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Millions on the Margins: Music, Ethnicity, and Censorship among the Oromo of Ethiopia

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by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Eskender.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Music
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This dissertation will demonstrate how music among the Oromo people of present day Ethiopia functions as a system for the preservation and negotiation of a uniquely Oromo identity, as well as a vehicle for resistance against the hegemony long ago established by outside ethnic groups. I will demonstrate how a long history of censorship of Oromo music by various ruling elites has made censorship one of the major features of Oromo social and aesthetic processes. This dissertation will therefore investigate the dynamic of the processes and dialogues through which Oromo identity becomes manifested, and in which music plays a deep role. In Ethiopia, a nation officially "independent" of European colonialism, "Ethiopian" culture was always equated with that of an ethnic minority. Not until the fall of Haile Selassie were the voices of other histories and previously peripheral groups given a chance to participate in the dialogue of Ethiopian statehood. I will use my ethnographic research from the US to Ethiopia to explore the relationship between performance art and state power in Ethiopia. Marginalized under Selassie,

embraced and then shunned under the Derg and the current regime of Meles Zenawi, Oromo music demonstrates these complicated relationships. Oromos use music to "remember" past histories, bolster a sense of community among Oromo speaking groups, and fuel anti-colonial nationalism directed not at a European invader, but a black African one. Oromo music is used by the current regime in Ethiopia to present a face of multiculturalism. Yet while the government selectively preserves Oromo culture, Oromo musicians continue to be imprisoned, intimidated, and disappeared for making certain kinds of music. Because of this, various forms of censorship (both external and internal) have become a part of the Oromo music making process. Ethnic identity in general, and Oromo identity in particular, is performative. Music, like the ethnic identity it is used to bolster, is a performative act that creates a space for a polyvocal and heterogeneous dialogue through which Oromo identity is constituted. What can the relationship between Oromo music and the Ethiopian state tell us about ethno-nationalism, censorship, and memory? What does the selective preservation on the part of both Oromo and the Ethiopian government tell us about the role of performance in maintaining history and ethnic identity?

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Chapter 1
Introduction

"The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act."
--John Berger *Ways of Seeing*

On 27 March, 2010, my friend Marcus[1] and I lined up outside the Millennium Concert Hall in Addis Ababa to attend the celebration of a new Oromo radio station. We had spent the previous hour drinking coffee at a nearby restaurant and chatting about the significance of such an event. Marcus was himself an Oromo artist, a painter. While he was proud to call himself Oromo, he was one of the few Oromo I had met who had trouble embracing Oromo nationalism as I had encountered it in meetings with many others. He even claimed to support Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia's Prime Minister, a claim that I had never heard from an Oromo before. As we left the coffee shop, I couldn't help noticing that he switched conversation topics to something more benign as we neared the masses of Oromo waiting in line to get to this event. Security was tight. And whenever the topic of the Oromo came up in conversation, lips were as well.

After a plate of food that came with the price of the ticket, we made our way into the performance hall. Thousands of people already were there, with a steady stream continuing to pour in. I met some other Oromo friends, who were decidedly more nationalistic than Marcus. They welcomed me as I took a look at the surroundings, which included a huge stage filled with contemporary Western

[1] All names in this dissertation, unless otherwise noted, have been changed for the safety of my informants.

instruments (i.e. drum-kit, guitar, bass, etc.), and a large screen that would alternate between showing video from the Oromo television station, and showing the bands and crowd in attendance that evening. Up to this point, I hadn't encountered anything that I hadn't expected. Then, the music began.

The first performance was by Biftu Oromia, a government sponsored Oromo cultural performance troupe. They have a large repertoire consisting of songs and dances from the many regions of the Oromo state. Dressed in the traditional clothing of each area, they would perform highly choreographed pieces adapted for the stage. Other than the choreography, another noticeable feature of the evening was the music, which was performed entirely on Western instruments, by musicians who were not normally part of Biftu. The clothes were quite traditional, but neither the movement of the dancers nor the sound seemed to have much in common with anything I had experienced in my fieldwork up to that point. The only thing I recognized was the deep sub-glottal growl made by a male singer, one of the truly distinct features of Oromo music (in comparison with the rest of Ethiopia). I was particularly interested to see this group because months earlier I had attended a rehearsal, recorded it, and handed out a questionnaire in an effort to begin closer work with the performers. Instead of becoming more closely involved with this group as I had hoped, I hadn't seen them since. My many efforts to get in contact with them again proved futile, and I eventually gave up after being told that even if they wanted to answer questions about themselves, they would never be allowed to do so. I would later find out that Oromo clubs or performance groups other than the

state sanctioned Biftu were forbidden, and many of the Oromo I met complained that Biftu was nothing more than a propaganda tool of the government, wishing to demonstrate a more multicultural attitude. Immediately following one of Biftu's performance sets, someone appeared whose presence would disappoint, enrage, and terrify some of my compatriots that night, Meles Zenawi.[2]

After hearing Zenawi's name announced, the crowed turned around and looked up at a second level balcony featuring tables reserved for VIPs, where the Prime Minister sat. The applause and adulation that he received was thunderous, and went on for so long that he hand to stand up and wave three additional times after sitting back down at his table. For the past few years of research I had only ever encountered Meles Zenawi's name in conjunction with atrocities against Oromo. Zenawi was painted largely as a villain, yet here he was at an evening celebrating Oromo culture. Two of my friends that night were furious. "This was supposed to be a celebration of Oromo media, but instead it was just a rally for the OPDO," said Daniel. The OPDO, or Oromo People's Democratic Organization, is an Oromo political organization considered by many Oromo to be a puppet of the Zenawi regime. My friends explained later that as the night went on, the speeches made on stage by local officials, and all of the interviews they were showing clips of on the giant screen behind where the music was performed, were all "very pro-government." With the presentation of Zenawi it became clear that the flyer announcing an evening of celebrating independent Oromo media outlets was indeed

[2] See video "Zenawi."

a farce. “So why did you applaud for Zenawi,” I asked? “Oh, you do not dare to be seen in public as one who will not clap for Zenawi,” said one of my friends.

This dissertation will demonstrate how music among the Oromo people of present day Ethiopia functions as a system for the preservation, negotiation and resistance of their cultural identity. These negotiations of collective identity function against, and within a history of censorship by the ruling elite of Ethiopia. The often violent censorship of Oromo music has made it a core feature of both the aesthetic process and daily life of Oromo musicians and artists. I will demonstrate how censorship by and antagonism with Ethiopia’s ruling elites has informed the development of both Oromo identity and its musical practices. Largely overlooked in African and Ethiopian studies, the presence of the Oromo in modern day Ethiopia forces us to rethink a whole host of issues regarding the alleged uniqueness of Ethiopia in relation to other African countries, as well its place in the popular imagination of white Europeans, Americans and pan-Africanists. Thus, having ramifications for the geographic area from which the Oromo claim their indigeneity, this dissertation will also address many broader issues regarding social memory, modernity, ethnicity, and performance. Beyond catalyzing critical thinking in these and other areas, Oromo music itself has long been a performative act in which family histories were kept, social frameworks maintained, and the boundaries of the group were negotiated. The increasing modernization of Ethiopia, combined with a growing Oromo diaspora, has created new social spaces in which history is contested, ethnic boundaries are defined, and the politics of memory has life and

limb consequences. I contend that music is one of the performative practices/mechanisms best suited to offer critical insight into Oromo identity and politics. Throughout this dissertation I will provide examples of how Oromo music and musicians observe, reflect on, and speak to the contested layers of history and identity that are a central part of being Africa's "othered other" (Gow 2002:32).

Contemporary Ethiopia is a country in the Horn of Africa. It is bordered to the east by Somalia, to the west by Sudan, to the south by Kenya, and to the north by Eritrea.[3] Situated in a geographically isolated area that is sometimes called the "Roof of Africa," it has long held a reputation as being exceptional from every other region or nation on the African continent. These claims of exceptionalism include: the cultural and economic supremacy of Abyssinian culture, unbroken historical connection of inter-Ethiopian ethnic groups, relationship with Biblical Israel, that Ethiopia is a symbol of Black African power against European colonial forces (Holcomb and Issa 1990: 143-4). Unlike other areas in Africa, modern day Ethiopia has long had its own system of writing, and the ruling elite have been Christian for around sixteen hundred years. In the last forty years the monolithic and mythical history of an isolated, Christian Ethiopia has been called into question by numerous ethnic and religious minorities. This challenge to the long accepted history of Ethiopia is no small matter. The entire basis of the ideology of the ruling elite is premised upon the abovementioned history, which Holcomb and Issa call "the myth of Greater Ethiopia" (ibid.). These challenges speak to many of the present concerns

[3] See map 1.

of the social sciences (e.g. nationalism, ethnicity, memory, and identity). This dissertation will demonstrate the ways in which music is a core performative aspect in the creation and maintenance of these identities.

The crowning of Ras Tefari Makonen as Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930 solidified the "Myth of Greater Ethiopia" as the dominant historical ideology in the country. He took the name Haile Selassie, an Amharic term meaning "power of the trinity." The term "Greater Ethiopia" is used by Holcomb and Issa to describe the version of history held by Amhara/Tigrayan elites to justify their claims to history, and claims to rule. What, in Western academia, has been presented as "Ethiopian" actually draws from a historical relationship to ancient kingdoms claimed by particular ethnic groups. With the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups having secured the greatest amount of power in the region, their history was to dominate the concept of "Ethiopia" even to this day. According to the "Ethiopianist" historiographers (those whose work bolsters these histories), the inevitable rise of this culture mass began long ago. The Kibre Negast was composed in the twelfth century C.E., in which it was claimed that the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba and the Biblical King Solomon conceived a child. The blessings and favor of the God of Israel had now been conferred upon Ethiopia, the new Promised Land, home of the favored of the One True God. It was on these premises that the Solomonic line of kings was based. It was from this lineage that Emperor Haile Selassie also claimed descent, and thus the Solomonic Line ended with his death one year after being

deposed by the Socialist Revolution in 1974, known as the Derg. The fall of Selassie opened up a space for dialogue of alternative histories and viewpoints.

The current government is made up of a mixture of elected officials and guerilla fighters who overthrew Mengistu and the socialist Derg in 1991. It is officially a parliamentary democracy called the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, has been in power since 1994. He was one of the main fighters in the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), considered the primary ruling force in the country to this day through its backing of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF).

This dissertation will build upon other works exploring music in East Africa, but it will also focus on areas not previously of any central concern in Ethiopian studies. My emphasis on performativity and nationalism will be informed by the work of Kelly Askew, whose work focuses on the relationship of cultural performance and politics in Tanzania (Askew 2002, 2006). The place of music in identity formation in East Africa has also been touched on in works like Gunderson and Barz's *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa* (Gunderson and Barz 2000). Although that volume focuses more on Tanzania, it demonstrates an established interest in the role of cultural performance on community building and identity maintenance in East African cultures. Most texts on "East Africa" don't include much on the "Horn of Africa." Research in the Horn has been difficult since the early years of African nationalism and independence. Areas such as Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia have been dangerous areas to try and do

research. Of these, Ethiopia has been the most stable, making research there comparatively easier, that is to say at least possible some of the time.

Of the ethnomusicological research done on Ethiopia, the best known is probably that of Kay Kaufman Shelemay. Her research has focused largely on the music of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Shelemay 1993, 2005), and the music of the *Felashas* or Ethiopian Jews (Shelemay 1989, 1991). While her work on the music of the Orthodox Church music consists of a great deal of transcription in and explanation of the indigenous notation system used, her well known book *A Song of Longing: An Ethiopian Journey* (1991) is autobiographical and gives an incredible first-hand account of the revolution that toppled Haile Selassie. In the latter book she focuses on one of the smallest minorities in Ethiopia, and in the work on the Orthodox Church she deals with the tradition that is arguably the most well know and synonymous with "Ethiopia" (i.e. the northern highland Amharic Christian tradition and its mytho-historical past). In terms of organology and aesthetics, the work of Cynthia Mei-Ling Tse Kimberlin (Kimberlin 1968, 1976) is also important. The other widely used text on Ethiopian music is by Michael Powne (Powne 1968). This text doesn't simply ignore the Oromo, it repeats Ullendorf's famous line:

> "The Galla had nothing to contribute to the civilization of Ethiopia, they possessed not material or intellectual culture, and their social organization was at a far lower stage of development than of the population among whom they settled" (Ullendorf 1960 in Powne 1968: 38-68).

This quote also makes use of the term "Galla," which is now considered a highly pejorative term among Oromo. Many other examples exist where the "Galla"

are described as a brutal barbarian horde bringing only darkness, death, and ignorance to the more "civilized" Abyssinian Empire (Hassen 1994: 1-3). Indeed it was Powne's use of the term "Galla" and very Ethiopianist focus that initially made me curious about the Oromo. How is it that the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia had "nothing" to contribute to music in the region? It is certainly understandable that the ethnic group of the northern highlands would appeal to European researchers. They had a system of writing, were Christian, and had a longstanding monarchy. Also the equation of that area of what was formerly Abyssinia with the "Ethiopia" of the bible gave an extra air of mythical romance.

Memory and Music

I have found one of the central factors of debate for many Oromo, both internal and with perceived outsiders/antagonists, essentially breaks down to a contestation of social memory. The degree to which various sub-groupings of Oromo constitute a single ethnic group, the claims of colonialism against other African ethnic groups, the degree to which social organizations of the past should come to bear upon the present and future, all are part of a dialogue whose version of history and authenticity challenges that of the established power in the region (Baxter, Hultin & Triluzi eds. 1996). The drive behind the search for a common pan-Oromo identity, what Asafa Jalata has termed *Oromummaa* (Jalata 2007), was itself linked to a political trauma whereby the suffering of a large group of people at the hands of an imperialist invader took place. The suppression, persecution and occasional

outright attempts at annihilation of the Oromo place them firmly into what Andreas Huyssen has called the "culture of memory" (Huyssen 2000). The nationalism of many Oromo since the latter half of the twentieth century, has placed a high value on the memory and maintenance of Oromo tradition. Music (along with other performance based cultural expressions like poetry and dance), plays a crucial role in the preservation of a distinctly Oromo past, the commemoration of its hero's, and the negotiation of its values. "Musical performance not only engenders or empowers collective recollection among varied participants…it transforms the past into something alive and palpable" (Emoff 2002: 8).

In referring to music and ethnicity as I do in the title of this dissertation, I am making a statement about what I believe to be centrally important to both phenomena (i.e. performance). It is in the moment of performance that theory and practice become united. The sounds and sights of musical practice, and the theoretical speculation over the nature, meaning or structure of a theoretical notion are coterminous, and should be considered as such. The term "performativity" was first coined by English philosopher J.L. Austin in the 1950s against the logical positivist assertion that language is purely constantive (Loxley 2007: 7). Since then, it has been used in the social sciences, notably by feminist scholar Judith Butler, to demonstrate how identities are the result of performative processes rather than given by nature or culture. Culture is a process, and what we are is made through that process. "Our activities and practices, in other words, are not expressions of some prior identity, or the things done by an agent that is what it is prior to its

actions, but the very means by which we come to be what we are" (ibid., 118). It is my contention that ethnic identity in general, and Oromo identity in particular, is performative. The significance of this observation is that rather than view Oromo identity as some core given identity, I view it as a discourse in which multiple voices are involved. This dissertation will therefore investigate the dynamic of the processes and dialogues through which Oromo identity becomes manifested, and in which music plays a deep role. According to Taylor, performance is an episteme, a way of knowing (Taylor 2003). Since performance is "not simply an object of analysis" (ibid., xvi), my attempts to engage with Oromo music are done so with a desire to make visible a larger discussion over values and meanings. "If collective memory relies on social frameworks to enable transmission, then clearly the behavioral practices that define ethnicity participate in that transmission" (ibid., 88). If, as I have suggested, Oromo music constitutes a core mechanism by which Oromo identity is shaped and realized, it is not difficult to imagine why successive governments, often with explicitly anti-Oromo agendas, have kept eyes and ears on such practices, The subject of Oromo ethnicity, its boundaries and histories in particular, is pervasive throughout the literature written by Oromo academics and scholars since the beginnings of contemporary Oromo ethno-nationalism.

Under a succession of governments since the late nineteenth century, the many different Oromo speaking cultural groups have lived in social circumstances in which their new colonial conquerors (Amharic speaking Christians from the northern highlands) attempted to stamp-out Oromo cultural practices (Jalata 2005).

The range of tactics employed has ranged from ridicule, to censorship, to forced relocation and extermination. Elizabeth Jelin's work on the relationships between politics, state power and memory (Jelin 2003) is therefore influential in how I will position the attempt by many contemporary Oromo to reclaim their ancestral past. This alternative version of history in the Horn of Africa posits the culture of the northern Christian highlanders as colonizers. The language and theories of colonization, imperialism, and racism used by many Oromo is very reminiscent of those used to decry Western imperialism around the world. The music of the Oromo has been seen significant enough that from the government of Haile Selassie on, musicians thought to be sympathetic to nationalist sentiments have been persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, killed, or disappeared. Suspicions surrounding the place of music in Oromo nationalism likely contributed to the very difficult fieldwork experiences I had while in Ethiopia. With a low-key armed struggle still persisting today, the title of Jelin's book sums up what is probably the most common theme in Oromo diasporic music today.

Because the Oromo were an oral society up until the adoption of a written form of their language in the late 1960s, and the Amharas inherited one of the only indigenous African writing systems still in existence today, Taylor's work on the archive versus the repertoire (Taylor 2003) is particularly relevant. The Oromo have long been a cultural group in which the performative gestures of music, poetry and dance have come to function as a tool for cultural expression, preservation of identity, and resistance to Amharic cultural hegemony. This is yet another way in

which the northern ethnic groups who came to dominate the Oromo can be theoretically positioned as villains much in the way white Euro-American systems of imperialism and exploitation have. In Oromo music, and nationalist & academic literature, one can encounter all of the same accusations normally levied at white European colonizers, but in this case, the colonizer is a black African neighbor from the north. Asafa Jalata's accuses the Ethiopian elites of being selectively black, that is, by identifying themselves as black for strategic purposes. They appeal to their claims of a Semitic identity when appealing to the white, Christian hegemonic powers of the West, and simultaneously to their African identity to bolster support from other Sub-Saharan African countries and blacks throughout the diaspora (Jalata 2009). All of this is done while ruthlessly persecuting non-Semitic Africans like the Oromo. Attempts by Jalata and other theorists to place themselves as black Africans make up a large portion of the ever increasing Oromo "archive" that has begun in the last forty years and flourished in diaspora (Baxter, Hultin & Triluzi eds. 1996; Bulcha 2002; Hassen 1994; Jalata 1998, 2005, 2007, 2009; Legesse 2000). With the increasing use of both repertoire and archive to help contribute to the preservation and maintenance of an Oromo ethnic consciousness, answers to questions of how and why social memories are constructed and recalled demonstrate the increasingly complex epistemologies of how the Oromo define themselves as individuals and as a group.

It is not just *that* memory is retrieved, but *how* that is important. Kay Kaufman Shelemay has asked "Why is music so frequently implicated in sustaining

memory? How are memories transformed during musical performance into meaningful acts of commemoration?"(Shelemay 1998: 12). I will demonstrate that as an oral society, performative acts like music were among the only means the Oromo had to remember and interpret their cultural histories. This had many social and cultural consequences when such expressions became dangerous to perform under threat of state power. As the relationship between state power and Oromo identity grew more complicated, so did the Oromo capacity to make their own histories. In the diaspora, where the freedom to re-imagine the past doesn't carry the threat of imprisonment or worse, the creative writings of academics and performances of musicians have given rise to a situation in which much of the conversation and debate about the boundaries of Oromo identity are taking place outside of Oromia. In Oromia, traditional ways of life are disappearing, and the role of music as a tool of preservation is of great concern to rural as well as pop-musicians. The knowledge of a past being slowly forgotten keeps the eyes and ears of many on the future. In the diaspora, where nationalist sentiments can be freely expressed, much idealization and romanticism of the rural past as a source of authenticity, has prompted many to look at the past. In both of these contexts of preservation and/or re-imagination of history, music functions as an ideological and performative base.

Nationalism, Ethnicity and Folklore

Within the context of post-Enlightenment modernity, what exactly constitutes a "nation" has been notoriously difficult to define. The boundaries of "nation," and concomitant concepts like ethnicity and culture, are notoriously vague and elusive. What is clear is that the relationship between various types of group identification and politics has for centuries been dominated by the language of nationalism. The relationship between the nation and the state has been a key debate in both Liberal and Marxist thought (Hobsbawm 1990: 41). In the early periods of nationalism, the discussion wasn't about cultural nationalism in relation to the state. Rather, it was about the viability of the nation as a viable economic and military unit. Early nation building was more concerned with incorporating different groups to expand territory, not culturally homogenize the population. This form of nationalism, linked with social evolution and progress, had little time or concern for the "small people" (minority languages, ethnicities, religions, etc.) within their borders. (ibid.).

Musical nationalism in nineteenth century Latin America reflected this attitude. The musical nationalism that gave rise to the various national anthems throughout Latin America was thoroughly grounded in the cosmopolitan, not the local. European military band music and Italian opera were some of the earliest connections between music and state (Turino 2003: 178). If the nationalism nineteenth century was based on the exclusion of the masses, the twentieth was about inclusion. Growing frustration with the ruling oligarchy and foreign economic

control and exploitation "chaffed with the growing concept of a 'nation' as an inclusive, sovereign, cultural unit" (ibid., 180). With the masses perceived as a key alternative for the success of political and economic power, emphasis shifted towards the more cultural forms of nationalism common today. This principle of articulating nations as culture groups with states and the concept of self-determination must be understood if we are to grasp "the shifting relations between states and the populations in their territories (endodiscursively equated with 'nations')" (ibid., 173). It is this form of cultural nationalism that constitutes most of the debate and conflict between the Oromo and the current Ethiopian state. If political legitimacy includes popular sovereignty and the right of every nation to self-governance, then the Oromo constitute a very large challenge to the dominant politics and culture in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's "ethnic federalism" is itself designed so as to recognize the multitude of ethnic groups within Ethiopia. Its definitions of who constitutes a "nation, nationality, or people" have real consequences for people's access to resources.

The relationships between ethnicity and the nation-state comprise a great deal of literature in ethnic studies and anthropology. Ethnicity is generally understood to refer to the subjective "we-feeling" or belief in putative descent (Conversi 2002; 2). Many of the observations of Walker Connor are particularly relevant to the case of the Oromo and its ethno-nationalism in the latter half of the twentieth century. The "national question" of Marxist-Leninist theory held that the solution to social cohesion in a state consisting of numerous different ethnic groups

was to allow them a high degree of autonomy and self-determination (ibid., 5). This was meant to be a provisional solution in which national loyalties would eventually be overcome by a new "a-national" Soviet man (*homo sovieticus*). Ultimately, in the test of loyalties between national and class-consciousness, nationalism emerged as the preferred form of group identification. Nationalism trumped socialism virtually everywhere (ibid). This certainly proved to be the case under Ethiopia's Derg. The drafting of Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution brought the "national question" once again to the forefront of identity politics. Despite a great deal of protest from some, the country was divided into states based on ethnicity in a system known as "ethnic federalism." Just like in the Marxist-Leninist solution (a failed one), a high degree of autonomy was nominally given to Ethiopia's "nations, nationalities and peoples" (Turton ed. 2006). The consequences of this mode of state formation have provided interesting answers to the question of to what degree modernization leads to the reinforcement of current ethnic identities, or their dissipation.

The implementation of a constitutional democracy based on "ethnic federalism" has meant that Ethiopia has gone farther than any other state in Africa, and in fact around the world, in using ethnicity as its fundamental organizing principle. Thus, in Ethiopia, definitions and borders of ethnicity have an even more profound impact since the boundaries of the states themselves are drawn along ethnic lines[4] (ibid). The ethnicization of Ethiopia and its politics has further solidified, much to the chagrin of most people I've spoken with on the subject,

[4] See map 2.

ethnic-based political movements. Indeed, in many cases it has increased rather than decreased ethnic tensions. The idea of drawing political boundaries ethnicity (or what the constitution refers to as "nations, nationalities, and peoples") becomes especially difficult when there are no suggestions as to how to distinguish between various groups. With so much ethnicization of politics and ethno-national sentiment riding on vague and unclear categories, ethnicity in Ethiopia has become extremely politicized since the fall of Haile Selassie. A crucial question for those scholars studying nationalism, ethnicity and state formation is "What is the relationship between commonsense categories of experience and analytical concepts developed in order to understand the processes that produce such categories and effect their taken-for-grantedness?" (Alonso 1994: 379). In the case of Ethiopia during and after the Derg, this top-down classification of ethnic identities has served to reinforce and even create ethnic tensions, rather than alleviate them. As Akhil and Ferguson have observed "The assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture results in some significant problems" (Akhil & Ferguson 1992: 7).

The Ethiopian Constitution was introduced in Ethiopia in August of 1995. Since the fall of the Derg in 1991, the decision to install a federal government was to decentralize power and address the "nationalities question" prevalent since before the Derg (Fishea in Turton 2006: 131). The Derg themselves did not tolerate or endorse "ethnic groups," since this ran counter to their nationalization projects. Ironically, the fruits of both the arguments for and against the ratification of this constitution have come to bear. Its backers argued that provisions regarding

national self-determination were the only way to achieve peace and stability. Its critics argued that the emphasis placed on ethnicity would serve to reinforce and embolden ethnic tensions. Both of these have proved to be undeniably true.

One of the hallmarks of federalism is that constitutional power is divided between the center and the states. After the Derg, it was agreed that some level of the distribution of powers throughout various levels of the government was a necessity. The constitution grants federal, executive and judicial powers to the federal government (Article 50 (2)), and any powers not expressly given to either are reserved by the states (Article 51). As to what constitutes a nation, nationality or people, the Ethiopian Constitution reads:

> "A 'Nation, Nationality or People,' for the purpose of this Constitution, is 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 (Article 39 (5))" (Turton 2006: 18).

This is not only a broad definition, but it also makes some assumptions about the ethno-territorial make-up of Ethiopia that, upon inspection, turn out to be largely untrue. There are around eighty ethno-linguistic groups in Ethiopia, varying in size from a few hundred to millions. All of them, of course, fall into the broad definition mentioned above, except for the fact that none of the territorial or linguistic boundaries are so clear or definable. The larger groups who have there own states named after them (Amhara, Oromo, Tigray, Harari, Afar, and Somali) are often recognized as "nations." Yet even these states are by no means linguistically or culturally homogenous (though Tigray comes the closest). The remaining states are

made up of a mixture of smaller ethnic groups who aren't large enough to have their own regional state. These are the ones referred to as "nationalities" and "peoples." The Ethiopian Constitution recognizes that each ethno-national group has the right of self-government and self-determination even up to the point of secession (Article 39). Given how many recognized ethnic groups there are, this seems quite politically unstable. Problems lie not only in the rather positivist definition of ethnicity of the ruling party and the constitution, but also the fact that it imposed these definitions and boundaries onto groups who may not necessarily have done so themselves. Ethnic groups in various areas have gone to some lengths to conform to the various definitions of groups in order to conform to or work within a group in such a way as to gain access to resources. As Sarah Vaughn put it:

> "In other words it is the very creativity, flexibility and 'performativity' of social construction involved in group formation that enables a policy based on the reification of 'natural' groups to bring about the appearance of what it posits as already existent – 'natural' ethnic units" (Vaughn in Turton 2006: 202).

I will demonstrate how music in the projects of cultural nationalism is a fundamental part of the creation of *Oromummaa*. The power of music to create a sense of unity among previously disparate Oromo ethnic groups is a handy weapon in the Oromo nationalist's arsenal. As we shall see, the relationship between Oromo music and the state over the course of three different governments has brought radically different meanings and uses to the performance of Oromo music. It is now widely agreed that "cultural performance" (a term introduced by Milton Singer in the 1950s) "is a profoundly discursive form of behavior" (Guss 2000: 10). Rather

than cultural performance being simply a text to be read, discursive approaches to performance recognize that they are "dialogical and even polyphonic" (ibid.). Oromo nationalism is full of heterogeneous and contradictory elements, so rather than use the performances as an index or some sort of crystallized Oromo essence, I will instead view them with an eye toward what kind of meanings they produce. How Oromo music functions as a space for the contestation of social memory, the recognition (or creation?) of difference/sameness, and an attempt at self-definition will be among my major concerns.

