Ethiopian ethnic federalism: Sidama unsuccessful quest for self-determination

A contemporary analysis on the Ethiopian “unique” political structure and ethnocultural dynamics.

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Abstract:

The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia redesigned the new country’s federal structure according to ethnic lines and formally guaranteed the right of self-determination for every Ethiopian ethnocultural group. But not all the ethnic communities were allowed to administer their own state-region and, furthermore, to exercise the right of self-determination. This is the case of the Sidama ethnocultural group which, after two attempts, one of that failed and one still in progress, does not have the opportunity to exercise political autonomy over an own territorial region. The Sidama self-determination process’ evolution and their race to a political and regional autonomy represent a systemic gap within the federal model acquired in 1991, a contradiction between the federal rule of law and the pressures of a government that acts as if it were in power of a unitary and centralized state. Following this relevant issue at the core of this federal prototype’s assumption, this thesis aims to analyse if ethnic federalism formula could guarantee equal rights and freedom to all the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and could provide a solution to face the Ethiopian ethnocultural groups’ requests of self-determination. The still ongoing process of self-determination demanded by the Sidama people will be a fundamental element to study and to evaluate the Ethiopian federal model and its impact on the ethnonationalist claims.

Keywords:

Ethiopia, Ethnic Federalism, Sidama, Self-determination, Sidama, Ethnicity, Africa.
List of Abbreviations:

EPLF - Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF – Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Front
ESM - Ethiopian Student Movement
FDRE – Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
ISEN - Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities
NEBE – National Electoral Board of Ethiopia
NNPs – Nation, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia
OAU – Organization of African Unity
OLF - Oromo Liberation Front
PDRE – People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
PNDR - Programme of the National Democratic Republic Revolution
SEPDM- Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement
SLM - Sidama Liberation Movement
SNLF - Sidama National Liberation Front
SNNPRs – Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional state
SNNPs – Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples
SPDO - Sidama Peoples’ Democratic Organization
TPLF - Tigray People’s Liberation Front
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INTRODUCTION

A “Museum of Peoples”. This is how many scholars refer to Ethiopia, a country located in the Horn of Africa which brings together more than eighty ethnocultural communities, each with its own different history, traditions, language, and culture. The Sidama people represent only one of the many ethnocultural groups that inhabit this vast territory, but which has lately made a lot of talk among the Ethiopian media. The Sidama is in fact the first ethnocultural community who, following a precise procedure established by the Ethiopian Constitution, has embarked on their own path of self-determination in order to administer their own regional state autonomously.

The modern Constitution of 1995 establishes that every Ethiopian ethnocultural group can exercise the right of self-determination at any time. But even if the law is clear on this right, its implementation is unfortunately uncertain and obscure, as was the case for the Sidama’s request. After two attempts, one of which failed and one still in progress, the Sidamas still do not have the opportunity to exercise political autonomy over an own territorial region. That’s why my thesis aims to answer this research question “How the course of Sidama’s self-determination process has evolved and been realized under the Ethiopian ethnic federalism?”. The Sidama’s race to self-determination represents a systemic gap within the federal model acquired in 1991, a contradiction between the federal rule of law and the pressures of a government that acts as if it were in power of a unitary and centralized state. Although many political and comparative studies have been conducted on the Ethiopian federal model and its functionality, they still stop on a theoretical level. In addition to examining the characteristics of this political model on a theoretical level, my thesis aims to translate the study of federalism into the Ethiopian context on an empirical level. For this reason, the Sidama case will be a fundamental element to study the Ethiopian federal model, and to answer this other research question: “Is the Ethiopian ethnic federalism a solution concerning the requests of self-determination undertaken by those which, following Marxist-Leninist terminology, have been renamed Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia?”

Research Question and Objectives of the Thesis

At this point, my thesis intends to respond to two research questions, strictly connected to each other:

1- “How the course of Sidama’s self-determination process has evolved and been realized under the Ethiopian ethnic federalism?”;
2- “Is the Ethiopian ethnic federalism a solution concerning the requests of self-determination undertaken by the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia?”

1 Calchi Novati, 1994: 9 (English translation for “Museo dei Popoli”)
2 FDRE Population Census Commission, 2007: 17
3 Temesgen, 2016: 10
Having these research questions in mind, the main objective of this work is to discuss whether ethnic federalism, installed by the EPRDF’s government in 1991 could be a solution to guarantee equal rights and freedom to all the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia, through the analysis of self-determination process carry on by one of the numerous ethnic group that live in Ethiopia: the Sidama people. The Sidama case also would be relevant in creating awareness over this legal and constitutional self-determination process which is still undermined and suppressed by the government in law.

To fully understand why ethnic federalism was presented as the best solution for Ethiopia and its multiple ethnic groups’ ethnic empowerment, it is necessary to analyse the particularity of the socio-cultural, political, and historical Ethiopian background. In doing so, my thesis also aims to clarify the factors and the characteristics that make Ethiopia “unique” from other African countries, a country in which ethnic affiliation combined with a particular political structure, had created and still are a source of ethnic conflict dynamics and malcontent.

To best respond to these research questions, this thesis aims to examine two features that make the Ethiopian socio-political landscape “unique”, contextualizing them in a diachronic perspective.

The first factor concerns the ethnic composition of the country. As mentioned above, Ethiopia is composed of about 80 ethnocultural groups, each one with its different traditions, cultures, and linguistic systems. The fifth-place according to population density is occupied by the Sidama people which counts 4 million people within the Ethiopian territory. The Sidama represents one of the oldest ethnocultural communities of Cushite origins that inhabited the African central-eastern areas around the 9th century AD. Currently, they have settled in the south-eastern part of Ethiopia. The ancient Sidama political system named the Moote System was based on an agglomeration of clans territorially divided and independent, but united by a common myth of origin. From this derives the still-strong sense of identity and shared community as expressed by the motto “Sidama society as one unit.”

The second factor is represented by the Ethiopian particular process of state-building which has been defined by some scholars as a “dominant-group nation-building.” Ethiopia, unlike many other African states, experienced a different type of colonialism. The dominant role that Europeans played in imposing a specific mindset (in terms of statehood and macroeconomic structures) was exercised, according to theses first proposed by peripheral areas’ scholars, by the Amhara, an autochthonous ethnocultural group which dominated politically, economically and culturally the other local population altering their socio-political process and triggering potential premises of ethnic conflicts.

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3 Kuno, 2016: 139

6 Ibid, p. 239; Aalen, 2011: 63

7 Gudina, 2006: 119

8 Clapham, 1988: 20
State of Research

Several studies have been conducted over the effectiveness of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian scenario. Among them it is fundamental to underline “Ethnicity and Dilemmas of State Making: Ethnic federalism and Institutional Reforms in Ethiopia” by Aklilu Abraham9, “Does Ethnic federalism Exacerbating or Reducing Conflicts? The Ethiopian Federal Experiences” written by Alene Agegnehu & Worku Dibu10, “Ethnicity and Constitutionalism in Contemporary Ethiopia” edited by Jon Abbink11 and “The last post-Cold War Socialist Federations” by Semahan Gashu Abebe12. Together these articles’ authors try to focus and deconstruct the Ethiopian ethnic federalism’s experience. They place their evaluations always considering that the Ethiopian political system represents a particular structure in which politicized ethnic interaction continuously challenges the state’s legitimacy and could be, at least, the main cause of an imminent state’s disintegration. This innovative factor lies in the approach used by these three articles’ authors. In contrast to other publications or articles, which mostly focus on the ethnic federalism’s constitutional and legal background, the mentioned works elevate “ethnicity” as an essential constant, fundamental to fully examine the effectiveness of the Ethiopian ethnic federal structure. They underlined the fact that to examine ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is essential to consider ethnicity as a defining feature of the country political system. However, even if these articles use the ethnicity factor in deconstructing the ethnic federalism’s main characteristics, they lack in reporting empirical studies or specific case studies.

The book “The politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia” written by Lovise Aalen13 adopt a multidisciplinary methodology in filling the gap between political science and anthropology using and analysing two empirical studies of two southern Ethiopian ethnic groups: the Sidama and the Wolayta, giving importance to the creation and evolution of ethnic political movements.

Moreover, the book “The Sidama Nation: History, Culture, and Political Economy” by Wolassa Lawisso Kumo14, provides a specific and detailed analysis of the Sidama’s society and history from a Sidama point of view, as the author belongs to the Sidama ethnic group. This study provides a first analysis of the Sidama’s self-determination request up until 2015 employing a historical point of view of the facts. The author tries to contextualize the Sidama’s history, social and political evolution through the history of the Ethiopian state’s formation.

At least another important contribution to this thesis’ development was given by the consultation of Kinkino Kia’s dissertation “The right to form one’s regional state under the Ethiopian Federation: the Case of Sidama People”\(^\text{15}\), which analyse and combine the Sidama’s self-determination request along with Ethiopian ethnic-federal structure more in a constitutional, human right, law-focused approach until the facts of 2005.

Differently from other previous works, the focus of this thesis will include the whole and current Sidama ongoing process of self-determination, as no researches before had analysed this fact until the 2019 Referendum on the creation of a new Sidama state. A single Ethiopian ethnic group, the Sidama people, which is not so well-known to the international audience, and its self-determination process will serve as an instrument to determine if Ethiopian ethnic federalism could be a solution to NNPs’ requests of self-determination. It is important to underline that Sidama’s self-determination’s request is a process that is still going on. So, as there is no Sidama state yet, my thesis will give a conclusion about the federalist structure’s effectiveness which is based on the facts that happened until the Sidama referendum in November 2019. Besides this, my thesis will be a guideline to those researches who would analyse the Ethiopian federal scenario or simply want to continue the study on Sidama’s process of regional administration in years to come.

Selection of Sources and Limitations

Contemporary information and news are fundamental for my research question’s response, as my thesis intends to be the most up-to-date analysis of Sidama’s self-determination process. That’s why I choose as primary sources Ethiopian and international journals and their respective websites. Paper journals and their websites such as *The Reporter Ethiopia, Fana news agency, Borkena, Addisstandard, Addis Fortune, Sidama National Liberation Front* were continuously kept under the eye during my stay at the Italian Embassy in Addis Abeba’s political affairs’ office in July 2019\(^\text{16}\) on the Sidama’s self-determination request, a period in which the tension between this people and the Federal Government was particularly high. Even from my Italian home, these websites gave me important information about the Sidama’s ongoing request, up until the Referendum in November 2019. It is important to underline that the Amharic version of these websites gives more detailed information than the English one, so when I was in Ethiopia, I was helped by the local staff to understand and translate the articles. When continuing the research at home, without the linguistic support of the mother-tongue staff, the consultation of international websites such as *Al Jazeera, the guardian, BBC Africa, Africa news* and international reports like the ones from the *Amnesty International, International Crisis Group, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission* and the *Human Rights Watch* was fundamental not only for the linguistic facilities but because they are more reliable than the Ethiopian local press. Names, dates, and quantitative data are not always the same for all the Ethiopian journals, as the press


\(^{16}\) From May to August 2019 I was selected by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to attend a *curricula* traineeship at the Italian Embassy in Addis Ababa. During this period I was assigned to work at the political office together with the First Secretary.
is strictly controlled by the state and the information flow is not so clear and transparent even for the Ethiopian audience. In order to write data and narrate events, I had to compare these sources so as to provide an estimate on “what, when, who, and how” questions.

The same approach was used for the secondary sources I selected for my thesis. These sources were mostly books as *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991* by Bahru Zewde, *The Sidama Nation: History, Culture and Political Economy* by Wolassa Lawisso Kumo, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* written by Christopher Clapham and *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism: Constitution Making in South Africa and Ethiopia* by Yonatan Tesfaye Fessha altogether with publications retrieved from political, scientific, anthropological and social journals. All these sources combined were fundamental to understand and write about the Ethiopian historical background and its socio-political dynamics during the centuries.

**Research Methods**

The period of trainee in Ethiopia represents the first phase of this thesis’ research analysis in which I collected and compare multiple sources and materials and observed personally the evolution of the Sidama’s self-determination process. Since I was not aware of Sidama’s claiming nor of the Ethiopian political scenarios, this experience gave me the hint to focus and analyse more deeply the Sidama’s situation and mostly the Ethiopian federal structure. In this context, the mentioned research questions were developed. This curiosity led to the second phase of this thesis’ analysis method. To best respond to the research questions, it was fundamental to retrace the Ethiopian historical, political and social background which brought the ethnic federal structure’s adoption and the evolution of the Sidama’s sentiment of self-determination. In doing so, a qualitative historical approach has been used together with analysis of journal articles, reports of NGOs and historical events.

For a proper analysis, theoretical concepts of federalism, previously investigated by Alfred Stepan and Semahan Gashu Abebe who deeply studied the evolution of a federal state’s formation, have been essential to examine the Ethiopian political and ethnofederal model and consequently, to show the struggle of the Sidama people to acquire an autonomous status within the federation. This concepts helped me to focus and understood the complexity of the structural political dynamics of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism. Moreover, concept of “ethnicity” and “self-determination” were fundamental to further frame and contextualise the situation of the Sidama people and to investigate the outcome of a federalist political model, its fulfillment or its failure, among the international political debate.

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Once having re-constructed the Ethiopian socio-cultural and political scenario and analysed the theoretical concepts, the last phase of this thesis’ research analysis aims to contextualize Ethiopia in the socio-cultural, political, and historical framework and dynamics investigated in the, mentioned above, second phase of this thesis’ analysis research.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework necessary for this thesis’ development. Concepts as ethnicity and federalism have been analysed in order to best answer to the research questions. The second chapter starts with a deep analysis and discussion of the evolution of the social and political Ethiopia background in order to fully understand how ethnic federalism has been portrayed as the nest solution for the “unique” Ethiopian context. Without this deep and long historical focus it wouldn’t be impossible to evaluate the Ethiopian federalist political structure and the Sidama attempts of self-determination as the two of them are, in this thesis, strictly interconnected. So, in addition to the presentation of the country’s ethnic and demographic composition and the introduction of the Sidama community and its political structure, has the aim of analysing the Ethiopian state-building process from a historical perspective, covering a period which start with the reign of Menelik II to the end of the Derg regime. During this period and following a process of centralization sought over time by the main Ethiopian monarch, the Ethiopian identity tends to merge gradually with a defined culture, that is the Amhara one. This means that for the numerous ethno-cultural communities present in the Ethiopian territory to participate in the country’s political life it is necessary to fully assimilate the Amharic culture and tradition, abandoning their own identity features. This was precisely the main issue that moved the opposition movements that developed around the 1960s and 1970s in Ethiopia. The student movements, of Leninist-Stalinist ideology, sought, in contrast to the Derg regime, an answer to the so-called National Question. This movement’s aims were to achieve a total equality between the various peoples of Ethiopia by definitively eliminating cultural and political suppression made by the Amhara cultural predominance and to offer to all NNPs the opportunity to take advantage of the right of self-determination. This chapter focuses on the work of the Derg regime until its subversion, occurred in the last part of the twentieth century, by the hand of ethnonationalist opposition forces part of the EPRDF. The third chapter examines the Ethiopian ethnic federalism, the system of government adopted by the EPRDF as a solution considered effective for the Ethiopian ethnical pushes and for the resolution of the National Question. This type of federalism, however, collided with the strengthening of the hegemonic aims of the EPRDF party which over the years became the only single leading party, unchallenged in the Ethiopian political landscape. Although granting all the NNPs the opportunity to obtain their own mother state within the country, ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian context and its federal government seem to face some systematic issues. The last chapter examines the first request of self-determination made by the representatives of the Sidama people who, to date, and after having followed the procedure provided by the Constitution, have not seen the creation of their own autonomous region, yet.
1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 The concept of ethnicity in the Ethiopian 1995 Federal Constitution:

The ethnic factor has had, since the origin of the Ethiopian history, a fundamental value and constitutes the basis, the true essence of Ethiopia itself, as it represents the pillar and the basis of the new 1995 Federal Constitution of the country.

