", signed "Finfine, Oromia, 1936" which I collected in New York in 1990, is a good case in point. The picture portrays the ill-famed pulling down of Menelkik's statue in Addis Ababa by Italian Fascists during the occupation of the country. In spite of its controversial origin, and dubious reference, the image bluntly conveys one of those 'primary symbols' which contribute to formation of an Oromo separate identity. As Mekuria Bulcha reports (1992:6):

> In early 1992 a demonstration was staged by Oromo residents of Addis Ababa demanding the demolition of the statue of Emperor Menelik. The Oromo consider Menlik not only as a coloniser but as a criminal who killed hundreds of thousands of their forefathers, sold thousands of them into slavery, and confiscated their land and distributed it to the Abyssinians thereby turning a majority of the Oromo population into serfs...But to the Amhara, he was a great emperor who brought them glory, fame, expanded their empire and increased their wealth. Naturally, he is the symbol of their national pride. Therefore, their reaction was very quick. They staged a counter-demonstration and, as J. Perlez of the *New York Times* reported, "spruced up the emperor's statue with silver paint in defiance of southerners who wanted it torn down...

The competing views of Amhara and Oromo are not limited to the past, but en globe a critical assessment of the future. In this respect, current Oromo literature insists on the 'traditional participatory democracy' of the Oromo age-grade political structure, the gadaa system, which it opposes to the 'ethos of domination' and the 'culture of distrust, deceit and intrigue' are seen as 'the trademark of Ethiopian politics' (id., 9). To sum up, 'frontier' history is not new in Ethiopia, and present-day politics will keep fuelling no doubt new sets of symbolic representations and opposed identities in the region. What is new is that the 'other' sides of the frontier are no

longer silent. Collective memories and traditions are ways of representing one's past, and they provide it with a structured sense of self- identity and belonging. These representations, which have been so far mostly ethno-centred, will have soon to be de-centred if ethnicity is to survive and enrich peoples' lives, and not just again absorb and oppress. Meanwhile, it is to be hoped that the analysis of local contact conditions, and of the making and unmaking of inter-ethnic frontiers and identities, will help us understand the current outburst of ethnic passions and representations, and enable us to de-code their written or narrated 'generative texts', so as to better appraise the fluid and negotiated contexts which animate and condition all identities in the making.

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