Although ethnicity is of major concern to me, since this is one of the major avenues through which many Oromo are choosing to use as a major mode of self-circumscription, I recognize that ethnicity is something that rarely stands on its own. A greater focus on the relationships between ethnicity, class, and gender, have been a part of feminist and post-structuralist thought (especially black feminist literature) since the 1980s (McCall 2005: 1776). One of the results of these academic trends that assault the validity of modern analytical categories is that categories themselves are suspect (ibid., 1777). Indeed the question could be asked: Should we categorize and separate at all? In this dissertation I will indeed be using various categories of identity, but always with an eye on the processes in which they are produced and experienced. In this way I retain the healthy and indeed epistemologically necessary skepticism of categorization, but without denying the importance such categories play in everyday life. Music does not simply reflect underlying cultural patterns and social structures, but instead generates meaning

(Stokes 1994: 4). Musical performance can "provide the means by which ethnic identities are constructed and mobilized" (ibid., 5). This is also the case in much Oromo music, particularly revolutionaries and nationalists "retrieving Oromo cultural and political memories" (Jalata, K. 2009). If it is the processes of identity construction and maintenance that scholars are interested in, then it is my assertion that music offers an excellent catalyst into such processes.

Folkloric studies has produced a great body of literature on how oral traditions and histories of marginalized peoples on the periphery of civilization have made it "both a carrier and a producer of that history" (Cantwell 2008: 9). In most situations in Africa, the "civilization" of the imperialist cultural evangelists was a white European one. Thus, we are used to looking at indigenous black African cultures as the poor, underprivileged, backward people with no history. The connection to these aspects of society have been part of how "folk" cultures have been identified since the earliest days of folkloric studies with Johann Gottfried von Herder and William John Thomas (ibid., xii). The Oromo have long been conceived of in such a way by the Amharic ruling elite. This is part of why the Amharic histories are still often uncritically equated with "Ethiopian" history. The Amharas, like the Europeans, have long had a written language, a Christian history, and a penchant for using this as an ideological pretext towards the domination of darker skinned "others" from the south. I have interviewed a number of Oromo personally who remember the "Amharization" projects of previous Ethiopian governments, in which

the official language, culture, and history was forced upon them from higher powers, effectively relegating the ethnic majority of Ethiopia to "folk" status.

From its beginning, the concept of folklore has "suggested the outlines of a hidden, forgotten and backward culture" (Dorson 1976: 33). It is "hidden" in two ways, both deep in the past, and away from the centers of civilization. While sometimes seen in pejorative terms (backward, primitive, uncivilized, etc.), "folk" culture can be seen in a more noble light (simple, unspoiled, closer to nature). With eyes and ears towards the oral traditions and unofficial cultures/histories of the Oromo, I will demonstrate the place of music and festivals as helping to "bolster a sense of national identity" (ibid., 67). With the formulations of folklore taking place between the polarities of tradition and modernity, interpreting what it is to *be* Oromo is not nearly as fruitful as analyzing the process of *becoming* Oromo. Oral traditions, music, and mythic pasts (as folkloric studies and theorists will help me to demonstrate) are not simple tradition, but "an adaptive strategy of modern life" (Bronner 2007: 53). My experiences with the only legal and officially recognized (i.e. government controlled) Oromo group will highlight the place of power in the process of folklorization. When "folk tradition is reinterpreted and recontextualized as a staged and commodified folkloric performance," which has happened in countries around the world, it becomes clear how state/corporate power changes "the intent and consequent energy of the performance." (Hagedorn 2001: 68. Performances once demonized by the ruling elite as those of a backward, and primitive people, are now being used by them. Is this evidence that Oromo culture is

gradually growing in public acceptance, or that yet again the powers in charge have found a way to use Oromo music/dance traditions to some other purpose? Is it both?

Music, Politics and Censorship in Africa

In a very immediate and visceral way, censorship has been one of the primary forces contributing to the aesthetic of Oromo music. The power of music and the call for some degree of censorship has been a topic of debate since the ancient Greeks. The doctrine of ethos held that music had an almost magical power over a person's moral and ethical character. As such, music needed to be mixed in fair proportion to other endeavors, such as gymnastics, if a rightly balanced person was to be desired. Works on music and censorship have demonstrated that it is not as simple a phenomenon as one might imagine (Korpe 2004, Drewett and Cloonan 2006, Ritter and Daughtry eds. 2007). Images of a lone bureaucrat in a government office going through song lyrics with a red pencil, is not the only kind of musical censorship. The history of musical censorship in Africa demonstrates not only acts of one-sided censorship carried out by those in power, but also how "contending forces using music in power struggles over the nature of the (colonial and post-colonial) political settlement" (Cloonan 2006: 17). Right to free expression in various African contexts have been subordinated to the defense of national unity. Musical censorship can come directly from an institutional body, or in the form of self-censorship on the part of the musician. There are also "unofficial" forms of

musical censorship, which seem to be common to this day in Ethiopia. Under such a system, freedom of expression is technically part of the law on the books, but in actual practice it falls well short of anything resembling true freedom or expression.

Throughout Africa, especially during the years of independence after World War II, many of the discourses are led with music (Bahirtas 2009). Music has long played a role in strengthening the resolve of nationalists. Censorship in Ethiopia takes many forms other than the most direct. Article 29(2) of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) states:

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression without interference. This right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of his choice" (ibid., 25).

Despite this claim of freedom of expression, I am personally familiar with Oromo reporters, scholars and musicians who have been imprisoned, strong-armed into submission, or exiled because of their critical tone towards the government. Bahirtas's text deals with censorship of Ethiopian state radio and television, demonstrating how other strategies besides direct censorship are employed to keep dissenting or critical opinions silenced or given minimal exposure (ibid). I recall that a few months before I left Ethiopia, there was a story in a local English newspaper that Voice of America radio program, which transmitted Amharic speaking radio from the diaspora in the US was shut down my the Prime Minister. It was considered common knowledge that as the 2010 elections approached, Zenawi was cutting off all media that could potentially be critical of him, which VOA often is. As

justification, Zenawi claimed that the VOA was used by people in the diaspora to stir up ethnic tension, and even drew parallels between the VOA and the *Interhamwe* radio that contributed to genocide in Rwanda.

Self-censorship is most often practiced in cases where fear of repercussions initiates a pre-emptive strike against expression. Such a form of censorship is dealt with by Martin Scherzinger who, in discussing what he calls "double voices of musical censorship," complicates the notion of censorship being just a legally sanctioned public ban (Scherzinger 2007: 91). In this article Scherzinger explores the claim made by actor Tim Robbins that a famous middle-aged rocker friend told him he refused to speak out against the war for fear of repercussions by Clear Channel. Scherzinger is struck by the fact that the restriction is not felt by a legal or public body of censors like the State, nor is he even receiving the direct attention of a censor. The "double voices" referred to arise from the question of assessing the potential harms and benefits of from the point of view of both the artists and the listeners (ibid., 93). This type of self-censorship is very common in Ethiopia where I heard numerous stories of imprisonment (sometimes by interviewing those imprisoned themselves), home break-ins assumed to be by government officials, and disappearances in which the musician or poet was later found dead, or never found at all. While I certainly cannot corroborate these stories (except for the interviews with imprisoned musicians later released and pardoned), the many and frequent insistence of such occurrences by members of various ethnic and class groups left me feeling constantly feeling uneasy. If the other stories were true, it was

a brilliant move by the Ethiopian government to avoid the backlash that can be caused by overt censorship. More covert censorship, however, seems to escape the rather paradoxical logic. After the famous pop-singer Teddy Afro was arrested by Ethiopian authorities, for his alleged involvement in a hit and run death in Addis Ababa, nobody in the US or Ethiopia seemed hesitant to express their opinion that he was actually imprisoned because of his critical lyrics.[5] Again, while many allegations against the government are difficult to prove, the 2005 jailing of more than 30,000 opposition party members and numerous independent investigation into corruption of the current regime do much more to bolster the claims made by the musicians and people I met.

Musical censorship can occur less visibly than when it is inscribed by law. But legal entities are not the only avenues through which music can be censored. Though not directly tied to the state, "restrictions on artistic expressions can be as effective when they are imposed within a highly concentrated marketplace as when they are imposed directly by the federal government" (ibid., 103). Through interviews with a number of popular musicians in Addis Ababa, it became clear that the preference of Amharic language music in local cassette shops restricts the audience Oromo musicians can reach out to. These Oromo musicians assert that such an imbalance is not simply a result of consumer taste. Most music shops that buy and sell new music will pay an artist as much as ten times the amount if they bring back a cassette with lyrics in Amharic rather than *Afaan-Oromo.*

[5] http://www.freemuse.org/sw26658.asp

Censorship, or at least the threat of censorship (i.e. in the form of an internalized censorious instinct that many Oromo musicians seemed to have), was the most consistent thread running through my fieldwork. It shaped what I was able to do and not do, to hear and not hear. Despite this, the discourse about Oromo music by Oromo musicians allows for a great deal of insight on the nature of the censorious instinct and its role in Oromo performance aesthetics. Decisions ranging from choice of language, topic, to possible performance space, are all made while taking into consideration how such choices will be construed by ruling elite. This is especially true for Oromo popular music in Addis Ababa, which is created and sold within a few miles of its most potentially dangerous critics.

In the diaspora, a celebration of being freed from the censorship in Ethiopia can be heard in the great deal of politically charged, highly nationalist themes of Oromo music. As I shall demonstrate, these songs not only celebrate and reinvigorate Oromo culture, but openly decry Zenawi and praise those (the OLF) who seek to remove him from power. Discussions of music and censorship ask numerous questions like: What kind of harm can music cause? Does the right of societies or corporations to protect themselves from harm surpass the right of individual expression? These larger questions about the power of music and the nature of free speech will be addressed in relation to the current relations (official and unofficial) between Oromo music and the Ethiopian state. While the latter definitely holds a scrupulous eye on the former, the hegemony is never complete and uncontested.

Brief overview of fieldwork

Initially, I intended to focus my fieldwork explicitly on the more politicized aspects of Oromo music and nationalism. This was largely due to the fact that the first major texts I encountered that featured the Oromo as a central rather than peripheral phenomenon were the work of Oromo nationalist scholars working in the United States (the first being works by Dr. Asafa Jalata, and Dr. Mohammed Hassen). I had spent the previous three years working with an Ethiopian Orthodox community, about whom I wrote my Master's Thesis. In all those years I encountered scattered references to the Oromo in various texts on Ethiopian music and/or culture. I came to understand that the Orthodox Church in San Diego functioned as a focal point for the local community, but that this community was of course limited by who was Orthodox. Though there are Orthodox Christians from all over Ethiopia, it is still largely a religion of the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups. While the Ethiopian immigrants I knew always spoke with pride about the great number and diversity of Ethiopian ethnic groups, no one ever went into much detail about it. This made me all the more curious, as one of the claims of many Oromo is that the northern ethnic groups gloss over their identities with the catch-all term "Ethiopian," a term which to them symbolizes imperialism and colonialism on par with any European interference in Africa. It soon became clear that such an overt exploration of the politicized aspects of Oromo cultural politics would not get me much more than the loudest voices both sides of the debate. Kay Kaufman Shelemay,

whose experience in Ethiopian cultural politics is incredibly extensive and intimate, warned me that such a topic would be a "real non-starter."

After a brief exploratory trip to Ethiopia, and attendance at an Oromo Studies Association conference in Minneapolis, I decided that I did not want to give up researching the Oromo. I sent out grant applications, all focusing more on the fact that the Oromo were an understudied ethnic group, and that deeper knowledge of their situation could speak not only about the Oromo, but also about ethnic and nationalist identities in the Horn of Africa more generally. I received word that I got a grant from Fulbright IIE, and was excited to stick more generally to Oromo culture, thinking that I could in some way contribute positively to the multi-cultural dynamics of inter-ethnic dialogue in Ethiopia. I could still keep an ear/eye out for nationalist topics, but would do my best not to disturb the political hornet's nest I knew it could be. I did not meet with great success. While I did not want to present a dissertation that only explored Oromo music in relation to nationalism, censorship, or an oversimplified binary of *Habesha*/Oromo relations, the entire situation that presented itself to me in Ethiopia (most notably in the difficulties and roadblocks) dictated much of my focus.

I decided to reside in the capital city of Addis Ababa (called Finfinne by the Oromo). In a more rural area I wouldn't get the same amount of broad exposure of the many different Oromo groups. Finfinne is right in the middle of Ethiopia, so I could, as my contact at Addis Ababa University suggested, make multiple trips out to the different regions for a more complete perspective of the variety of Oromo

culture. I would get contacts through the Oromo Culture and Tourism Bureau (OCTB) who could easily facilitate such trips. These trips proved to be a rare event. After a few months, and no trips made, I started to seriously wonder about the possible success rate of my fieldwork experience. People would rarely keep appointments, and I noticed an unfortunate hostility towards me that I had never had among the Ethiopians in San Diego. Indeed, one of the things they prided themselves on was that they as Ethiopians were unlike other Africans in that they held no hostilities towards white outsiders. After being spit upon, cursed at and challenged to fight (the latter two on a regular basis) I found myself in a decidedly anxious and negative headspace. I expected the "See me next Tuesday" phenomenon (as Bruno Nettl has pithily dubbed it), but not to this extent, and not with the sense that just under the surface of Ethiopian social relations were psychic rivers of animosity, distrust and hatred. I thought that even if I make only minimal excursions to the countryside, I could still acquire a compelling enough ethnography of Oromo musicians in the capital city. This proved to be less possible than I thought, after getting to know some Oromo musicians who said that Oromo music clubs were illegal. While I did not actually check that law on the Ethiopian legal books, my slow but steady encounters with Ethiopians of all different backgrounds assured me that there was enough fear of Oromo nationalism that Oromo political and cultural activities were highly suspect. I was assured that even if official position was to the contrary, the government would do what was needed to ensure its stability.

Gradually, through contacts at Addis Ababa University and the government office of the OCTB I met some musicians and performance groups that would offer me some insight into Oromo music in Ethiopia. However, my hopes of joining a performance group, doing "deep hanging out" and learning a performance tradition to carry on in the US were dashed. Trips I made on my own or with friends proved fruitful but, as the election season ramped up, increasingly dangerous. One Oromo cultural performance group (Bitfu Oromia) was a ray of hope, but after one recording session with them, I never saw them again except at an event celebrating the current regime of Meles Zenawi (who was himself present). Eventually, a host of government workers felt comfortable enough to tell me that the very fact that it was the Oromo I was interested in (not the Amhara or Tigray) meant that everyone would be suspicious of my presence. Even if Oromo wanted to answer all of my questions, fear of government threats would prohibit them from doing so. Later contacts, one in particular who was not at all shy about giving me such information, corroborated this. Indeed he gave me almost thirty pages of handwritten notes about Oromo music. They included everything from general song-types and themes, to names of band and musicians who had been killed or imprisoned by the government. With information like this, it was clear that my desire to sidestep the politics was not going to happen. Thus, while I did not wish to position Oromo music and identity primarily within the binary opposition of Oromo versus government, it became apparent that to a large degree these opposing forces are a prime determinant.

Despite this, gaps and all, I managed to attain enough ethnographic and musical material to put together this dissertation. I hope it will give some perspective on the poly-vocal contestations of history and power in Ethiopia. I wish to stress this poly-vocality. This document is not intended to be a one-sided praise of Oromo culture against an oppressive and corrupt government. As is almost always the case, things are not so simple. Yet this tension and opposition features prominently in this dissertation because my experiences were so heavily shaped by them. Amhara/Tigray hegemony is not so total, nor is pan-Oromo unity so complete. What is clear, however, is that the relationship between ethnicity, nationalism and politics in Ethiopia can be bloody and contentious one. The tensions of an election year may have made my tenure there more complicated than it would have otherwise been. The complicated relationship between Oromo ethnic groups and the state is one in which musical performance (in all its appropriations, co-optations and contestations) can help to elucidate more about the dynamics of musical and ethnic performativity.

Chapter 2
Ethnicity and the Oromo

"Who produces usable ethnic pasts, how, and for what purpose?"
--Yiorgos Anagnostu *Contours of White Ethnicity*

During one of my first discussions with an Oromo scholar, I heard the tragic story of Bashir Dabiy, a female Oromo who, with one song, managed to anger both the Ethiopian government and more traditional Oromo. The song she sang was a girarsa,[6] a song-type traditionally sung in the context of celebrating a heroic warrior or hunter. Girarsa is now one of the primary song forms with which Oromo nationalist sentiment is expressed. It was, and still largely is, considered a male song form. With Bashir's performance, in which anti-government sentiments were expressed, she not only made a bold statement of her politics through the performative practices of her ethnic heritage (which angered the government), she also transgressed a traditional gender line by performing a man's song (which angered many traditional Oromo).

Bashir was taken to prison where, my sources say, she was "treated like a man." They beat her like a man, and tortured her like a man. Worst of all, they shaved her head. This was considered a grievous attack. For a woman to have a shaved head is considered a terrible thing in traditional Oromo society. She was later released, and is now living in Norway, having declared asylum there. Her story illustrates how aspects of ethnic and gender identity, in relation to state power and traditional societal practices, can be combined performatively through song and

[6] To be discussed in greater depth in later chapters.

poetry. Because of her ethnicity and her gender, she was marginalized twice over, with dangerous consequences. This yet another example of why I argue that censorship has become part of the larger Oromo musical aesthetic. Oromo music, in various contexts, is often inseparable from the real presence of dangerous consequences.

In this chapter I address the concept of ethnicity, with a particular emphasis on the circumstances in which ethnicity has become a salient category of group identity for the Oromo. I do this because in the case of Ethiopia, the system of "ethnic federalism" has politicized ethnicity in such a way as to make it a salient aspect of social identity. Using interethnic relations in Ethiopia as a starting point, I will explore the concept of ethnicity in terms of its roots, praxis, and consequences, demonstrating how the motivations behind the expansion or constriction of group identity can help to clarify shifts of power within its various constituent parts. Put simply, understanding a shift in the precedence of one aspect of group identity over another requires us not to look at the products of ethnicity discourse, but its motivations. In doing ethnographically based work on ethnicity's "processes and interconnections" (Malkki 1995: 1), rather than its instantiations, I hope to demonstrate more clearly the degree to which it is shaped and determined by external forces. This dissertation will therefore close by exploring the process of constructing various forms of identity.

As I explore the process in which "Oromo" as a more unified conception of identity becomes socially and politically relevant, it will become apparent that the

concept of ethnicity is inter-related and largely inseparable from other forms of group identity (race, class, gender). The term "intersectionality," originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has been used to describe the interactions between these "reciprocally constitutive categories of experience and analysis" (Smith 1998: xiii). Black feminist thought has long assumed that gender, race, and class are mutually dependent cultural constructions and projections, and the assertion put forward by many cultural studies and humanities theorists that "identities are discursively produced and never fixed" (ibid., xv) will be one that I consent to. Indeed the concept of *Oromummaa* as a pan-Oromo ethnic identity would never have occurred were it not for the harsh economic exploitations at the hands of Northern Ethiopian groups who, in subjugating all Oromo people, united them in a common economic subaltern class. Dehumanizing ideologies levied against the Oromo to justify their domination by the Habeshas were manifested in the form of religious, ethnic, and class bias.

The subjective "we-feeling" long acknowledged by theorists of ethnicity is at once a strength and a weakness of any attempt at circumscribing group identity. Too narrow or too wide a definition will render the boundaries too useless to be of any help. The problem with primordialist definitions of ethnicity is that anthropological literature is rife with examples negating any attempt to demonstrate that it is largely inherited. Conversely, instrumentalist definitions overlook the instances in which emotional, subjective reasoning often goes against the supposedly rational, goal-oriented nature they propose (Yang 2000: 42). These essentially teleological

arguments offer immense insights into the fluid and dynamic nature of ethnicity, but fall short when subjective, emotional reasoning outweighs the supposedly goal-oriented nature of ethnic striving. Wittgenstein implores us to ask not for the meaning of a word or concept, but its use. What does it *do*? While ethnicity does indeed *do* something, it often does not do so with impeccable internal coherence or logic. This is why I am insisting on understanding motivation. What was the motivation behind the first attempts at widening the lens of ethnic identity among Oromo groups previously conceived of as distinct? What is the motivation behind it now? Equally important, what are the social conditions that give rise to this motivation?

Ethnicity in Ethiopia

So, why ethnicity? There has been an increasing ethnicization of identity in present day Ethiopia ever since the first encounters between the Amhara and the Oromo in the sixteenth century. Centuries of an increasing store of hatred against northern settlers by southern peoples became a strong element of commonality between them. This grew, but precluded any large-scale solidarity, because the southerners still saw national distinctions amongst and between themselves. This started to change in the mid-nineteenth century with the conquests of Menelik. The conquest set up a feudal-like system in which the Amharas and their collaborators constituted a higher class, while the Oromo were largely subordinate. Thus, from the beginning of Amhara hegemony, there was a conjunction between class and nation.

While this conjunction was not the entire root of Oromo ethnicity, it is the behind the motivation of distinct groups to search for commonalities amongst themselves to widen the scope of identity for the purpose of unity against a common oppressor.

The three major terms that stand out when researching ethnicity in Ethiopia are *Amhara, Shankilla,* and *Galla.* These three terms can give us very good insight toward group identity as conceived by the various groups. Amhara is not a traditional group identity based on hereditary descent. First and foremost the Amharas were Orthodox Christians, secondly they spoke Amharic, which had gained special significance in the region since the Abyssinian expansion of the thirteenth century. Furthermore, it has been noted that the Amhara were not "markedly Negroid in racial features" (Donham and James 1986: 12). The Amhara occupied a "core" position in a core-periphery system based on the centrality of their regional power, rooted in the highland plough system[7]. At the periphery lay the Shankilla, a term that carried racial connotations. They were, simply, blacks. They lived in peripheral areas unsuitable for the plough, and were therefore considered largely as a resource for occasional slave raids. Descendants of Ahmara-Shankilla unions were socially stigmatized, and mixture of a mere 128th part was recognized (ibid.). Galla, while carrying overtones of race and slavery, was primarily focused on religion and culture, not race. Gallas were pagans, and uncivilized. Many folk-sayings exist

[7] The Amharas had long been using plough based farming. The soil of the lowland periphery areas was less suited to the plough.

testifying to this prejudice.[8] As Amhara colonization ramped up, the Oromo found themselves on the exploited end of a feudal-like system. Thus, the "interrelationship between ethnic categories in Abyssinia was conditioned by the struggle between emperors and regional nobility to control fiefs" (ibid., 13).

Abyssinian identity was eventually saddled with the moniker Amharic because of language, although this identity was no more culturally homogenous than "Galla" identity. It was only in relation to "others" (Shankillas, Muslims) that Amhara and Tigray peoples saw themselves as "Habeshas." The common language, religion, and social hierarchies, coupled with the plough and a sense of divine right over their neighbors, meant that their regional identities became one against the alien Galla of the south. Likewise the Oromo came to recognize their own similarities as of increasing significance through their common subordinate position under the Amharic-speaking colonizers. Under this new system, the fact that it was easier for even a poor peasant from the north to consider themselves superior to any southerner, was heightened under the newly instituted inequalities. Thus, while sentiments of cultural and ethnic superiority already existed (in the *Kebre Negast* primarily), it took their conjunction with class (under the new feudal system) to polarize and politicize notions of ethnicity that have created current ethno-nationalist sentiment.

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[8] These include "Ye-Galla chewa ye-gomen chomayelem" (It is as impossible to find a Galla gentlemen as it is to find fat in greens), and "Galla-na shinfilla biyathetim aytera" (Even if you wash them, stomach lining and a Galla will never come clearn). From (Donham & James eds. 1986: 13).

Although Oromo nationalists tend to argue that they are re-presenting the past, some have accused them of re-creating it to suit their own ideas and agendas. Oromo nationalism did not gain much momentum until the 1960s-70s, and even then one could see that such attempts to regain dignity and build solidarity could lead to some Oromo who remain confident of the essential one-ness of Oromo culture (Baxter, Hultin & Triluzi eds. 1996: 9). Many Oromo scholars, in working against Ethiopianist historiography, have written with a focus on or assumption of Oromo same-ness. While admitting the differences of each sub-group, they nevertheless write that certain ethnic features (most prominently language, but also traditional religious and political systems) are common to all (ibid.). Whether or not they are right to use these broader notions of collective identity depends on the answer to the question: How much do you need in common to be the same?

According to Gow, "the contemporary Oromo anti-colonial nationalist enterprise is fatally limited because it is dictated by the Amhara/Oromo division" (Gow 2002: 33). Nationalists present the Oromo as peace loving, while vilifying Ethiopians, and "employing a language of nationalist exclusion in a manner not dissimilar to their Ethiopian oppressors" (ibid., 35). Gow even refers to the Oromo capacity for the inclusion of outsiders (especially after an inter-ethnic war, or an inter-ethnic marriage) as touted by Oromo nationalists "as a characteristic in contrast to Amhara exclusiveness" (ibid., 126). So besides commonalities, the ability to work through the absence of commonalities is presented as an Oromo characteristic. And yet even as aspects of Oromo traditional politics, like the gadaa

system, are used to extol the democratic character of traditional society, the fact that women are excluded from the grades of the gadaa system is enough to be a critical indicator of an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Men were the ones extolled as heroes and hunters, and were allowed to function in the high offices of the local governance.

So is Oromo ethnicity a historical fact, or the result of some contemporary reinterpretation and refashioning started by contemporary elites? The answer is unequivocally both. Gudina is right when he raises criticisms of the "colonial perspective" (Gudina in Turton ed. 2006: 119-130) forwarded by many Oromo nationalists. Yes, the Oromo were occasionally conquerors themselves. Yes, there were many prominent Oromo throughout the Abyssinian monarchy. Yes, the Oromo could be Amharized. However, this does not change the fact that such instances are exceptional and that the vast majority of the Oromo population were indeed dominated on multiple levels. Yes, the possibility of changing ones status existed. The price of this assimilation (change of religion and language) was essentially a complete change of ethnic identity. Most Oromo, even if they were aware of this possible change, could likely never have accepted such terms. As for the increase of pan-Oromo consciousness, Oromo scholars have, and continue to, err on the side of broad commonalities that were hitherto unknown or unimportant. Some Oromo texts go into great, even painful, genealogical details (Haile and others 2004). Yet they readily admit that, because their primary sources were entirely oral, many of them could be based simply on fabrication or conjecture (ibid., 5-9). Also, loyalty to

the local group has always been primary, with other Oromo groups sometimes just as "other" as anyone else. Is an Oromo child an Arsi Oromo if both his/her parents are from the Arsi region, but the child was born in Addis Ababa and speaks only Amharic? What about Oromo children born in the diaspora? Are they Oromo? African American?

We have seen how the roots of Oromo ethnic identity are inescapably tied to issues of politics and class. In praxis, its application in the latter half of the twentieth century has been largely emancipatory. Ethnicity has been used both expressively and instrumentally. DeVos has noted that when an individual's group loyalty lies is dependant on whether one is oriented towards the past, present or future. "Ethnicity" he claims, "is a past-oriented form of identity, embedded in the presumed cultural heritage of the individual or group" (DeVos 2006: 375). Such distinctions are important, since the resultant identity conception can become a challenge to state authority. National separatists, whose sense of identity is rooted in a common past, can be as threatening to a state as those rooted in a sense of future (e.g. a universal religion like Christianity or Islam, or the international proletariat of communism). One can be a loyal citizen of the state and be an ethnic minority. Christians in ancient Rome were an example. It was only when their loyalties to Christ began to supersede those to the state that problems arose. So what have been the consequences of the increased ethnicization of politics in Ethiopia?