Since the concept of ethnicity is not easy to define, as it is a particularly elusive and “slippery” term, it is used in this thesis in a sense strictly connected to the common idea that we have of “ethnic groups” and, consequently, following what the Ethiopian 1995 Constitution has delimited in article 39.

First of all, ethnic groups are mainly recognized to be, as reported by Hutchinson and Smith, “a part of human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members”. Even in the new Ethiopian Constitution, social markers as culture, origins and language became fundamental in order to define what a NNPs, or ethnic group is:

\[
\text{a group of people who have or share a large measure of common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.}
\]

Several theoretical approaches have been employed in order to better design the “boundaries” of the ethnic concept and its effect in human life and political society. Among scholars exist three main “school of thoughts” that try to understand this blurred concept introducing respectively three main theories which are the primordialism, constructivism and the instrumentalism theories. Since ethnicity is conceived as the pillar on which the entire Ethiopian political structure is founded on, the instrumentalism theory assumes for the definition of ethnicity in the Ethiopian context a significant value. The instrumentalist theory in fact sees ethnicity as an ad hoc element of political strategy, manipulated and used by groups of interests to achieve

\[\text{21 Anderson, 2013: 2}\]
\[\text{22 Hutchinson & Smith, 1996: 6-7}\]
\[\text{24 Abebe, 2014: 19}\]
\[\text{25 According to the primordialism theory, ethnicity is considered as a permanent feature of the individual and of the communities in which he lives. Common traits such as religion, culture, social organization, and the language are considered features objectively acquired at the individual’s birth. (Cp. Hutchinson & Smith, 1996: 6-7)}\]
\[\text{26 Constructivism theory suggests the inclusion of a subjective element at the base of the ethnicity’s concept. This theory imagines ethnicity as a result of multiples intersections between different, both internal and external, social interactions. (Cp. Hutchinson & Smith, 1996: 15) The reflection that the individual, who belongs to a given community, make towards its “being part of a group” (e.g. towards certain customs and traditions which characterize the social community) and also towards external actors and socio-political and economic factors, modify continuously the perceptions that the individual has on his belonging group. Therefore ethnicity becomes an extremely flexible and dynamic concept. (Cp. Nagel, 1994: 154)}\]
\[\text{27 Alemayehu, 2004: 14; Abebe, 2014: 19}\]
secondary purposes, such as gain a higher social and political status and obtain more political power. According to Abner Cohen, ethnicity is essentially a political phenomenon in which cultural differences are associated with serious political fractures. In the Ethiopian context, ethnic identity acquires a political reference and became extremely politicized since the instauration in 1991 of the EPRDF government and its following 1995 Costitution’s creation. In this scenario, ethnic identity, as underlined by Jon Abbink “has been declared the ideological basis of political organization and administration, and has also been enshrined in the Federal Constitution defining the outlines of the new Ethiopia”. Following this reasoning line, even sociocultural markes are inevitably converted into political identity’s indicators such as happened by including the definition of ethnic groups (or NNPs) as an article of the Constitution. In this sense the sociocultural dimension in which Ethiopian ethnic groups are collocated inevitably assumes a political significance. As underlined by Ghai:

makers such as language, race, religion, and colour cease to be mere means of social distinction and become the basis of political identity and claims to a specific role in the political process of power, ethnic distinctions are transformed into ethnicity.

As underlined previously, it is precisely in the Ethiopian case that ethnicity takes the form of a purely political phenomenon, creating “realities” that did not previously existed. Althought creating particular political social structures, the concept of ethnicity strongly influenced the entire internal and structural organization of the 1995 Ethiopian federal state. The division of the Ethiopian territory is carried out according to purely ethnic criteria, formally established by the 1995 Constitution and also defined by the federal system, which assumed that each ethnic group should be reserved a precise and delimited geographical area. This Constitution establishes the formation of nine regional states on ethnic/linguistic basis: the State of Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, SNNPRS, the Gambella people’s State and the Harari population’s State. As demonstrated by the regional state’s name, each subdivided territory should represent the numerically dominant ethnic group but, in reality, none of these states proved to be “ethnically pure.” Multiple ethnic minorities are scattered within foreign regional realities, increasing the so-called “minority-majority tensions” and the heterogeneity of the entire Ethiopian nation. Compared to many other African countries in which ethnicity was and still is stigmatized by both state policies and intellectual discourses, the Ethiopian case diverged from this path, according to Aalen, already from the post-colonial period, by inserting

29 Ibid
30 Abbink, 1997: 159
31 Ghai, 2000: 4
32 Abbink, 1997: 159
33 Fessha, 2010: 187
34 Fiseha, 2006: 135
36 Abbink, 1997: 163
37 Fessha & Van Der Beken, 2013: 34
38 Ibid
39 Abbink, 1997: 160
nationality and ethnicity’s issues in its political agenda even before the introduction of an ethnic-based federal system in 1991.\(^{40}\) However, such delicate issues will inevitably become easily manipulated to satisfy political aims and ends.\(^{41}\)

1.1.1 Ethnicity in Ethiopian nation-building process: the role of the “core culture”

Besides the political connotations, the ethnicity concept can be understood as a reference point to retrace Ethiopian history and its state-building process. Christopher Clapham maintains that, unlike many African states that have experienced colonialism conceived as an “alien” imposition of a typically western mindset, Ethiopia, external to this type of control, has developed and maintained over the centuries a particular and singular “large scale” centripetal political organization.\(^{42}\)

This multi-ethnic political system, put in place especially during the reign of Menelik II (1889–1913) and focused on the incorporation of territories and peripheral cultures, had constrained the “assimilated” to respond to a specific culture that has assumed over the centuries a “dominant” and “central” role: that is, the Amhara one. In this case, the analysis of ethnicity in Ethiopia is codified through a historical-social construct in which a singular ethnic group, the Amhara one, prevailed overtime over all the other ethno-communities present in the country. The latter are thus relegated to assume a peripheral and marginal role.\(^{43}\)

However, if assimilating the Amhara culture offers the opportunity to actively participate and access to the national political life, on the other hand, it implies cultural subordination and the obfuscation of one’s original ethnic affiliation.\(^{44}\)

\[\text{To be a “genuine Ethiopian” one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity, and to 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).}\(^{45}\)

In this perspective, the political, economic, and socio-cultural monopoly of the Amhara culture over the Ethiopian country’s evolutionary process is defined by some scholars, including the sociologist Donald Levine, an “Amhara Thesis.” According to this thesis, the history of the dominant ethnic group is portrayed as the official history of the entire country, imposing itself on that of the other existent ethnic groups.\(^{46}\)

This ethnocultural abuse of power is presented as “dominant group nation-building”; according to this perspective, the history of the country is rewritten and built by the predominant ethnic élite in a way suitable

\(^{40}\) Aalen, 2011: 25
\(^{41}\) Ibid, p. 11
\(^{42}\) Clapham, 1988: 20
\(^{43}\) Gutema Balcha, 2008: 17
\(^{44}\) Clapham, 1988: 25
\(^{45}\) Mekonnen, 1969: 4-5
\(^{46}\) Gudina, 2006: 119
to “justify” its dominion (e.g. the Amhara-Shewa dynastic line’s affiliation, which, it was said, headed directly to the legendary figure of King Solomon). The reasons for this specific culture’s predominance are explained by the political scientist, Christopher Clapham. According to the author, the Amharic culture is provided with particular plasticity and assimilative force. It was because its own ethnic characterizations assume blurred boundaries. This has led it to be the nucleus and the gluing element of a multi-ethnic state, as to say, a “core culture”. At the same time, Ethiopia suffers more than the other African states in terms of integrations and national identity as it has a “core culture” associated with a specific ethnic group. On the other hand, David Turton’s studies, carried out among the ethnic groups of the South, show that in reality, the social, political, and cultural ethnic minorities’ subordination is nothing more than the price to pay to be protected and defended by other ethnic groups. In a win-win perspective, the majority group, in this case, the Amhara one, bestows protection on that minority group which agrees to be subjected to a peripheral role.

1.2 Federalism

The concept of federalism can be understood as a system of government in which sovereign authority is divided between levels of government, generally central and subnational, regulated by constitutional guarantees. In reality, the analysis of the federal system should not be reduced to this general definition, as it can take on different nuances and connotations depending on the way it is designed, according to the objectives undertaken by the state and the structure of the state’s institutions.

In addition to the consideration of federalism as “the product of a political negotiation in which governmental powers are divided between two levels (central and regional),” Alfred Stepan highlights other forms of federalism, some of which, unlike what has been explained above, are not the result of a voluntary federal agreement between certain parties. The scholar identifies three distinct ways to stipulate a federal agreement, he names the existence of federations born form “coming together,” “holding together” and “putting together” formation-processes.

“Coming together” federations are the result of an agreement between independent political identities. Besides establishing a political union and sharing sovereignty between the various units, this agreement preserves the

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48 According to Christopher Clapham, unlike the majority of the African peoples, the Amhara do not constitute a “tribe”, neither a group defined by a clear mythology or a common descendant, nor even by a single ancestor. All has generated a “genealogical vagueness” over time. This vagueness contributed positively to the process of cultural and political assimilation incentivized by the spread of Amharic-origin names throughout the Ethiopian territory and by a nomenclature system that erases the individual’s ethnic origins. (Cp. Clapham, 1988: 23-24)
49 Ibid, p. 36
50 Gutema Balcha, 2008: 9
51 Abraham, 2006: 85-86
52 Morbidelli, Pegoraro, Rinella & Volpi, 2016: 100
53 Alfred Stepan cited in Abraham, 2006: 86
parties’ political autonomy and identity. This type of federations are mainly settled-up in order to “constrain the centre and prevent majorities from overriding a sub-unit”.

On the contrary, “holding together” federations provide the existence of a fully operative state which, divided into several subnational entities, devolve political autonomy to each one of its units. The formation of “holding together” federations could be justified by the desire to reduce ethnic-based conflict, by demonstrating not only respect for multiple communities’ cultural and ethnic diversity that are part of the state but also commitment to guarantee the integrity and the existence of this ones. In most cases, the decision to fulfil these commitments is made by the central authorities of a unitary state which, in the common interest of pursuing “social justice and democracy”, exercise a coercive force against the various sub-national entities.

Unlike the two previous models, the “putting-together,” which represents the third type of Stepan’s federation’s models, does not contemplate any federal agreement’s stipulation neither the will to create any of it. This last model, which is based on a coercive imposition carried out by a central power, is considered by Alfred Stepan “a non-democratic federation formation”.

This latest federal model could suggest the existence of a federal political system outside a democratic context. There is in fact a scientific debate in the identification of federalism with democracy. Many scholars see the existence of a dual relationship between federalism and democracy. The existence or not of one of the two systems affects the existence of the other. Indeed, the scholar Daniel Elazar sees federalism as one of the fundamental pillars of modern democratic governments. However, some researchers, such as Peterson King, speculate the evolution of a federal system in the absence of democratic principles. The Ethiopian political scenario provide us as an example: despite not having developed a democratic political and historical background, it has however taken a federal path. So, Ethiopian political model, as Abbink underlines, “shows that a country can be post-modern without having gone thorough a successful modern phase” o rather without having developed “a country-wide democratic polity”.

Having therefore ascertained the existence of a federal political structure in a non-democratic context, the research moves on to the study of a federal non-democratic prototype’s success and concrete realization. But having analysed contexts of federalist polity in the world, political researchers find the realization of

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54 Ibid
55 Abebe, 2014: 13
56 Ibid
57 Keller, 2002: 24
58 Abraham, 2006: 86
59 Elazar, 1996: 1
60 Peterson King cited in Abebe, 2014: 11-12
61 Abbink, 1997: 173
62 Ibid
63 Peterson King cited in Abebe, 2014: 11-12
“successful federations” only in democratic scenarios, concluding that “a sustainable federal polity is inconceivable without commitment to genuine democracy.”

According to Abebe, federations could also be divided according to the political powers exercised by the subunits and guaranteed by the centre. The results of this distribution are the Asymmetrical and Symmetrical federations. In the first case, the subunits which compose the federations have different powers and competencies. This difference depends on the role of a certain subunits within the federation, that could be relevant for the whole country according to political, economic and demographic factors. On the contrary, in Symmetrical federations all the subnational units share same political powers and are characterized by an equal political representation. Moreover, the relationship between the constituent states and the centre could be a defining feature in differencing two other types of federalism: the Co-operative and Competitive federalism. As the name suggests, Co-operative federalism defines those federation in which subunits and federal governments enjoy a mutual and cooperative relationship. Differently form the Co-operative, the Competitive federalism is based on a competitive mechanism which could be among sub-units (horizontal competition) or between a sub-unit and the national federal government (vertical competition).

1.2.1 The right of self-determination or secession within the federal state

As clarified by Harbo, the term secession took its origins from the Latin term “secedere” which means “the fact of an area or group becoming independent from the country or larger group that belongs to.” Actually this term differs according to the area of study in which scholars and researchers anchored their studies but, all of them use interchangeable notions such as secession, withdrawal or exit clause, as well as self-determination. Generally ones refers to self-determination when a group secedes from a unitary state and seeks international recognition, this term could be employed in an interchangeable way with the term “secession” even for federal political contexts.

Analysing the historical and legal path of this right in the so-called Third World, self-determination was introduced by the United Nations (UN) in those states which “succeed in dismasting the colonial structures […] to advance the decolonisation process.” In order to foster the end of the colonial systems, this right was later retroposed by the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in

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64 Ibid
65 Abebe, 2014: 13
66 Ibid
67 Ibid, p. 14
68 Harbo, 2008: 133
69 Ibid
70 Ibid, pp. 133-136
71 Abebe, 2014: 31
Regarding the Ethiopian case, the self-determination concept was historically referred to Marxist-Leninist ideology. The reason is that this ideological background was very popular among not only political élites but mostly among those student movements that carried out progressive ideals and sought to cure the malaise of the Ethiopian society.\textsuperscript{73} Precisely, according to Asnake Kefale, was the Stalinist theory of nationalities that “heavily influenced the position of the students and the political movements that emerged out of ESM” most of all after the 1974 Revolution.\textsuperscript{74} In line with this statement, many concepts used to face ethnic-based issues, including the right of self-determination, were copied from Russian revolutionary background and applied in the Ethiopian context.\textsuperscript{75} As Asnake Kefale underlines:

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The students, therefore, not only considered Ethiopia akin to Tsarist Russia as a ‘prison house of nationalities’ but also sought to ‘resolve’ the problem through Stalinist principles of self-determination, which profess the right of a ‘nation’ to ‘arrange its life in the way it wishes’ either ‘on the basis of autonomy’, ‘federal relations with other nations’ or ‘complete secession’. The theory moreover recognized the sovereignty and equality of ‘nations’.\textsuperscript{76}``
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Moreover, the right of self-determination, although be a subject of international law, could be the result of prevailing historical circumstances such as war and revolution or ideological influences.\textsuperscript{77} The way they are conducted, violently or peacefully could determine the type of secession within the federations. Generally peaceful secessions are always achieved through established legal processes: even if they bring about a constitutional change, this is achieved constitutionally. That is the case of Ethiopia which, among few federal states, has included the recognition of self-determination’s right in its Constitution. The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 allows that every Nation, Nationality, and People of Ethiopia have an unconditional right of self-determination, including the right of secession. Not only the nine sovereign ethnic states have the right to secede; every minority tribal group in each of the nine states also has the right of secession.\textsuperscript{78}

1.2.2 Ethnic federalism as the solution (or a failure?) in accommodating ethnicity and the demands of self-determination

Of recent origins is the debate between many scholars and political analysts regarding federalism as an institutional tool for accommodating ethnic diversity in a plural society. In reality, federalism was not born to alleviate ethnic conflicts or to regulate cultural pluralism.\textsuperscript{79} In fact, federalism’s categorization into “ethnic, 

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid
\textsuperscript{73} Kefale, 2013: 62-64
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, p. 63
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid
\textsuperscript{77} Harbo, 2008: 135
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid; Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995: art. 39(1)
\textsuperscript{79} Abebe, 2014: 26
plurinational, multinational or ethnofederal has recent origins. It is especially during the last few decades that we have witnessed the assumption of a federal model as a “technique of addressing ethnoregional demands” in those contexts in which “national minorities are regionally concentrated” and where the cohabitation of numerous ethnic groups inevitably leads to the emergence of ethnic conflicts (mainly in Africa and in Asia).

In reality, the application of a federal model as a solution to ethnic-based issues is a source of conflicting opinions among the international community, which has divided itself into two completely antithetical factions. Many scholars are in favour of the assumption of a federal system for its ability to resolve ethnic disputes, always considering some systemic limits. Professor Ivo D. Duchacek highlights that federalism can represent a concrete solution in avoiding ethnic conflicts only when ethnocultural groups are “territorially organized.” This could avoid possible outbreaks of conflict dynamics deriving from the division and/or creation of artificial boundaries that do not take into consideration the ethnocultural communities’ real territorial needs. Following this thought-line, the concept of ethnic federalism can be implied to define those federal agreements which, in accepting the diversity of the various ethnocultural groups, base their political structure on a fair and equitable territorial division between the various ethnic communities. Sure enough, it is defined as “ethnic” or multi-ethnic whose federal agreement that includes in the relationship between central and regional governments the respect for different system of languages and identities, a territorial recognition based on an ethnic line, and the consensus of the involved ethnocultural communities.

In support of this, Abebe sustains the idea of a federalism that “accommodating ethnic and linguistic diversity in plural societies,” highlighting that “there has also been empirical evidence which shows that federalism is a useful device to reduce ethnic conflicts in many countries, from economically advanced countries like Switzerland to developing ones such as India.”

In these contexts, as in Africa too, the combination between regional self-rule and shared governance, which is intrinsic in the definition of federalism, has played a fundamental role in creating a compromise between self-determination’s pushes carried out by ethnocultural groups and the stabilizing force generated by the central government. According to this intuitive vision, “societies with histories of interethnic tensions or powerful secessionist sentiments, a federation may be the only way to sustain democracy while preserving the territorial integrity of the state.” However, it should be noted that the presence of an a priori “well-developed

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80 Anderson, 2013: 4
81 Abebe, 2014: 8
82 Ibid, p. 27
83 Anderson, 2013:3
84 Ivo. D. Duchacek cited in Abraham, 2006: 86
85 Ibid
86 Abraham, 2006: 86
87 Abebe, 2014: 26
88 Ibid, p. 27
89 Abebe, 2014: 27
90 Anderson, 2013: 3
democracy, protection of human rights and an advanced economic system” can be decisive factors in the realization and success of a federal system, especially in underdevelopment and poverty’s scenarios. Therefore, it should be necessary in order to analyse the federal experience and its democracy’s implementation, to realize the political, economic and social framework of the country in question. Indeed, considering these parameters as essential features, it is inevitable that “disagreements about whether the installation of federalism following the introduction of political liberalisation and democracy in the multi-ethnic societies of Africa and Asia exacerbates or causes political conflicts among various ethnic minorities”. Abebe’s statement underlines ethnic federalism’s other side of the coin, that is to increase, rather than reduce, the frictions between ethnocultural communities, inexorably intensifying the possibility of exacerbating ethnic conflicts and violence. Anderson, in his comparative research, summarizes and lists the reasons why federalism should not be considered as an effective solution in solving ethnocultural plurality and the issues associate with it:

ethnically defined federal arrangements are prone to a variety of pathologies, they harden, rather than alleviate, ethnic identities; they empower extremist ethnic leaders; they foster a zero-sum political dynamics at the center; they elevate a “primitive” form of identity over more elevated, progressive identities; they generate periodic state crises because they are unable to achieve equilibrium; and ultimately, they equip ethnic groups with the resources needed to challenge the territorial integrity of the common-state.

Hence Anderson notes that “ethnofederations are inherently vulnerable to the secession of one, or all, of the ethnically-defined subunits”. This statement introduces an issue of significant importance, “bringing to the fore” what Erk & Anderson believe is an intrinsic paradox with federal systems. The two scholars point out that even if federalism is intuitively a solution in managing and alleviating ethno-linguistic conflicts, it is also its main cause. In fact, in its systemic duality between the centre and sub-units, federalism “provides opportunity to conflict between regions and centres that might otherwise not exist”, inevitably increasing the possibility of the state’s fragmentation and disintegration.

So federalism is both the “palliative cure” and the cause not only for ethnic-based conflicts but also for self-determination and secession’s demands, defined as “forms of collective representation.” According to the two authors, the measures that have been designed to guarantee the minority groups’ political representation and increase their socio-political and economic inclusion within the federation can act with the same and opposite effect, that is, intensify separation and centrifugal forces, not only political-physical but also mental. This has happened for those countries which, like Ethiopia, have seen federalism as a mechanism for conflicts’

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91 Abebe, 2014: 27-28
92 Ibid
93 Anderson, 2013: 4
94 Ibid
95 Erk & Anderson, 2010: 2
96 Ibid, p. 1
97 Ibid, p. 2
98 Ibid
reduction and a tool capable to grant fair and equable ethnical recognition, launching to the creation of regional political structures of self-rule within a federal model of shared-rule, constitutionally guaranteed. However, by defining federalism as a “perpetual union between center and sub-units,” how can this model of political government allow at a constitutional level, its own disintegration through the formal recognition of a self-determination and secession’s rights? It seems that federalism, in guaranteeing constitutionally form of collective representations (which is something is recognized for), sentences its own self-destruction and its political-national involucre dissolution. As Harbo underlines “once the secession right is established one cannot talk any longer of a federal constitution.”

We, therefore, return to a definition of federalism as the cause and, in the meantime, the cure of the government/state dissolution.

Rather, according to Sunstein, self-determination and secession’s recognition at the constitutional level:

\[\text{would be a cure worse than the disease, as sub-units holding a tight at secede intensify their separatist agenda rather than seeking political solution in the federal union. This is because any dissatisfied sub-units could threaten to leave the federation unless its demands are met.}^{101}\]

In addition, the constitutional recognition of self-determination rights “weakens the federal system by giving political coercion to the federal units and it could have negative consequences on the fundamental principles of co-operation and solidarity or “federal loyalty” among the entities.”

Although producing a “chain-effect” of self-determination’s requests even in other federal units, Harbo sees in the possibility of a secession “an element of uncertainty for economic development and unity of the system as a whole”. In conclusion the author asserts that a federal structure that constitutionally acknowledges the right of self-determination and secession is generally a failing political system.

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99 Harbo, 2008: 133
100 Abebe, 2014: 35
101 Sunstein, 1991: 666
102 Harbo, 2008: 134
103 Ibid
104 Ibid
2. ETHIOPIA’S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Ethiopian ethno-demographic composition

The Ethiopian upland, the cradle of the Ethiopian state, is located in the region called “Horn of Africa,” in the north-eastern part of Africa. The highest regional area on the continent, it has the peculiarity of being the only African peninsula between the Rift Valley’s depression and the Indian Ocean. For this reason, this region is recognized not only for a great geographical and climatic variety but also for a fervent plurality of peoples who have inhabited it and still live there.

The name Abyssinia, originally “Habashat” which derives from one of the many tribes’ names that inhabited the territory in the pre-Christian period,\(^{105}\) is a term deriving from the verb “to unite” and it is used mainly abroad to describe historical Ethiopia. The term Abyssinia intended to mean the composite nature of both the state and its population.\(^{106}\) Sure enough, Ethiopia has a large mix of peoples within it, which, unlike the populations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, have kept their characteristics uncontaminated by any external influences.\(^{107}\) The famous Italian scholar, Carlo Conti Rossini defines Abyssinia in his work “History of Ethiopia” (1925) a “Museum of Peoples.” A state composed of many facets, an ethnological mosaic of cultures, traditions, stories, languages, and peoples in continuous evolution and constant transformation. A process which, according to the scholars, lasted without interruption from the second millennium BC onwards.

The existence of multiple ethnocultural groups is the demonstration of these dynamics. These communities, established in the various part of the territory, each one with their own system of life and work, have undergone over time an intense mixing both on an ethnic and cultural level.\(^{108}\)

Like a puzzle, current Ethiopia is made up of numerous ethnocultural groups. According to the estimates provided by the Summary and Statistical Report of 2007, there are about 80 ethnic groups that inhabit the vast Ethiopian territory,\(^{109}\) each with its own cultural characteristics, its own history, and also with its own linguistic system. Researches show that 2/3 of the 74 million inhabitants belong to three main ethnocultural groups: the Oromos, which counts about 34.49% of the population, followed by the Amhara (24.89%) and the Somali (6.2%), for then continue with the “minor” groups such as that of Tigray (6.07%), Sidama (4.01%), Gurage (2.53%) and Welayta (2.31%). Therefore, Ethiopia, as for many other African states, it is known to be a “Country of Minorities,”\(^{110}\) as to say a gathering of multiple communities, a sort of a galaxy composed with a multitude of constellations.

\(^{105}\) Zewde, 2002: 1  
\(^{106}\) Calchi Novati, 1994: 9  
\(^{107}\) Tibebu, 1996: 414  
\(^{108}\) Calchi Novati, 1994: 10  
\(^{109}\) FDRE Population Census Commission, 2008: 17  
\(^{110}\) Fessha, 2010: 151
According to the studies, in the past, the peoples highlighted as “indigenous” are those of Cushite origin, or commonly defined as “Cemitic” or “Hamitic” groups with Semitic language, whose traits are prevalent throughout Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{111} The Semitic groups present in the northern upland, or “Abyssin”, are divided into two macro-sectors: the first refers to nomadic groups of Tigre language and Gheez-speaking peasants; the second, located in the central part of the upland gathers Amhara, Gurage and Hararini groups. Semitic groups had a dominant role in Ethiopia’s history since all kingdoms and empires were under the direct control of Semitic groups, Amharic, or Tigre speakers.\textsuperscript{112} Over time, Amharic, a language spoken in the central part of the Abyssinian upland, became a sort of \textit{lingua franca} for the whole Ethiopian Empire.\textsuperscript{113}

Instead, in the south-western part of Ethiopia, Omotic peoples are identified, settled in the Omo river’s valley. They stand out for the Ethiopian banana’s cultivation and for having developed political systems’ structures based on the hierarchization of power.\textsuperscript{114} Furthermore, in the Ethiopian context, the term “South” does not only have a strictly geographical value but it is considered as a “category” in which all states and peoples who were not directly involved in the imperial policy of Gondar or who simply played a peripheral role are included.\textsuperscript{115} Some of these are the Kafa Kingdom, the Wolayta Kingdom, and the Sidama Kingdom\textsuperscript{116}; the latter will be studied in this thesis.

2.2 The Sidama people

According to the author Wolassa Lawisso Kumo, the Sidama people still represent one of the oldest ethnocultural groups that descended from the Cushite civilizations which inhabited the central-eastern areas of Africa.\textsuperscript{117} Currently, the Sidama lives in the central-southern part of Ethiopia and covers a territorial area that ranges from Lake Hawassa to Lake Abaya, called \textit{Sidamaland}, reputed to be one of the most fertile areas of the entire African Continent.\textsuperscript{118} This area, under the Sidama administration, is part of the multi-ethnic region of the SNNPRS and consists of 19 \textit{Woreda} and 3 cities, always managed by the representatives of the ethnocultural group.\textsuperscript{119} According to the official census carried out in 1995 by the \textit{Sidama Development Programme}, the population of this ethnocultural group is estimated to be 4 million people.\textsuperscript{120}

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\textsuperscript{111} Calchi Novati, 1994: 10  \\
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid}, p. 13  \\
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Ibid}, p. 14  \\
\textsuperscript{114} Calchi Novati, 1994: 13  \\
\textsuperscript{115} Zewde, 2002: 16  \\
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Ibid}  \\
\textsuperscript{117} Kumo, 2016: 139  \\
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ibid}, p. 141  \\
\textsuperscript{119} Kia, 2013: 60  \\
\textsuperscript{120} Hameso, 1998: 106
\end{flushleft}
In line with the historical sources, the Sidama people inhabited the highlands located on the border between Ethiopia and present-day Eritrea and, once they separated from the Cushitic Kingdom around the eighth and ninth centuries AD, they initially settled around Lake Hayq located in the northern part of the current Wallo region. Here they began to develop their own ethnolinguistic identity and political, economic, and social features that are considered unique compared to their Cushitic “cousins”.

2.2.1 Sidama’s political system

Sidama’s political and administrative organization is characterized by a decentralized administrative system founded on an egalitarian basis, known as the “Moote System”. This particular system provides for the presence of an “agglomeration” of independent and territorially divided clans, each one governed by their own clan leader, the “Mootichcha,” a political figure that can be compared to that of a “King.” The Mootichcha is considered the head of the political-administrative structure and he is locally elected considering his age and knowledge. Furthermore, the Mootichcha must respond to a National Council composed of various gathered Local Councils. According to the author Lovise Aalen, the Sidama clan leader’s figure differs from the image that we have of the typical “African tribal leaders.” Their political power was spiritual rather than military, as they did not have a militia to control. For this reason, clan leaders must submit to the decisions made by the clan’s elders, also called Chimeessa. Furthermore, the Council of the Elders, or Songo, is defined as a formal organization with the particular function of clarifying disputes and defining political decisions, acting as a sort of modern Parliament. Also, according to Lovise Aalen, both figures of Mootichca and Songo play an important political and religious role in Sidama societies.