Ethnic tensions in Ethiopia have been a significant problem for the ruling elites since the Selassie regime. Ethno-nationalism was one of the many problems contributing to the instability of his government. Riding into power on a wave of anti-Selassie sentiment, the Derg had no less trouble with it. For a while they toyed with the notion of self-governance for each ethnic group. Ultimately this, as well as the hope that the military government would make way for a representative democracy, proved to be too great a hope. From the Derg's Marxist viewpoint, class was the primary root of social inequalities, so talk of ethnic separation was "counter-revolutionary," a threat to the proletariat. As the possibility of democracy grew thinner, and the military government showed no signs of relinquishing its political dominance, ethno-nationalist collaboration between many groups proved to be the Derg's undoing. For that very reason, ethnicity has remained a major preoccupation of the Zenawi government. The EPRDF, headed largely by Tigrayans, had to find a way of addressing these issues. The fruits of their efforts have been, at best, mixed.

The new system of "ethnic federalism" (in which the country was divided into states based upon large groupings of ethno-linguistic groups) gave a sudden thrust of ethnic consciousness into a sanctioned political force (Turton in Turton ed. 2006: 1-31). While the intent was to empower previously marginalized groups, it has often led to the reification of previously fluid identities, often with violent consequences. The consequences have reinforced what many scholars believe to be a key ingredient in the formation of ethnic consciousness, conflict. These theorists

assert that a discussion of ethnicity must start from a "theoretical position that regards some form of conflict as a normal or chronic condition in a pluralistic society" (DeVos 2006: 2). This is not to say that ethnic difference will always lead to conflict, since it can be used expressively as well as instrumentally. It does, however, further reinforce the claim that notions of ethnicity are intricately bound up with those of protest, conflict, and modernization. This is seen quite clearly in the case of Ethiopia. Absolutely no one I asked about ethnic federalism had a positive view of it. Most people seem to be firmly under the conviction that it had only increased ethnic tensions.

Ethnicization in praxis has indeed proved that the institutionalization of ethnicity doesn't encourage integration, it encourages exclusivity (Kebede 2001). Asefa once told me that he hated filling out government forms and being issued identification cards by various institutions or agencies demanding to know his ethnicity. He claims that it used to be quite a peripheral issue. The most relevant form of social identity when he was growing up was religion. Even this was not done to regulate the daily minutia of interactions between Muslims and Christians, but because dietary restrictions between the two groups meant that one simply needed to know. Asefa's family, and indeed many families I met, were often both Christian and Muslim. At large family gatherings, weddings for example, who is of which religion is important because in Ethiopia it has become social custom that Christians and Muslims not eat meat slaughtered by someone of the other religion. Oromo, Amhara, etc., was of far less consequence, especially for Asefa's family who was

made of both ethnicities. He and Tewodros (his Oromo colleague and best friend) see the current ethnic situation as just an attempt to "divide and rule." There may be something to this. A genuine multi-ethnic state practices "decentralization, power sharing, and consent based governance" (Kebede 2001). The current Ethiopian government practices none of these. It embodies another of Kebede's observations, that control of the state by a given ethnic group turns ethnic affiliations into a built-in advantage over others. With the ethnicization of political parties, party politics becomes ethnic politics.

So what sort of concept is ethnicity? I have suggested that it is one of many aspects of identity which may take precedence over others, and that clarification of this concept comes through analysis of motivations. The vague, subjective character of ethnicity is both a weakness and a strength to those who would use or analyze it. For scholars, ethnicity is much like the term culture. It is notoriously hard to define being that it is so broad, nevertheless it is a concept that seems difficult to throw away. I have demonstrated how the motivation behind the expansion of the scope of group identity by the Oromo, glossing over the importance of previous differences in light of a common oppression, illustrates a conjunction of ethnicity and class. In the modern context, ethnicity has always become a salient category of social and political force after the conjunction of an identity rooted in a putative belief in common descent with some form of conflict, often subordinate social or economic status.

Both Ethiopianist historiography and the Ethiopians who I first encountered during my fieldwork for my Masters thesis, tend to emphasize the great difference between themselves and "other" Africans. Much of my thesis was spent detailing how Ethiopia was an exception to the rest of Africa. The fact that these differences are sometimes real and sometimes imagined means that they are not so different from most concepts of difference that exist between "selves" and "others." Many of the ways in which "Ethiopians" have come to distinguish themselves have already been touched upon. There are, of course, the mythological and religious roots in the Middle East. Seeing themselves as the inheritors of the blessings of Israel via the union of the biblical King Solomon with the Queen of Sheba, Orthodox Christian Ethiopians have long looked to the roots of their identity which lay outside the continent of Africa. It is mind-boggling to think that the cornerstone of the "Ethiopian" identity that came to be revered by many black nationalists and pan-Africanists in the New World as a symbol of black pride, was so emphatically self-defined by its rejection of black African roots. The fact that Ethiopian kings had considered themselves Caucasian, and despised the admixture of black blood with their own, would likely have caused those who sought to construct a pan-African identity to search elsewhere if they had only known.

The fact that Ethiopia was one of the two African countries that was not directly colonized (a claim which is highly debatable), has created a very different relationship between Ethiopians and the outside world. I have been told by many Ethiopians that the main difference between themselves and other Africans is that

since they weren't colonized, they didn't "long for the white face." In these ways, those who considered themselves Ethiopian, set themselves apart as quite distinct from the rest of Africa. It is against this unique sense of self-identity among people from Africa who often don't care to have themselves referred to as "black" or "African" that Oromo have sought to define themselves against. Oromo scholars have been intensely focused on their "African" roots, and often deride the Habeshas for attempting to deny theirs. In order to sidestep the baggage of colonialism, most northern Ethiopians won't admit to having been colonized. Oromo, on the other hand, are greatly concerned with their own colonization at the hands of the Ethiopians.

The "African-ness" of Ethiopia

What do we mean when we say "African?" This concerns me since much of what the ethnomusicological literature on "African" music seems to put forward many conceptualizations that would imply that neither Ethiopian nor Oromo music could be considered African. Even though most of these texts will endeavor to deconstruct notions of what is "African," it still carries some implications that I feel must be made explicit if we are to be honest about what we mean. Much of what is labeled "African" music might best be labeled "sub-Saharan black African music." And yet even if we accept that the former label stands in for the latter, both Ethiopian and Oromo music seem to stand out as different from such generalizations. "African" has tended to refer to music that is polyphonic, populated

with multiple drums and percussion instruments, music that is functional to its society, and music in which rhythm is *the* defining characteristic. If Africa is to be equated with blackness and drums, it is indeed difficult to argue that Ethiopia and the Oromo music within Ethiopia's borders are thoroughly African. I recall being on a bus from Harer to Addis Ababa with Asefa, and letting him listen to some *son jarocho* music on my Ipod. "It sounds African," he said. I asked him what that meant, and received an answer saying that there is a certain sense of rhythm that is "African." I asked him if Ethiopian music wasn't African, being that it was from Africa. "No" he said. "African music is very different."

One of the most prominent examples in ethnomusicological literature of putting forward a notion of what is "African," and probably the most criticized for it, is Chernoff's *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*. This has long been my favorite piece of Africanist ethnomusicology despite, and perhaps even because of, its conceptualizations. This book provides, however, a fantastic example of how definitions of Africa are either too general or too particular. Chernoff writes sentences about "the African way of life," and understanding what "involvment with music means in Africa" (Chernoff: 1979, 12). This is not to say that Chernoff isn't aware of the conceptual dangers of oversimplification, he just seems to do it anyway. He writes that many people, even pan-Africanists like Senghor hold that rhythm is the organizing force of black African musical style (ibid., 23), and that most people too simplistically equate Africa with drums (ibid., 27). Despite this, he thinks he can generalize about African musical style. We shall see how according to his definitions

of African rhythm, the Oromo wouldn't count as African at all. Or when Oromo music would fit into said categorizations, so would any number of other musics outside the continent of Africa.

The broad observations about the "community dimension" of African music are entirely too ubiquitous. That African music is defined in part by "how the music can become socially relevant" (ibid., 35) seems to suggest that Chernoff already has an idea of what he wants to define as African before he has even started. Are non-African cultures silent on the community dimension or social relevance of their musics? Of course not. So of what relevance are such generalizations? Part of what I love about this text is that the author is brave enough to search for generalizations while so much Africanist ethnomusicology seems to stress complexity so as to avoid seeming racist in its simplification. And yet, these generalizations are so general as to be of little use-value. Likewise, his specifics are so specific that if I were to accept them, this dissertation would not be a work of Africanist ethnomusicology.

Chernoff states that in Western music "rhythm is most definitely secondary in emphasis and complexity to harmony and melody" (ibid., 42). In Ethiopian and Oromo music, the entire rhythmic feel of a piece takes a back seat to the poetry and its resulting melody. Furthermore, it is decidedly not polyrhythmic. Chernoff says much about African polyrhythms and learning to keep "time steady by perceiving rhythmic relationships rather than by following a stressed beat" (ibid., 51). Chernoff details how multiple rhythms occurring at the same time, competing for our attention, and being held together by a timeline mark African music. As evidence to

the contrary, I re-offer the examples heard already on the accompanying CD to this dissertation. Most songs feature a very strong stressed beat, and those that don't are structured around the melody. Additionally, my own experiences in playing salsa music with some Oromo and Ethiopians demonstrate that this supposedly natural tendency toward complex rhythm in which "an African has a more comprehensive education in rhythm" (ibid., 97) is not at all the case.

The year before I left for Ethiopia, I was living in Xalapa, Mexico with my wife while she did her doctoral research. While there I began playing salsa and other Afro-Cuban music with some local musicians. What started out as discussion and informal training lead to bi-weekly gigs in which I learned by doing, and really began to understand the time of rhythmic organization mentioned by Chernoff. On one of my trips to Shashemane I found myself in my hotel room with some Oromo acquaintances who expressed interest in the music I learned while in Mexico. I overturned some plastic garbage cans and arranged some chairs and table so that I had some improvised bongos, congas and a clave. These Oromo, one of whom was a musician, had quite a bit of trouble placing the various rhythmic parts in relation to the clave. I would play the bongo part on the bottom of the trashcans while speaking the clave rhythm for them to follow. Once I stopped vocalizing the clave, their attempts to maintain it quickly fell apart. As "Africans," shouldn't they have been better at this? The same thing occurred later in a group setting in which some locals in Addis Ababa gathered to learn to play Latin music. At a US Embassy function, I met a professor (Abiyi Ford) who said that he played Latin music, and even had

some congas and a djembe. I jammed with him a few times before I met his teacher Kofi, an accomplished percussionist from whom I was keen to learn more. Eventually a group of Ethiopians and myself would find our way to Abiyi's house to take lessons from Kofi. Being that I had some experience, I often found myself in the position of co-instructor. The same problem occurred, following a timeline instead of stressed beats proved difficult for the Ethiopians. If rhythmic complexity is key, and "an understanding of the way in which African rhythms are structured is our best analytical tool" (ibid., 93), then Ethiopian/Oromo music is decidedly NOT African. Clearly, I cannot accept Chernoff's notions of "African."

Having given some indication of the problematics of the term "African" as an identity marker, I now return to the question to the nature of ethnicity. Speaking from my own personal experience, as a "white" person raised in a largely non-white environment, I have always favored the constructionist theory of ethnicity, which holds that ethnicity is not simply inherited. Instrumentalist views, however, fail to take into account how a person or group can be placed into an ethnic category in which they would not necessarily place themselves. It seems to me, however, that there is something to be said for the primordialist notion of ethnicity. I believe that this has been ignored for two reasons; inaccurate representation in compendiums of ethnic studies, the fear of many theorists (especially "white" theorists) of sounding racist by daring to consider that some parts of our social reality might not be purely socially determined. The latter is a handicap which is found not only in ethnic studies, but across the social sciences where theorists seem to populate their work

with obfuscating terms, glorifying their "others" and abstaining from any analysis which might be construed as "judgment."

Messay Kebede refers to primordialism as arguing that "ethnicity has its roots in psycho-biological drives that condition people to be a part of affective and solidaristic closed groups" (Kebede 2001). He quotes Pierre L. van den Berghe as asserting that "ethnicity…is extended kinship" (ibid.). Despite the many examples of the social and cultural fluidity of ethnic ties, there also seems to be something incredibly stubborn about them. If instrumentalism is about rational calculation of interest, and primordialism is about sentiments, then it stands to reason that people might use both at different times. A belief in putative descent, common to most defenitions of ethnicity, could perhaps also be termed the "look-like-me-club" attitude. This sentiment still seems to have a hold of people today, despite, or perhaps because of, attempts to demonstrate how small differences in melanin levels, hair, eye and nose shape are inherently useless in determining behavior, reasoning capacity, etc. In an article entitled "On Xenopbobia," philosophy professor Massimo Pigliucci suggests that it is the biological hardwiring rooted in our evolutionary past that causes xenophobia and racism to be such powerful, often visceral social antipathy towards "others."

Pigliucci received a lot of criticism for his assertion by colleagues who were quick to point out to him the "complex cultural dimensions of xenophobia" (Pigliucci 2010). Expanding upon an argument by evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, Pigliucci argues that it is a mistake to contrast cultural and biological explanations of

behavior. To understand this, we must look at the standard Aristotelian distinction between proximate, and ultimate causes. “An evolutionary explanation of a given behavior answers the question of what is the *ultimate* cause of that behavior (i.e. an explanation in terms of the purpose or function the behavior serves)” (ibid.). In the case of racism, xenophobia, or ethnic prejudice, an ingrained evolutionary instinct of distrust of outsiders as a potential threat seems a plausible explanation. Yet even if this is true, we still need a *proximate* explanation “for both the basic behavior and the various complex forms it takes” (ibid.). This is where culture takes on its role. While still stressing the importance of the cultural dimension Pigliucci asserts that “contrary to what scientists and humanists all to often seem to think , biological and cultural accounts of human behavior are not only not at odds, but in fact compliment each other, both being necessary for a more rounded understanding of the human condition” (ibid.). Thus, while it is true that modern skepticism of the “other” is a complex cultural phenomenon, at its roots is a well accounted for biological survival tool which might account for its strength and persistence in the face of mounting evidence against it as a belief increasingly unnecessary and impossible to maintain.

Chapter 3
The Oromo: A History in the Making

> The irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient.
>
> -- Gupta & Ferguson, *Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference.*

"What makes an Oromo an Ethiopian? Because they were captured, demonized, lost their land and had their identity abused? How can you take an identity that degrades you and assumes you are inferior? Only an Oromo castrated by an identity complex can call themselves an Ethiopian. I am an Oromo. I reject Ethiopian identity. " (Jalata interview 2010).

The quote above comes from an interview with Dr. Asafa Jalata, one of the primary Oromo nationalist intellectuals (a professor of sociology currently teaching at the University of Tennessee Knoxville). His academic works were the first I ever encountered that mentioned the Oromo people in a positive light, or as something other than a footnote. He firmly rejects the identity marker, "Ethiopian," and has dedicated nearly all of his scholarly and activist effort to the cause of raising awareness about the Oromo. His rejection of Ethiopian identity is not unique. Many Oromo, when asked where they are from, will say Oromia, rather than Ethiopia. When pressed as to where Oromia is, the answer is often "near Ethiopia."

So what is Oromo identity, and how is it different from Ethiopian identity? The previous chapter detailed some of the historical reasons how "Oromo" has come

to be subsumed by "Ethiopian." Part of the difficulty for Oromo nationalists wishing to unite a unified "Oromo" people is the great number of cultural differences among Oromo speaking peoples. This chapter will demonstrate the larger historical processes that combined to create not only the concept of a unified Oromo people, but a conflict that is still a contestation of history with dangerous consequences. It will be shown that both the identity markers "Ethiopian" and "Oromo" are not without their complications. Who chooses to employ these markers or not? The abovementioned quote by Dr. Jalata gives some idea of the feeling educated Oromo nationalists have about the terms "Ethiopian" and "Oromo." But how do other Oromo conceive of these terms and their conflicted histories? How have these terms come to be imbued with many different significations and meanings? To answer this, we must begin by looking at history. Or perhaps more accurately, histories.

This chapter will provide a history of the Oromo from the 16th century up to the present. This history will show how the conceptualization of the Oromo as a "people" first began. Indeed, there was not always broad sense of community among the many Oromo speaking ethnic groups, and for many, the term is still not the primary means of group identification. This pan-Oromo consciousness, called *Oromummaa* by Asafa Jalata (Jalata 2007), is a force that began only in the middle of the twentieth century. The impetuses behind the creation of this expanded group consciousness essentially stem from a contestation of history between Oromo and the ruling elites (made up largely of cultural and/or ethnic Amharic Orthodox Christians). Given that the Oromo did not have a formal writing system until the

twentieth century, all details of their presence in written historical records were written by others. These others included not only European travelers (Pankhurst 1965), but also their neighbors to the north. The written language of Ge'ez (and its present day linguistic descendants Amharic, and Tigray) has been used by the ruling elites in Ethiopia for over a thousand years. The first mentions of the Oromo referred to them as pagans, barbarians, and invaders (Pankhurst 1965, 1998). Challenging these assertions about who is invader and who is indigenous, the rhetoric of Oromo nationalism today turns the tables. The consequent struggle has helped to topple two ruling regimes, and re-discovered (or created?) the history of the third largest ethno-linguistic group in Africa.

After reviewing the history of the Oromo through these different lenses, I will detail the beginnings of *Oromummaa*, and the role music and cultural performance played in shaping and disseminating these ideas. Music is an incredibly useful tool for bolstering nationalism, especially within the context of an oral society. Yet even as Oromo nationalism continues to develop, we must understand that "the subject 'Oromo' is not a singular essence defined once and for all, but the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experience" (Gow 2002: 43). Many of the writings of and by Oromo nationalists continue to stress the oneness of the Oromo, even though the existence of the united Oromo with its own distinctive common culture is only "assumed as an unquestioned given" (Baxter 1996: 9). Thus while I am sympathetic towards the struggles of Oromo cultural and political nationalists I, like other non-Oromo scholars, am more skeptical. When we Western

scholars encounter terms like nationalism, we know that "many horrors lurk in its shadow" (ibid., 10). This is why I intend to search through the polyphonic discourse of *Oromummaa* through the performative experience. In coming to understand these historical claims and contestations we can come to have a clearer understanding of two key questions: "How does a nation come to be imagined? Who does the imagining?" (Askew 2002: 14).

I will then use the personal histories of some Oromo musicians whose quite different relationships to and ideas about state power and music demonstrate the incredible complexities of Oromo identity politics in the last half a century. One musician has long been antagonistic towards the past regimes in power, and has used music in his expression and cultivation of an Oromo personal and political identity. He has been imprisoned for it multiple times, yet refuses to acquiesce. Another, during the Ethio-Somali War, actually used music to bolster Ethiopian nationalism, writing a song credited by some to have swayed Oromo to fight on the side of Ethiopia rather than Somalia. After his service, as the government began to grow suspicious of Oromo nationalism (and the power of music to spread it), he was stripped of his instrument, separated from his co-performers, and spent years in exile in Djibouti, only to later be granted amnesty and come back to Ethiopia to a government job. Contrast this to yet another performer who is beloved by many Oromo nationalists, yet refuses to mix his music with politics, believing music to be too pure a thing to be soiled by its association with the filth of politics and war.

It must be said that the reason for my inclusion of these particular individuals has much to do with the fieldwork problems I mentioned at the beginning of the dissertation. Unfortunately, I was not lucky enough to have arrived back home with a huge number of recordings and interviews to leaf through and decide which best represent Oromo music, or which best exemplify some particular aesthetic or history. I had to work with what I could safely gather. However, all of those musicians interviewed in this chapter were people whom my various contacts thought it important enough to introduce me to. In that sense, I can be assured that these musicians were/are, at least to some degree, important to a larger audience of Ethiopians who are both Oromo and non-Oromo. I don't know if it is a reflection on those I knew while in Ethiopia, or if any larger inferences toward the general populace can be made, but there is a noticeable absence of female singers/performers. I don't know if this is simply a result of the proclivity of my informants/friends to choose male singers or not, but from my own experience it does seem like the major singers and performers tend to be male.[9]

I will conclude by bringing all of these strands of ethnography and theory together in order to ask questions about the performative nature of conceptions of group identity, and how the relations of these conceptions to state power have shaped Oromo social consciousness and musical aesthetics. Whether nationalist, ethnic, or linguistic, all "imagined communities" are rooted in the search for identity

[9] At music shops in the *mercato* (market) in Addis Ababa selling more contemporary popular music, there did seem to be a higher number of albums featuring lead female vocalists.

which "because it cannot be 'remembered,' must be narrated" (Anderson 1983: 204). The Oromo and the state, which many of them see as being an imperialist colonizer, both use Oromo cultural performance to reinvent and articulate themselves in continual re-negotiation of state and cultural power. There is a long established theoretical interest of Marxist theorists like Gramsci, Foucault, and Bourdieu in the dynamics of states and power. Askew expands on their concerns by asserting that "*performing* the nation brings it into being. Words alone are insufficient" (Askew 2002: 292). I agree, and assert that I can demonstrate this using an ethnographic account of the performative approach toward the creation of an Oromo identity.

The Oromo People

The reason I choose to start with the history of the Oromo in the sixteenth century is that this is where they make their first appearance in written historical records. These accounts come from European and Abyssinian sources. It must be remembered that the area in the northern highlands of present day Ethiopia[10] has had its own writing system for over a thousand years, one of the only places in Africa known to have maintained such a distinction. Referred to as "Galla," now considered a pejorative term among the Oromo, their image is one of paganism, barbarity and lack of civility. They are first referred to as being invaders, moving north from the southern periphery of the Amharic north, recently weakened from defending themselves against a Muslim invasion (Oliver & Atmore 2001: 127-134).

[10] See map 1.

Manoel de Almedia, a Portuguese Jesuit who traveled to Ethiopia (then Abyssinia) in 1622 commented on this "invasion" by saying "The Gallas are heathens, or rather, are neither Christians, Moors nor heathens, for they have no idols to worship, and take very little account of God" (Pankhurst ed. 1965: 44). The presence of the Portuguese in that area at the time can be attributed to the presence of Orthodox Christianity. The fact that European Christians had found co-religionists in that area would continue to play an important role in allying the two.

From the sixteenth century on there continue to be Oromo moving as far north as Tigray, and gave significant problems to the Christian rulers whose southern provinces were lost to the Oromo (Oliver and Atmore 2001: 130). During this period some Oromo made in-roads into the northern aristocracy through marriage and soldiery. Indeed, had history played out slightly differently, this dissertation may have been discussing music in relation to an Oromo hegemony. As it turned out, the help of European Christian allies helped keep Abyssinia Amharic and Christian through the importation of firearms (Jalata 2005: 53). It was during the colonial expansion of Menelik II in the late nineteenth century that the Oromo speaking areas were brought under the domination of Christian, Amharic-speaking elites. Having revived the "Solomonic Dynasty,"[11] Menelik II wanted to expand the

[11] A dynasty based on the claims of the *Kibre Negast*, a text which asserted that the Biblical Queen of Sheba was an Ethiopian, and that a union between her and King Solomon resulted in a son named Menelik, through whom the blessings and favor of the god of Israel were transferred to Ethiopia. This ideology was used to assert the supremacy of northern Christian cultures, allowing them to colonize the pagan Oromo to the south.

size of his empire, and used European aid to do so, as had happened before. The Oromo, at this point lived in largely non-hierarchical societies, practiced animal husbandry or non-plow agriculture, and followed Islam or traditional religious practices (Marcus 1994: 104). It is in their common domination by Amharic speaking groups that Oromo speaking groups came to have something more in common than just language.

The growing Amharic state infrastructure meant that there needed to be an increase in revenue collection. Rural Oromo populations were forced to produce for the state under a system known as the *nafxanya-gabbar* system. The Oromo *gabbar* was essentially a feudal serf, working for a landowner (*nafxanya*) who was often an Amharic landowner or clergyman (though sometimes an Amharized Oromo). The benefits of their labor went to the Amharic north (Jalata 2005: 77). This inter-ethnic domination is not well known outside of academic circles even to this day. Indeed, the forcible subsidy of the Ethiopian core by the Oromo periphery "is perhaps *the* secret of modern Ethiopian history" (Donald & James 1986: 24). Before this conquest of the Oromo, they practiced a form of social government known as *gadaa*. The *gadaa* system was a democratic one, having a system of checks and balances, and divisions of power (Legesse 2000). The *nafxanya-gabbar* system weakened, or in many cases destroyed, this Oromo form of governance. This system of government is of incredible interest to Oromo scholars today, and one musician (Ali Birra) is credited with encouraging Oromo in "remembering" this unique cultural practice by singing about the importance of maintaining cultural heritage in his

songs(Argo 2008: 88). The Oromo were also mixed agriculturalists, cultivating barely and other crops in the more highland areas, and cattle herding in the more lowland areas (Jalata 2005: 30). While the confiscation of lands forced them to stop or change these livelihoods, small-scale agriculture and cattle raising are still practiced in Oromo regions. It has been asserted that before this point in history Oromo typically referred to themselves as Guji, Borena, Arsi, or any of the other sub-groupings of Oromo as their primary mode of self-identification, rather than as "Oromo" (Levine 1974: 136). Based on my own observations in the field, and much to the chagrin of Oromo nationalists I'm sure, this still seems to be largely true. However, near the end of the rule of Haile Selassie (who ruled from 1930 to 1974), some Oromo began to find a sense of pan-Oromo ethnic identity, and used it in projects attempting to assert the political power of its fully combined population. One of the major moments of crystallization in the creation of *Oromummaa* came in the form of a concert in 1977.

Oromo unity through performance: The National Theatre show of 1977

I first encountered this Oromo cultural event in a text by Gadaa Melbaa (Melbaa 1999). In it he asserted that it served an important role in Oromo nationalism, which is unique in that "the Oromo were colonized by a black African nation" (ibid., 8). He mentions one of the earliest Oromo cultural troupes, *Afran Qallo*, developed in Dire Dawa in the 1960s. In the 1970s other cultural troupes like *Burqa Bojjii, Biqiltu Mendi and Lalisa Nejjo* in Wellega, Hawiso *Biftu Biyya Keenya* in

Harerghe all contributed to the raising of an Oromo consciousness (ibid., 99). These troupes would tour throughout various Oromo regions. Even before the cultural show discussed in this chapter, musicians were among the first to express Oromo nationalism. Touring performances ensured that such sentiments traveled quickly throughout Oromo speaking areas. The most famous and influential of these groups (*Afran Qallo*) was formed in response to an incident at an Oromo wedding in Dire Dawa in the early 1960s. At this wedding, an Oromo asked the Adare[12] musical group playing at the wedding to sing in *Afaan Oromo*. The group replied that their instruments did not know *Afaan Oromo*, although the entire group could speak it. Annoyed Oromo guests raised organized a committee and raised money to form the *Afran Qallo* group (Jalata 2005: 186). Initially gaining fame in the Harerghe region of Oromia, their popularity spread. The group was invited by the Afars in Djibouti to perform a concert, but the members were denied visas by the government. Eleven members went to Djibouti without visas, four of which decided to live in exile. Four returned and were imprisoned. But the impact was already made. The popularity of the *Afran Qallo* group and their combined efforts with the Macha Tulama Self-Help organization[13] "marked the public rise of Oromo nationalism" (ibid., 179). After

[12] The Adare are an ethnic group in Harer. Because of the long established presence of Islam, a number of African and Arab ethnic groups became blended over time to produce an ethnic group with its own distinct language and customs.
[13] A self help group founded by educated Oromos to help improve the living standards of the Oromo, since it was felt that the Ethiopian government clearly showed no interest in doing so. Besides improving the welfare of the Oromo people, the also aimed at mobilizing Oromo so as to undermine the Amharic colonial policies that they saw as attempting to divide and rule the Oromo people.

their dispersal, Oromo nationalism had to move underground until the fall of Selassie in 1974.