In the case of Sidama, the clan is reputed to be a prime example of a political organization unit capable of providing a primary source of identity and a sense of unity. In fact, to date, the Sidama people have a clear conception of the “Sidama society as one unit.” This is because, even if Sidama society is made up of various territorially fragmented clans, they all share the same “myth of origin” and the same genealogical line. For this reason, the Sidama people can be considered as a “loose federation” made up of various clans, which,
united by cultural, linguistic, economic, and territorial ties, form in their own small way, a sort of national dimension.\textsuperscript{133}

2.3 The beginning of the Ethiopian modern history

According to the historiography, 1855 was the year in which Ethiopian modern history started with the first “unification” attempt of the various existing regional principalities under a single central monarchical authority.\textsuperscript{134} In fact, what we now call “Ethiopia” can be said to be the result of a conglomeration of multiple heterogeneous societies, historically formed during the nineteenth century through territorial expansion and military conquests.\textsuperscript{135} It was Menelik II, \textit{Negus of Shoa}\textsuperscript{136} (1844–1913) who carried on and completed the unification process started by his predecessors. Crowned Emperor after Yohannes IV’s death, he was recognized for having undertaken simultaneously two “twin” policies: centralization and modernization.\textsuperscript{137} Menelik II, consolidated historical Abyssinia under one power, pushing himself to the southern part of present-day Ethiopia. Moved by the desire to control all the main trade routes that crossed Ethiopia, Menelik II at the helm of his army managed to conquer and control most of the populations of the South that had never been subjected before to an effective control exercised by Ethiopian rulers.\textsuperscript{138} He incorporated and brought under his control many ethnic groups such as the Oromo, Sidama, Gurage, Wolayta. Like many of the southern groups, what is now called \textit{Sidama Zone} was conquered around the early 1890s through a treaty signed by the last Sidama king, Baalicha Worawo, Menelik II’s general and the Abyssinian army’s leader who was the first to set foot in Sidama lands in 1891.\textsuperscript{139}

The Sidama couldn’t do anything in front of Menelik army’s technological/military and numerical superiority; King Sidama Baalicha Worawo, in averting a possible massacre, strategically raised the white flag and agree to submit to the Amhara.\textsuperscript{140} The Sidama lands’ conquest had a strong impact on the Sidama people’s political and social reality, transforming it completely.

From 1875 to 1889 Menelik II expanded his reign four/five times more than its original boundaries, reaching what are the current country’s borders.\textsuperscript{141} This expansion process took several forms concerning the type of

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid}, p. 240
\textsuperscript{134} The period of time prior to the Ethiopian modern history’s start was characterized by the “\textit{Zamana Mesafent}” era. The term “\textit{Zamana Mesafent}”, literally “Era of the Princes”, was used to define that phase of feudal anarchy that characterized the historical period between 1769 and 1855 in which regional princes increased their influence by taking advantage of the monarchical power’s systematics weakness. (Cp. Gudina, 2006: 120; Zewde, 2002: 27)
\textsuperscript{135} Fessha, 2010: 152
\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Ibid}, p.: 159
\textsuperscript{137} Kia, 2013: 18
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{139} Side Goodo, \textit{There are no people called "Sidamo": Stop the use of "Sidamo" misnomer}, 4\textsuperscript{th} October 2007. Accessed on 27\textsuperscript{th} April 2020 from Sidama Chronicle: \url{http://sidamachronicle.blogspot.com/2007/11/there-are-no-people-called-sidamo-stop_26.html}.
\textsuperscript{140} Kumo, 2016: 166-167
\textsuperscript{141} Fessha, 2010: 159
submission, peaceful or violent. For those groups that bowed to the Emperor’s control peacefully, the treatment took the form of a sort of “indirect rule,” that is, they were allowed to keep their leaders for the ordinary region’s administration. Instead, for those who tried to resist using the force, Sidama included, no treatment was reserved except for the brutal expropriation of their lands. The so-called land alienation was one of the “two facets of domination” introduced by the Emperor on the conquered peoples. The conquered territories were divided between the various Northern princes, the Church, and the generals, but above all among the Shewa Amhara, an ethnocultural group that, during the reign of Menelik II, became the representative of the political and cultural power. This type of imposition was called “Gabbar-Melkegna”: the confiscated land governed by Menelik II’s generals was intended to increase the prestige and military strength of the Emperor himself. In the southern areas, the role of “Melkegna” (delegate) was given to the Northern military who settled there after the conquest and became defined as “Neftegna.” The northern rulers confiscated about 2/3 of the southern territories, leaving the rest to the indigenous peoples, depriving them of their rights over the lands.

“Neftegna-Gabbar” was the term assumed to describe the system of government imposed on the South’s regions: a system of political, military and economic control, rather than the government, carried out through the use of violence and weapons. Following this particular authoritarian and hegemonic system, the land owned by Sidama was extorted from the indigenous population and divided between the “conquerors” or “colonist,” who became the new owners. The result of this system’s imposition was an increasing economic gap between the North and the South of the country that lasted until 1974.

On the other hand, the other side of domination assumes socio-political and cultural characteristics. With the population of the South’s incorporation, cultural and linguistic contrasts became more and more relevant. For this reason Amharic, the Shewa Amhara élite’s linguistic system, become the lingua franca of the Empire, imposing itself on the approximately 70 different languages present in the South. We are therefore witnessing a process of “Amharization”: Sidama communities and other ethnic groups were forced to speak Amharic, to convert to Orthodox Christianity and, in many cases, even to change their name, all this in order to be

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142 Ibid, p. 160
143 Fessha, 2010: 190
144 Ibid, p. 160
145 Kia, 2013: 20
146 Fessha, 2010: 161
147 The Neftegna-Gabbar system provided for the assignment of an indigenous customer (Gabbar) to a single Neftegna to whom he had to supply food and labour. (Cp. McClellan, 1978: 429). In reality, the Gabbar in addition to being used in an individualistic context, can also be defined as a tax-paying unit. Each Gabbar unit had to pay 5 thalers a year to the Neftegna. In the Southern regions the term Gabbar took on a different connotation, it was mainly used to define indigenous peoples as inferior beings compared to those in the North. In fact Gabbar and Neftegna were separated by important linguistic, cultural and religious differences, which combined with military domination and ethnocentrist ideological elements gave birth to a “pseudo” colonial system of the North over the populations of the South. (Cp. McClellan, 1984: 662-663)
148 Kia, 2013: 19
149 Kumo, 2016: 242
150 Kia, 2013: 19
151 Fessha, 2010: 161
accepted by the ruling class and participate in the country’s political and economic life. In this way, the languages of the South’s population become to be discriminated against and denigrated. Economic marginalization combined with political and cultural alienation were the main characteristics of the Northern government’s imposition on the conquered populations of the South and a distinctive sign of the Emperor Menelik II’s centralization policy.

Many scholars argue the Emperor's choices by associating them with an imposition of a particular culture on others, not a unification process. However, other scholars, belonging to the Oromo ethnic group, show the military policy employed by Menelik II as a “Colonial Thesis” or a colonization process.

Many recognize the Menelik II’s figure and that of his generals as the creators of the modern Ethiopia Empire-State through a historical process of nation-building. Menelik II’s supporters consider the policies of “Masgabar” (literally, convert into slaves) and “Mekinat” (pacifying, colonizing) universal and indispensable characteristics for launching into a nation-building process. According to the so-called “Menelikans,” contemporary Ethiopia would never have been such as it is now without the imposition of the cultural, linguistic, and religious values belonging to a single ethnic group on the others. This was possible only because of Menelik II. Menelikan’s motto “One Ethiopia” reflects their view of themselves as authentic representatives of Ethiopia as a unique and indivisible nation. By firmly opposing to those who support the idea of a “Colonial Thesis,” they support the use of force against ethno-nationalist movements. Instead, those who do not think as Menelikans, siding in favour of a greater recognition of marginalized ethnic groups’ rights, are considered unpatriotic and even labelled as non-Ethiopian.

Sidama’s political and cultural domination exercised by the Amhara élite and proceeded by Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974), continued undisturbed until the Italian occupation’s period between 1936 and 1941. Sidama’s opposition movements took advantage of the Italian occupation to eradicate the brutal feudal system and to free Sidama lands from the Amhara’s political and cultural oppression, in convergence with the new Italian occupiers who worked to undermine the previous political monopoly exercised by the Amhara. The Sidama’s rebellion suffered a severe blow with the Italian army’s defeat. In fact, after the Italian retreat in

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152 Ibid, pp. 161-162
153 Fessha, 2010: 161-162
154 The so-called “Colonial Thesis” is only one of the three main ethno-nationalist perspectives that seek to read and interpret Ethiopia’s history in light of its birth as a state. The other two perspectives identified in Merera Gudina’s essay are: the “Nation-building Perspective” and the “National Oppression Perspective”. According to the first perspective, the ultimate goal of the state’s construction lies in the unification or reunification of the territories previously under the control of the Historical Ethiopia. This perspective’s followers tend to justify or simply disregard the injustices generated as a result of the actions of the empire-builders. The second perspective is generally advanced by the members of the Ethiopian intelligentsia associated with a Marxist background. They recognize the injustice conducted during the state’s expansion process, but at the same time, they reflect on the existence of a united and cohesive “Great Ethiopia”. (Cp. Gudina, 2006: 119-130)
155 Supporters, even contemporary, of the political-cultural system adopted by Menelik II.
156 Gudina, 2006: 120
157 Kumo, 2016: 244
1941, the previous feudal system was restored in the Sidama territory and the Amhara hegemony was reactivated. Sidama’s short uprising for his people’s freedom was soon silenced in the worst possible way: the Amhara, taking revenge on the various resistance and opposition movements born during and after the Second World War, massacred thousands of civilians in many districts, including many Sidamas. The Sidama speak about this period defining it as “the second terror,” a second reminiscence of the pain and suffering experienced in the “first terror” that occurred when the Amhara conquered for the first time the Sidama during the reign of Menelik II. The historical cultural subjugation and the territorial alienation are still remembered today and they are often underlined, especially in the Sidama’s current propaganda, as an invective against the government and its reluctance on the Sidama’s 2019 Referendum.

The successive regimes that followed one after another in Ethiopian political history systematically perpetuated an adverse condition to peripheral peoples’ ethnonationalism aspirations of political autonomy and their consequent political and economic development. Ethiopian history has shown that the various ethnocultural groups, including the Sidama people, oppressed by the domination of a core culture have been forced to use violence and armed struggle through the opposition movements’ organization, born to resist oppressive political system and to conquer one’s freedom, autonomy, and political-cultural equality.

It was precisely on this wave of resistance towards the end of Haile Selassie’s reign that the Sidama’s opposition was able to reorganize itself and undertake a new and more organized riot against the imperial regime which collapsed on 12th September 1974 pursuant the Ethiopian popular 1974 Revolution.

2.4 The birth of the student movements and the rise of the “National Question”

The political, economic, and cultural system promoted by the Haile Selassie’s government resulted in a level of alienation such as to favour the emergence of class and ethnic origin’s evident contrasts. The first protests organized against the imperial regime were coordinated by young and educated élites, most of whom returned from the period abroad carried out thanks to the scholarship financed by the Emperor himself. By experiencing the world outside Ethiopia, the students realized how economically and politically backward their homeland was. From an international point of view, Ethiopia, although boasting a victorious past against the European colonization’s process, still possessed minimum development requirements, resulting, in 1950

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158 Aalen, 2011: 75
159 Kumo, 2016: 244
160 Kia, 2013: 63
162 Kia, 2019: 8
163 Kumo, 2016: 244
164 Aalen, 2011: 28
165 Ibid, pp. 28-29
rearwards even regarding the African colonies. The birth of anti-colonialist and nationalist movements in the rest of the Continent strongly influenced the opposition exercised by Ethiopian students against the imperial government. This was reinforced by the fact that, during this period, Addis Ababa became a lively intellectual hub, due to the nearby presence of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and many international organizations’ headquarters. The presence of these external bodies and the impact with the modern Western education model favoured, above all, the catalysation of anti-imperialist, anti-American, anti-authoritarian, Marxist-inspired, political ideologies in vogue in Europe in the same period.

Especially in the late 1960s, the student movements and their demonstrations became more lively, constituting a real “turning point” in the political history of Ethiopia itself. As a result of a weak, almost absent, association political life, student movements “as the most outspoken and visibly [...] consolidated opposition group” grew, representing and promoting the latent public opinion’s demands and wishes. A turning point in the process of student movements’ radicalization was represented by the year 1964, in which the “militant phase” officially began with the formation of a group, named “the Crocodiles,” that acted undercover. It was during this period that the student association officially converged in the creation of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). This movement had a connection not only in Addis Ababa but also in Europe and North America. During this phase, the ESM approached more Marxist-Leninist ideals and values, they officially embraced this ideology in 1974.

2.5 The Marxist ideology’s advance in Ethiopia and the 1974 Revolution’s outbreak

In the African panorama, Marxist ideology’s spread is associated with the presence of European colonial forces that have imposed their own vision of society, also introducing a new and foreign system of production: capitalism. This upset the traditional African societies’ internal dynamics by radically changing their social structure. The so-called “fact of conquest,” or rather the application in all respects of the European capitalist model into the African dimension, has led to the creation of anomalies such as to contrast the endogenous

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166 Ibid, p. 29  
167 Vaughan, 2003: 131-132  
168 Tareke, 2009: 35  
169 Vaughan, 2003: 132  
170 Ibid, p. 128  
171 Ibid  
172 Getachew, 2018: 27  
173 Zewde, 2002: 223; Marxism, in addition to its modern vision of capitalism, social relations and class oppression, represented a revolutionary theory for social transformation. This conception enchanted the student movements which considered this ideology as the best solution and cure for the real problems of a poor and underdeveloped Ethiopia, conceiving the revolution as a shortcut to faster political, economic and social progress. (Cp. Tareke, 2009: 28)  
174 Getachew, 2018: 27
development of the African societies. But, even if Ethiopia was spared from European colonialism, it did not escape from the so-called colonial era, but experienced it differently and uniquely, unlike other African states.

The dominant role that was of the Europeans was exercised by an autochthonous ethnic group, the Amhara, that dominated the other multiple local populations politically, economically and culturally altering their socio-political process and, on the other hand, increasing the potential ethnic conflict. For this reason the “fact of conquest” becomes relevant for Ethiopia as well as for the other African States which experienced European colonialism. The almost non-existence of integrative and redistributive policies and the presence of an inhomogeneous political community fuelled the already present ethnic conflict and increased antagonistic relation between the peripheral ethnocultural groups and the dominant Amhara group. Furthermore, Ethiopia’s inclusion in the capitalist system during the mid-twentieth century determined a coexistence with the pre-existing traditional feudal system, generating evident contradictions and contributing significantly to the outbreak of the Ethiopian 1974 Revolution.

By promoting the Marxist ideology and the so-called “National Oppression Thesis,” the student movements were firmly opposed to the Amhara political, economic, and sociocultural supremacy and to the assimilationist policy promoted in a such concealed way by the imperial government. In that period, as a matter of fact, “the national issue was a taboo subject” and, as such, the Ethiopian government tried in every way to avoid any reference to the obvious ethnic, linguistic and differences present in the country, even discouraging any unofficial investigation on this topic. But the government’s discrimination against other languages and cultures did not stop the students and intellectuals’ voice who, in addition to reflecting on the condition of Ethiopia itself, began to question their own social identity, trying

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175 Social change is interpreted as an endogenous aspect. Change is accepted if it develops within a particular society and is not imposed by an alien model. An alien model’s forced imposition generates a non-compliant social change that alters the original development’s path of a given society. (Cp. Keller, 1981: 521-522)
176 “The truth about Ethiopia is that it is a colonial state in that the Amhara elite under the leadership of Emperor Menelik violently conquered neighbouring peoples and imposed its economic interests and culture on them. Just as in the case of European colonial conquest, in Ethiopia too, <<boundaries [were] penetrated by outsiders who are products and carriers of a different system intent upon forcefully changing the pattern of production and imposing a different set of rules>>. The imposition of the Ethiopian rule with its imperial political system, feudal class relations, and Christian beliefs on the southern peoples, who had different social systems and beliefs, is no less colonial than the British or French conquest of African peoples.” (Kebede, 2011: 288)
177 Keller, 1981: 523
178 Ibid
179 Ibid
180 Aalen, 2011: 23
181 Vaughan, 2003: 133
182 “The Abyssinian nature of the Ethiopian nationalism and identity was taken for granted. No mention was made for example, about the neglect of all other languages in favor of Amharigna, or the identification of Ethiopia with Christianity.” (Vaughan, 2003: 133)
183 Clapham, 1988: 195
to define and explain who was the “real Ethiopian man” and the “genuine Ethiopian.”184 It is precisely at this time that the conflict between center and periphery, between nationalism, regionalism and ethnicity, was not fought only on a political and insurrectional level, but took on the characteristics of a real inner conflict that gripped the minds of many Ethiopians.185 Thus emerged the conception of “Ethiopianism”: thinking of a free Ethiopian being outside the Amhara imposition, an individual who could overcome any regional and tribal attachment or devotion.186

Inspired by Welleigne Mekonnen’s text, the so-called “National Question” became the workhorse of the most radical student groups against the imperial regime which brought to the Revolution of 1974’s outbreak.187 But its interpretation was a cause of contrast within these movements and among all the minor groups scattered throughout Europe and North America. Generally, the various movements, coherent with Marxist ideology, agreed on two main aspects.188 The first aspect directly accuses the Ethiopian Empire which, by promoting a strong repression among the various nationalities throughout its government policy, at the same time increased an evident class oppression. The solution was found in the definitive class exploitation’s removal, represented in the Ethiopian framework by the Southern people’s land alienation which was considered an essential prerequisite in order to proceed to the second aspect. The second one deals with the recognition of multiple nationalities through the stipulation of a right of self-determination which provides for an equal distribution of territories within the Ethiopian state.189

2.6 The Ethiopian Revolution

Many scholars define the 1974 Revolution as the crucial event par excellence of the modern Ethiopian history. This event shook the country as never before, radically transforming both civil society and the government system.190 Although unexpected, the surprise effect is not to be considered a unique prerogative of the Ethiopian case, but a typical feature of revolutions in general.191 The Ethiopian Revolution was not unique but it fits perfectly with the “concept of modern revolution” defined by John Dunn as a “form of massive, violent and rapid social change,”192 capable of upsetting the normal society’s relations.193 In this scenario, represented by an inefficient and obsolete political system, the people refuse to be governed while the aristocracy fails in

184 On these topics see: Mekonnen, 1969: 2; Vaughan, 2003: 134
185 Clapham, 1988: 196
186 Vaughan, 2003: 134
187 Ibid, p. 137
188 Clapham, 1988: 198
189 Ibid
190 Tareke, 2009: 34
191 Zewde, 2002: 228
192 Ibid
193 Ibid
its traditional political control. A common factor which is also present in the Ethiopian context, is the revolutionary élite’s strength which, moving for the country’s good and a better future’s achievement, loses control of the revolution and leaves out the true meaning of it. The Ethiopian Revolution also shares characteristics with previous historical revolutions. Like the Chinese one, the Ethiopian Revolution was accompanied by an agricultural reform that radically decisively transformed the rural landscape. Similarly to the Russian and French ones, the 1974 Revolution put an end to the monarchical dynasty but subsequently opened the doors to the establishment of a totalitarian and dictatorial system. As the Russian Revolution gave way to the Stalinist Regime, the Ethiopian edition handed over the country to the future dictator Mengistu Hayle-Mariam and the instauration of the military-based Derg regime.

Moreover 1974 Revolution had a significant importance for the Sidama people especially for one crucial aspect. Indeed, the Revolution marked the abolition of the country’s archaic feudal administration system. The “Land to the Tillers” land reform, which followed the monarchy’s abolition, was deemed a victory for the hitherto Southern Ethiopia’s oppressed peasants who were relieved of the obligation to pay large amounts of tribute and to work for free (corvées) in the Neftegna’s properties. Although this land reform’s concession, the popularity of the Revolution dropped sharply in the early 1980s with the introduction of cooperative agriculture. In some areas, small farms were confiscated and coffee producers, especially Sidama, were forced to sell their products only through cooperatives at a lower price. This process’ resistance further strengthened that anti-government movement that was taking hold among the Sidama people already in the early 1970s, namely the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), recognized as the first organized Sidama movement.

2.7 The policy of the Derg Regime

On the 20th December 1974, the Derg, after having overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie, formalized what was its government policy’s first attempt. The new government program was formulated in ten main points in which nationalism and socialism were combined to strengthen the neo-military regime. The Ten Points Programme aimed to define the ultimate goal of the Ethiopian Revolution, a revolution now controlled solely

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194 According to the author Barhu Zewde (in *ivi*), the pre-revolutionary Ethiopian scenario conforms to the description offered by Lenin in which the describes the basic characteristics of a possible revolutionary situation.
195 Zewde, 2002: 228-229
196 Amharic little-used term to define the establishment of a “parliament of the armed forces”, composed of representatives of all the main military units. (Cp. Clapham, 1988: 40)
197 Zewde, 2002: 229
198 Kia, 2013: 177
199 Ibid
200 Kumo, 2016: 178
201 Clapham, 1988: 45
by the military sphere. In the name of a new Ethiopian Socialism “hibretesebawinet” and renew national unity, the formal existence of the multiple ethnocultural groups and their relative difference was denied. Amhara cultural supremacy was consequently reduced and limited. The problem to be solved, in addition to cultural repression represented by the supremacy of the Amhara culture, was within the right of self-determination. The Derg had to express its view on this question and it did through the Programme of the National Democratic Republic Revolution’s (PNDR) proclamation in April 1976.

The year 1983 marked a “turning point” regarding the possible resolution of the National Question. On 25th March 1983 the Derg authorized the creation of an Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN) in view of the promulgation of a new Constitution that would take into account the ethnic and linguistic criteria of the population. Its main aim was to analyse the respective eighty and more ethnocultural groups’ social conditions present in Ethiopia and then develop a suitable plan for autonomous regions’ establishment. Although many efforts were invested in data processing in order to reach a proper constitutional agreement based exclusively on the ethnic groups present in the territory, the linguistic and ethnic criteria were not fully considered in the final agreement. In fact, the constitutional project that emerged granted nominal autonomy to those territories inhabited by population with different lifestyles and linguistic systems which represented a “minimal economic unit.” The recognition of ethnocultural minorities was thus excluded from the decision of the Derg. Furthermore, autonomy was mainly addressed to areas where the conflict with the central state was more intense. In this context, in September 1987 the new Constitution was promulgated, symbol of a new emerging State: the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE), proclaimed by dictator

202 Prunier, 2015: 228
203 “Ethiopian Socialism” was the name given by the Derg regime to its ideology programme based on the nationalist motto “Ityopya Tikidem” (Ethiopia first). This motto was “indicative of the autonomy of the Derg and of its efforts to define its own ruling principles” (Cp. Kebede, 2015: 236). “Equality; self-reliance; the dignity of labour; the supremacy of the common good; and the indivisibility of the Ethiopian Unity” were considered the fundamental principles of the Derg’s political manifesto. (Cp. Tareke, 2009: 39)
204 Prunier, 2015: 228
205 Ten Points Programme’s first point: “1- Ethiopia shall remain a united country, without ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural difference”. (Cp. Clapham, 1988: 45)
206 Ibid, p. 199
207 “The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The unity of Ethiopia’s nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and all reactionary forces […] Given Ethiopia’s existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administrators to head its internal organs.” (Clapham, 1988: 199)
208 Keller, 1985: 4
209 Clapham, 1988: 200
210 Keller, 1985: 14
211 Vaughan, 2003: 152
212 Ibid, pp. 152-153
Mengistu. The PDRE Constitution, in addition to institutionalizing the one-party system, further emphasized the Ethiopian State’s unity and its commitment to centralizing the country, although its administrative configuration in regional autonomies. Including the PNDR’s autonomous regions’ formula, the new Constitution was the first to recognize the different nationalities’ presence, decreeing Ethiopia a multinational state in the name of “equality, equalization, autonomy and language.” Thanks the ISEN’s work and following the definition of nationality interpreted by the regime, the government designed a new Ethiopia’s map in which five autonomous regions were delimited: Eritrea, Tigray, Assab (for the Afar ethnocultural group), Dire Dawa (for the Issa) and Ogaden and other 24 administrative regions, whose powers although, were always strictly controlled by the regime and remain unprotected by any constitutional guarantee.

The new structure aimed internally to re-organize the structure of the regional governments by formally following the concept of nationality, dividing in this way large nationalities (including the Oromos, the Amharas, and the Somalis) according to an ethnolinguistic separation line. With the establishment of new autonomous regions and the formal openness of the state towards ethnic/cultural expressions, ethnicity was increasingly politicized and brought to be a relevant issue on the national political stage. Although the Constitution aimed to regulate the National Question or Question of Nationality through the institution of autonomous regions, it did not guarantee reconciliation with the opposition forces, which intensified mainly in the late 1980s. Regional-based resistance forces such as the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) which, embracing ethnic nationalism as a weapon to defeat the military regime’s centralism, firmly opposed to Derg, starting a bloody civil war. The ethnic issue then becomes the glue of various opposition movements fighting against the Derg. As guerrillas advanced, Mengistu was forced to fly off the country and take refuge in Zimbabwe while Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and

213 Kia, 2013: 24
214 Ibid
215 Aalen, 2011: 32
217 The definition of nationality was based on those populations or groups that had a history, a culture, a language and a common territory and, moreover, a limited economic autonomy. (Cp. Kia, 2013: 25)
218 Kia, 2013: 25
219 Aalen, 2011: 32
220 Kia, 2013: 25
221 Aalen, 2006: 246
222 Kia, 2013: 25
223 Aalen, 2011: 32
224 The EPRDF was created by the TPLF in 1989. Its creation was motivated by the desire of the TPLF to form an ethnic-based multiparty coalition. During the clashes for the liberation from the Derg, three organizations, in addition to TPLF, took part in the EPRDF; The Amhara-based Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM), the Oromo-based Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers’ Revolutionary Movement (EDORM). (Cp. Van der Beken, 2007: 34)
TPLF forced entered respectively in the cities of Addis Ababa and Asmara in May 1991, ending the Derg’s military regime and the dictatorship of a single party.\(^{225}\)

Of great importance was the role of the Sidama movement in the Derg regime’s defeat. The SLM was born mainly to overcome the Derg dictatorship by embarking on a real armed struggle against the regime and also to fight to conquer, maintain and defend the Sidama people’s autonomy and freedom.\(^{226}\) As Shiferaw Muleta points out “[…] The armed struggle of the SLM for self-rule was one of the top five armed struggles launched by the EPLF, TPLF and OLF against the Socialist-Dictatorship of the Derg regime.”\(^{227}\) According to the Immigration and Refugee Board’s research team of Canada, Ottawa, the SLM operating methods can be divided into two categories according to the analysed historical period: from 1975 to 1991 the Sidama movement adopts the use of violence the guerrilla tactics in opposition to the Derg regime, while 1991 marks a turning point in which SLM has radically changed its operating method, opting for a peaceful resolution.\(^{228}\) In fact, already immediately after its creation, precisely in 1975, the SLM strongly opposed the Derg’s military junta and undertook a guerrilla\(^{229}\) that lasted about seven years, between 1977 and 1983.\(^{230}\) The SLM managed to completely liberate three districts located in the southeast of the Sidama territory from the oppression of Mengistu Hailemariam’s military regime.\(^{231}\) In this civil war about ten thousand Sidama fighters were killed.\(^{232}\) Although the history of the Sidama resistance remains largely obscured compared to that of the other opposition movements in the country, the Sidama people enormously contributed to the weakening of the Derg’s military regime and its subsequent fall in June 1991. As evidenced by Africa Watch Report in 1991 volume: “The War ins Sidama was on the Derg’s best kept war secrets. They paid an immense sacrifice for the ‘gradual weakening’ collapse of the Derg dictatorship but their story remains largely untold which informs imperatives for further research.”\(^{233}\) The SLM’s action was not only considered important from a military-offensive point of view but was essential for the emergence of a nationalist awareness that resulted in the active participation in the stipulation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and resolution of the National Question together with the EPRDF once having eliminated the Derg regime.\(^{234}\) In support of this, some Sidama scholars underline the fact that: “The development of Sidama nationalism owes its origins in the conquest and

\(^{225}\) Zewde, 2002: 256  
\(^{226}\) Kia, 2019: 9  
\(^{227}\) Muleta, 2019: 1  
\(^{229}\) Kia, 2013: 64  
\(^{230}\) Kumo, 2016: 179  
\(^{231}\) Ibid  
\(^{232}\) Ibid  
\(^{233}\) Africa Watch Report, 1991: 83  
\(^{234}\) Kumo, 2016: 180
the growing discontent and deep-seated malaise caused by the Ethiopian empire statehood.". 235

This sentiment of nationalism still persist today, most of all, in the Sidama National Liberation Front (SNLF)’s current press statement in which the reference to the “blood and bones of your sacrificed sons and daughters” aims to ferment Sidama’s national consciousness against the government.236

After the fall of the Derg regime, the reins of the Ethiopian state and its future were taken over by the EPRDF which, motivated by the injustices carried out by the regime against ethnocultural groups, sought to prevent future ethnic-based conflicts. To avoid this, EPRDF leaders hoped for the creation of a new system of government that had at heart country’s ethnic aspects, making them fully integrated into the organization of the post-regime state. Therefore, the new Ethiopia must necessarily break with that past which had repeatedly suppressed multiple ethnocultural groups, eliminating any influence of the previous regime.237

Comparative studies238 have shown that prospects of establishing autonomy agreements are more likely when the state undergoes a regime change. This is because the new leaders who manage the transition oppose the previous centralization system and also, in the search of a greater sense of security, use the promise of autonomy as a bond of alliance239. This was precisely the Ethiopian case. The federal system’s launch ensured the new EPRDF’s government the free country’s reorganization. With the end of the Derg regime, the EPRDF, in addition to put an end to the hegemony of the Amhara culture, aimed to organize a governmental structure in which it could govern without any interference from the old élite.240

235 Kia, 2019: 9
237 Aalen, 2011: 34-35
238 These studies have analysed some state’s condition who have introduced solutions of autonomy for their sub-national ethnocultural groups. (Cp. Ibid)
239 Ibid, p.36
240 Ibid
3. THE ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL PERIOD

According to Alfred Stepan, the Ethiopian government did not immediately qualify as an “ethnic federalism,” but, during its state-building process, it took different forms, moving from a “holding together” federation to a “putting together” federation. So, following the models reported by Stepan, Ethiopian federalism does not fall into a specific category but, over time, has undergone interesting transformations.  

First of all, concept of ethnic federalism was introduced in Ethiopia in 1991, as soon as the ethnic-based coalition, represented by the EPRDF, came to power, definitively eradicating the Derg regime. The purpose of the EPRDF and new Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in addition to ending the civil war once and for all, was to rebuild the country based on democracy, peace, freedom, and ethnic equality principles. The only way to achieve this ambitious goal was to experience federalism in the Ethiopian context, a system that could increase the entire population’s political participation and that could finally respect the previously oppressed population and nationalities’ ethno-regional rights. Reason why ethnic federalism was presented as the only solution for a new and democratic realization.