With a new government in power (the Derg), many Oromo were encouraged by the prospect of establishing their culture as worthy and legitimate. Despite failed efforts to use adapted Latin script to write in *Afaan Oromo*, a cultural committee was given the power to create and bring together cultural performance groups (music , dance and drama) throughout Oromia. Six such groups from Bale, Arsi, Harer, Shewa, Ilbabour, and Wellega came together in Addis Ababa to put on a show. To quote Jalata:

> "It was the first time since colonization that the Oromo had assembled to celebrate their cultural heritage. Later, regretting that it had allowed the Oromo to hold their celebration, the junta imprisoned, tortured, or murdered most of the participants, both organizers and performers (ibid., 188).

As the prevalence of themes of pan-Oromo unity became increasingly apparent, the government regretted its decision. It was boycotted by the Ethiopian News Agency and was not reported (Wedejo 3/2/09). All new Oromo cultural groups were banned, and the performers and leaders of previously existing groups were arrested. The forces of ethnic nationalism that had been harnessed by Marxist scholars and students to end the Selassie regime, had now become a problem for them. According to Melbaa:

> "The Oromo people have long used their songs, poems and dance to express their suffering and oppression under Amhara rule. These are also used to keep alive their spirit of resistance by strengthening Oromo nationalism. Now they are used to strengthen the ongoing political and armed struggle" (Melba 1999: 102).

Having discussed this event with some of the attendees and performers, I was happy to find that there was a great degree of congruence between Melbaa's text and the stories told to me by interviewees. Not only were the events surrounding the performance itself corroborated multiple times, but even particular highlights of the event and sentiment towards them was almost the same from person to person. Nonetheless, it must be stated that the pieces of this puzzle are in no way complete, my knowledge nowhere near extensive enough to claim complete accuracy and objectivity.

The show began with the musicians from Harer (Ali 12-14-09, Wedejo 3-2-10, Sheika 1-9-11, Makonnen 1-13-11). Being one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Ethiopia, Harer musicians were among the first to begin translating Oromo musical styles onto Western instruments (accordion, guitar and harmonica being the most popular). Because of this they were well ahead of some of the other Oromo groups in terms of showmanship, and technical proficiency on their instruments. Both Ali from Harer, and Zerehun Wedejo, from Wellega made this claim. In addition to their performance skills, they also had the most developed political music (i.e. they had the most experience in writing poetry and lyrics utilizing nationalist themes). There was strong approval among the Oromo of the Harerghe region of the Macha-Tulama association, an Oromo cultural group dedicated to helping other Oromo, the first coordinated attempt at resistance against Abyssinian hegemony. Formed in 1963 as a self–help development association, the MTA became a pan-Oromo movement that gave birth to Oromo nationalism (Hassen in Jalata 1998: 183). The MTA succeeded

in spurring a great deal of cultural pride among the local Oromo that blossomed into a more developed nationalism sooner that other regions. The spread of its cultural pride is attributed greatly to the music is these early travelling bands (Ali 12/114/09, Wedejo 3/2/10). Early Oromo nationalist musicians making music in this context include Ali Birra and Ali Shabbo, and were cited as influences by Ali (Ali 12-14-09). After Selassie's return from exile in England (which lasted from 1936 to 1941), there was a renewed focus on Amharization, i.e. the spreading of the Amharic language, culture and religion as THE culture of Ethiopia (Jalata 2005: 106). Programs were put in place whose goal was the slow erosion of Oromo language and culture. Speaking *Afaan Oromo* in school could put a child at risk of being beaten by a teacher, all of the first attempts to write in the Oromo language were destroyed, and all official state business was to be carried out in Amharic (ibid., 188). The Derg's initial support of multi-ethnic policies ended with a legitimate fear for their own hold on power, should the various ethnic groups consolidate their efforts against them (Birhanu 2-13-10). Perhaps it is not surprising that the Harer musicians suffered the most in terms of loss of members after the show (lost to prison or worse).

The boldness of the Harer Oromo inspired many other Oromo performers to focus on unity against a common oppressor. Zerehun Wedejo was one of these performers. Born in the Wellega region (on the Western borders of Ethiopia near Sudan), Zerehun was fifteen years old in 1977 when he decided to sing his song "Kottaa Aramaa Aramnaa" As is typical of Oromo music, and even Habesha music

directed against the Italians during the WWII invasion, the message is contained in double-meaning. The lyrics say:

> Let's weed our farm,
> Pick and clear the daisy that subdues the healthy growth of the crop
> The weed thrived here in our garden because the land is so fertile.
> Make sure to get the whole weed including the root
> Anything less will cost us a second round of weeding
> Let's pile the weed under the sun by exposing its roots
> So that it will rot, decompose and later help fertilize the crop
> Alas! The crop will thrive without competition
> And I look forward to seeing the crop ripen.[14]

The meaning of the lyrics, though veiled, were not lost on the ears of the government officials in attendance that evening. Zerehun was immediately placed in prison for eight months for his song. During our interview over coffee in the lobby of a hotel, he made his position on the past three governments quite clear. He was one of the first Oromo I had met who was not as closed or cautious about his opinions of the current government. When I asked if he prefer I change his name in the writing of my dissertation, he insisted that I not do so. He detailed his childhood, and his developing interest in music. He mentioned that there were *ferenji* reporters and dignitaries at the concert that evening, many of whom were so impressed by the performers that they asked the government for permission to take them out of the country. All of these requests were denied.

Zerehun was also the first Oromo to suggest a particular explanation for why I may have been having the kind of trouble I was with my research. The Oromo

[14] See CD track 10 "Kota Arama Aramna". Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.

people, he claimed, were beginning to become angry with the *ferenjis* because of their support for the Zenawi regime. "How can the *ferenjis* continue to support the Woyane[15] government with aid when he is killing the Oromo?" (Wedejo 3-2-10). I responded that most *ferenjis* in the United States and Europe had no idea who the Oromo were, or that they even existed, and that this was part of the reason I had wanted to research the Oromo, to shed greater light on the situation. This was, of course, greatly appreciated by Zerehun. We then retired from the hotel café to Dereje's (my guide that day) car, for a more private place to hear Zerehun's music. This was done partly in the interest of simply making a better recording, but also, to be careful about who might hear it. Including the song "Kota Arama Aramna" mentioned above, he also sang for me one of the first girarsas I had ever heard live. Girarsa was initially a song sung in relation to ritual hunting (in which a young man went off alone to hunt and kill a wild animal as a rite of passage), or warfare. In each case it was a song/poetic form related to the vanquishing of one's enemies. It is now used form political purposes, expressing dissent against state powers through thinly veiled lyrics which critique the current political situation of the Oromo. It is considered by some to be a folksong style that should be considered the Oromo national literature (Tolesa 1999).[16] In Zerehun's girarsa, he expresses his exasperations in a poetic style that also mixes imagery of Oromo landscapes and

[15] A term for the current regime headed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.
[16] Girarsa will be discussed in greater depth in later chapters.

wildlife. An exact translation that also takes into account the poetic devices of the language is difficult, but the girarsa roughly states:

> Calm down O Booraa (this refers to and African Wild Buffalo)
> Till you cross the stream
> Patience O my heart
> Till the right moment arrives
> We should suffer no more
> Let's move closer
> And see what is happening
> O folks, we are loosing [forsaken]
> We're forgetting the glory of our forefathers
> A shining radiance that calls out to us
> I just don't know what to do
> I've toiled much, suffered a lot
> And lost my childhood
> I've told you not to drink Farso (a home made beer)
> Made from a red millet
> Yet you refused to do so
> Now lie down [and do nothing] and count the stars [pay the consequences]
> Colobus monkeys have no equal in tree climbing
> But are no good for hanging a beehive
> Vervet monkeys have no equal in laughter [playfulness]
> But no good for keeping a mistress
> A generous person is more than willing to give away plenty of Dadhii (honey mead)
> A stingy person yet unwilling to share Farso
> A fowl does not dig a ford
> The earth of its own land
> An enemy doesn't flinch a bit
> But only cousins and blood relations
> I wish the shops of Shagger (Finfinnee/Addis Ababa) were located
> Right across my home (are nearer to me)
> I'm glad that the sufferings of these days are not mine alone (everyone is tasting as well)
> Had it (the suffering) been limited to me alone
> It would have been sarcastic and a laughable
> Now I know how to deal with it
> Your slim and swift son knows how to handle troubles of this scale
> O dad, you should be proud of your son
> I am able to eat anything served for dinner (Oromos are selective in what they eat)

Or to stay the night without eating anything (a sign of starvation or poverty among the Oromo)
I'm doing this not because I'm ignorant of becoming an opportunistic
But 'cause of my goals and objectives (that I'm paying dear prices).[17]

The sonic make-up of these two pieces sung by Zerehun further reinforces my assertion that melody and text are often the most important aspects of an Oromo song. In "Kota Arama Aramna," a small three-note phrase rising in pitch settles on a pitch that sounds something like a tonic. This pitch acts almost like a recitation tone, in that most of the text seems to be sung on said pitch. Brief melodic excursions, often in the form of melismas, return to a tone that seems to act as the sonic root for the melodic phrases. This holds true in the girarsa Zerehun sung as well. Even though there are a great deal of pitches heard quickly in succession (a part of the more melismatic nature of melodies all throughout Ethiopia), almost every pitch has a word or syllable attached to it (which by definition would make it more syllabic than melismatic). This gives the girarsa a rushed feeling, a sense of urgency. The subject matter of the lyrics, I think, reinforces this assertion. Zerehun's dynamics do seem to add a sense of drama, and probably reflect the years of performance experience he has had. This musical aesthetic in which a root tone or pitch acts as the sort launching and returning point for fast melismatic movement can be heard in many of the solo examples in the accompanying CD to this dissertation. When listening to this solo girarsa sung by Zerehun, or indeed any of the other solo

[17] See CD track 11 "Girarsa." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.

girarsas I encountered and recorded, I can imagine it being played as a solo on *masenko* without losing any of the drama and emotion of the piece.

As Stoever-Ackerman reminds us, "sound is not merely a scientific phenomenon . . . it is also a set of social relations" (Stoever-Ackerman 2010: 61). The text of this piece highlights two very noticeable sets of social relations: those of many Oromo to the ruling elite, but also of the Oromo to a somewhat idyllic pre-*Habesha* conquest past. The use of rural imagery to root the Oromo with the "past" is one of the major ways in which Oromo musicians maintain a conceptual unity with the primarily rural identity often conceived to be authentically Oromo (Gow 2002: 56). This mechanism, of course, is nothing new. Zerehun said that even if he could sing certain songs in public safely he wouldn't, because the Woyane government and *Habesha* musicians were already taking music from the Oromo (and other regions), combining it with theirs and calling it "Ethiopian" music. He sees the beginning of what ethnomusicologists have seen many times in other areas, the selection of regional styles to create a "national" musical/cultural canon (Turino 2003:195). Zerehun, like other Oromo I would later meet, was thoroughly disapproving of Biftu Oromia, the government sponsored Oromo cultural troupe (to be discussed in the next chapter). He claimed that it was just another way for the government to keep tabs on the Oromo, under the guise of embracing multiculturalism. From what I would see in my later fieldwork, I must admit that this appears to be an assertion not entirely without grounds. And yet, many Oromo both in the diaspora and in Oromia claimed that the current government is also

imprisoning or killing Oromo musicians who openly expressed dissent. Were both occurring simultaneously? The inability of state authority to make up their minds as to where they stood on the subject of Oromo music demonstrates both an understanding of its power to mobilize Oromo masses, and an occasional attempt to use it for precisely those purposes. This is well demonstrated through the life and music of an Oromo musician from Harer, Ali.

Ali

I met with Ali[18] the day after I arrived in Dire Dawa. The bus ride was one of those grueling eleven-hour events that one hopes to never do again. I had to console myself with the fact that via this ride I saw much of the countryside and its inhabitants. I had gone with Asefa, a friend from Addis Ababa. Originally born in Harer (an hours taxi ride from Dire Dawa), Asefa still has much family there. He graciously offered to escort me and help find me some important local Oromo musicians. The first night we stayed in Dire Dawa, and the next day went of to Harer where we met with Asefa's family. This was particularly special for me because I had long heard about these folks through Yimmer (Asefa's father and my first Amharic teacher back in San Diego). We had enormous amounts of food and coffee, and then the same thing again only a few hours later. The next day we were off to the *jegol* (the old walled portion of Harer). It was a maze of narrow streets and sun parched

[18] See photograph 1.

stone walls.[19] Asefa's friend Haimanot had arranged for us to meet with Ali, a local musician who had gained special prominence during the Ethio-Somali war.

One of the most amazing things about the meeting was that it started on time. Ali had told us to come at three in the afternoon. When we cam at five minutes to, he was ready. "I am *ferenj*," he said[20]. The meeting consisted of myself, Ali, Asefa, Asefa's uncle, and Haimanot. Asefa's uncle had come because he spoke *Afaan Oromo*, which we thought Ali might be more comfortable being interviewed in. Ali was pleased that we had arrived with a healthy supply of *chat*[21], which is absolutely indispensable for almost any meeting in Ethiopia lasting an hour or more. Ali's story illustrates many of the complex ways in which Oromo identity in relation to state power in Ethiopia can and has manifested itself.

Ali was born in the Dire Dawa many years ago[22]. At age thirteen he started playing the harmonica, initially drawn to music by *Afraan Qallo*, one of the first Oromo music groups. At that time he was playing Oromo melodies that he heard from local bands, and also around the house. He and some friends would gather in the evening to play, since the daytime occupied them with school or work. Ali himself worked as a tailor as his primary means of income (from age thirteen to

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[19] See photograph 2.
[20] Asefa later explained that in calling himself *ferenj*, he was pointing to the fact that he was punctual. The term *ferenj*, besides referring to a white foreigner, also has many other largely positive connotations (punctuality, beauty, and intelligence being the major ones).
[21] The dried leaves of a plant grown all over Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Chewing on the leaves gives an amphetamine like mild stimulation much like coffee.
[22] I did not ascertain his exact age, but estimate that he is in his sixties.

eighteen). In Dire Dawa there was a relatively strong Western presence because of the Ethio-Djibouti railway, so Western instruments had long been available in this city, long before anywhere else in Ethiopia. After some years, he developed an interest in singing, and became good enough that he and his group of friends began playing shows at local functions and festivals. Around this time he started to learn accordion as well. The records of Ali Shabou, Ali Birra, and Shentem Shebisa were strong influences at the time. His youthful endeavors were to be interrupted by the Derg regime. At this time, it was very difficult to sing Oromo music, or indeed any nationalist music that came into conflict with the Derg's idea of *Etyopia Tikdem*, or "Ethiopia first." His group was dispersed mostly to Somalia. Ali himself went to Jijiga (in between Harer and the Somali border) and became a tailor full-time.

The main cause of fear towards Oromo music, more so than that of other ethnic groups, was the sheer size of the ethnic group. Understanding the power of music to unite people under one banner, or act as a messenger of clandestine information, the Derg became paranoid and took any expression of Oromo national identity in music to be "counter-revolutionary," an offence with the most severe of punishments. Tensions were especially heightened because of the Ethio-Somali war. The Oromo and the Somali are closely related (indeed one sub-groups of the Oromo is called Somali), both linguistically and culturally. The Derg feared that ethnic sensibilities would cause many Oromo to take up arms with Somalia. Somalia also made similar appeals to the ethnic sensibilities of the Oromo. One of Ali's friends was imprisoned by the Somali government, then run by Siad Barre, because he

would not accept a term which the Somali applied to the Oromo, *Somali-abo*. This term was one that appealed to the long social historical relations between the Oromo and the Somalis. Ali's friend refused this term and its implications of loyalty to Somalia, insisting that he was neither Ethiopian nor Somali, but Oromo. Because of this he was imprisoned. This illustrates one of the main difficulties of even considering yourself an Oromo during this time period. The state of your birth was suspicious of you because of your very existence, and the new state to which you flee to escape may be equally as quick to judge your loyalties based on your ethnicity. Ethiopia said that you were Ethiopian, denying the importance of your ethnic conception of self. Somalia recognized the Oromo ethnic identity, but insisted that it implied loyalty to Somalia on account of the ethnic, and often religious, similarities. This ethnic Catch-22 seemed to have a solution, when the Ethiopian government changed its policy, and proclaimed in 1977 that any Oromo would be free to practice their culture. This was a strategy to bolster support among the Oromo in Ethiopia, and also draw home the Oromo it had previously sent fleeing to Somalia. Ethiopia was to need all the soldiers it could get. It also tried, largely at the behest of national organizations like the Eritrea Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), to at least appear more democratic by officially allowing expressions of national identity.

Although keeping his musical practices strictly in private for a while, Ali was still famous enough to be called upon to participate in the newly legal music scene. A group of wealthy Oromo in Dire Dawa bought a number of instruments for him and

a number of other musicians in return for their services performing at a fund-raiser for the newly published newspaper in *Afaan Oromo*, *Barrisa*. This began a period of time in which his group went all over Oromia to tour. During this time, he met a number of other musicians from all the different Oromo areas. This was his, and most other Oromo musicians, first time encountering Oromo music from other regions. As stated earlier, Harer music was much more advanced in terms of organization, poetry, instrumentation etc. Also, because of its contact with Western culture via the Ethio-Djibouti railway, they were among the first to have and make use of Western instruments (accordion, guitar, harmonica, etc.). The Harer sound, combined with the fact that many of the earlier mentioned musicians were from Dire Dawa and Harer, gave Harer music a special place among newly modernizing musicians. This recognition was not lost on the government. Neither was the fact that much of the music being translated from traditional to popular music was quite political. Oromo music was indeed contributing to a newly found pan-Oromo consciousness.

Music via the radio was to also be a tool in bringing back Ethiopian Oromo who had fled to, and were beginning to take sides with, Somalia during the Ethio-Somali war. Whichever side the Oromo took would have the benefit of a huge amount of manpower. The song "Siamtee" translates as follows:

It is calling you out loud.
The blood and bones of your father
Your grandfather, great grandfather
And your mighty ancestors is calling you:
How could an alien, a Somali infiltrator take over your country.

Fight for your country; die for her.
Stand up for her; guard her.
Do not become a thug nor an instrument of war against your country.[23]

The difference between the sound of the melody in this song versus girarsa or some other more traditional song form is noticeable. Unlike other, more "traditional" songs I had recorded, the melody for this tune is hummable. The more declamatory and speech-like rhythms of girarsa are a stark contrast from the easily discerned downbeats of "Siamti." This is likely the result of at least a few external factors. Firstly, this music was written for mass audiences, and indeed the fame of Ali and this piece were largely the result of the radio. A catchy melody with a strict tempo is much easier to follow. While there is a small amount of melodic ornamentation in this piece, it is largely syllabic. From my experience, I have found that much Oromo music tends to prove difficult to Western ears. Yet I have also found numerous "Westerners" exposed to this music simply via their proximity to me, whistling this tune, or asking to hear it again. While this is of course subjective, and is to a large degree a matter of taste, I think this phenomenon speaks to a point in which the aesthetics of Oromo song form and style began to change as a result of their translation to Western instruments and media. Of interest to me is, or course, the fact that in Ali, we encounter an Oromo making this quite radio-friendly music not for the purposes of forwarding Oromo nationalism, but for bolstering Ethiopian nationalism in the face of a harsh war with neighboring Somalia.

[23] See CD track 6 "Siamti."

Why Ali chose to support Ethiopia rather than Somalia was never made clear to me.[24] Regardless, the Derg looked quite favorably on this tune, and immediately recognized the use these musicians might be in helping propagate pro-government ideologies. Ali continued to write music against the Somalis. Another of his songs demonstrates the link that many Ethiopians drew between the largely Islamic population of Somalia and the government of Saudi Arabia. It was believed that the Saudi's were helping to fund the Somalis (their co-religionists) in their attempt to gain control over large areas of Ethiopia.

Hey You,
You soldier of fortune
Confused, disoriented one
Unable to differentiate between
A friend and a foe
You are digging your own grave
Burying yourself deep under
Did you realize that the gun you are carrying
Is a property of the enemy and will never benefit you?
So why don't you turn it against them?

Ogaden is my eye
Jijiga is my chest
O Karamara, I will embrace you
Ye are my umbilical cord
Petro dollar of Saudi Arabia
Will never buy the land of Ethiopia
So, get up my people
Come join us our farmers.[25]

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[24] Perhaps it was partially related to the fact that the Somalis never recognized the Oromo as Oromo. As I shall discuss later, even when Somalia was allowing thousands of Oromo refugees escaping persecution, they did not register them in the refugee camps as Oromo, but as Somali (or Somali-abo), and even punished those who spoke in *Afaan Oromo*.
[25] See CD track 7 "Harer Oromo Song 2."

After the Derg had conquered the Somali forces with the aid of Russian weapons and Cuban soldiers, Ali and his group were recognized by the government as a contributing force behind their victory. As such, the group was briefly embraced by the Derg, and was even given new instruments and invited to perform all around the country to help raise funds and rehabilitate soldiers. Ali was very happy to do this job, especially since he and his friends were now salaried employees of the government, receiving a monthly stipend and a house. This was not to last. After a few months they were invited to play at a National Sports Festival in Addis Ababa, and the increasingly suspicious Derg (now led by Mengistu after the death of General Tefari Benti) confiscated their instruments and dispersed them. It is generally believed (at least according to Ali and my co-interviewers that day) that it was the death of General Tefari Benti and the ascension of Mengistu to power that accounted for the sudden change of heart regarding these musicians. Mengistu was highly suspicious of any links to the OLF. Because of this, he feared the power these musicians had when it came to communicating with and rallying the Oromo people. Any audience member who gave money to the band was imprisoned. Afraid that they would instigate an Oromo revolution, the musicians were accused of passing messages for the OLF. This illustrates something of a paradox in Oromo music; the reason it is less well known is because it is considered so powerful. It is utilized for a while, until the full extent of its power to influence and mobilize a very large portion of the population is realized, at which time it is promptly clamped down on.

After the fall of the Derg, the government of Meles Zenawi put these Oromo musicians through exactly the same process. At the point in time the OLF was still working on building the new government with the EPRDF. The OLF had taken the musicians to Djibouti for a concert.[26] The OLF and the EPRDF had a falling out, and the OLF removed itself from the new government, claiming that the EPRDF were demonstrating corrupt and ethnically biased practices under the guise of setting up a democracy. Since the musicians were in Djibouti at the request of the OLF, the Ethiopian government asked the government of Djibouti to stop airing the concert which Ali and his musicians were performing in. They were now in exile in Djibouti, not daring to come back. In 1995, the Zenawi government offered them amnesty and they returned to Harer. Ali was asked to sing at the wedding of the mayor of Harer and, as payment, was offered a job in the Culture and Sports bureau of the government. From helping and being used by a government, to being persecuted by that government, and then being offered a job in that government is, apparently, something an Oromo musician has long had to deal with.

Ali has now had to deal with constantly shifting state policy towards Oromo music and culture in Ethiopia under three regimes, two of which directly altered his life. The suspicion of Oromo music, combined with the fear of the potential power it could harness, was not enough to keep the Derg from attempting to use it, before regretting their decision. Unfortunately, many musicians suffered the consequences.

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[26] This was when the OLF was still working with the EPRDF in building the new government.

Some musicians, however, have long done their best to dissociate their music from overtly political matters. In looking at one such example, we can see not only differing attitudes towards the place of music and politics, but also ask whether complete disconnection between music and identity politics is truly possible.

Legesse Abdi

We have seen in the case of Ali how the Ethio-Somali War brought together Ethiopian national interests and Oromo music. One of the most famous Oromo musicians, Legesse Abdi[27], believes that music and politics should not mix. Being one of the most famous Oromo *masenko* players, he has been performing most of his life through three different regimes and watched the change in attitude towards Oromos and their music. Legesse Abdi, who was 74 at the time of our interview began playing as a teenager in Jida. Around age twenty Legesse went to Addis Ababa and joined the National Guard. Because he was an Oromo he was placed into the Imperial Guard as a horse rider (Oromo, especially those from the Arsi area, have a reputation for being skilled horsemen). Not especially excited about his new appointment, Legesse informed his superiors that he had "other talents" which may be made use of, referring to his instrumental and vocal skills. His skills were made use of, as he was eventually playing for the powerful leaders of military and government, even Haile Selassie himself.

[27] See photograph 7.

I first saw Legesse play at an Oromo cultural festival at the National Theatre in Addis Ababa. Knowing that previous Oromo cultural shows had famously expressed Oromo nationalist sentiments quite explicitly, I was interested in what I would find. There were numerous performances by pop-musicians (some of whom I'd met or would later meet), drama sketches, and poetry. My translator and newfound friend Daniel did his best to translate for me while everything was going on. He was the only contact I would make who was immediately comfortable enough with me to reveal his strong anti-government opinions. He explained that the cultural show I was watching would not contain any of the strong words of festivals past. Many of the attendees, he said were part of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), long considered a puppet of the ruling Tigray elites. When Legesse came up to play, everyone went wild. This frail septuagenarian used his *masenko* and thin voice to sing a song about, as Daniel put it, togetherness. This was a safe, non-political statement. "Working together" could refer to inter-Oromo or Oromo/Habesha relations.

At my home the day of our interview, Legesse told me that music is too special a thing to be mixed with politics. He was one of the few Oromo I ever heard who said that things had gotten better over time. Legesse said that he recalls playing gigs during the Selassie regime when he and his fellow Oromo musicians were introduced to Amharic audiences as "Galla musicians." Back then it was acceptable to call someone a "Galla" right to there face. Beginning in the Derg time it became less acceptable, and nowadays if someone said it to him he would punch them in the

face. I asked him whether or not he thought that his use of Oromo themes in his music could perhaps be construed as a kind of less-explicit nationalism. That even though he was not calling for revolution, his mention of Oromo places by Oromo names, references to Oromo culture (e.g. the *Gadaa* system, idealized modes of rural existence, etc.) seemed to attract nationalists to his music (which is how I first heard of him). Tewodros translated all of this to him, and he simply grinned and said something to Tewodros which was translated to me roughly as "I'll just play, that's what I do" (Abdi 4/14/10). He warmed up his *masenko* and played the following song:

> O Abichu of a different stream (a stranger?)
> Stop roaming in the vicinity of Tokke
> I can't say (do) more but wish you good-bye
> And be safe (let no thorn pock your feet)
> What did I tell you yesterday?
> I'm longing and starving for you
> Why didn't you show up?
> Is it because your parents didn't let you go out?
> Or that you've decided not see me anymore?[28]

Before the melody enters, introducing the text, Legesse plays the *masenko* in a standard way (i.e. relatively a-rhythmic, lots of melismas). A compound triple meter is established thirty-four seconds into the track. The melody is also established. After Legesse's voice enters, the pitch of the open string is bowed in between the sung phrases of text (seemingly in order to maintain the rhythmic pulse). Throughout the rest of the piece the relationship between the *masenko* and voice is either this bowing of the fundamental tone in between phrases, or a nearly

[28] See CD track 13 "Legesse Abdi-Song" and video "Legesse Abdi."

exact duplication of the vocal line on the *masenko*, resulting in a kind of monophony. Other than the fact that the words were in Afaan Oromo, it sounded very much like *masenko* music I had heard performed by Amharic players.

The above translation was provided to me months after I had returned. At the time, I was just told that I was hearing a "pastoral song." I wonder why this particular song was chosen for me. Since I am aware of the heavy use of double-meanings embedded in Oromo song texts, I wonder what deeper meaning this piece might have. As I watched Legesse, carrying his *masenko* in a ragged old gunnysack in the heavy rain that was coming down that day, I was forced to think of all my encounters with Oromo musicians I had encountered the previous eight months. With each one I was frustrated by the answers that were either too general or too evasive to be of much insight. I constantly thought back to an Oromo who worked in a government office who said that even if people want to tell me everything about Oromo music, especially in relation to Oromo nationalism, fear would prevent them. I was clearly not the only frustrated one. I can only imagine what it must be like to be forced to be suspicious of everyone, not knowing their true motives. The attempt to cap these negative emotions, and the frustrations at having to do so, was quite apparent all throughout Ethiopia. The tension was palpable, and it was only with Asefa and Tewodros that I could discuss it openly. Nationalism and politics were subjects I rarely discussed openly with any Oromo, and I only did so after Oromo offered an opinion on it unprovoked. It gradually became apparent, however, that the inter-ethnic tension was responsible for the high degree of distrust and

animosity. Nationalist sentiment, whether I was there to study it or not, would play a very large role in shaping my experiences in Ethiopia.

Conclusions

Music continues to be one of the most effective ways to build and maintain social solidarity. This is especially true in oral societies, a term still applicable to the majority of people in Oromia today. As Folklorist Richard M. Dorson has asked "How do you get at the records of those who leave no records?" (Dorson 1972: 239). Music is a particularly useful avenue to approach, if not historical records per se, the historicity of the Oromo. Songs, especially among the Arsi, are a part of the activity of everyday life, from preparing meals, to wedding ceremonies, to the *gadaa* ceremony. Although the historical accuracy of the content of songs is always going to be called into question more than a written text might be, the very ephemeral nature of music itself has been something of an advantage to people who would invest so much of their personal and social identity in its practice. It is easily carried anywhere, easily remembered, and not able to be destroyed in the way written records or other physical cultural artifacts might be.

The destruction of cultural practices is unfortunately something that many Oromo have experienced first-hand. Much of the answer as to how the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, have come to occupy a subordinate social role can be found in history and the politics of political expansion. From their earliest appearances on the pages of chroniclers by northern *Habeshas* and European

missionaries/explorers, the Oromo were placed outside of civilization (which in this case was a long established Christian, Amharic speaking power). They were pagan, uncivilized, barbarian, etc. They lacked the advantage of a common religion with the Europeans that the *Habeshas* had, a commonality that would later prove useful for the *Habeshas* who were armed financially and military to undertake their own expansionist desires with the blessing of the Europeans during the days of the "Scramble for Africa." In Ethiopia, this scramble allowed Menelik II to double the size of his empire, occupying all the lands to the south as far as Kenya, and making Oromos "Ethiopians."

And yet, as I have demonstrated, the relationship between Oromo and the Ethiopian state has not been purely antagonistic. In the case of Ali, we saw how a newly installed government, eager to gain the favor and support of the Oromo masses, used Oromo music to bolster Ethiopian nationalism during the Ethio-Somali war. Initially supportive of Ethiopia's many ethnic groups, in terms of self-expression, the Derg only later re-evaluated its stance, arguing that ethnic nationalism was counter to the spirit of the revolution in which class, not ethnic identity, was the primary concern. This same process was repeated under the transitional government and the government of Meles Zenawi. There was a period in which musicians were courted to write songs for the new power, a power that would soon change its tune and not as easily suffer any critical dissent by musicians.

The case of Zerehun Wedejo demonstrates how song lyrics with even a hint of dissent can land the singer in dire trouble (something to come up many more

times in this dissertation). Zerehun was lucky to only be imprisoned for a few months, while others were killed or disappeared. The use of lyrics with double meanings, and girarsa, has long been a weapon used by Oromo to express political and social dissent. The Oromo cultural show of 1977 was one of the specific moments where the Derg clearly regretted its decision to allow the show to go forward. It was also a major moment in the development of Oromo music and Oromo nationalism. It was the first time Oromo from a number of different areas came together for the purposes of presenting, while simultaneously exploring, a pan-Oromo identity. Oromo who had never heard the music of other Oromo were now exposed to it, able to be inspired by and explore the many differences and similarities.

In the cases of both Ali and Zerehun, I have shown that fear of the potential of Oromo musicians to mass support for Oromo nationalist sentiment is something that successive governments have had to confront. The main source of this fear is related to the sheer numbers of Oromo speaking people within Ethiopia. The more these Oromo come to see themselves as one social unit, the greater the potential for a shift in political power. In the case of the Derg, and later the Zenawi regime, there was a brief period in between the collapse of one regime and the rise of another, when it seemed that the Oromo were finally going to be included in the halls of power, and have their culture finally legitimated and recognized. Because of this, much political music was written in these years, which saw a brief flowering of

Oromo political and cultural critique through the performative practice of music.[29] And yet the ruling elite could only seem to allow or utilize this for brief periods of time. On the whole, there still seems to be great suspicion of Oromo music and musicians. This, combined with the adoption of the system of "ethnic federalism," means that in many ways, merely to be Oromo is in some ways unavoidably political.

Not all Oromo have incorporated nationalist or political sentiments in their music. In part this is probably due to the possibility of physical violence if discovered, but also, in the case of Leggesse Abdi, some consider music to pure and special a thing to be sullied with an association with such a thing as politics. Yet even in singing in *Afaan Oromo*, for working Oromo, in an Oromo performance aesthetic, a certain degree of cultural nationalism is inherent in the musical performances of any Oromo, whether they consider themselves nationalist or not. In addition, the fact that every Oromo said that I must speak with Legesse brings up another issue concerning who I interviewed and why. Legesse is famous enough that even my Amharic friends expressed excitement on my behalf at our meeting. Folklorist Richard M. Dorson says that oral history often simply copies the formulas of elite documentary history in that "The big shots are interviewed" (Dorson 1972: 241). Except for a few brief excursions into rural areas, most of the people I interviewed were already relatively famous and respected as musicians, and all of them were male. The interviews are thus in no way meant to be a complete

[29] Later in the dissertation I will introduce a musician who wrote during the transitionary years between the Derg and Zenawi's Prime Minister-ship.

perspective of Oromo music. They do, however, offer an insightful angle through which to explore Oromo censorship, ethnic identity, and power relations in Ethiopia.

When it comes to the history of the Oromo, and to what degree it constitutes a certain level of sameness between various Afaan Oromo speaking groups then question must be asked: "Who does the defining?" (Stokes in Stokes ed. 1994: 11). Ethnicity is, after all, a form of classification. And in a country like Ethiopia that has gone so far in using ethnic classification to structure the physical boundaries of states and the distribution of resources, who does the defining and how it is done makes the question of what Oromo music does arguably more important that what it represents. This holds true not only for the influence of various external forces that shape Oromo identity (state authority, ruling elite), but also internal forces (different religions, regional customs, gendered notions of power). "Who can be paid (and trusted) to do the spade work of modifying instruments, training musicians, creating archives and repertoires?" and "Why should music be worth this trouble to the modernizing state?" (ibid.) will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4
Traditional Music

"Now this should be a lesson,
if you plan to start a folk group,
don't go mixin' politics,
with the folk songs of our land.
Just work on harmony and diction,
Play your banjo well,
And if you have political convictions,
Keep 'em to yourself."

--Johnny Cash *The one on the right is on the left.*

Although it had been a difficult day, I was in a relatively good mood, still very much excited at undertaking my first trip out to the rural areas to do some fieldwork. My guides and I went to a rooftop restaurant in one of the larger buildings in the town of Shashemane (about halfway between Addis Ababa and the Kenyan border). I was very pleased upon arriving to see to government workers I knew already sitting at the table. They were in town for just a couple of days on some assignment. The combination of the cool breeze, the smell of the roasted meat and fresh *injera* we were about to enjoy, and the delightful laughter of one of my colleagues in particular, made for a refreshingly relaxed atmosphere. For the first half-hour or so of the dinner, it had everything an Ethiopian dinner should have. After a conversational turn down a topic of some sensitivity, however, the tone became much more hushed.

I asked when I was going to meet Biftu again. I had only met and recorded them once, and was keen to interview the members individually, possibly even learn

some of their repertoire. I had waited outside their rehearsal space for days hoping to see them again, and had been trying to contact those I was then dinning with for a few weeks. I had so many questions. “Even if they (the members of Biftu) want to answer all your questions, they never will” said one of the government workers. “They are a government sponsored group, so they will never say anything against the government. Not because they don’t want to, but because they dare not.” My companions that night went on for over an hour about how because of unresolved hostilities between Oromo and the government, almost all the Oromo I spoke with would refrain from truly speaking their minds. They would do this not to be rude, but as an exercise in self-preservation. Everyone it seemed, from members of the government, to the general public, would be continuously scrutinizing my intentions.

The current government is too wary of Oromo music and its potential to incite nationalism. As such, suspicion would be the least I should expect. I had long wanted to distance myself from government and university offices, hoping to strike out on my own in Addis at the very least and get an idea of the Oromo music scene in the capital. I soon found out that Oromo music clubs and establishments were not legal. While I knew there was an official position of multiculturalism and freedom of speech, I was coming to understand the “unofficial” side of things. I thus had to wonder about the presence of a government employee with me on all my rural trips. How would this effect the music, and the interaction between villagers and myself? How is it possible to approach “traditional” music or even culture with so much mutual distrust and fear? What follows in this chapter will demonstrate the dialogic

relationship between Oromo perceptions of roots (both musical and social), and the polyvocality of Oromo identity in the present.

The slow disappearance of traditional lifestyles, with increasing urbanization and modernization, has created a dialogic space in which music serves as a critical space for competing notions of modernity, authenticity, and identity. Maintaining continuities with a rural or idyllic past (in this case that of a pre-Amharization Oromo culture) has compelled many Oromo to search for an authentically Oromo identity in the past, though always thinking of the future. Indeed "tradition and modernity may coexist, mingle, and blend in a variety of forms and meanings" (Romero 2001: 138). The place of "traditional" music in rural, urban, and festival contexts can well illustrate this negotiation of social meaning in praxis. This chapter will endeavor to critically analyze both the symptoms and the consequences of these performative practices.

As a nation-state shaped by ethnic federalism (established in 1995) Ethiopia has gone further than almost any state in the world "in using ethnicity as its fundamental organizing principle" (Turton in Turton ed. 2006:1). As such, the boundaries and classifications of ethnicity are of interest not only to the Oromo, but also to the Ethiopian state.[30] I have demonstrated in the previous chapter that both the Selassie and the Derg regimes have had the loyalties of the Oromo as a major concern. During the Selassie years, strict programs of Amharization were implemented. These include the use of the Amharic language in school, in courts of

[30] See Map 2.

law, and the use Orthodox Christian culture as THE culture of Ethiopia. This marginalization of Ethiopia's many ethnic groups was part of why the transitional and Zenawi governments chose to implement these policies, so as to allow greater regional autonomy for each ethnic group. This has created a host of problems, since defining an "ethnic" group can be a notoriously difficult task. Though it was hoped this system would help to ameliorate inter-ethnic tension, the results have been largely to reinforce these tensions (Fiseha in Turton ed. 2006: 131).

There is an Oromo regional state, and this state does receive federal funding for cultural affairs, in the form of the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau (OCTB). While constitutional rhetoric would seem to indicate a genuine interest in multiculturalism, in practice the current government seems to still be treating Oromo music and culture with a very strong skepticism. Many of the Oromo I met with and interviewed claimed that the preservation of Oromo culture by the government was selective, and done largely to keep an eye on it. I will use my experiences with a government sponsored Oromo cultural performance group, Biftu Oromia, to demonstrate these claims. Whether or not Biftu Oromia is an authentic representation of Oromo culture is of concern to many Oromo and the government. Throughout this chapter my interest in authenticity will not be to establish what authenticity is, but rather "'who needs authenticity and why?' and 'how has authenticity been used'?" (Bendix 1997: 21).

My experiences of music in rural areas showed me how important the past was to people in villages far from the direct oversight of the government (though

not entirely removed). In one rural community, the music type that the villagers elected to show me recalled the days when cattle were a more significant part of their economy. As it was told to me, only the elders knew this music, and it was sung now as an exercise in memory, as well as an expression of sorrow at a disappearing way of life as the young went into larger cities for their work and future. Yet another experience showed me the large hand the government had taken in the preservation of Oromo culture, in the form of a youth performance group who were taught the songs and dances of their own culture by the government. Considering the antagonistic relationship between the Oromo and the last two governments, I was surprised and pleased to find such a seemingly genuine interest in the future of a culture previously targeted for extermination by those in power. And yet it became increasingly clear that preservation for preservation's sake was not the only interest that manifested itself in these cultural projects. Brave Oromo in the capital city, as well as many in the diaspora, expressed extreme skepticism and even hostility at the governments attempt to extend its reach into "traditional" culture. I will demonstrate the changes to Oromo music made by or as a result of this government intervention. Is this just another way for the government to control the terms of Oromo definition? As Stokes has asked, "Who does the defining? Who can be paid (and trusted) to do the spade work of modifying instruments, training musicians, creating archives and repertoires?" (Stokes ed. 1994: 11). Then again, are Oromo notions of "traditional" culture and identity any less complicated, or without an agenda?

Through my experience at the largest Oromo festival, Erecha, I will also be able to approach the terms in which various Oromo ethnic groups are defining themselves. Erecha is a seasonal holiday celebrating the end of the rainy season, and is closely linked with the traditional Oromo calendar, and the indigenous religion *Waqafetna*. Ritual places for this celebration include near particular sacred mountains, rivers or bodies of water (Haile 2009: 76). Banned under the Selassie regime, it was only re-allowed under the current regime of Meles Zenawi. Only a very few people in attendance, therefore, knew exactly what the festival was like before the long hiatus, in which much may have changed or been forgotten. The theme of "remembering" traditional values is central to the Oromo in this festival, not only locally, but internationally in the diaspora as well. The theme of Oromo unity across all religious, political and local boundaries is central to this festival. As has been shown in other anthropological texts on festive/cultural performance, that was once rooted in a traditional religion, has now taken on multiple meanings which oscillate between "ethnic solidarity, political resistance, national identity, and even commercial spectacle" (Guss 2000: 9). This is certainly the case with Erecha, and the reflexive nature of many of the proceedings act to persuade the participants to debate, negotiate and challenge ideas about their Oromo identity. As Guss has stated, it is a challenge for anthropologists to "discover new strategies with which to present the increasing collision between the local, the national, and the global, between many forms of cultural difference that now see to converge at every point" (ibid., 3). Guss suggests festival behavior as a way to approach these transformed

cultural landscapes, and it is through this lens that I will analyze Erecha. It was at Erecha that I first saw the Biftu Oromia performance group. Though they supposedly performed "traditional" music, it was only in their presence that I ever saw an instrumental group performing together on instruments I had always thought were Amharic. Biftu's use of these instruments will come up later in this chapter, but a brief overview of organology and genre typology will help establish the changing dynamic of Oromo musical performance as it is taken out of its original context.

Instruments/Organology

Melody is of primary importance in Oromo music across the traditional/popular spectrum. The most common instrument, therefore, is the voice. Vocal lines are nearly always pentatonic, highly melismatic, and their rhythm is largely dictated by the text or poetry of the song. This is not unlike the vocal sounds of other Ethiopian ethnic groups. The primary difference is, of course, the language being used, Afaan Oromo. Another prominent feature of Oromo vocalization is a deep sub-glottal growl used for rhythmic emphasis at certain points in the song/piece. This kind of rhythmic exhale is not unknown in Amharic or Tigray music. The Oromo growl, however, is much more forceful, gravel-y, and widely used.[31]

[31] See CD track 4 "Arsi Oromo 4" for an example. It will be heard in many examples, but in this one it takes a more prominent role. It is known by many different names.

The growl is in many ways a distinct Oromo sound.[32] As I stated, rhythmic exhalation is done in a similar manner in other Ethiopian musics, but the Oromo version sounds much more like an attempt at a lion growl. My Amharic teacher in Addis Ababa (I was continuing with my Amharic while learning Afaan Oromo as well) told me that indeed the Oromo growl came from the sound of a lion. "Where the Oromo live, there used to be many lions, so the sound is mimicked in the music. The Amharas and northern peoples lived in the highlands, where lions are rarely if ever seen. Because of that, the Oromo are really related more to the lion." He told me this after I had shown him the video of my fieldwork outside Shashemane,[33] after which I remarked how many different bird and animal sounds were being made by the male performers. "Oh yes," said my teacher "the Oromo are very close to nature." This idea of a closer link to nature can be seen often in both anti-Oromo histories (where it is used to identify them as primitive) and Oromo nationalist discourse (where it is used to bolster the temperate, balanced, idyllic image of Oromo past).

I was extremely surprised to find that certain instruments were used, since I had understood them to be Amharic instruments. What I found was conflicting claims as to their ethnic heritage and origin. I will not spend too much time on description of the instruments, because I only ever found them in the context of Oromo traditional music when the performers were part of a folkloric group

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I only know the Harer region's name for it, gomorsa. Since most of my recordings are from the Arsi region, I will just call it the growl.

[32] This is true in Ethiopia at least. The growl is very reminiscent of the growls that can be heard in South African mbaqanga music.

[33] See "Langanicha" video.

sponsored by the government. In my trips to rural areas, I never saw any of these instruments used.

Other instruments used include the *washint, krar, masenko,* and *kebero*. The *washint*[34] is an end-blown aereophone, typically made of bamboo and ranging from 40 to 60 centimeters in length (Powne 1968: 26). Depending on the length and position of the holes, the timbre and register between two different *washint* can be quite distinct. Accordingly, these flutes are traditionally solo instruments, considered shepherds instruments, as they were easy to make and take anywhere to while away the hours. Although a melodic instrument, listening briefly to a *washint* will give an immediate insight as to the nature of melody in instrumental and vocal instrumental music. The sequence of melodic phrases consists of fast mellismas, usually starting on a high pitch and descending. This aesthetic is changed when the instrument is placed in a group setting (as in the case of a folkloric group to be explored later). In this case, it usually doubles a melody played by a *masenko*, or sung, or both. This means that instruments for such a group context must be built so as to match each other in pitch range and tuning. Stringed instruments can easily adjust to a reasonably wide range of fundamental pitches, but aereophones must be cut at a certain length, and finger holes bored in certain places so as to achieve its pitches.

[34] See photograph 8.

The *krar*[35] is a five or six stringed harp or lyre, typically considered the secular cousin of the sacred ten string *begana*[36]. Sometimes know as the "Devil's harp," the *krar* is also associated primarily with Amharic traditions (Kebede 1977). It is tuned to a pentatonic scale and, like all other instruments throughout Ethiopia, it typically considered a solo instrument to accompany singing by the performer.

The *masenko*[37] is a single-stringed bowed fiddle. One of the most famous Oromo musicians today, Legesse Abdi, plays the *masenko*. While I had always heard and read about the instrument in association with Amharic music (Kebede 1977, Powne 1968), Legesse suggested that it was originally Oromo. Weather or not he was correct, the logic he used to stake this claim was straightforward. The string of the *masenko* is actually a number of hairs from a horse-tail. The Oromo (the Arsi in particular) have long been considered to be natural horsemen, their warriors long having used horses in battle. (Legesse Abdi interview 2010). It does make sense that an instrument whose sound is drawn from horsehair would come from a culture in which horses played a central social role. Just like the *washint*, the *masenko* melodies are typically fast and mellismatic. The tuning is entirely dependant on the player, since the string is usually tuned to fit his vocal range. In the context of a singer/player, the piece will typically alternate between sections of fast descending

[35] See photograph 9.
[36] An instrument used in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.
[37] See photograph 10.

mellismas on the *masenko*, and sections where a single note drone is played while the singer sings.[38]

In traditional rural contexts, as in many places throughout Africa, there is no strict distinction between audience and performer. In these contexts, the physical layout of the dancing, as well as the singing, largely follows a strict gender division. Of everyone participating, dancing is either done in two rows (with males facing females) or in a circle (with men in the center surrounded by women). Besides being immediately physically apparent, the division of gender is also audible. While in some contexts both men and women sing, it is almost never at the same time. Rather, they alternate back and forth. Alternatively to alternation of melodic parts, the females often sing all of the primary melody, with the males occasionally interjecting with sounds mimicking local wildlife, or a short rhythmic break in which stomping and clapping by the men is done in conjunction with the growl.[39]

Genres

An outline of the different varieties of songs among the Oromo can never truly be complete. So ingrained into everyday life are songs and music that it might be more prudent to try and discover aspects of life or culture for which there are no songs. While there are songs and music for most occasions, as one would expect in almost any culture, certain types are thought of as distinct. Being that the Oromo

[38] See video "Legesse Abdi" and CD track 13 "Legesse Abdi-Song."
[39] Examples to be given later in the chapter.

were, until quite recently, an oral society, music played a very large role in the transmission of history and value in their oral literature. General song-types include:

1.) Sirba jaalalaa – love songs
2.) Faaruu amamtii – religious/spiritual songs
3.) Sirba da'umsan – birth songs
4.) Booi'cha – death songs
5.) Sirba Ayyana waggaa – songs about seasonal changes
6.) Sirba siyaasaa – political songs
7.) Sirba loonii – cattle songs
8.) Sirba Hojii – work songs
9.) Sirba cidhaa – marriage songs
10.)Sirba gadaa – gadaa songs
11.)Sirboota daa'immanii – children's songs

These categories are by no means exhaustive, and subdivisions exist within each of them. Indeed, this was part of the reason it was so exhaustive trying to ascertain all or even most of the contexts for which music was important in Oromo cultures. With the existence of so many different Oromo ethnic groups, the most common information anyone gave me was that it is such a vast topic. It is easy to get lost in the vastness of Oromo music. Nevertheless, I have tried to focus on Oromo music within specific contexts and using specific examples which will allow a discussion of general Oromo song-types and aesthetics. I will begin by discussing rural music, as it is heralded by all Oromo to be the repository if Oromo musical and cultural authenticity. As I shall demonstrate, and as it is usually expected by ethnomusicologists by now, this authenticity is problematic, and the elevation of it to such a pure and high status can be an obstacle in its dissemination and reception. This information was given to me by Dereje, who on two or three occasions met

with me to give me pages of hand written notes on the subject. The way in which the wide variety of Oromo song types was shared with me reminded me of talking with the Ethiopians at home and abroad about the many different cultures and ethnic groups in the country. I could never be sure of the reason(s) behind the claims of the vastness of Oromo music and culture. Perhaps it was a cover for lack of knowledge. Or perhaps it was a mechanism from keeping the foreign researcher from getting too close to a subject that he oughtn't. It was always the same when talking with Ethiopian musicians, who would talk endlessly about the multiplicity of rhythms and melodies before ever showing me even one. As one might expect, the significance of these songs becomes diminished, and their chances for being forgotten, increase as traditional lifestyles disappear.

Some comparison between musics in their traditional rural context, government folkloric groups, and more Westernized pop-music will demonstrate both the sonic and the ideological changes which have come about as the music moves from its local home to the national and international stage. In each of these contexts, relationships between music and the powers of government, economic market, and political ideology demonstrate a complex polyvocal relationship that occurs through the dialogic processes of music.

One such example of this polyvocality is the festival of Erecha. Arguably the most important festival day in the Oromo calendar, the history of this event and its practice today can demonstrate how *Oromumma* operates on a performative level. For David M. Guss, festival behavior is a good vehicle through which to approach

transformed cultural landscapes (Guss 2000). Rather than focus solely on what the "original" meaning of Erecha was, I will demonstrate the polyvocality inherent in this ancient cultural tradition that was only re-legalized in the 1990s under the Zenawi regime after almost fifty years of being illegal under Selassie and the Derg. Rather than being threatened by modernity, the increasing urbanization of the Oromo population and its use of new technologies in the performance and documentation of the festival, demonstrate the recognition of power in such acts of performance. As Guss states;

> "The same form, therefore, may be used to articulate a number of different ideas and over time can easily oscillate between religious devotion, ethnic solidarity, political resistance, national identity, and even commercial spectacle" (ibid., 9).

We shall see how all of these meanings are manifest at Erecha. How this festival is represented, and what it represents shows that Erecha, not just a cultural relic of a past long destroyed, responds critically to contemporary historical and social realities.

Erecha

Erecha is a seasonal Oromo celebration, the biggest of the year. It celebrates the end of the rainy season, thus a different phase in the harvest season, and also the time when water levels in rivers lowers, something which in many areas can still keep certain communities and families apart. Oromo of all religions can be found celebrating, although the ritual prayer and throwing of grass into a body of water (usually lake or large river) has its roots in the traditional Oromo animist religion of

Waqafetna. Some Christians and Muslims have problems with certain rituals during the festival, but as Waqafetna (the traditional religion) is considered monotheistic, most simply consider the festival more in cultural terms or see no inherent contradiction in the arguably syncretic cultural/religious practice. It is a tradition that was made illegal by Haile Selassie and remained illegal up until the installation of the current government. What does it mean to Oromo today to be a part of this celebration, and what role does music play in it?

It was the fourth of October 2009 that I caught an early morning bus ride to the celebration of Erecha. Celebrated all over, I was fortunate enough to be heading to the largest gathering outside the town of Debre Zeit (called Bishoftu by the Oromo, it is one of the many towns whose name was changed from an Oromo to an Amharic one). I went with Simbo, a friendly and enthusiastic Oromo who worked at a restaurant near my home in Addis Ababa. Before speaking with him, I didn't even know of the existence of Erecha. I never encountered the festival in any of the literature I had read in the U.S., though it is featured in some of the literature I acquired at the OCTB. Posters of the festival hang all over the OCTB office, and though people initially expressed shock at my not having heard of Erecha, they often quickly realized that as a non-Amharic festival that had been banned for almost fifty years, that this shouldn't be a surprise. After returning to the U.S. and getting back in contact with the Oromo community in Minneapolis (especially the OSA), I have come to realize that all throughout the diaspora, from Minneapolis, to Melbourne, to Oslo, Erecha is central to the festival calendar for Oromo of all ethnic and religious

backgrounds. No matter that the aisle of our bus was small, or that the whole bus would sway quite a lot above the uneven dirt roads, it made a sufficient platform for those who chose to dance on the way to the festival of Erecha. It was early in the morning, but my recent acquaintance and guide Simbo was already participating enthusiastically in the singing or Oromo songs from every region. We were in for a one hour bus ride from Addis Ababa to Debre Zeit, or as the Oromo would say, from Finfinnee to Bishoftu. The Oromo I met were always quick to point out the "real" name of a place, before it was changed by the "imperialist Habeshas." Our cited destination was a festival in which people from all Oromo nations would meet to celebrate the change in seasons. It would take place by a very special tree, called *Odaa,* which is one of the major spiritual sights to those with an eye on Oromo tradition. As it turned out that day, over two million people were gathered to take part in this tradition.

My excitement was interrupted by a rather disconcerting encounter we had upon arrival at the town near the festival grounds. Our bus was stopped by some soldiers, and there was a noticeable tension between the soldiers and the passengers. Simbo and Benti (an Addis Ababa University student we met on the trip who became a co-guide) were angry because they said that the soldiers told them no automobiles were allowed past that point, which was a good mile and a half or so from the grounds. Strangely, we continued to see some cars get through. Simbo and Benti said that the soldiers were obviously just stopping buses loaded with Oromo because the long walk from that point to the lake discourages the elderly and very

young from attending. I wondered how this could happen. After all the ceremony was recently legalized, so what would be the point of continually discouraging Oromo to participate? Indeed the whole day was something of a microcosm of my experience in Ethiopia, in which the government claims of multicuturalism and the Oromo claims of ethnic bias, persecution, and lack of freedom of speech, both appeared to have some basis in fact. Large groups of Oromo in different types of dress could often be seen running by the rest of us singing and chanting the whole way.[40] These images were exactly like those hanging in frames on the walls of the OCTB, yet could be found almost nowhere else. And why, if there is an Oromo Culture and Tourism Bureau, were there never any mention of Oromo cultural celebrations either in tourist guides, local performance venues, or national publications? With the millions (literally) of people who were there, how was it that this festival was not only devoid of tourists (I saw one other *ferenj* there that day), but completely unknown to me, who had been studying Oromo music and culture for almost five years at that point? It seemed to me there were more fruitful questions to keep in my mind from that point on.