With the end of the Derg regime and the EPRDF’s establishment, Ethiopia began to act as an avant-garde concerning the other African states, simultaneously trying to satisfy the multiple ethnocultural groups’ demands and rights and to open the regime to little, albeit non-existent, democratic features’ inclusion, all through with an ethnic-based federal system’s experimentation. The “ethnic-driven” push was considered an excellent starting point for the Ethiopian political system’s restructuring and the most effective tool in strengthening the political, economic, and socio-cultural rights and privileges of the many NNPs of Ethiopia. In particular the ethnic empowerment enforced by the government give space to the previously oppressed languages and cultures who found a new expression, and was optimal for the birth of a new sense of ethnic identity. This identity and cultural awakening were thought to be positive in the reconstruction of a new inclusive political process.

Thus, ethnic and linguistic criteria become the cornerstone of a process of decentralization and federalization strongly desired by the new government. In this context, Ethiopia is included in the “holding together” federation model in which federations are the product of a consensual and parliamentary pact that aims to preserve the unity of the state through the creation of a multi-ethnic federal system.

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241 Abraham, 2006: 86
242 Aalen, 2006: 245
243 systempeace.org offers the Ethiopia’s 1946-2013 authority trend. Is it possible to visualize the democratic index increasing from 1991 which was-8, when the Derg was ended to 1995, to year in which Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was founded reaching approx. 1. [The scale goes from -10 (full autocracy) to 10 (full democracy). If a country was colonized in a given year is encoded as -20]
244 Aalen, 2006: 243
245 Abraham, 2006: 91
246 Ibid
247 Keller, 2002: 24
The choice to establish a multi-ethnic federation derives from the need to ensure that ethnocultural communities could receive a territorial recognition in which they can exercise their ethnic features. In this way, the Ethiopian federal system has formalized a special spatial compartmentalization, delimiting different geographic areas according to specific ethnic lines. This new structure was thought to protect and, at the same time, to promote the different linguistic systems, cultures, and identities by introducing the possibility of self-management for the multiple and recognized ethnolinguistic communities.\textsuperscript{248}

Ethiopian ethnic federalism’s experience could be divided into two main phases.\textsuperscript{249} The first phase concerns the period from 1992 to 1995, a period in which the Marxist political philosophy is fulfilled.\textsuperscript{250} The \textit{Transitional Government}, led by the EPRDF coalition, eager to resolve the \textit{National Question} once and for all, having granted the right of self-determination, attempted to strengthen the political and administrative new state’s structure through a complete state policy’s transformation.\textsuperscript{251} Thus, 14 autonomous regions were created based on purely ethnic and linguistic criteria, endowed with administrative, political, and fiscal powers and functions, but still linked to the central government. Ethiopian ethnic federalism’s experience was further elaborated with the end of transition period and the creation in 1995 of the Federal and Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{252} It is important to remember that, during the transition phase, the first “democratic” elections were held in June 1992 in order to establish local and regional level assemblies, followed by two other national elections, one of which for the creation of the Constituent Assembly. The common factor of all these three elections was the undisputed victory of the EPRDF’s multi-party coalition. Although the new formally democratic Ethiopian structure was meant to allow the different ethnocultural groups’ participation and political interaction, the EPRDF played a dominant, hegemonic role in legislating before, during, and after the transition period. The strategy that the coalition used was to create an \textit{“impression of inclusiveness”} already present in the 1991 \textit{Transitional Conference}, by encouraging the formation of political parties and organizations that represented the various ethnocultural groups.\textsuperscript{253} An example was the coercive creation of ethnically based surrogate parties wanted by the EPRDF, such as that of the \textit{“People’s Democratic Organizations”}\textsuperscript{254} whose purpose was only to \textit{“project the illusion of a multi-ethnic federal state”}.\textsuperscript{255} This also happened in the case of the \textit{Sidama Liberation Movement}: reluctant to submitting and abandoning its “independence” was absorbed and replaced in July 1991 by the EPRDF with a “puppet-party” named \textit{Sidama Peoples’ Democratic Organization (SPDO)}

\textsuperscript{248} Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4840
\textsuperscript{249} Abraham, 2006: 91
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid, p. 92
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid, p. 97
\textsuperscript{255} Keller, 2002: 24
mainly composed of war prisoners, teachers and young unemployed unaware of the party race to the power.\textsuperscript{256} Also, the \textit{Ethnic and National Question}, together with the \textit{self-determination of independence} became an important source of popular consensus.\textsuperscript{257} In doing so, the EPRDF, besides expanding its number, gained other minor political organizations’ trust by acquiring more and more representative power.\textsuperscript{258} Using the “voluntary non-participation” in boycotting the hegemony of the EPRDF, the little opposition did nothing but increase the power of coalition in the national arena.\textsuperscript{259} The EPRDF was the only competitor in the 1994 election for the establishment of the \textit{Constituent Assembly}. On the 8\textsuperscript{th} December 1994, the new Assembly, consisted of EPRDF’s majority, ratified the new Constitution which was approved by reconfirming what were the party’s points of strength, that is, the ethnic groups’ right of self-determination and the realization of the ethnic federalist system.\textsuperscript{260} It is precisely in this reality that the Ethiopian federal experiment turns from a “\textit{holding together}” prototype to a “\textit{putting together}” federalism. By leveraging the desires of self-determination of the multiple ethnocultural groups and by manipulating the political and administrative institutions to its advantage, the EPRDF was able to increase and preserve its dominance in the Ethiopian political scenario.\textsuperscript{261}

The new Constitution approved in December 1994, laid the foundations for the implementation of the new federal structure, officially formed by nine autonomous regions, defined by articles 47 and 49 of the Constitution: Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harar, Oromiya, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State (SNNPRS) and Tigray and by two cities with independent administration from the central government: the new capital Addis Ababa and the city-state of Dire-Dawa.\textsuperscript{262} Most of these regions are made up of a specific dominant ethnocultural group from which it takes its name, except for the Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, and the SNNPRS territories, regions in which there is no a predominant ethnic group.\textsuperscript{263} In particular, the SNNPRS gathers a considerable number of 56 ethnic groups considered to be “minor,” including the Sidama group.\textsuperscript{264} These ethnic groups incorporated into multi-ethnic realities can form their own “mother state” through a specific legislative process according to the provisions of the Federal Constitution’s article 47 paragraph 3 which allows them to undertake a self-determination procedure.\textsuperscript{265} Moreover, the Ethiopian territory was divided into 66 administrative provinces, 55 \textit{Woredas} (districts) among which 6 special districts. Each of these levels of government share the same government structure formed by similar legislative, executive, and judicial apparatus.\textsuperscript{266}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Hameso, 2006: 70
\item Abraham, 2006: 97
\item \textit{Ibid}, p. 99
\item Abraham, 2006: 103
\item Van der Beken, 2007: 42
\item Keller, 2002: 24
\item Vaughan, 2015: 283-331; \textit{Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995: art. 47(1), 49.}
\item Keller, 2002: 32
\item Cohen, 1995: 164
\item Kia, 2013: 10; \textit{Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995: art. 47(3)}
\item Keller, 2002: 34
\end{enumerate}
The Constitution recognizes “the equality of all languages of the nation” and also guarantees to each of the autonomous regions the possibility to exercise the respective working language, except for the multi-ethnic regions in which the use of their own linguistic system was limited only for the every-day use while the Amharic for the working environment.267

3.1 The annexation of the Sidama to the SNNPRS and the dispute over the city of Hawassa

With the formalization of Ethiopian Constitution, the relations between the central government and the Sidama people did not improve at all. The decision to guarantee the administration of one’s own regions to only six major ethnocultural groups, without considering demographic, economic, social and political factors, was one of the main reasons for the Sidama resentment towards the government, which without any consultations was inserted, together with 56 other ethnocultural groups, within the SNNPRS.268

The EPRDF’s unchallenged decision to create the new federal structure brought obvious advantages to those ethnocultural groups who were the direct administrator of their own region because, according to the constitutional provision, they were allowed to choose their own working language and to legislate directly in some specific sectors such as education, health, and territorial administration. Advantages that were never enjoyed by those ethnocultural groups incorporated in a single multi-ethnic region.269 Precisely for this reason, the fusion of multiple ethnocultural groups within a single regional reality, such as that of SNNPRS, increased the Sidama people resentment, believed to be one of the most numerous ethnic communities compared to some other entire regional states.270

Furthermore, the economic, social, and political diversity of the 56 ethnocultural groups incorporated within the SNNPRS severely limited the potential represented by the Sidama communities. Indeed, the various NNPs which live in the region are set at different economic development levels.271

267 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995: art. 5(3)
268 Kumo, 2016: 255; In 1991/92, “In 1991/92 the empire was divided into 14 regions/zones. Sidama was designated as Zone 8. In 1994, Sidama as a region was dissolved and it was included in the so called Southern, Nations and Nationalities Region with the political seat in Hawassa. This city is also the cultural and economic centre of Sidama. Sidamas were not consulted about the dissolution of their own region nor about the merger with SNNPR. The TPLF/EPRDF leadership imposed its undemocratic and wrong beliefs and policies on the people of Sidama” (Hameso, 2002: 5)
271 Kumo, 2016: 255
The Sidama are recognized to be the second-largest coffee producers after the Oromos and are therefore considered one of the pillars of the entire Ethiopian economy.\textsuperscript{272} It should be noted that, like the Sidamas, the Omo Valley tribes are also part of the same region. They are populations that, living in an underdeveloped condition, need greater attention and socio-economic protection by the federal state.\textsuperscript{273} For these reasons, the SNNPRs’ existence is strongly criticized; the South is too ethnically diverse and territorially extended to be managed under one and single region.\textsuperscript{274}

Another thorny issue concerns the Hawassa city’s status, whose administration is disputed between the federal government and the Sidama people.\textsuperscript{275} The city of Hawassa was strategically founded by Emperor Haile Selassie between 1951 and 1964, replacing the old village of Yirgalem, Sidama province’s historical capital,\textsuperscript{276} to create a prosperous industrial centre for Southern Ethiopia and an important commercial hub between Addis Ababa and Nairobi.\textsuperscript{277} Hawassa’s foundation began the “eviction” of thousands of local Sidama farmers who settled in the immediate vicinity, while facilitating access to various populations and ethnocultural groups looking for business in the new city.\textsuperscript{278} This created persistent hostility between the indigenous Sidama population and newcomers from other ethnic communities. To date, Hawassa is considered a multi-ethnic city where the Sidama group represents only a minority.\textsuperscript{279} For this reason Sidama people were often labeled “barbarian” and “uncivilized.”\textsuperscript{280} In fact, for most of the last forty years, Ethiopian emperors and especially the single party TPLF/EPRDF constantly discouraged the indigenous Sidama people, either directly or indirectly, to take possession of the city government.\textsuperscript{281} With the adoption of 1995 Constitution, the city of Hawassa was promoted to the capital of the SNNP’s Region. This government choice meant that the city was officially detached from the Sidama administration to form a special administration area.\textsuperscript{282} This represents the pinnacle of the Sidama resentment towards the government.\textsuperscript{283}

3.1.1 The “Looqque Massacre”

On the 24\textsuperscript{th} of May 2002, between 10 and 15 thousands Sidama people filled the streets of Hawassa intending to ask the federal government to return its regional administration to the Sidamas and to bring the city of Hawassa back under the direct control of Sidamas. The protest was conducted by students and elders in a non-violent and peaceful manner, until armed soldiers opened fire on the unarmed crowd carrying out a real
massacre of civilians. From Sidama and some scholars’ point of view, this terrible event takes the form of a “genocide,”285 premeditated by the central government. The “Looqque Massacre” is also perceived in the Sidama perspective as a sort of strategy in order to damage Sidama’s political control, its authority over the Hawassa City, and to subsequent limit future self-determination pushes.286 The central government did not consider Sidama’s requests, in fact, in May 2003, a year after Looqque event, Hawassa was placed under the control of SNNPRS regional administration.287

The “Looqque Massacre” was only the beginning of the violations and abuses that the Sidama people should have endured over the years to come. Intimidations, torture, and mass imprisonment intensified but Sidama’s voice and struggle for recognition for an autonomous regional status did not weaken.288

Hawassa City is known for having an ethno-symbolic and economic advantage not only for the Sidama élite but for the entire population. The measures taken by the government were not perceived as a compromise rather than a real punishment against the entire Sidama community. The government strongly impose rules to reduce the constitutional privilege and benefits of the Sidama administration, which reacted by fuelling the SLM resistance movement.289

3.2 Constitutional and procedural mechanism of a NNPs in requesting their right of self-determination

According to what is explained in article 47,290 the new FDRE’s Constitution, allows each Ethiopian ethnocultural group the right of regional and administrative autonomy. However, the Constitution establishes

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284 “On 24 May in Awassa, capital of Sidama zone in the southern region, regional and federal police shot dead at least 25 people and wounded others at a demonstration which was peaceful until police shot without warning. Two police officers were killed – by other police, according to some sources. Scores of demonstrators and their alleged supporters were detained in the following weeks and many were reportedly tortured” (Amnesty International, 2003: 102)

285 The author Seyoum Hameso, specialized in the Sidama context, defines this sad event as a part of a process of genocide carried out by the TPLF/EPRDF party and by the Ethiopian state towards those ethno-cultural groups that aspire to self-determination. In this article “The Politics of Genocide (2002) – the Case of Sidama”, the author directly accuses the Ethiopian state of having conducted discrimination and exclusion policies that have generated visible cases of genocide, such as happened in Looqque in March 2002. In fact, the author defines it as “not a separate incident, it is the culmination of calculated massacre and an important part of genocide”. (Cp. Hameso, 2006: 2-7)

286 Tronvoll, Tezera & Boroje, 2020: 9

287 Kia, 2013: 76

288 Ibid

289 Muleta, 2019: 7

290 “2. Nations, Nationalities and Peoples within the States enumerated in sub-Article 1 of this article have the right to establish, at any time, their own States; 3. The right of any Nation, Nationality or people to form its own state is exercisable under the following procedures; a. When the demand for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council; b. When the Council that received the demand has organized a referendum within one year to be held in the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand; c. When the demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in the referendum; d. When the State Council will have transferred its powers to the Nation, Nationality
the formation of only nine regional states, as compared to all ethnocultural groups present in the Ethiopian territory, especially in southern Ethiopia. This “exclusivity” has created a real difficulty for those ethnocultural groups who wish to administer their autonomous region. To deal with this question, the Constitution has put in place a mechanism capable of allowing those ethnolinguistic groups the possibility of establishing their own administration. Article 47, besides to define nine autonomous regions’ formation, apparently promises the right of self-determination for all the Ethiopian ethnocultural groups, once a specific legislative procedure has been carried out. According to Article 47, the first procedural requirement is that a self-determination request is approved with two thirds of the majority by the Council of Nation, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia. Before the application is approved, however, it must be presented and approved by the same area or wereda’s councils. After being examined by the NNPs Council, the application must be submitted in written form to the State Council, which has to organize a referendum in the area from which the self-determination request started. The Constitution clarifies that the referendum must be organized and prepared within a year, and that it needs a simple majority of the votes to ensure that the self-determination request could pass to the next level. Once the referendum’s majority votes have been ascertained, the State Council should transfer the necessary powers to the NNPs so that it can exercise its right of self-determination. With the self-determination process’ conclusion, the new emerging regional state is considered an equal partner in all respects within the Federation.