To what extent is the subaltern status of the Oromo a consequence of active discrimination/censorship? Has the anti-Oromo rhetoric of the twentieth century taken such hold in Ethiopian culture (especially among the ruling elites), that it was now naturalized, and invisible to those whom it did not effect? In her book "*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,"* bell hooks asserted "To be in the margin is to be

[40] See photograph 11.

part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks 1984: xi). This notion of the margin and the center is illustrated by a set of railroad tracks in her childhood home in Kentucky. This was both a literal and a metaphorical symbol of the divide between black and white in the rural south. It was this divide that created a worldview entirely unique to those on the wrong side of the tracks.

> "The sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view- a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors…"(ibid.).

This example of the white privilege in the United States, and the inability of most whites to see it, is comparable to the situation in Ethiopia (where *Habesha* privilege is undoubtedly a fact of life). True the ruling elites of Ethiopia might not any longer be forcing the Oromo to become serfs, forbidding them to speak there language, or moving into Oromo areas and killing large throngs of people (though they are accused by some Oromo of still doing the latter). However, the Amharization projects of Menelik II and Haile Selassie, combined with the equation of the Amharic speaking, Christian parts of society as "Ethiopian," means that the Oromo do still indeed exist on the margins of society. On this festival day, in the midst of millions on the margins, I began to more clearly see the interplays of these different world-views.

The massive throng of people seemed to get larger as we all converged onto a smaller road that lead to the event grounds near *Hora Arsadii* (*hora* is the *Afaan Oromo* word for lake, *Arsadii* is the name of that specific lake). *Hora Arsadii* is one of the eight "Lakes of God" in Oromo tradition (Haile 2009: 87). We arrived at the end

of the road facing a hillside stage already busy with music and dance performance. In between the stage and us were Oromo, in the tens of thousands.[41] It became clear I needed to get to the stage, which would require quite a feat. Simbo grabbed my hand and took the more direct approach to the stage, pushing us to the front. An important part of the soundscape for those eight to ten minutes was the word *ferenj* coupled with the upward vocal inflection indicative of a question. That and the occasional "Welcome!" in English made me feel equally welcome and othered. As we finally neared the front, we were stopped by military police. Simbo and Benti were adamant that I was affiliated with Addis Ababa University (a half-truth at the time since I lacked the official paperwork to back this claim), and that I was researching music. The guards let the three of us through and we ascended the hill to the level on which the performers and press were found. Depending on the direction I looked I could see performers, elders, the lake, or thousands of people crushed against each other to hear the music. Simbo and Benti were both smiling, happy to be so near what they called "the real Oromo music."

This "real" Oromo music was being performed by a group of young men and women who I would later come to know as Biftu Oromia[42], a government sponsored music and dance group dedicated to "traditional" Oromo music. I will discuss Biftu more thoroughly later in the chapter, in which I recount our first and last intimate meeting. They had at least one song and dance for each region, each one requiring a

[41] See photograph 12.
[42] See photograph 13.

costume change for the men and the women. The first performance for which I was fully prepared to record was a piece from the Arsi region.[43] Though I was unaware of this at the time, Arsi would be the region in which I spent the most time with rural musicians. Each song was well choreographed, displaying both the similarities and differences between the movements common to the many regions of Oromia. The music was provided by a band[44] consisting of *washint, krar, masenko*, and a set of drums that looked like a Western drum-kit, but upon closer inspection was clearly not. It was only in the folkloric performance tradition that I encountered this multi-drum kit. It provided a strong, monorhythmic pulse largely implied by melody in rural folk musics (occasionally strengthened by stomps and claps). This strong pulse would alternate between a duple and a triple meter in most songs. The alternation between sections with different rhythmic feels is something very common across the entire spectrum of Oromo music, though achieved in different ways.

I found it odd that Biftu was a government sponsored/organized group. On the one hand, this fact fit in well with the re-legalization of the festival by the Zenawi regime. It seemed that things were to some degree getting better, and that the government's embrace of multiculturalism wasn't completely hollow. All around the stage were Oromo flags, *odaa* tree drawings, and other nationalist sentiments. A decidedly nationalist speech (to be discussed later) was given by one of the great spiritual leaders of the traditional Oromo religion. It seemed some modicum of self-

[43] See CD track 8 "Erecha track 9" and video "Erecha-Biftu."
[44] See photograph 14.

determination had been achieved. If this was true, it seems to belie the claims by Oromo nationalists that the government despises and wishes to eliminate any expression of Oromo culture. And yet, I thought about the soldiers who stopped our bus and made all the festival-goers walk. The continual warnings I got from Oromo with whom I talked for a while, discussing my project, gave me some insight in to the deep and sometimes hostile waves of distrust flowing just underneath Oromo/government relations.

After the folkloric groups performed, a band consisting of more Western instruments (guitar, bass, keyboards, etc.) backed up a number of more popular music acts. The tradition of audience members coming up to the performer to his them on the cheek, dance next to them, or give them money proved to be a bit of a hassle for the military police who were the guards and bouncers at the event. At one point the number of people surrounding a male singer, Jambo Jolte incited such frustration that the guards began swinging their clubs at people. I couldn't be sure if this was the result of frustration that so many people were trying to occupy the same space, or if the song itself was a bit too nationalist for their tastes. Neither would have surprised me, but a picture shot by Simbo gave me an idea.[45]

In between two of the performances there was a very impassioned speech by the Abba Gadda, or spiritual leader of the Oromo in traditionalist terms (though Oromo of all religions hold him in high regard). Although I got only the roughest of translations in the moment of delivery, I could get the gist of it through sheer force

[45] See photograph 15.

of expression. I could tell it was highly culturally nationalistic at the very least, on account of the pumping of clenched fists, and the icons draped on the traditional clothing of both the speaker and his consort. I later received a more thorough translation, and was proven correct. Though a great deal of it is general, the nationalist undertones and the Oromo centered history referred to shows how important Oromo unity is.[46] He implores people to not let their culture be replaced by "aliens" and not "take foreign names." The references to *ferenjis* is particularly interesting. At once help is sought from them because they are educated, while a reminder is also issues that "we are better than the *ferenjis*." "If we believe in ourselves, if we can have self-respect, if we are able to educate ourselves, if we uphold our culture, we are the *ferenji*."[47] It is interesting here that a long list of things that are synonymous with the good, are synonymous with the *ferenji*. This is largely true all over Ethiopia. Probably much to the chagrin of black nationalists the world over, calling someone a *ferenj* can be taken as meaning punctual, educated, or even beautiful. Initially astonished when I heard this from Simbo, it was later expounded upon many times in conversation with other close friends such as Asefa and Tewodros. In the speech by Abba Gadaa, such a reference to the *ferenjis* was certainly not what I had expected when first listening to the speech and recognizing the term. I assumed they were being condemned. After his speech the band started to play again, but a large throng of people begin to migrate down the hill towards

[46] See translation in appendix.
[47] See translation in appendix.

the lake. Simbo, Benti and I followed. The place where everyone was headed was to the lakeshore, where the most sacred and traditional aspect of the festival, or the root origins attributed to it at least, were taking place.

We then made our way down a dirt road to the shore of the lake. Through readings (De Salvac 1901, Haile 2009) and discussion I had ascertained that the *Odaa* tree, under which the more traditional side of the gathering was to take place, was a sacred site not unlike Mecca for Muslims. What was especially interesting was that this festival was originally part of the traditional animist religion of *Waqafetna,* but it has become a site in which every outside religion (which most of the population belongs to) now takes part in a syncretic way to show support for unity of the ethnic group as a whole. Practitioners of the traditional religion are indeed present underneath the Odaa tree, performing some kind of trance ceremony[48], but are by far a minority presence. I was fascinated by the performance and wanted to stay longer, but it did not seem to be of as much interest to my guides that day. This seemed odd to me because there was quite a large crowd surrounding them (I have since been told by Oromo to whom I've shown the video that such traditional ritual practices are as much a curiosity to most Oromo these days as it would have been to me). But Simbo and Benti insisted that I see the primary ritual of Erecha.[49] A prayer

[48] See video "Erecha-Odaa."
[49] See photograph 16.

of thanksgiving to God is given while taking a bunch of grass to the shore or the lake, dunking it in and shaking the water on oneself.[50]

Besides the performances on stage, there is music occurring all over Erecha. During the walk to the grounds large groups of men could be seen marching and singing, a sight which continued throughout the day. People would suddenly gather into a circle and begin singing, dancing and clapping. . Other work in the social sciences has demonstrated how festivals, far for merely being something in which meaning can be read as a text, are sites of cultural performance, semiotic battlefields. Although I heard no political nationalist cries for separation that day, the cultural nationalism and the struggle to embrace *Oromummaa* was part of every visual and auditory frame that day. Clothing such as hats, scarves, and shirts bearing the symbol of the *Odaa* tree (not to mention traditional clothing from various regions), and the distinctly Oromo growls and language heard in the music were all part of the festivities that day. Such cultural nationalism "is a semiotic work of using expressive practices and forms to fashion concrete emblems that stand for and create the 'nation'" (Turino 2003: 175). In the next section, covering my work in rural Arsi Oromo areas, there was a similar notion of performative culture expressed by its practitioners. While persons would certainly not dare voice support for the OLF in the presence of a stranger, especially when accompanied by a government television crew, the simple performative act of a unique Oromo past

[50] See video "Erecha-Waqa."

was as strong a message as could be sent out. The trick for myself, and the researcher in general, is being able to receive it.

Shashemane

The bus ride from Addis Ababa to Shashemane is about six hours. Despite the oppressive heat, anyone presumptuous enough to open a window to encourage air circulation would find themselves promptly scolded by the entire bus. I was to find out later that most Ethiopians have a particular fear cold circulating air, believing it to be bad for health. One positive aspect of the ride came in the form of an Ethiopian born Finnish gentleman who spoke excellent English and was very keen on speaking with me and helping ensure that I reached my final destination with no troubles. He told me about how he was born in Ethiopia but moved to Finland at the age of seven or eight. We spoke on a wide range of issues, though the main topic of conversation was social welfare and medical systems. He was praising the Finnish system of healthcare and social assistance and lamenting the Ethiopian situation. He was actually going out to Awasa (fifteen minutes away from Shashemane) to visit an orphanage he had founded. He said that this was going to be his last personal visit to Ethiopia. He said that Ethiopian society had become so terribly rife with greed, corruption, crime, sexism, xenophobia, etc., that he hated coming back and would only send money from this point on. This put me a bit on edge.

After arriving in Shashemane I met with my contacts, some of whom I had met at the Oromia government office, others I met for the first time. One of these new

contacts, Bonsamo, had arranged to take to an area where some of the local youth had been arranged by him to perform for me. Bonsamo worked for the Culture and Tourism Bureau Office for the Oromia state government in Shashemane. I was never sure exactly how this would affect the way people would interact with me. For although he was a government worker, I found that a number of government employees would eventually help me in ways that I expected they would not. Likewise, I didn't know what to expect of him. If he was a government worker, how would his arranging of everything effect the kinds of encounters I would have? I was already getting sick of this mediation. Yet engaging in this study completely apart from the government, I was beginning to discover, was difficult if not impossible. Early the next morning, after a long night in a small hotel room with no electricity, Bonsamo and I headed towards the small town of Kofele. From there we took a horse drawn carriage[51] out on a large dirt road to a modern community center amongst a sea of farms and huts. It was not inside, but outside this center that my recordings would be made. As I was soon to find out, Bonsamo had his ideas of how this music was to be presented to me. These arrangements, as well as the nature of the musical ensemble, shed a great deal of light on the changing conceptions of the place and purpose of music in contemporary Oromo culture.

The ensemble was a group of five females and five males.[52] They were all clad in traditional clothing, which I thought was odd because no one else I had seen

[51] See photograph 17.
[52] See photograph 18.

throughout the rest of the area was. An older man with graying hair who seemed to be in charge welcomed me and introduced me to the group, made up entirely of teenagers. The man in charge said he needed just a few minutes to rehearse them, then I could begin my recording. Right away I noticed the very constructed nature of this encounter. I came to record rural music in its traditional context. Fascinated to see how it was to be presented to me, I put together all of my recording equipment and started to record. After their rehearsal song I started my video recording as well, although not before I could be relocated to a place where I could get the cows in the field in the background at the suggestion of Bonsamo and the group leader who said it would look more authentic this way. At the time I did not have the opportunity to analyze the obvious orchestration of my supposedly "authentic" Oromo musical encounter. The music of the group presented me with something that was sometimes the same and sometimes different from the "traditional" music group (Biftu Oromia) I had recorded earlier in Addis Ababa.

The first thing to be noticed was the physical arrangement of the performers. As is common in Oromo music, the performers are either in a circle, or in two lines with men and women facing each other. In this case men and women were facing each other. The men do most of the dancing, rocking forward and back at various points of the music (what I will call the A section), and executing high leaps and heavy footed stomps at others (the B section). The only move the women make is during the B section, and involves a fast shaking of the neck and head, such that the hair is often flung about with significant force. The gendered lines drawn in the physicality

of the dancing are echoed in the music, as men and women never sing at the same time. Each line interweaves with the other in a way that is sometimes call and response, but more often than not an extension or elaboration of the previously sung line.[53]

The piece performed for me was in a compound triple meter, common throughout many Oromo and non-Oromo musics in Ethiopia. The piece alternates between two sections which, although I have labeled them A and B, are circular and repeated for as long as the group decides it is going to perform. While this can be hours, my group limited most songs to fifteen minutes. The A section involves a repeated melody sung in alternation by the men and women. During this section the women were playing the *kebele*, a set of two sticks that look vary much like the *clave*. The *kebele*, used in place of bare hands, is found only in Arsi and to a small extent Harari Oromo music. These are used, as clapping is used, not so much to establish a rhythm, as to highlight, comment on, or contrast with the rhythm established by the melody. For example, track 3 demonstrates a song whose melodic rhythm implies a strong triplet feel. It is not the job of the *kebele* to establish the triplet feel, or even to maintain it. Rather it plays a secondary role, that of highlighting particular rhythmic emphasis, or contrasting with the established rhythmic pulse. If we think of this song as being in 6/8 meter for example, the *kebele* plays on the four when the women are singing. While the men are singing it will play on the four briefly before playing in a polyrhythm or hemiola (two against three) for the men's section.

[53] See video "Near Kofele" and CD track 2 "Arsi Oromo 1."

In these performances, the Oromo growl of the males was most apparent. In between the alternation of pentatonic melodies between the men and the women, a rhythmic break would occur in which the growl would be accompanied by the jumping and stomping of the men. This would occur every couple of minutes, always very conspicuously, seeming to have structural significance to the piece performed. Occasionally the break would be followed by a simple repeat of the previous material, but sometimes it would be the link into a whole new section. I had heard this structure before, when listening to the rehearsal of Biftu. In one of the accompanying tracks to this dissertation, there is a song that demonstrates the forcefulness of the growl through a song that features an alternation of women singing and men growling or making other percussive sounds with their lips rather than singing themselves. [54]

Over the next two hours or so I filmed, recorded, and photographed, occasionally being relocated to other areas at the suggestion of Bonsamo, who was insistent that none of my photographs should have either of the two concrete buildings in the background. As other locals passing on the road began to notice the goings-on, a large enough crowd gathered for me to be able to further consider the fact that only the performers were in traditional clothing. All of this set up and presentation was of course causing me to take extra thought on the notion of authenticity. Knowing full well that such a conception is completely contingent on time and space, I nonetheless felt a certain conceptual dissonance about such a production put

[54] See CD Track 4 "Arsi Oromo 4."

together for me under the guise of authenticity. The most confusing moment came when I was told by Bonsamo that the next time I came, the group would be trained to perform other kinds of musics for me. When I enquired about what he meant by "trained," I was informed that this was a group put together by the Culture and Tourism Bureau of the Oromia state government office. The youth, he explained, were taught Oromo traditional song and dance by officials working for the government! While the more recent generations did of course gain some basic musical knowledge through local acculturation, they learned the vast majority from a government agency. This is especially shocking because the previous two governments were overtly hostile to all or most Oromo musical culture. Oromo cultural/religious celebrations like Erecha were banned by both governments. To imagine that a system that was once bent on the destruction or, at the very least, vilification of this ethnic group as backward and primitive, would someday be one of the primary sources of its preservation is something most Oromo throughout the twentieth century could scarcely have been imagined. And yet, as I shall demonstrate, this preservation is conditional, much is the same way cultural preservation was under the Derg. Under the Derg, most public performances (musical, poetic, theatrical) had to first be approved by a censor, or were banned outright because of there ubiquity of politicized themes disguised by double and/or hidden meanings (*girarsa*). Today, no official censor is in place, but it is well understood by musicians and performers that certain styles and subjects are off limits. Thus, the parts of Oromo performative culture that are to stand the greatest

chance of being preserved, are those that pass a litmus test whose outline is provided by those in charge. The best example of this can be found in a government sponsored in Addis Ababa called Biftu Oromia.

Biftu Oromia

Biftu Oromia is a national cultural performance troupe sponsored by the government.[55] They travel all around Ethiopia largely, though not exclusively, in Oromo areas. They perform at government functions, as well as at various locations on Oromo holidays or other cultural days of significance. I first encountered them at a rehearsal they were having in a house used as a rehearsal space. I was told that I would be able to see and hear traditional music. What was to proceed was about five songs from different regions in Oromia, all of which demonstrated traditional dance, melodies, and clothing. Particularly interesting was the instrumentation of the accompanying band. Every song featured *washint, kebero, masenko, and krar*. Not every region uses all or even some of these instruments in their music. Additionally, the tuning of instruments like the *krar* and the accompanying use of scales on the *masenko* are in Amharic tuning. When I asked someone about this phenomenon, they said that they just find the closest approximation between the original Oromo

[55] I do not know exactly when they were formed, but it was certainly after the overthrow of the Derg. Much of this basic information I asked in a questionnaire given to the group and its leaders. I never saw those questionnaires, or the group again, except at a huge concert that was supposed to be celebrating the Oromia television and radio stations, but instead turned out to be an OPDO pro-Zenawi rally. Zenawi himself was in attendance. See videos "Biftu for Meles," and "Meles Zenawi."

scale and the Amharic one. Understanding the rhythm used for each ethnic groups was just as difficult. The song for each ethnic group was played on a *kebero*, in this case a set of three to four drums, ranging from very low bass to very high (exactly like the drum-kit I'd seen them use at Erecha). I recognize the Harer song right away from the rhythm that Ibrahim had taught me using modern drum-kit sounds. The others I had to learn. But what I continued to find out was that sometimes the rhythm used had little or no basis in actual rural musical practice in each respective area. I have still not received a satisfactory explanation as to why the Arsi rhythm used in popular music and this "traditional" performance group bears no resemblance to any rhythm I heard while in the Arsi region. While it is entirely possible that I merely missed those rhythms, as I didn't spend much time there, why would pop-musicians and modernizers choose an obscure rhythm or, as Ibrahim had said, just make it up? By comparing and contrasting two types of traditional music recorded in rural Arsi areas with the Arsi piece performed by Biftu, we can take a look at the process, results, and problems of translating musical styles into new genres.

In listening to the Arsi Oromo track performed by Biftu Oromia[56], a number of major musical and sonic phenomena that are directly rooted in traditional rural practice can be ascertained. These include; the opposition between male and female in vocal lines, the abrupt transition into and out of melodic and/or repetitive sections, the hemiolas or occasional instances of polyrhythm, and the sub-glottal

[56] See CD track 15 "Arsi song" and "Biftu-Arsi" video.

growl performed by the males. In the Biftu track, the females introduce and carry the melodic line of the first section, with the males contributing whoops and hollers (the other male dancers), or growls (the soloist). The abrupt transition into a second section (at 2:08) highlights the male-female dichotomy even more, featuring interchange between female singers and the soloist that is very reminiscent of the rural Arsi track, featuring no soloist, but still strict division of male and female. The abrupt transition from a section whose rhythm is considered by many to be *the* Arsi rhythm, to the very common triplet feel occurs here. This new change of rhythmic feel introduces the *kebele*, and with it the occasional instances of polyrhythm. This comes in the form of a 2 over 3 feel, with the *kebele* playing the duple rhythms over a well-established triplet pulse. This is the only example of polyrhythm I encountered in the whole of Oromo music, popular or traditional. The growl, featured in all sections of the Biftu piece, is also one of the main ways in which Oromo music can be differentiated from non-Oromo music. Amhara and Tigray musics both have a similar "growl" type noise in their traditional and popular music, functioning in much the same way as in Oromo music. When performed, however, the Amhara/Tigray version is much more breathy and comparatively less aggressive than its Oromo counterpart. As can be heard in both the Biftu Oromia track and of the rural Arsi tracks[57], the Oromo growl is much louder and aggressive. It is also part of a larger pallet of sounds drawn from the soundscape in which the Oromo live. A great variety of these sounds, as well as a similar conception of rhythmic

[57] Particularly CD track 4 "Arsi Oromo 4."

organization (albeit with a more free rhythmic section), can be heard in the Arsi Oromo song type of *langanicha*.

During the recording session I would record them performing in a particular regional style, and then take a picture of them in the traditional clothing of that style. Everyone was very friendly, and from what I heard from those who were translating for me, there was already conversation of me writing a book on them, or helping them to tour the United States. I had printed out a small questionnaire for each of the members to take with them and fill out, which I hoped would give me some general information about them that I could use as a basis for composing more particular questions when I finally got to interview them individually. I handed it out to everyone while expressing interest in learning to play the any instrument I could, and maybe even perform with them. The fact that I never saw them again (except within the context of the performance detailed at the beginning of the first chapter of this dissertation) could perhaps be contributed to the misfortune of bad timing in relation to performance schedules, and the general propensity for Ethiopians of all kinds to set themselves against being scheduled. Instead, I believe the short story at the beginning of this chapter gives a better idea of the answer.

The *langanicha* track I recorded[58] was done on a separate trip to Shashemane. As with the previous trip, it involved getting from Addis Ababa to Shashemane, and then securing transport from there to a more rural spot[59]. I was again met by

[58] See CD track 1 "Arsi Oromo-Langanicha" and video "Langanicha."
[59] See photographs 20 though 23.

Bonsamo, who arranged transportation with a local news crew going out to film footage of various animals on a local wildlife park. For a fee, we were allowed to ride along. After they finished filming at the park, they would take us to the village, which was inside the park. Previous arrangements had been made by Bonsamo for persons from a few nearby villages to meet at one village to perform for me. We arrived as the other villagers were arriving and meeting under the central tree of the village[60]. I greeted those circled around the Odaa tree (older men only, of course) as best I could. They were courteous, friendly, and fairly outgoing. As I was having a conversation with one of the elders (with Bonsamo acting as translator), a question arose whose answer I thought might prematurely end our day. "What is your religion?" the elder asked me. Asking a person's religion is not considered rude at all, and is one of the more common questions one can get all throughout Ethiopia. My answer to this question always received varied responses. "I have none," I replied. In translating my response I could see that neither Bonsamo nor the elder quite comprehended my counter-response. Such a response is highly unusual. "Do you believe in God?" asked the elder. "Define God," I answered. Rather than refuse to speak to me any further, as I expected could very well happen, the elder broke into a broad smile, and tapped his index finger to his head, then mine, as if to say "good answer." He then rounded up the men and women and immediately began the performance of music and dance that would last the next few hours. They

[60] I don't believe it was an *Odaa* tree. It looked like a tree very numerous in the region that Asefa said was called *girar* (which was easy for me to remember since it sounds like *krar*).

collectively decided to perform for me a musical style that they regarded as traditional, but disappearing. *Langanicha* is essentially a cattle song. Such styles have become less common with the increasingly peripheral status of cattle cultivation due to modernization. The style was new to many of the younger villagers there that day, only known by those who grew up when the youth weren't as drawn to the city, where they would get other jobs and become more acculturated with other lifestyles.

Sonically, *langanicha*[61] differs from other Oromo musical styles in its lack of any strong rhythmic pulse. Yet again the importance of melody over rhythm is brought to bear, as the poetics of the song necessitate a different, rather asymmetrical rhythmic pattern. In this track, the women have the melody, with the men adding decorative sounds (largely soundscape derived, animal sounds) punctuating throughout. The clapping of the women does not establish a steady beat but, like previous tracks explored, rolls along with it. If one were to notate the claps one could do so as I have.[62] This example can be misleading, since the performers are certainly not conceiving of it in a 5/4 time signature or indeed in any time signature, since the idea of strong and weak beats and many other rhythmic conceptions implied in Western notation do not apply. This is merely a guide to follow the clapping in relation to the phrasing of the text. Again, melody and text is primary here. There is a pitch that is always returned to on the 5 beat, and the melodic

[61] See video "Langanicha."
[62] See notation example 5.

phrases last for two measures when considered this way. The men's rhythmic break, which seems to come out of nowhere, comes when this pitch is lowered or flattened. This pitch is flattened on the 1 and 5 of the measure that is to precede the rhythmic break, so the men must listen for their cue. The rhythmic break, as expected, does not follow the already established pulse of the previous portion of the song. Instead it is an alternation between growls, various vocables, and stomping (the latter of which coincides with the women's clapping for this section only). There is no *kebele* used here, and no instances of hemiola or polyrhythm.

After the lunch break, the news crew that had given us a ride to the area decided that the performances were interesting enough to be filmed. Because of that, some of my footage (video and photo) contains news microphones and occasionally newsman[63]. At one point I was even interviewed. By then I had had enough practice in explaining briefly and concisely what I was doing in Oromia, I just had to make sure not to mention anything about Oromo nationalism. I enjoyed meeting the children before we left, for many of whom I'm sure I was there first *ferenj*. I met some who had I had met earlier while taking a break. I would look down to find a small child stroking the skin on my arm with a look of wonder. Sometimes I would smile, and they would smile back. Other times I would say something to them in *Afaan Oromo*, and then Amharic. Rather than make them smile, this seemed to freak them out. As I had not again picked up my recording equipment after lunch, I was armed only with my memory when a small child was told by one of the news crew

[63] See photograph 24.

that I was there to study Oromo music, and began to sing to me. She smiled as she sang. I'll probably never know what was sung to me that day, but I certainly won't forget it.

That was not the last touching moment of the day, nor the last one in which that elder with whom I had spoken earlier would surprise me with his seemingly more pragmatic version of Islam. We left with the truck-bed loaded up with people to take back to the main town area (town in the sense that among a number of isolated villages, this place had a coffee bar with enough electricity to run an espresso machine. On the way we passed by a young woman wearing a full Islamic burka. I had understood that the more extreme and conservative versions of Islam were not especially prominent in Ethiopia, though they had been making some inroads. The elder I spoke with earlier got my attention and pointed the woman walking along the dirt path we were using as a road. He then used two fingers to make the motion of a tear running down his cheek and said something in Oromo I didn't recognize. "Wahabbi?" I asked, trying to think of a word besides Al-Qaeda that would imply extremism. He shook his head in the affirmative and said in Amharic "ebd" (meaning "crazy"). I put my hand on his shoulder, and he did the same. As we got to the coffee bar, everyone unloaded, and all took turns either shaking my hand or hugging me. One man had some birr (Ethiopian currency) in his hand in a way that made me think he was going to beg. As he held out his hand Bonsamo said "He wants to give you that to say thank you." That was the first, and only such offer I had ever received. I politely refused, which I could tell he appreciated. Bonsamo said

that I should return once more to record a third song style, which would give me a full understanding of Arsi Oromo music. That trip never happened.

As with my first trip to the Shashemane area, I was skeptical at the idea that things had been "arranged" for me, and that this included government agencies teaching local youth songs specifically so they could perform for me. I appreciated that this latest trip afforded me the opportunity as what seemed to by a group of people performing what they wanted. No doubt, however, things would have been different if government news cameras weren't there. Between my trips out to the region and my recordings of the various groups, I found that I was presented with a number of issues regarding the feasibility and safety of my project. Not only my safety, but the safety of those whom I was there to learn from in the first place.

Conclusions

Since what constitutes "traditional" music and culture is largely equated with rural populations, I have endeavored to demonstrate how and why such practices are continued. And yet, most of my experiences in the more rural, folk context were always in some way affected by the presence of state cultural institutions, either the physical presence of a government employee (near Shashemane) or the presence of federal troops (Erecha) there to keep order. As Cantwell states "…the reframing of folk culture by high cultural institutions can be deeply confusing and potentially painful" (Cantwell 2008: 72). I was forced to wonder how the performances might have been different were it simply a village setting where the agenda set would be

entirely that of the villagers. The closest I got was the performance at Shashemane, where I was told by Bonsamo that the performances that day were ones that the villagers had chosen to perform for me, knowing that I was a researcher interested in Oromo music. And yet, Bonsamo could often be seen shooing children out of the way, arranging performers so as to be better in line with each other, etc.

It is easy, therefore, to lament the absence of that truly authentic event in which a group of Oromo villagers began to make music of their own accord whilst my presence faded into the background where I could observe "real" Oromo music. While I have now spent two years lamenting these and other shortcomings in my fieldwork, largely dictated by the dangerous politics and ethnic animosity circulating widely during my tenure in Ethiopia, what I can glean from all this is a fascinating series of shifts in the relationship between the Oromo and state power, as well as the way in which the "traditional" is viewed by rural and diasporic Oromo. Since I have argued that there is no cultural core of Oromo-ness, but that it is rather a discourse shaped by many different social and political forces, the salient aspect of my observations in rural areas is to be found in the relationship between ideas of cultural history and the consequent performance. According to the Arsi elders with whom I spoke that day in Shashemane, the music and dance I was witnessing was a kind of performance that was disappearing as traditional lifestyles altered with the passage of time. In this way the performance of a cattle song by people whose lifestyle was centered around the raising of cattle, but has become increasingly less so, was to them something of a nostalgic lament. In more "traditional" times this

performance practice would have been more a part of everyday life. Yet now it is relegated to cultural memory, having gone from a functional to a more symbolic essence. Cantwell says of the performers of music, that it is their "actions and choices in which musical meaning originates" (ibid., 10). In looking at the music making process, it is evident that it produces, and also is produced by history. In considering its performative nature, it becomes "both a carrier and producer of that history" (ibid., 9).

The music of the youth groups that were organized in advance for me poses as compelling set of considerations as to who is now invested in the process of Oromo music making (and by extension culture making). Whereas since the Selassie regime Oromo musicians were largely shunned or ignored, the current government has now taken it upon itself to invest in the preservation of Oromo culture. As I have suggested this could be out of a genuine desire to embrace a Western style multiculturalism. Among most of the Oromo with whom I've spoken, however, there is an uneasiness to this new relationship which manifests itself in ways ranging from simple skepticism to outright suspicion and hostility. The belief that the government interest in Oromo music and culture is done to keep an eye out for nationalist or anti-government sentiment, seems to be not entirely without merit.[64]

Assertions by some more fervently nationalistic Oromo that the government is bent on the complete destruction of Oromo culture seems to be belied by the existence of festivals like Erecha. After all , if the current government or

[64] Further evidence for this will come in later chapters.

Amhara/Tigray elite was indeed intent on stamping out Oromo culture, why would the Zenawi regime have lifted the ban on Erecha imposed by the Selassie regime? The diasporic interest in this particular Erecha festival is also worthy of note. Erecha festivals modeled on this particular instantiation of it can be found in all major Oromo diasporic communities, from the U.S. to Australia and Europe. Video clips of the festival can be found on YouTube, as well as a number of the Oromo websites that will be discussed in a later chapter. Some famous musicians even return from the diaspora to attend and perform. As my guides and I made our way from the performance stage to the Odaa tree, three black SUVs were making there way slowly through the crowd, and slowly head back shortly before we arrived. "It's Khamer Yusuf!," exclaimed Simbo. Indeed it was. He was due to perform in the afternoon at a stage outside of the grounds, but first had to go down to the Odaa tree, which is the spiritual center of the entire festival. Unsurprisingly, it is also the primary symbol used by the Oromo in diaspora to symbolize the "traditional" roots of the culture. Months later when I filmed the villagers outside Shashemane under a similar tree in the center of the village, I was impressed by the power of the symbol. Despite the evanescence of the "traditional," its symbolic weight is maintained by the sights and sounds of its keepers.

The existence of a group like Biftu Oromia prompts some interesting observations. At first glance, it would seem as though Oromo music and culture has been to some extent accepted. After all it has now been accepted into the national presentation of Ethiopian arts. And yet the fact that it went so long before being

ostensibly validated by the ruling elite merely serves to remind us of the hegemonic powers engaging in censorship in the first place, and even now. There is indeed an irony in the fact that the only Oromo performance troupe allowed is backed and funded by the same institutions still heavily monitoring and censoring Oromo music, surreptitiously of course. Many Oromo with more nationalistic inclinations are emphatically opposed to Biftu Oromia. The musicians expressing this opinion are particularly insistent that it is "not really Oromo music." This sense of there being a fundamental tension between artistic expression and the institution of censorship has been observed by theorists like Martin Scherzinger. He observes:

> "If art's social role is to test the limits of social conventions and laws, which is to say probe their fault lines, the ideal artist places a high premium on individual expression and treats prejudgments with suspicion" (Scherzinger in Ritter and Daughtry eds 2007: 112).

The fact that the music of Biftu must pass through some filter of censorship is clear. And yet its existence does to some degree demonstrate the slow acceptance of Oromo music and culture, since such a thing would never have been allowed under the previous two governments. It is still under close surveillance, but the mere fact that it exists at all would be shocking to many Oromo musicians even twenty years ago. This makes Biftu in many ways a microcosm of the larger relationship between the Oromo and the ruling elite. Things are getting better, but the suspicion that lies just beneath the already tense and tenuous relationship, will take a great deal of time to be resolved.

Chapter 5
Oromo popular music

"When people hear good music, it makes them homesick for something they never had, and will never have."
--Edgar Watson Howe

"You can cage the singer but not the song."
--Harry Belafonte

In this chapter I will look at Oromo popular music, and its place within the lives of urban Oromo, especially in Addis Ababa. I will argue that the production and dissemination of pop music serves a number of functions. Popular music is regarded by most urbanized Oromo as a natural next step in the evolution of Oromo music, one that it must take if it wants to survive. What is kept in the translation between traditional and popular music can tell us a lot about what is considered the most crucial to Oromo cultural identity. The translation of largely melodic and vocal-centric musics to pop instrumentation (e.g. guitar, bass, drums, keyboards, horns) clearly creates a distinct new overall sound to the music, in which the "Oromoness" must be heard in other ways. The fact that poor Oromo musicians spend the time and effort traveling to different regions of Oromia in order to ensure that music from all Oromo areas is heard testifies to the importance of the place of these modernization projects in the hearts and minds of young urban Oromo.

There are many changes (both aesthetic and social) in the transition from local performances of traditional music in its original rural contexts, to more widely mediated and disseminated music. With the influence of international music (jazz,

reggae, hip-hop), and the application of Western sound-engineering technology, Oromo music cannot entirely be thought of as something that "happens in a local context and employs only the expressive means specific to a locality" (Grenne in Greene and Porcello eds. 2005: 2). Oromo pop musicians, inspired by musics from around the world, are filtering their own unique identity through a maze of sounds and aesthetics from around the world, as well as Western recording technology. Some degree of assimilation must take place in order to fit Oromo musical sounds within the parameters of the recording technology. And yet one of the major goals of making a distinctly Oromo music is to differentiate it from other musics (especially Ethiopian musics). Thus, concerning the nature of the sound engineering of Third World cultures, Greene is correct when he asks "Might assimilation and differentiation both be underway at once?" (ibid., 3).

While I intend to use my discussion of popular music as a point of conversation in the debate between the processes and place of aesthetic modernization projects, it will also serve to draw attention to musical censorship and performance space. While the Ethiopian constitution guarantees the right of freedom of thought, expression, and the press (Bahirtas 2009: 25), I came to understand through a variety of sources (Oromo musicians, performers, government workers, doctors) that a strictly "Oromo" performance space is not allowed in Addis Ababa. While there was no "official" censorship, the claims made by Oromo and non-Oromo, musician and non-musician alike, was that there were still consequences to those who criticize the government. This realization was a

huge blow to my desire to establish myself with some performance group in the city in order to learn about contemporary performance practice. There would be no "deep hanging out" for me. What it did demonstrate, however, was yet another example of the many complicated forms of censorship. Censorship of popular music in Africa has been well theorized by scholars like Kelley Askew, Michael Drewwet, Martin Cloonan, Diane Thram, and others (Martin & Cloonan eds. 2006). The more commonly known form of censorship by a bureaucratic state over minority peoples and opinions is not the only form of censorship, and the case of the Oromo will demonstrate yet another dynamic. In the case of contemporary Oromo music, there is no official censorship, but consequences are often meted out unofficially. Because of this various forms of self-censorship are exercised. The decision of what musical and textual elements to include or not include is made by all performers of Oromo music. As Cloonan has argued, colonialists, traditionalists, and liberationalists have all had censorial agendas. "In all this it is the power to represent which is at stake" (Cloonan in Martin & Cloonan eds. 2006: 18).

The absence of performance spaces and the ways in which they are worked around can also speak to a number of issues regarding the use of musical performance and recording as re-negotiation and resistance. I will use my experiences in a few recording studios in the capital, as well as my experiences with an Oromo musician who would do much to fill in the gaps of knowledge it seemed the political situation in Ethiopia at the time prohibited me from filling. What I did discover was that a fair number of musicians working incredibly hard in small, ill-

equipped recording studios, producing cassettes that were sold throughout the country. While overtly political themes were largely shied away from, the aspirations and motivations behind the efforts of a handful of composers and poets testify loudly to compelling and complex notions of modernization, authenticity and aesthetics.

Ibrahim's Studio

I first encountered Ibrahim through my friendship with Asefa and his friend Tewodros. The most fruitful instruction I had came from him. While Ethiopia is full of musicians and full of persons afflicted by blindness, Ibrahim fell into both categories. Ibrahim is also a keyboard player. Having been trained in Western music theory, he was someone who could explain to me some of the intricacies of Oromo conceptions of musical phenomena in more relatable terms. Born in the town of Meso in the state of Harerghe in 1972, he was fortunate enough to go to a school for the blind, which eventually took him to Addis Ababa University and the Yared School of Music. In one hour with him I was able to make great headways into sharpening my sense of discrimination between various Oromo, and by extension non-Oromo, music. I also got to witness the process in which traditional rhythms and melodies were translated into more pop-music oriented directions.

Ibrahim was something of the main man at a small house (admittedly large by Ethiopian standards) that was partially converted into a recording studio. He was the primary musician, composer, and arranger. Tewodros, Asefa and I met up with

Kaleb, a well-known singer, in the Merkato. Kaleb was to be our guide/liaison to the studio. Kaleb, like many others who I would rarely if ever see again, expressed great enthusiasm for my project upon learning of it. We arrived at the compound, and Kaleb greeted and introduced us to all the musicians waiting in the living room. The living room was full of young men (teenage to twenties) sitting around chewing *chat* and watching some Steven Segal movie that was subtitled in Arabic. They said it was just background noise. I learned form them that most were recently arrived from rural areas, and they were eager to make a CD of Oromo music from their region. Ibrahim, working in one of a couple of studios suited to this task, was the best composer for the job they said. Apparently the composition process often begins with a singer who has a regional melody, under which a rhythm track and instrumentation will be added. Again, the nearly constant supremacy of melody. I was intrigued. Kaleb finally called us into the studio.

Ibrahim could speak a little English, and proudly so (Ibrahim 11/22/09). He tried as often as he could to respond in English or listen to me without having Tewodros and Asefa translate for him (he spoke to us in Amharic, which both Tewodros and Asefa speak). After some rather terse answers about his own past (most of the people I interviewed gave notoriously short answers with little elaboration), he began to demonstrate for me the differences between regional melodies and rhythms, as well as Oromo and non-Oromo musics. This was my first chance at really being able to discern between the various musics on the radio that still sounded largely the same to me. It was also affording me the opportunity to see

how musical materials from rural areas and traditional musics became modernized, and the philosophies of musicians and artists surrounding that modernization and change.

Ibrahim explained that only Oromo music uses a pentatonic scale based on the Phrygian mode. Finally, a breakthrough. Playing a pentatonic scale starting on C, D, F, G, or A would give one a pentatonic scales that could be found all over Oromo and non-Oromo areas. Pentatonic scales starting on E, however, would give one a scale only to be found in Oromo music. Ibrahim demonstrated by having one of the singers sing a short riff in that scale. He then immediately returned to large statements about Oromo music that I had to cut through by asking repeatedly for specific examples. For a transcription of the basic syncopation of Harer popular music rhythms, see the appendices.[65] Like most Oromo rhythms that I would hear, it was in a compound triple meter. The difference in the various regional rhythms came from the small differences in syncopation, and the distribution of that syncopation between the snare drum and tom-toms. The Harer rhythm, which I would eventually become quite adept at identifying, has a distinct rhythm in the snare that gives it a "chika-chika" sound (an onomatopedic device used by Ibrahim, Asefa, Tewodros, and every other Oromo I knew who at one point imitated the Harer sound for me). Next the Jimma rhythm. I had explained that on the bus ride to Erecha, my companion was trying to show me some Jimma dance moves. I would occasionally do it at the wrong time, and he would tell me that it was no longer a

[65] Notation example 2.

Jimma song. I couldn't explain the difference between the rhythms, nor could my companion do much to clarify for me. Ibrahim, his keyboard already switched to the drum-kit setting, happily gave me a demonstration. Again, it was a rhythm with a compound triple meter, but the snare hit between 2 and 3, and the low tom hit on 5 (if written in 6/8), gave it a very driving sense of syncopation.[66] If the first half of the rhythm (first three beats) is repeated, but the snare is substituted for a tom, you get the Kamise rhythm. [67]

I was excited to finally be told about these differences, previously subtle to me, now quite clear and distinct. Ibrahim's education at the Yared School of music meant that he had studied Western theory, and could easily comprehend my questions and explain them using terminology I was familiar with. I hoped we could get through all of the rhythms that day. I tried to sing songs to him I had heard at Erecha, or on the radio, hoping that he would know the regional source of the rhythms and/or melodies. I knew the Arsi songs I had heard well. Arsi was explained to me next. I would later come to find it odd that the rhythm used for Arsi was clearly in a duple meter, which I would never hear in the rural Arsi areas.

The Arsi music, Ibrahim said, took a lot of inspiration from nature in terms of the sounds used. For example, the deep growl meant to be imitative of a lion, the many rhythmic vocalizations of the men drawn from the birds, etc. Also, the Arsi were the exclusive users of an instrument called the *kebele*. The *kebele*, as I have

[66] Notation example 3.
[67] Notation example 4.

detailed earlier is essentially two hand size sticks, often affixed to the palms of the women so that when they clap their hands together it makes a bright pitch that is easier to hear than clapping bare handed. As of my visit to Ibrahim's studio I had not yet been out to the Arsi region, where (as discussed in earlier chapters) I encountered much that would have allowed me to ask some more penetrating questions. One such question I had, based on previous encounters with Oromo music, involved the source of these rhythms that were supposedly "transferred" to the Western drum kit.

In my encounters with Oromo traditional music I had not only never heard these rhythms, I had never heard the use of drums of any kind. At Erecha I had seen a drum kit used for the cultural dance troupes that provided a steady rhythm, but was told that this was only used in folkloric troupes. So, it had to be asked, where do these rhythms come from? Ibrahim informed me that while most Oromo groups do not use drums, a few do, although he admitted they were small and largely used to "back-up" the rhythm, not establish it. I would later hear traditional music in the Harerghe region, and there was no "chika chika." I would later hear a great deal of traditional music in the rural Arsi region, and heard nothing like the Western drum kit pattern I was told was an Arsi rhythm. Could they be making it up, or at least picking and choosing selectively from various regions in order to serve their own ends?

In her book on the process of making Zulu music in a South African studio, Meintjes has looked at how mediation can act both as a conduit and a filter, "it

transfers but along the way transforms" (Meintjes 2003: 8). While musicians in her text were mobilizing traditional values and beliefs as embodying "African-ness" (black, Zulu) as opposed to "whiteness" (Afrikaaner, apartheid, white), the Oromo are using a similar process to sonically produce their "Oromoness." As we have already seen, and will continue to be shown throughout this chapter and dissertation, the sound of "Oromoness" is highly mediated. In a later casual conversation with a government worker who worked as an arranger/composer for the group Biftu Oromia, I asked about the scales used in the pieces I had seen. I asked why, if Oromo music had its own distinct scales, they played using the Amharic scales? Indeed the Amharic system uses four primary scales, all of them pentatonic. The names for these scales derive from the geographical area of their origin, as well as certain characteristics it is thought to have. *Tizita* and *Anchihoye* are examples of scales associated with a particular characteristic or affect (the word *tizita* means "nostalgia," and songs in this scale are typically nostalgic) (Tamene 1998: 10). *Batee* and *Ambasel* are names of places in the Wollo region, although according to one Oromo musician, *Batee* means "moon" in *Afaan Oromo* and is therefore an Oromo scale.

Although the lowest tone of the scale depends upon the vocal range of the singer, I will explain the division of the scales within an octave using middle C as a starting point. Though the starting pitch may be a wide range of pitches, the relationships between the pitches used is always the same. *Tizita* is a scale that would include the notes C, D. E. G. A, and the octave C. Although it is not as common,

altering the E and A by lowering them a half step (C, D. Eb, G, Ab, C) to achieve a kind of *tizita* minor is occasionally used. These adjustments to make a "minor" scale from a major sounding one also occur in *batee* and *anchihoye*. *Batee* is its unaltered form is C, E, F, G, B, C, with its minor being C, Eb, F, G, Bb, C. *Anchihoye* in its major form is C, D, F, G, A, C, its minor form being C, Db, F, Gb, A, C. The *ambasel* scale is C, Db, F, G, Ab, C (ibid.). Of course with this many alterations of half steps to a pentatonic scale, it seems likely that there will be some overlap between Amharic and Oromo scales, possibly even the same scale found under different names.

If they were an Oromo music group, shouldn't they play their own scales? The composer/arranger responded that since most of the instruments are usually played using Amharic scales, he just picks one that is closest to an Oromo scale and uses that. "Or I just make one up," he said casually. "You make up the scale?" I asked. "No, no," he said "but to make the song work with the group instrumentation sometimes things must be changed." He went on to explain that occasionally the lyrics, the meter of the words, the scales, and the rhythms sometimes needed to be altered. I got the distinct impression that "altered" sometimes included, as he put it, "making it up." And yet this "making it up" was not some uninspired creation *ex nilio*, but rather drew inspiration from timbre, implied rhythm of the text, soundscape, etc. This was the same impression I got from Ibrahim in the studio, whose alteration at first appeared to be so seemingly contrived as to barely be Oromo music anymore. Yet everyone (all Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopians present) agreed that they "sounded Oromo." In the process of mediation, much was changed or added, but

language, timbre, and the influence of local stories and folk tales gave the Oromo sounds their identity. "We go to the different regions to study all of these factors, and then adapt them to new instruments, and new purposes" (Ibrahim 11/22/09).

This observation backs up Mientjes' assertion that historically, ethnomusicology has focused on formal parameters in genre analysis (tuning, scale, rhythm) as distinguishing features, at the expense of timbre (Meintjes 2003: 12). In the studio, I was so busy asking about scales and rhythms, that I neglected to listen for smaller, yet no less important, aspects of the sounds themselves. Of course the use of *Afaan Oromo* was the number one give a way as to the ethnic identity of the music makers. Yet, there were other ethnic identity markers that I had to understand as different before I could hear them as such. One example is the sub-glottal growl used in Oromo music, both traditional and popular. It was only after a lesson with my Amharic teacher, who pointed out that the use of such rhythmic vocalizations could be found in Amharic and Tigray music as well. The difference in Oromo music, my teacher said, was that the Amhara/Tigray version was "weaker," almost like a sharp exhale. The Oromo version, in contrast, sounded more like a growl. My teacher speculated that this was probably because in the highland areas inhabited by the *Habeshas*, seeing a lion was rare, whereas in the lower elevation Oromo areas, it was much more common. "The lion growl" he said "is an Oromo sound."

It is interesting that the rhythmic differentiations between various Oromo groups is achieved through the sounds of a Western drum kit, specifically the

alternations between tom-tom and snare drums. “First we learn the cultural music, we go to those areas” said Ibrahim “then we adapt it.” As I’ve already suggested, this “adaptation” seems to have a wide, sometimes creative scope. Yet, it is significant enough that these musicians from all over Oromia, travel to these areas to learn the culture, so they can present it in their own aesthetic way. Though I cannot say for sure when this practice began, I would surmise that it did so around the same time that groups like *Afran Qallo* (discussed earlier) began touring Oromia, and almost certainly not before that. This adaptation can sometimes take the form of regional sounds directly (the sub-glottal growl, the *kebele* from the Arsi region, etc). What is more common, however, is differentiation of regional rhythms through the different sounds of the Western drum kit, an instrument to which no comparable instrument is to be found in most rural areas. This means that Oromo musicians are using internationally recognized Western drum sounds to “ethnicize” and even regionalize their music. The “Oromoness” was in the music I was hearing, I was simply listening for “authenticity” in the wrong way. Although I knew it, I had to be reminded that authenticity is always provisional. Authenticy is “concerned with what is good, true, natural and coherent according to culturally specific codes” (ibid., 260).

So who listens to Oromo music? Who is it made for, and what do Oromo music makers hope to achieve in making their music? The impetus behind modernizing traditional musics, according to Ibrahim (and later echoed by many Oromo musicians) was quite simply, to adapt. “We want to change, not all in all, but change is necessary and is good for tradition.” A perfect example of the symbiosis of

the traditional and the modern in dialogue, Ibrahim's musical praxis demonstrated that such forces were constantly informing not just Oromo musical sound, but also the process of the production of Oromo musical sounds. Thus, we are reminded of the dangers of documenting stylistic or instrumental variations as an "external expression of a cultural core or sensibility" (White 2008: 13). While the primary demographic purchasers of Oromo music are other Oromo, most popular musicians I met with (Ibrahim included) wanted to make music for everyone. Beats and styles from the Western hemisphere like hip-hop and reggae, to name the most popular two, are just as common on a cassette or CD of Oromo music as Oromo beats. This was done in order to attract non-Oromo listeners, who might take an interest in the more traditional music after hearing the more "international sounding" music. The success of this strategy, combined with the incredibly small resources and budget, is certainly negligible.

As my guides and I prepared to leave I asked if they were only studio musicians, or if they performed shows. They said that they occasionally performed shows in small venues, mostly outside Addis Ababa. As of yet I had not heard of the restriction on Oromo music venues, and thus didn't inquire further as to the types of performance spaces they were used to performing in. If claims that Oromo venues were illegal were true, the spaces would have to be somewhat clandestine as well (perhaps that's why he said they performed "mostly outside Addis"). I asked if we could meet again, either in the studio or in concert, to which he and the rest of the musicians responded positively. I asked all the musicians on the couch if I could

interview them, and the all smiled and agreed. One pair looked at each other smiling, speaking back and forth and using one word that I recognized…"rockstar," striking a pose in an imaginary spotlight and getting a good laugh. This was yet another time when I would be receiving rather mixed signals from a group of people I wanted to become more deeply involved with. I received hugs, thanks for my project, and then never spoke to any of them again. I arranged meeting times with Ibrahim a few times after that, but he would always cancel or not show up. What could be going on here? If this was a "see me next Tuesday" phenomenon, why would they be so enthusiastic about everything? It was my time spent with another musician, Daniel, which would give me some idea as to the nature of the tense system of relations between government and musicians.

Daniel

I first met Daniel at an Oromo cultural show at the National Theatre. I wasn't sure what sort of expectations to have. I had known about the show at the National Theatre in 1977, and the outcomes of it (arrests, killings, censorship). Yet I was fairly sure that I shouldn't expect such things on this particular day, all dissenting or anti-government Oromo opinions being kept well in check. I went at the suggestion of Dima, a government worker in the Addis Ababa branch of the Oromo Culture and Tourism Bureau of the Oromia state government. When we met in the theatre of the lobby he took me to a seat, placing me next to a young man called Daniel. Daniel was to be my translator for the show, as well as a contact for other musicians (he was

himself a musician and turned out to be quite well connected to the popular music scene). He was also the first person to openly and without prompt bring up the subject of Oromo nationalism, something I had long before I left for Ethiopia decided to refrain from bringing up until it was brought up by someone else. I mentioned my troubles with Biftu Oromia, and he seemed entirely unsurprised. They were a government group, and as such they were nothing but a propaganda tool for the state. In Daniel's view, they only existed so that the government could appear multicultural. He was insulted that the Ethiopian government was now utilizing an Oromo performance group in public events, and calling it "Ethiopian" culture. In his view, Oromo culture was emphatically NOT Ethiopian culture. He claimed that most people at the show that day were OPDO[68] and I would find little in the way of true Oromo sentiment.

Daniel came to be my contact for the information I had initially been interested in acquiring, but had decided against pursuing. I had told myself that if it was presented to me I would accept it, but mustn't make a point of showing interest in the overtly political. As it gradually became clear that politics was one of the prime forces in determining what I could and could not safely approach, the strictly dichotomous Oromo vs. government relationship seemed to be the angle through which much of what I experienced became colored. Every time we would meet he would have pages of written (in English) material on whatever questions I had been

[68] Oromo People's Democratic Organization. Widely considered to be a puppet organization of the ruling EPRDF.

asking at our last meeting. After our first meeting at the National Theatre, and our discussion thereafter, Daniel met me at a coffee shop with five handwritten pages entitled "Problem factors in Oromo music are…" He then listed twenty-six major problems, some of them with sub-problems (e.g. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2). These include but are not limited to:

> -Absence of government interest for progress in Oromo art.
> -Fear that if Oromo music becomes too popular, Afaan Oromo, already the majority language, will dominate rather than Amharic.
> -Most Oromo artists have emigrated from the countryside and, as such, don't know how the system (either of government or the music business) works.
> -Little media coverage on Oromo music. Those that have it are part of the EPRDF.
> -Terrible economy. Not enough to publish and distribute their music.
> -Shortage of adequate studios, composers, technology.
> -No Oromo music school.
> -Government blockage of artists sympathetic to Oromo concerns
> -Every government from Haile Selassie on has imprisoned or killed Oromo musicians. These include; Abdulla Arsi, killed under the Selassie regime, Abubakar Mussa and Mustafa Abdii, killed under the Derg regime, and those killed under the current Zenawi regime including Ebbisa Addugna, Josehp Gammachu, Jiregna Ayaana, Abdii Kophe and Usmayyo Mussa.[69]

While I certainly cannot verify these claims, they matched claims that I had heard about the relationship between Oromo musicians and government while at and Oromo Studies Association in Minneapolis in the summer of 2008. I had hoped to steer clear of such hot political topics, but it seemed that they had now find me, and I had to decide what I would do with the information. While I certainly could not walk into a government office and ask for records of musicians they've ruthlessly persecuted and/or killed, I could observe musicians and studios in Addis Ababa and

[69] Again, these are all claims by one person, the veracity of which I cannot verify.

see how Daniel's characterization of the situation checked out. Certainly the fact that I seemed completely unable to find any public places or clubs where Oromo music was performed lent credence to Daniel's claim that no such place was allowed. The combination of Daniel being so well connected, and the great length at which he spoke about Oromo nationalism, made me think that I would perhaps get some more information about this situation. Different interviews/meetings I had, however, had very different senses to them. One of the first places we went was called Master Sound Studio.