3.3 The debate on the Ethiopian ethnic federalism’s functionality

Realization of ethnic federalism within the Ethiopian context has developed conflicting opinions between experts and scholars. Agegnehu & Dibu mention several authors which present that the execution of this type of federalism has not only favoured the country’s stability level but has also guaranteed to individual subnational entities the opportunity to develop, promote and protect their own linguistic and cultural system. Furthermore, from a sociological point of view, the federal structure based on a multi-ethnic factor, compared to an ethnically homogeneous federation, cannot only encourage the population’s political participation but can also improve and increase a sense of empathy among the citizens.

By evaluating these positive aspects of the ethnic federalism’s experimentation, other experts in this field have highlighted the presence of some contextual factors that may be decisive for the establishment of a federal

or people that made the demand; and e. When the new State created by the referendum without any need for application, directly becomes a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia;
4. Member States of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia shall have equal rights and powers” (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, art. 47)

291 Kia, 2013: 52
292 Ibid
293 Ibid, p. 54
294 Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4839-4840
295 Ibid, p. 4840
government’s model or its failure, determined by an escalation of ethnic-based conflicts.296

First of all, the fundamental contextual condition for the realization of a federal system and its success, is the *a priori* presence of a democratic government. In fact, democracy in itself embodies the respect for civil rights and both individual and community freedoms, providing the state with that equality and peaceful coexistence’s common values that can ensure the natural recognition and safeguarding of the country’s ethnocultural groups.297 Reason why, if there was no condition of previous democracy, the realization of a successful ethnic federalism and the various ethnocultural groups’ union would be the result of a coercive process wanted by a dominant elite. It would not be a spontaneous and genuine result of a democratic principles’ implementation.298

As underlined by the analyses of SystemicPeace website, the democratic factor is practically absent throughout the whole Ethiopian history.299 According to Lovise Aalen this democratic discourse is part of a political rhetoric useful to the government to accommodate its interests, as the author highlights: the EPRDF government “accept liberal democracy rhetorically, but the system has apparent illiberal or authoritarian traits,” positioning Ethiopia into the category of *semi-authoritarian states*.300 This consideration draws attention to a relevant paradox regarding the Ethiopian political structure: it aims to resolve the various ethnonationalist pushes in an ethnic federal political framework while maintaining a non-democratic form of government.301

This coercive force also reappears in the realization of the 1995 Constitution and the establishment of the Ethiopian federal system. Unlike many countries, where the Constitution is the result of a pact between various subnational entities and the central state, the Ethiopian federal reality is created “from a centre”302 through a unilateral decision made by a single political party, the EPRDF. At worst, this hegemonic party could declare at any time to return to the previous “unitary state.”303

Scholar Abraham Aklilu argues that continuous appeal of the EPRDF to the *National Question* and the resolution of the rights of the NNPs through a federal experiment, would have guaranteed not only the conquest of a vast basis of legitimacy for its new leadership, but it would also have justified the acquisition and consolidation of a state-power which was necessary to lead the coalition to gain the role of the dominant party in the Ethiopian political scenario.304 The fable of equality between ethnic groups, respect for languages and culture in order to put an end to one’s cultural supremacy over another, has been used by the party to centralize the power in its hands. The EPRDF therefore, legitimizing its action by adopting a modern rhetoric based on the respect for human rights and the pursuit of democratic principles, has done nothing but continue one of the

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296 Aalen, 2006: 244
297 Ibid
298 Aalen, 2006: 244
300 Aalen, 2006: 243-244
301 Ibid
302 Cohen, 2006: 165
303 Ibid
304 Abraham, 2006: 91
Derg regime’s primary objectives: “incorporating every member of the community into structures of control.” What was supposed to be a federation capable of equally dividing the power between the regions, has turned into the creation of a centralized unitary state with a single party. A state in which the subnational entities are strictly supervised and limited by the central government. At least, this hegemony of power exercised by the EPRDF has in no way facilitated the decentralization of powers through the creation of autonomous regions, but instead has favoured the evolution of an “asymmetric” and “hyper-centralized” federal system.

Another critical point of Ethiopian federal model concerns the “artificial” division of the geographical areas for the creation of the autonomous region. As proof of this, Alene Agegnehu & Worku Dibu underline the fact that “an artificial demarcation of boundaries between or among regions generates violent conflicts among various ethnic groups.” Furthermore, according to the two scholars, the artificial demarcation was elaborated only following linguistic criteria and not contemplating other factors such as “identity” and “consensus” of the Ethiopian ethnocultural groups, as explained in the Constitution. According to what the two authors suggest, then we should speak of “language-based ethnic federalism.”

Moreover, according to the scholar John M. Cohen, in delimiting the regions, little attention was given to their real geographic dimensions, the actual population density and the various existing natural resources, such as water springs and grazing lands that, already before the introduction of the federal system, were the “bone of contention” between the various neighbouring ethnocultural groups. As proof of this, an autonomous region was recognized for the Harari population which has about ten thousand units while the Sidama, whose population is estimated at about 4 million units, was denied the regional administration, and they were included in the SNNPRS’ multi-ethnic region. The result of this “blind” distribution increases an “inter-state diversity,” as the regional states differ from each other both in size but, above all, in terms of potential. This is capable of generating fierce ethnic competition which can lead to violent ethnic conflicts focused along regional borders. Instead of managing the complex ethnic reality in a “though” way, it would seem that the ethno-federal administration has instead favoured the new ethnic conflict’s emergence. Certainly, adopting the multi-ethnic federal system is very complicated when there are no already defined territorial areas belonging to specific ethnocultural communities.

305 Aalen, 2006: 96
306 Temesgen, 2016: 10
307 Keller, 2002: 32
308 Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4841
309 Ibid
310 Fiseha, 2016: 136
311 Kia, 2013: 136
312 Cohen, 1995: 164
313 Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4840
314 Ibid
315 Fiseha, 2016: 136
In the Ethiopian context, this territorial configuration is exacerbated by the fact that a significant number of Ethiopians do not live in the territory in which the members of their ethnic community reside. This can generate what Assefa Fiseha defines as “local tyranny” or when the dominant ethnocultural group considers itself the legitimate owner and leader of the “mother state.”\textsuperscript{316} This consideration involves the marginalization, both political and economic, of those citizens who are from different ethnic backgrounds or simply for those who do not want to identify themselves in a specific ethnic group.\textsuperscript{317} They are thus considered “B-series citizens” or “settlers” and, in many cases, forced to leave the region, increasing the number to the so-called “displaced peoples.”\textsuperscript{318} The situation tends to reverse in regional states where there is no dominant ethnocultural community. In this context, “minor” groups may exercise a “local tyranny” towards the “majority.”\textsuperscript{319} Even if a “mother state” has been guaranteed to the major ethnocultural groups, the problem of ethnic groups considered to be “minor” included in multi-ethnic regions such as Gambella, Benshangul-Gumuz and the SNNPRS remains. In addition to generating a sense of distrust towards the government, who had fulfilled the autonomy’s desire only for certain ethnocultural groups, one of the many ethnic communities may claim to govern and exercise its authority also over the other peoples. This could generate what is called an “intragroup conflict.”\textsuperscript{320}

In conclusion, the ethnic federalism’s implementation in the Ethiopian context, instead of reducing the conflicts between ethnocultural groups, has favoured its increase. The dream of unity is distorted by the federal experience which, by formalizing the right of self-determination in the Constitution, has done nothing but even more fragment the country, emphasizing centrifugal forces at the expense of a centripetal and unitary force.

By accentuating these centrifugal forces, Ethiopian ethnic federalism is configured as a springboard for the formation of numerous separatist movements and ethnonationalism groups that claim their right of self-determination and regional autonomy. Certainly, this centrifugal forces’ presence can over time become a destabilizing factor for state peace and security.\textsuperscript{321}

\textsuperscript{316} Ibid
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid
\textsuperscript{318} Displaced people are denied any constitutional rights, access to resources and opportunities in the region in which they live. Because of their “restricted regional/local citizenship” which is linked to the concept of “primordial ethnicity”; they frequently are in conflict with the home-grown people. (Cp. Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4842); Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4841-4842
\textsuperscript{319} Fiseha, 2016: 136-137
\textsuperscript{320} Keller, 2002: 26
\textsuperscript{321} Agegnehu & Dibu, 2016: 4843
4. SIDAMA’S SELF-DETERMINATION PROCESS

4.1 The first self-determination request

Since the 1992 regional merger, the SLM has been the only political organization to fight for the consideration of the right of self-determination and for the achievement of an autonomous region directly administered by the Sidama ethnocultural group. However, in July 2005 and precisely between 14\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} July, the members of the Sidama Council within the \textit{Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement} (SEPDM) who raised the issue in public, deliberating, and approving the regional autonomy’s request.\footnote{Aalen, 2006: 96} During these meeting, the Sidama’s role was analysed with the past and contemporary Ethiopian political historiography, to underline how the Sidama people represent one of the most ancient Ethiopian ethnocultural communities with a richness in culture, language and lifestyle.\footnote{Kia, 2013: 82} The main reasons supporting the motion made by the Council considered the Sidama population’s socio-cultural uniqueness, represented by its own linguistic system, by the presence of significant social norms and practices, by a strong sense of identity, by a demographic consistency and by a prosperous local economy. These motivations were reported as “key-points” for the battle to obtain a Sidama regional state. Therefore, these points were, at first instance, widely approved directly by the Sidama people through some mass deliberations conducted locally by the \textit{Kebele}\footnote{Small administrative unit, comparable to a neighbourhood. The Kebele is part of the Woreda.} and \textit{Woreda}.\footnote{This approach totally differs from the usual Ethiopian top-down approach, in which decision are made and imposed from above. For the first time in Ethiopia there is a constitutional process that starts from the bottom, at the popular level, and then reaches, step by step, the government’s high levels. (Cp. Kia, 2013: 82-84); Kia, 2013: 82-84} After unanimously approving and voting for the creation of the Sidama Regional State, the \textit{Zone Council}, in line with the constitutional procedures, had delivered the written-form request to the \textit{SNNPRS State Council}, which agreed to examine it and verify its legality.\footnote{Ibid, p. 83} After examining the request, the \textit{Standing Committee of Legal Affairs} in the SNNPRS Council announced the constitutional validity of the Sidama’s regional status’ achievement’s proposal. The same answer was given by the \textit{SNNPRS Council of Nationalities}. The separation from SNNPRS’ proposal was therefore published in the \textit{Regional Official Journal}.\footnote{Ibid, p. 85}

According to the Constitutional provision, the \textit{State Council}, after receiving the request for self-determination from the \textit{Zone Council}, has the obligation to announce a referendum within a year. The Constitution is clear about how the referendum should be carried out in those NNPs which raised the formation of a regional state’s demand. However, for the Sidama case, no referendum was organized.\footnote{Ibid, p. 83}
As soon as the Ethiopian authorities realized that the establishment of Sidama regional state would have caused a “leopard-spot effect,” inducing other ethnocultural groups to request the formation of their own regional state, they suddenly stopped the self-determination process.329 The Sidama’s self-determination process was rejected during a meeting between the Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and some Sidama leaders. Sidama leaders were accused of had violated some EPRDF’s internal procedures.330

The first charge was brought to the Sidama Council as it would execute the request before it was discussed by the EPRDF party leader. The second charge was made regarding “Sidama’s own lack of development”331 for its inability to manage its own regional state. The third accusation was motivated by the central government’s fear to face a “domino-effect” of requests for self-determination. It was observed that the granting of an own regional state would push the other NNPs to submit their requests, thus destabilizing the EPRDF’s political control over the entire federal state.332 As highlighted by Lovise Aalen: “disintegration of the Southern region was clearly not in the interest of the ruling party.”333 So, in avoiding further pushes for autonomy, the EPRDF made strategic changes in Sidama’s regional administration: role of the President of the Region was entrusted to an official adverse to Sidama’s regional autonomy.334 Even if the EPRDF single party limits and suffocates any self-determination push for fear of running into the Ethiopian state disintegration, it is necessary to underline the Sidama’s perspective that emerged from the following statement: “our quest is not a quest of dismembering a region or a country.”335 According to Sidama’s vision, silencing the voice of self-determination while invoking the country’s unity, would be only a justice and honesty’s imitation. As the report of the Sidama’s researcher Ambaye Ogato: “The Sidama people have never been against unity and demanding for self-rule should not be framed as a contravention against unity. Our question is a question of justice, a question of being constitutional; it is a moral question as much as it is a legal one; most importantly it is a historical question.”336 Unfortunately, the moral issue becomes nothing in front of those who decide the rules of the game and those who had the power, as the International Crisis Group in fact highlights in 2009:

The domination of the federal state by the EPRDF party network severely undermines democratic institutions. Both supporters and opponents of ethnic federalism recognise that centralised party rule and federal interventions in the regions undermine local self-government. State institutions and the party system are systematically intertwined. This builds upon a long tradition. The Amharic term “mengist” expresses the conflation between representatives of the local government, the political party and the state.337

329 Kia, 2013: 85
330 Aalen, 2006: 152
331 Ibid
332 Ibid
333 Ibid, p. 153
334 Ibid
336 Ibid
337 International Crisis Group, 2009: 17
4.2 The second self-determination request and current updates

After the 2005 failure of the self-determination request, the Sidama campaign remained latent until 18th July 2018, day in which the Council of the Sidama Zone unanimously presented a second request for autonomy taking advantage of the EPRDF’s political weakening\(^{338}\) and the election of the new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed.\(^{339}\) These factors opened up a new scenario in the country’s political landscape and aroused renewed interest for those ethnocultural groups motivated to continue a process of self-determination. For these reasons, the Sidama community’s political activists immediately undertook the constitutional request process in order to achieve the desired regional autonomy.\(^{340}\)

Continuing with the constitutional process, the Council’s request was further approved unanimously on 3rd November 2018 at the regional level, by the Council of SNNPs. Meanwhile, an “academic task force” was established in the Sidama area, commissioned by the Zone Council and composed by scholars of Sidama origin, whose aim was to outline a legal and administrative framework for the new regional state’s creation\(^{341}\). On the 22nd November 2018, the House speaker of the SNNPs Council officially consulted the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) for the referendum management and in favour of Sidama Nation’s creation within 12 months, as approved by Article 47 paragraph 3 of the Constitution.\(^{342}\) Only through this legal institution, supported by a majority vote, the Sidama will be able to see a verdict for its regional autonomy request, but after a year, no referendum date was communicated by the NEBE.\(^{343}\) In his speech to the Parliament on 1st July 2019, the current Prime Minister Aby Ahmed clarified that the request, in line with the constitutional formulation, will only be able to meet the necessary requisites when the NEBE, recent renewed state’s organ, can be fully operating. NEBE’s silence regarding the choice for the referendum’s execution was justified by its preparation for the national elections scheduled for 2020.\(^{344}\) In reality, however, NEBE and the Federal Government’s impassiveness in front of the expiry date of the ultimatum imposed by the Sidama for the 18th July 2019, has only increased the ethnocultural group’s tension toward the current Government. In fact, having noticed the Government’s indifference, the Sidama’s activist group “Ejjetto,\(^{345}\) of academic and

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338 Due to a crisis inside the party
339 Muleta, 2019: 8
340 Tronvoll, Tezera & Boroje, 2020: 11
341 Ibid, p. 12
342 Muleta, 2019: 8
343 Ibid
345 The Ejjetto youth group was an extremely important tool in influencing the political élites through exhibitions and marches held in Hawassa city and in other Sidama’s territory places. It was precisely the continuous protests and the pressure employed by the activists that led the Sidama Zone Council to formalize the request for self-determination on the 18th July 2018. (Cp. Tronvoll, Tezera & Boroje, 2020: 11)
university origin, made up of intellectuals, professionals, entrepreneurs, both men and women, noticed its own ultimatum to the Government: on the 18th July 2019 the Sidama regional state would have been unilaterally proclaimed. The self-proclamation action launched by Ejjetto activists may represent a contrary tendency in contrast to the wave of democratization encouraged by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and a threat capable of causing the explosion of “Pandora’s box” of the multiple ethnocultural groups that live in the Ethiopian state, often ignored and trapped in the governmental impassiveness. Following the Sidama’s example, about 11 ethnocultural groups incorporated into the SNNPRS strived to undertake their self-determination request in the period between 2018 and 2019.

The dual nature of this request for self-determination, in one hand in line with the Constitutional procedures but on the other, totally unconstitutional in the act of self-proclamation by the Ejjetto group, had a triggering effect in the increase in episodes of violence and of tension not only between nearby ethnocultural groups but also in the whole country, already destabilized by the failed coup attempt that took place on the 22nd June 2019. Numerous and growing violence has occurred near the ultimatum’s expire date not only in the city of Hawassa, which has become the ethnonationalist movement Ejjetto’s garrison, but also in the proximity of other inhabited centres. On the evening of the 17th of July, a few hours before the Sidama imposed end of ultimatum, NEBE officially announced the organization of referendum within the following five months. Despite the announcement, on the same day, the Federal Armed Forces intervened in the region in order to restore security. The number of victims caused by the clashes is still uncertain, the regional authorities have conferment four deaths compared to the sixty reported by activists and opposition groups. According to some local newspapers, on the 19th of July in the town of Hagere Selam the Special Security Forces killed 17 civilians engaged in a

348 Ibid
349 Ibid
350 Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°146. Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama over Statehood. July 2018. International Crisis Group: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b146-time-ethiopia-bargain-sidama-over-statehood; The failed coup d’état that took place on the 22nd June 2019 was carried out by the Amhara Region’s Security Forces against the Amhara Regional Government. During the clashes, the Amhara Region’s President Ambachew Mekonnen was assassinated together with the Chef of the General Staff of the Ethiopian National Defence Force, General Se’are Mekonnen. Prime Minister Aby Ahmed’s Office accused Brigadier General Asamine Tsige, Head of the Amhara Region’s Security Forces, of organizing the plot. The coup d’état’s reasons ar not yet known but it is possible that it is traced back to the nationalist sentiment of Amharic origin’s manifestation. (Cp. The Guardian. *Ethiopian army chief killed by bodyguard and regional leader dead in coup attempt*, 23rd June 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/23/ethiopia-coup-attempt-leaves-army-chief-shot-says-pm)
march towards the police station.\textsuperscript{351} In addition to extensive damage to public and religious buildings and private properties, \textit{Ejjetto} movement leaders and some journalists from the \textit{Sidama Media Network}, based in Hawassa, were arrested.\textsuperscript{352} On the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of July, as a result of the violent episode’s escalation, the Ethiopian federal authorities decreed that the SSNPRS will be under a \textit{military command post}’s control (which is essentially the equivalent of a “state of emergency” with federal military outposts).\textsuperscript{353} Around the end of October 2019, the NEBE officially announces the date of the referendum which will be scheduled on the 13\textsuperscript{th} of November 2019. By this date, the NEBE would have requested the SNNPRS to organize by 13\textsuperscript{th} October 2019 a legal, administrative and institutional framework able to regulate some “key issues” concerning the future Sidama state, such as the ethnic minorities’ protection within the new region\textsuperscript{354} NEBE will also guarantee a budget of approximately 3 million dollars to organize the referendum. Therefore, NEBE announced that all the residing citizens in the Sidama area would vote for the referendum, not just those belonging to the Sidama ethnic group. If the referendum will have positive results, the Sidama state will be the tenth regional state effectively belonging to the Ethiopian federation.\textsuperscript{355} On the 15\textsuperscript{th} of October 2019, NEBE announces in an official statement the referendum’s postponement to 20\textsuperscript{th} November 2019, one week after the scheduled date due to delays in its organization.\textsuperscript{356} The censuses of the citizens with the right to vote were conducted between 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 16\textsuperscript{th} November. According to \textit{The Report Ethiopia}, there have been registered numbers beyond expectations:

\textit{The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia’s (NEBE) expected the number of voters to show an increment of ten percent from the participants in the 2015 election, which would be roughly around 1.7 million. However, the number of voters registered now is more than two million,” the administrator said.}\textsuperscript{357} According to the information published by the NEBE, the referendum will count approximately 1,692 polling stations set up in 598 \textit{Kebeles} which will be under the control of approximately 6,000 electoral officials. Because of the execution of referendum, on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of November 2019, the \textit{Sidama National Liberation Front}

\textsuperscript{351} \textit{Al Jazeera. Ethiopia: At least 17 killed in violence over Sidama autonomy}, 20\textsuperscript{th} July 2019. \textit{Al Jazeera}: \url{https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/ethiopia-17-killed-violence-sidama-autonomy-190720170914800.html?utm_source=website&utm_medium=article_page&utm_campaign=read_more_links}


\textsuperscript{354} \textit{Abem K. Abebe. What Ethiopians can learn from Sidama’s thorny statehood journey}, 19\textsuperscript{th} September 2019. \textit{Al Jazeera}: \url{https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/ethiopians-learn-sidama-thorny-statehood-journey-190916142335708.html}

\textsuperscript{355} \textit{Ibid}


(SNLF) have invoked in a press statement the peaceful collaboration of the whole population, putting pressure on the ethnonationalist sentiments, the discrimination and the domination of the Sidama people throughout the history:

Masking their motto under the pretext of Ethiopia and their account on a misconceived unity; the indicated rulers have consistently imposed their will on your nation thereby coercing you to speak their language by relegating yours, dance their dances by undermining yours, obliging you to sing their songs, follow their religions by subjugating your own noble cultures and think in the manner they require you to think by totally relegating yours. By doing so you, as the rest of the subjugated nations in Ethiopia, you have been subconsciously coerced into systematic self-denial for the last nearly 130 years and your rulers wish to maintain the status-quo. Therefore, to this date, your historical rulers and their descendants are working to consolidate their position and perpetuate your systematic slavery under the pretext of Ethiopian unity thereby deny you of God-given rights to self-respect and self-realisation by becoming self-governing national state- the fact that increasingly unsettle them.358

On the report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission’s press review, the referendum of 20th of November 2019 has been conducted in a peaceful context, despite being organized in a short period and a tense political climate for the whole country. No critical incidents were reported during the election day. Federal and regional forces collaborated with the NEBE to ensure a security situation in all Sidama territories.359 As stated by the data reported by the NEBE, a total of 2,2280.14 votes were recorded, of which 2,277,063 valid and 18,351 null for a turnout of about 99.86%. Voters were called to put an “x” on the Shaffetta360 symbol for the new regional state’s formation or on the Gojo361 symbol to remain within the SNNPRS362. The official results highlight the victory of the Shaffetta. About the 98.51% voted for the new Sidama regional state’s formation.363

The effects referendum are not clear yet as the government’s next move. The positive outcome of the referendum, in addition to triggering a “chain effect” of self-determination requests moved by other NNPs keen to proceed with the recognition of their own autonomous region, could start a further state political crisis in mapping and defining the borders of the new Sidama State. Partitioning of Sidama State with the neighbouring regional governments, such as Oromia, Gedeo Zone, and the remaining southern Region, will

360 Sidama’s traditional container.
361 Sidama’s traditional hut.
represent a huge challenge for the federal government.\textsuperscript{364} Moreover, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed pointed out that the Sidama state, in order to be effectively considered and autonomous state of the Federation, must request a constitutional amendment that could modify the number of the states that assembled the Ethiopian federal agreement. In order to be effective, it requires the approval of two-thirds of the two federal chambers’ members in the joint session and the six out of nine regional states. The modification of Constitution, therefore, entails the participation of both the federal government and the governments of each regional state, a certainly complicated and arduous challenge to carry out.\textsuperscript{365}

The Sidama referendum, besides represents a first concrete example of a secession from a multi-ethnic region, was nothing more than the first step of a self-determination process which will certainly not end soon and which still has an uncertain future. The country’s already fragile political condition will probably be aggravated by the instability and the chaos that could derive from the Sidama region’s separation and the other NNPs that will impose themselves in front of the federal government.

**CONCLUSION**

The Ethiopian historical and political experience represents an exception when compared to other contries of the African continent. Having examined the Ethiopian state-building process, it clearly differs from the common path that other African states have taken, or rather, have been forced to undertake due to the colonial heritage’s influence. Ethiopia, unlike the rest of the Continent, experiences a different type of colonialism: not endogenous but rather indigenous. As highlighted by Christopher Clapham, the concepts of “state” and “nation” in the Ethiopian context, constitute indigenous points of reference, while for the rest of Africa they largely represent “alien” ideas imposed by external colonization. The uniqueness of Ethiopia derives from the fact that the country takes shape through a progressive centralization of peoples and peripheral ethnocultural groups who are attracted to a “centre,” consisting of an ethnic community which already has a strong identity and historical tradition: the Amhara one. In order to be integrated into the Ethiopian state, an ethnocultural group was forced to adopt what is called a “core culture,” that is, to assimilate the Amhara language, religion and customs to the detriment of their own ethnocultural identities. All this reveals a paradox in the construction of an Ethiopian political and historical identity: if for a people the assimilation of the Amhara culture would have meant greater political participation at a national level, at the same time it would have meant abandoning its history, its culture, and their own identity.

With the Derg military regime’s emergence in 1974, there was an attempt to redefine the concept of Ethiopian nationalism away from the Amharic “core culture.” The student movement in action during the 1960s


reiterated the idea that Ethiopia could only be considered a nation endowed with a real political identity only when all the Ethiopian ethnocultural groups had been treated equally and not suppressed from the domination of another culture. However, the new policies on nationality promoted by the Derg did not change the Amhara cultural supremacy, instead they created greater confusion about being a “genuine Ethiopian.” All this contributed to the emergence of a new ethnic discourse, which eventually led to strong political opposition towards the central state, glued together by a strong ethnic commitment.

Once the Derg’s military opposition was overwhelmed by the joint coalition of ethnonational movements called EPRDF, there was a change of direction regarding the concession of the right of self-determination for the multiple NNPs of Ethiopia. The party leaders and the subsequent EPRDF/TPLF regime came from that student movement, in vogue in the 1960s and 1970s in Ethiopia, which possessed a Leninist-Stalinist approach on the National Question. Subsequently, this ideology met the needs of the new leaders who pushed for a new restructuring of the Ethiopian society in their favour. Intending to eliminate any trace of the previous regime, which oppressed the multiple ethnocultural communities, the EPRDF had the opportunity to centralize and legitimize its political power by becoming the only party on command in the Ethiopian political scenario.

The Amhara cultural supremacy, the consequent exploitation and marginalization of the remaining ethnocultural groups combined with the influences of the Leninist-Stalinist ideology in the Ethiopian state’s reconstruction after 1991, created a particular and unique context in which ethnic federalism was imposed and assumed as a suitable system of government. In fact, in the Ethiopian context, ethnic federalism was considered a valid solution to cultural and identity oppression because it aims the resolution of two main objectives, strongly sought during the Ethiopian history: the right of self-determination and secession’s granting of the multiple Ethiopian NNPs and the end of ethnonationalist conflicts. Following the ideal of self-determination, article 47 of the 1995 Constitution affirms the faculty for any NNPs to establish its own mother state following a precise constitutional procedure.

After having examined this relevant historical-political background is now possible to answer to the two research questions:

“Is the Ethiopian ethnic federalism a solution concerning the requests of self-determination undertaken by those which, following Marxist-Leninist terminology, have been renamed Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia?”

Even if the introduction of ethnically based federalism has given to the multiple ethnocultural groups important constitutional significance in enhancing cultural expression and most of all self-government provisions, the actual political federal structure which is based on ethnic features is paradoxically reducing rather than enlarging ethnic and cultural identities, freedoms and rights. This is because today Ethiopia suffers from the lack of one systemic pre-condition for a successful federal system’s realization: the presence of a democratic system of governance. Ethiopia state-building process, as previously analysed, is not the result of a genuine inclusion of democratic features but a context in which liberal democracy is considered as a “rhetoric discourse” only adopted in order to cover the illiberal and authoritarian counterpart and to increase the
dominant élite political power. The bystander dominant political party which, driven by the fear of ceding to the numerous ethnocultural communities’ centrifugal forces and by the obstinacy in keeping its territorial sub-units tied together (such as the case of the SNNPRs) operates as if it is at the head of a centralized unitary state. This could be the main cause of the asymmetrical translation that Ethiopian governmental model has assumed during the EPRDF regime and still maintain today. In this scenario, as highlighted by Lovise Aalen “the regime is falling short of democracy, while at the same time claiming to accommodate its various ethnic groups in a sustainable way through a federal system.”366 In this semi-authoritarian and non-democratic context, ethnonationalist pushes are inevitably frozen out together with their cultural and identity claims. The relevant fault in democracy became also the motive of the unfulfillment and impediment of the Sidama process of self-determination. The to-date non-existence of a Sidama regional state is the concrete response to the “How the course of Sidama’s self-determination process has evolved and been realized under the Ethiopian ethnic federalism?” other research question.

The strict interconnection between the two research questions lies in the fact that: the current Sidama regional state’s impracticability suggests that for the moment Ethiopian federalism has failed to keep its promises. Ethiopian ethnic federalism, a system which found its basis on a non-democratic system of government, has not proven to be a solution regarding both the National Question and the requests of self-determination promoted by the various Ethiopian ethnocultural communities, as at the moment the Sidama, like other NNPs of the Ethiopian federation, are unable to exercise both political and administrative autonomy, albeit provided from the Constitutional charter. In this context, the federal ethnic government has proven to be unable to handle a constitutionally valid request of self-determination.

The general conclusion that emerges from this thesis is that ethnic federalism developed in the Ethiopian current context has taken a distorted form from its own raison d’être, emerging at first as an ineffective tool in pacifying ethnic-based conflicts and satisfying the constitutional demands of the Sidama people. In conclusion, the ambitious dream of self-determination and political participation for most Ethiopian ethnocultural groups still remains unfulfilled. As demonstrated with the Sidama case, the Ethiopian state still remains excessively tied to the use of coercive power in order to maintain control over its multi-ethnic population. Therefore, relations between the state and the society in Ethiopia to date are mainly characterized by hegemonic control of the masses by a certain political élite who has control over the state and its economic and military assets. It should be noted, however, that since the Sidama request is the first of its kind, the federal government has encountered systemic difficulties in dealing with this situation. In order to officially decree the Ethiopian federal system’s efficiency (or not) as a solution to the NNPs’ self-determination requests, it will be necessary to wait for the outcome of the Sidama’s self-determination request, a process that will certainly not end soon. Yet, although some progress has been made lately in resolving the Sidama issue, the future of creating its own regional state is still uncertain and unclear.

366 Aalen, 2006: 244
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