Master Sound Studio was, like Ibrahim's, quite small.[70] There was some notably good equipment, like Roland Fantom-S and VA-7 keyboards, as well as a Triton. Cubase was the computer program used for the recording, editing and mixing before master tapes sent to an Indian owned cassette manufacturing plant outside of Addis Ababa to have duplicates printed (Roba 4/7/10). The main recording engineer, Roba, was in charge of the place. As we sat down for our interview, I wondered if discussion would take a more nationalist turn, knowing Daniel's proclivities for topic. As it turned out, it did not, and as I've already stated, I had decided not to be the one to bring it up. Roba was forty-four years old, and from the Wollo region. At age thirteen he stared playing guitar, although he was later inspired to take up the *krar* under the inspiration of a musician he had seen named Henock. After this baptism into traditional instruments, he went on to learn the *masenko* as well (along with keyboard and continuing on with the guitar). Roba

[70] See photograph 27.

seemed a little uncomfortable, so I stuck to asking questions about how the traditional music was translated to popular music. Just like Ibrahim, and others, he said that the melody was the most important thing. You have to start with the melody, and build everything else around it. I asked if he ever recorded only traditional music, or mixed in instrumental elements like the *krar* and *masenko* with the pop music. He claimed that this was only rarely done because of the lack of competent performers. As would be expected, the other major problems stem from lack of funding. Without funding one could not make improvements to the studio, or acquire better instruments. The Oromo music made far less at music shops. This was corroborated by every musician I spoke with (and a few non-musicians). The dynamics of the cassette trade in Addis demand a mention.

According to a number of interviewees, and just casual conversation on the topic, the way cassettes get sold in the shops demonstrates a clear cultural bias towards Amharic music, although this is changing. If you are a new artist, to get your cassettes sold in the shops, you need to go there personally and negotiate a price with the shop owner. The shop owner listens to the music, and then offers a price. It is nearly always much lower if the music is in Afaan Oromo. The artists are nearly always offered more if they bring a tape with lyrics in Amharic. The music can stay the same, but the language should be changed. In an interview (which will be gone into in greater detail later in the chapter) a young Oromo musician, Muluka, said "If me and an Amhara make a cassette under similar conditions (studio quality), the Amhara will sell his for ten times more" (Muluka 4/16/10). Roba also said that this

was a major problem in acquiring funding. He said the market appeal of Oromo music was slowly growing. The terseness of Roba's answers suggested to me that he might be uncomfortable with all of the questions I was asking him. Perhaps he assumed that since I was with Daniel, nationalism and censorship were on my mind. I finished up and thanked him and Daniel and I left. Over dinner Daniel asked if I noticed Roba's discomfort, to which I responded in the affirmative. Daniel said that most people would always be worried about whether or not what they said would reach government ears. "This is why your project will not be successful, but it must be done, and I will make sure you know the truth so you can tell others," he said. This made me feel dizzy with contradictory thoughts. I had long been concerned over the lack of fieldwork and ethnographic material I had been acquiring, so when he said that my project would not be successful, my heart sank a bit. On the other hand, I was filled with a renewed sense of urgency to collect all that I could since he said it "must" be done. Additionally, I was becoming increasingly concerned for my safety and the safety of my informants. How much were they risking in telling me anything at all? The weight of these thoughts has not left me since.

A week later Daniel said that he had arranged an interview with a musician who was recently released from prison after sixteen years. He was pardoned, and thus, was willing to tell me anything I cared to ask about. I will refer to him as Giorgis. Born thirty-five years ago in Western Harerghe (near where Ali Birra and Ali Shabbo and their Oromo nationalist music was widely loved), he had a great deal of exposure to nationalist sentiment. Skipping over many of the details of his

childhood, he started telling me that he was a singer and some-time manager of the Chaffe Gada Band, one of the bands famous for being broken up by the current government in their early years in power. He started singing with them in 1991, the year the Derg was overthrown. By 1992, it was becoming clear to Giorgis that the northern-led parties (made up of left over guerillas largely from the TPLF) were not interested in full equality for all in the country. Because of this he started to sing against the northern-led government.[71] After a performance in Addis Ababa in 1992 he was arrested and taken to a military camp[72] and given the choice to join the Ethiopian military, or be imprisoned. Giorgis chose the latter.

Giorgis said that he was charged with a host of fabricated crimes, and stayed in prison for twelve years before he was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was released 4 years after this sentence with the help of Oromo from the diaspora, notably Ali Birra. While in prison he made a guitar out of scrap materials he had access to, such as cardboard (for the body) and copper wire (for the frets). He composed uplifting songs in an effort to stave off thoughts of suicide. He wrote songs about his mother, and songs with lyrics to convince himself that he had nothing left to fear. Being that we were in a crowded café, he didn't sing for me then, although he said that one line he remembers is "a dead donkey is not afraid of a

[71] The band's composer at the time, was Roba, the studio engineer I'd interviewed earlier. Besides being the composer for the band, he also taught Giorgis to play the guitar. I now looked back on Roba's hesitancy to speak to me with a much clearer view of what might have informed such an attitude.
[72] The only other band member he spoke of was Asli Mohammed, who was sentenced to death, but later released.

hyena." He said he was relieved of fear if he accepted the fact that he was already dead, and that nothing his captors could do would affect him.

After he was released he was helped by Ibrahim[73], who offered him shelter and food. Giorgis said that his goal now is to study music at the college level, doing essentially what I was doing, to encourage greater awareness of Oromo music, culture, and the plight still suffered by many who are still largely unknown to the world. This would be difficult, of course, because the only university level music study in Ethiopia is the St. Yared school of music, which teaches Amharic and Western music. As of the writing of this dissertation, there is not one private school dedicated to Oromo music. As for documenting and preserving Oromo culture, he said that the government would likely not allow such a project, and expressed amazement that I was allowed in the country to study Oromo culture at all.

In discussing his hope that Oromo music would become more well known to the world, he expressed two seemingly contradictory attitudes; to keep the music traditional, and to make it modernized and "developed." Hardly anyone I met seemed to come down on the traditionalist of the traditionalist/modernist divide. Most musicians, like Giorgis, suggested that music was perhaps the best way of bringing together ideas about history in order to strengthen an Oromo identity for the future. In discussing this propensity for regional identities maintaining continuities with a rural past, Romero says "The claims for a cultural 'past' therefore, appear as a selective task, very much in tune with the current endeavor of moving

[73] I was starting to get an idea of what a close circle the Oromo musicians were.

into the future" (Romero 2001: 65). Music is often used as a primary weapon against the historical, cultural, and ideological claims of a nation-state, and in this case is directly challenging its authority. Music becomes a site for negotiation of histories, political power, and dichotomies of traditional and modern come to be negotiated. Tradition and modernity "may coexist, mingle, and blend in a variety of forms and meanings" (ibid., 138). Modernizing, for Giorgis, was not destroying culture, but simply altering it to bring a taste of it to the world. This idea of modernizing so as to bring the Oromo to the attention of the world was another recurrent theme made by many Oromo musicians. One must simply always stick to the "root" culture, which in this case is often an idealized form or a rural, pre-Amharic conquest past. As we were paying the bill for our coffee and wrapping up I thanked Giorgis, and asked if I could record him singing some of the songs he had written while in prison. He said that he would love to, and that I could just schedule something with Daniel and we would meet. Unfortunately, as with many other attempts at second meetings, this never happened.

My last chance to interview some Oromo popular musicians also came through Daniel a few days before I left the country. It was around the theme of modernity that our discussion largely revolved. Daniel had arranged for us to meet five musicians at a local coffee shop, after which we would relocate to my home for the interview. Out of the five who were supposed to be there only two showed up (three counting Daniel). These two were Kaleb, a twenty-two year old from the Borana region, and Muluka, a twenty year old from the Bale region. Neither spoke

English, so Daniel acted in his usual role as translator. I briefly interviewed each concerning their own personal histories, and then moved into larger questions that I posed to the three of them as a whole, giving each a chance to respond. Their desires and frustrations, hopes and fears, and passion for their culture all came through during our conversation.

I asked them about the purpose of modernization. Both were inspired by Oromo music at a young age. His older brother, whom he described as an excellent singer, and who is now living in London, influenced Muluka. Kaleb was always interested in music, and began composing poetry and songs after learning to write in school. But the reason they were interested in modernizing music came from, as they put it, "hearing Oromo beats" in international music. When they listened to reggae or to disco, they would hear aspects of their own music. "When I hear disco music or reggae, I hear parts of my own cultural music and I think 'What's the connection?'" said Muluka. Kaleb agreed, saying "All world beats can be found in Oromo music." They all referred to a beat very much like the tresillo[74] found in much Latin music, that can also be found in the Western regions like Wellega where it is found in some traditional music. Though they didn't provide an example, they claimed that the reggae beat could be heard in regional musics of the south. They went as far as to say that these Oromo song types were likely the root of all these musics. Their logic was one that I often heard in tying the Oromo to everything from

[74] The first 3 hits in a 3-2 clave (X - - X - - X-). This pattern is also heard in a great deal of Latin music, where the snare drum is heard hitting the second and third beats of the tresillo.

Obama to K'naan (the Somali artist whose song "Waving Flag" had recently been enjoying popularization due to it being chosen by FIFA to be one of the theme-songs of the upcoming World Cup in South Africa). All I could think of during this interchange was the necessity of a mytho-historical identity used by a people struggling for a national identity.

The logic went something like this. Archeologists, in uncovering Lucy, demonstrated that Ethiopia was the birthplace of humanity. Because the Oromo were the indigenous people of the area, the first human beings were Oromo. It was then reasonable to conclude that similarities between the musics of different places in the world had a common Oromo root. This rather strained and casuistic logic seemed to be held quite sincerely. These were similar to other claims I had heard that Obama was an Oromo. There are a number of Oromo speaking peoples in Kenya, and since Obama's father was from Kenya, he must have some Oromo in him. It was the same with K'naan, a Somali born Canadian musician. Daniel, Kaleb and Muluka all claimed that in his song "Waving Flag," which was receiving massive airplay in Ethiopia at the time, they could hear Oromo musical elements. This was explained because he is Somali, and the Somali and the Oromo are known to share a great deal of heritage both biological and cultural (a claim discussed earlier in this dissertation). This way of reading an Oromo identity into the popular musics of the world fascinated me. While it was certainly of questionable historical accuracy, it set up an important link between Oromo music and its modernized form. In a way, the popularization of Oromo song styles to international ones was adapting and

changing them, but conceived of in another way, they were just reworking already reworked Oromo material.

And yet it was the future that seemed to concern them more than the past. This is part of the link between Oromo nationalism and music. It is generally hoped that if the music sounds good enough to Western ears, they will listen to it, know about the Oromo, and come to help them. Daniel had earlier, in one of the packages of handwritten pages he gave me, said that the music was a way to speak to the world via the exposure of globalization. He took my presence in Ethiopia as proof and said "You are the body of globalization." He explained that with increasing globalization, more powerful countries would come to support the Oromo goal of self-governance. Kaleb and Muluka seemed to agree, adding their dissatisfaction with Ethiopian recording studios, which are the only avenues through which to voice their situation. The bias of studios and music shops towards Amharic music, although slowly changing, limits Oromo exposure. "We're behind," said Muluka. Kaleb agreed saying "Afaan Oromo is still not well accepted. I hope it will be, because it needs a fair chance to grow up." Studio space is not the only space from which the Oromo are explicitly or tacitly excluded.

"In Addis Ababa, there is no chance to perform as an Oromo, or even to organize" Kaleb said. He then told me that he was invited to Kenya to perform three big concerts for the Oromo community there. He claimed that the Prime Minister of Kenya was at one of the concerts. Compare this reception to Addis Ababa, where Daniel and other musicians he knew claimed to have there homes broken into, with

music stolen or instruments broken. They of course claim government harassment. The type of censorship and self-censorship these artists have to engage in just to be safe echoes a long history of complicated censorship models throughout the African continent.

At the end of every interview, I always ask the interviewee(s) if they would like to ask me any questions. Turnabout is fair play. The three young musicians I was talking to asked me the same question I always get; how did you come to know about the Oromo? After finishing my answer they talked amongst themselves for a moment, seeming to have another great question. Instead it was an exhortation. "You have to go back to America and tell people about us. You have to tell them what is going on, show them our voice." I agreed to do so, and they responded warmly, saying that they hoped I would come back safely and soon. I thought back to all of the many discussions of the ethics of "being a voice for the voiceless" throughout graduate school. I thought about ethnographic representation and allowing our informants to speak for themselves. Where exactly one stands on the issue of being a megaphone for one's "others" is always a complicated issue. I, on the other hand, had the unfortunate fortune to be implored to do so. These musicians were not the first to merely ask that I tell people that the Oromo exist, and about their situation, in the hopes that once the democratic people of the West knew, they would come to their rescue. Whether this was faith or hope on their part, I wasn't sure if I shared it. I suppose time will tell.

Censorship in Africa often varies greatly from Western countries, where technological advances have decreased the role of the state as censor and increased the role of the market as censor (Cloonan in Drewett & Cloonan eds. 2006: 6). While the censorship of music in colonial times is the most obvious example of direct censorship, Drewett and Cloonan remind us that traditionalists, colonialists, and liberationalists all had censorial agendas. Traditionalists wanted to exclude any outside influence that might change the culture, colonialists used music (often in the form of marching bands, Christian hymns, etc.) to "civilize" the people, and liberationists used it to criticize the colonists. Thus African music was tied up in a "triple knot of censorship" (ibid., 7). Much Oromo music (traditional and popular) serves a two-pronged function similar to that of other black African groups resisting European colonialism; preserving local and traditional culture, and serving to critique the colonial power. The main difference of course is that in this case, the colonizer is a black African one (depending on who you ask of course). Except for the few who would openly voice Oromo nationalist sensibilities, most people chose to exercise cautious self-censorship while around me. Martin Scherzinger calls this question of assessing the harms and benefits of music from the point of view of both artists and listeners the "double voices" of musical censorship (Scherzinger in Ritter & Daughtry eds. 2007: 93).

The necessity of having an inner censor or "policed self" was ubiquitous in Ethiopia. I expected this would be a problem, and thought I was prepared for it. But after a while, the palpable weight of the "anxious awareness of being observed"

(ibid), was something I was beginning to internalize as well. At first I wrote off the warnings that all those who were rude to me, or following me as paranoia. But being that it was an election year, and numerous people warned me on numerous occasions to "be careful," I felt incredibly uneasy. Not only that, but certain government workers had eventually told me that the musicians and people I was interviewing most certainly wanted to tell me a whole lot more than they were, but would never do so even if they wanted to for fear of who might discover what they had said. Scherzinger refers to J.M. Coetzee's observation that "agents of censorship do not as a rule acknowledge their own censoring activities" (ibid., 97). This definitely reflects the situation in Ethiopia. Except for a few restraints, the constitution guarantees the right of thought, freedom of expression and the press (Bahirtas 2009: 25-26). And yet, as I've illustrated, the freedom to exercise this expression is decidedly NOT the case.

In looking at other uses of musical censorship in Africa, we find many ways in which such a situation is not unique. For example, in many political situations in sub-Saharan Africa the kinds of critiques hurled at previous governments by liberation movements "were not always welcomed by those same liberation movements once they had assumed power" (Cloonan in Drewett & Cloonan eds. 2006: 8). In the case of Thomas Mapfumo in Zimbabwe, musicians once part of the liberation struggle go on to be used as state propaganda. In Zimbabwe, much like present day Ethiopia, liberation struggles assumed "the ruthlessness of the regimes they ousted" (ibid., 18). Robert Mugabe has used groups of armed government

employed thugs to achieve "de facto" or unofficial censorship (Thram in Martin & Cloonan eds. 2006: 72). It seems as though this has been achieved in Ethiopia as well. Since it is unofficial, all I have to offer as "evidence" are these ethnographic accounts I have had with Ethiopians, both Oromo and non-Oromo. While there may certainly be exaggerations and/or fabrications, we nonetheless see a sad and all to common relationship of musicians to state power. I offer, as a final example of this relationship, a conversation I had with a government worker who has been dealing with issues since the Derg, and bravely and graciously decided to open up to me about these factors.

Insight in Asele

In my continued effort to utilize non-government and bureaucratic channels to meet Oromo musicians, I had decided to go on a trip to the city of Asele, east of Ziway Lake, and about equidistant between Addis Ababa and Shashemane. It is Tewodros's hometown, and he said that he could likely find some musicians for me to meet. He even arranged a friend of his, who worked in a government office in another area, to meet with us for an interview. This person, Tewodros claimed, was very knowledgeable about music. His own personal history also tells us much about the relationship of Oromo musicians to state power in both the Derg and Zenawi regimes.

After the Derg came to power, it used its influence to send urban Ethiopians out to rural areas to educate the public about socialism. This included establishing

musical groups where young men would get together to sing in Amharic, regardless of their primary language, about the virtues of socialism. While Oromo in these situations sang in these groups, and doing their official duty, but day-to-day cultural music (religious, wedding, etc.) was still practiced as it had always been in rural areas. From Selassie to the current government, these forms of music making were largely ignored by the government, not being seen as a threat in the way some more popular forms of music were. Direct attacks on this kind of music would be almost impossible, especially in Arsi areas, Arsi being considered an Oromo group in which almost every activity is accompanied by music. "There is music for everything, especially in Arsi life" claimed Asefa in what had rapidly turned from being a personal interview to being a collective discussion of Ethiopian history between Asefa, Tewodros, Birhanu, and I. Initially, the Derg approved of and even encouraged these more regionalized identities.

Birhanu was trained as a stage performer, and introduced performers in these localized groups. The songs and poems were in Oromo, but the introductions to the performers, along with a short statement about socialism were done in Amharic. This was a chance to live up to the Derg's initial promise of a multicultural, multiethnic Ethiopia, while at the same time promoting socialism and keeping an ear to the local perception of the revolution. Even though local musics and poems were being performed, they still had to go through a government censor, to make sure there was no "counter-revolutionary" content.

> "I was sent to different districts to train people in all aspects of musical and stage performance. Since I was appointed to these districts, anyone who did anything the government didn't approve of would be blamed on me. I was the filter. It was my responsibility. Being on my guard in this way is not isolated only to the Derg time, it is still the same today" (Birhanu 2/13/10).

The message was something like "be yourself, but within the parameters of what we deem acceptable." Anyone who did not ran the risk of being killed. Love songs, songs about rivers and mountains, were allowed. Anything that seemed to carry double-meanings was shied away from. One famous musician, Bashir Dabiy (now in Norway) used harvest music and poetry to criticize the government and was exiled. Birhanu himself took no chances, as an organizer and presenter, to allow this criticism to get through, as he would be held responsible if it did. As he said, this was true under the Derg, and for the Zenawi government. As he is still working for the government, he tries to be especially careful about what he says, since Oromo are still accused of supporting the OLF and never heard from again. As the conversation shifted to more contemporary times, his voice took a hushed tone.

Even in the transitionary government (the time between the overthrow of the Derg and the establishment of the constitution 1991-1995) one had to be careful of expressing OLF sympathies.[75] Although the OLF was initially working with the transitional government, they eventually left, accusing the TPFL (the party headed by Meles Zenawi that would eventually become the EPRDF) of unfair ethnic bias in their proposed policies. After the OLF withdrew, they were labeled a terrorist organization and banned. Birhanu said that even today, with official laws against

[75] I have already shown an example of this in Giorgis's story earlier in the chapter.

censorship it is well understood that you can make a cassette filled with anti-government songs and pro-OLF lyrics, you just can't be caught listening to it. "You can make it, even sell it, but hearing is forbidden" he said. "The main difference between the Derg and this government is that the Derg was clear. If you do this, or this, or this, we'll kill you" claimed Asefa. "During this time they say, officially, you can sing about anything you like. But if you're caught with the wrong tape, you're in trouble. You can make a tape praising the OLF, you can even sell it in Addis. But if you are caught listening to it, even in your home, you will be taken away. Hearing is forbidden," added Tewodros. It is in this way that the Derg was almost preferable. Oromo musicians knew where the line was, and what happened to you if you crossed it. Under the Zenawi government, certain things are guaranteed to get one in trouble, but its not always clear, and one never knows what the consequences might be, and how severe for expressing an opinion.

This mixed message style is further illustrated by the relationship between the government and other popular musicians like Teddy Afro, Ali Birra, and Khamer Yusuf. Teddy Afro, officially jailed by the government for a supposed hit-and-run in which a vehicle, was widely believed to have been jailed over the political content of some of his songs.[76] People like Ali Birra and Khamer Yusuf are well known supporters of the OLF. They both live in Canada, and yet they continually return to Ethiopia to give concerts (Khamer Yusuf even lives there off and on). My companions that evening claimed that the only reason the government allows them

[76] http://www.freemuse.org/sw26658.asp

to come back and not arrest them is because of two factors; the revenue they make for the country, and the desire to appear tolerant—at least in international eyes—of even the most fervent OLF supporters. The interview closed with a reminder that what was being discussed was "so dangerous" that I ought not to talk to other people in the country about what I had heard. While there is no official censorship of political views, such concerns do not exactly sound like those of a people free to say what they like.

Conclusions

Oromo popular musicians are struggling to operate within a series of constraints that, although not always "official," are nonetheless enough real enough to inspire constant vigilance against expressing one's ethnic identity in a way that may be construed as supporting the OLF. Because of this, all musicians, even those who do not care for politics, and only want to explore and disseminate the wide scope of their own culture (like Ibrahim), must be careful. The Ethiopian government seems to know that overt censorship can cause a backlash, and that more covert means can help to elude "this paradoxical logic" (Scherzinger in Ritter and Daughtry eds. 2007: 105). In his book on censorship in Amharic speaking radio stations in Ethiopia, Bahirtas says that despite the constitutional article guaranteeing freedom of speech, the Ethiopia Radio and Television Agency issued a music directive in 2006 containing 17 articles intended to control and monitor the music played by the station. Of these articles, number 4(3) states that "the songs

that our station transmits shall not go against the honor and reputation of children, youth, women and nation, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia and have the effect of instigating dissent" (Bahirtas 2009: 28). Having the authority to censor anything that can be perceived as "instigating dissent" seems like a direct contradiction of freedom of speech, and in the case of the Oromo, could be the exact article used to prosecute them. And Bahirtas' text deals with Amharic speaking radio stations only. I can only imagine what sort of restrictions go into television and radio stations broadcasting in *Afaan Oromo* (there are one of each).

In his article on censorship after 9-11, Martin Scherzinger asks "Is the decision to withdraw music from the public willful, enforced, or both?" (Scherzinger in Ritter and Daughtry eds. 2007: 95). In the case of contemporary Oromo popular musicians, the memory of when and how the withdrawal of music (and indeed musicians), occurred, has implanted the fear which now causes them to make and enforce censorship on themselves. The aesthetics of censorship, therefore, concern not only what may or may not be heard, but also the process by which value is assigned to artistic material. The results of this value assignation can be heard in Oromo popular music, even if the content is consciously expurgated of anything that may be construed as controversial by the ears of those in power. The use of *Afaan Oromo,* and the importance musicians like Ibrahim place on going to rural areas to gather melodic and rhythmic material, testifies to the extreme value placed on them. Though accepted now, even the use of *Afaan Oromo* could, at one time, have landed one with a beating, were one impertinent enough to sing or speak it in the

classroom. Its use was, and to a certain degree still is, a performative act with strong political associations. Scherzinger argues that no artwork can exist without this internal process of valuation. He says:

> "The internal process of selecting, organizing, and assigning value to artistic material constitutes a field of aesthetic and political judgments without which there can be no artwork" (ibid., 93).

I have also shown the restrictions placed on the popular music scene in terms of limited resources and technology. In an impoverished country, only a tiny percentage of Oromo could even hope to have access to the kind of technology to record and disseminate their music. And those that do have to deal with bias against the Oromo language and culture. The lack of any performance spaces or ability to organize themselves in Addis Ababa means that Oromo popular musicians must take extra precaution, in the form of pre-emptive self-censorship, to not incite the suspicion of those in charge. Likely because of this, the most common theme in Oromo popular music is love. While this is a popular theme in music all over the world, in the case of the Oromo, it is also a strategy utilized to keep musicians and other performers out of trouble.

All societies practice censorship in some form or another (Drewett and Cloonan 2006: 215). In terms of the relationships between musicians and state power, they can either resist or be co-opted. In assessing this relationship we are compelled to ask questions like: "What is the nature of harm caused by art? . . . Does society's right to protect itself from harm (to safeguard its core values for example) surpass the rights of the individual?" (Scherzinger in Ritter and Daughtry eds. 2007:

109). Is there in fact a tension between the aspirations of art and the institutions of censorship that they work against? Art and music have long tested the limits of social custom and laws, and those Oromo who use music to "probe their fault lines and weaknesses" (ibid., 112) run the risk of paying the ultimate price to do so.

In February of 2010, while I was still in Ethiopia, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi decided to block the Amharic radio program Voices of America, comparing it to the Rwandan Interhamwe (the privately owned Rwandan radio station that one year prior to the genocide, began calling for violence against the Tutsi ethnic group). Zenawi accused it of trying to de-stabilize the country. Many accused Zenawi of pulling the same old predictable action he has taken before when the political goings are tough. Not only was it an election year in which tensions were high and allegations of corruption flooded both the ruling and opposition parties, but the story of his rebel group's use of food aid to purchase weapons in 1984 was receiving national attention.[77] While I cannot completely corroborate all of the claims made by my many informants who had accused the government of various atrocities, it was incredibly troubling news to encounter in the local English speaking papers. Even though many pointed out that this action seemed to directly contradict the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression (an observation made by the U.S. government), the Zenawi administration still claimed that it was acting in the interests of democracy, the Ethiopian people, and the peace. I'm afraid I must ask; is

[77] For a basic overview of all this, see the following website. http://allafrica.com/stories/201003251162.html

the free circulation of ideas antithetical to democracy and peace, or a core feature of it?

Chapter 6
The Diaspora

> The formation of a diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. Together these stressed actions strive to open up new spaces of discursive and performative postcolonial consciousness.
>
> -- Okwui Enwezor

Tamrat was on his way to becoming a part of the Oromo diaspora, but for his own safety, he couldn't even tell me. He was one of the editors of Addis Neger (Amharic for "new thing") a popular newspaper based in Addis Ababa. I had first met him at a US Embassy function, and was surprised to meet an Oromo who explained to me why he wasn't an Oromo nationalist, but an Ethiopian nationalist. He seemed to have a great number of contacts and was very interested in my project. I thought he was going to be perhaps THE primary contact through which all future fieldwork and contacts would come. He is very fluent in English, and extremely well read. As such, every meeting we had at a coffee shop, or indeed even in my own home, was quite a pleasure. He is also very familiar with American television and movies. He once explained to me ethnic relations between Oromo and non-Oromo by quoting an episode of the television show "Scrubs." In the episode, a Caucasian female character is overhearing the wedding plans of a Hispanic co-worker. Hearing about all the festivities and traditions rooted in her co-worker's heritage, the Caucasian woman exclaims to herself longingly "Damn! I wish I was ethnic." Tamrat

said this is exactly the state of mind his Amharic friends would be in when attending an Oromo wedding or holiday event. “In a very similar way, my friends would say they wished *they* had culture,” said Tamrat. “This is amusing because outside of Ethiopia, their culture is the primary one that is known. But since it is not considered “cultural,” or “ethnic,” but just “normal,” they look jealously at what they perceive to be genuine culture.”

Tamrat came to my home to tell me that he had won a scholarship prize, and that he would be in New York for a couple of weeks studying journalism. He gave me a few phone numbers, we had tea, and he left. After over a month of not hearing from him I began to wonder if everything was all right. One of my housemates came home in the afternoon and showed me a story she had found on-line about Tamrat. Apparently, his newspaper was in trouble with the government for printing stories critical of it. Tamrat and one of the other editors had received word, somehow, that the government was planning to arrest them on some new laws through which they could imprison them for a long while. The US Embassy granted Tamrat asylum, but he was not to tell anyone the details. He was lucky to escape before being arrested by Ethiopian authorities. When I later went on-line to show my wife Jill the story, the web-site was blocked by the government.

So within two months of being in Ethiopia, one of my primary contacts had to flee the country for fear of imprisonment because of his newspaper’s criticism of the government. This knowledge was, I must admit, a bit frightening, and was only the beginning of endless stories/examples I would accrue that impressed upon me the

fact that I must watch what I do and say. The "policed self," very much a part of Oromo social consciousness, was something I was starting to understand personally. Tamrat is now at Bucknell University, where he is continuing his studies, as well as being a critical voice against the Ethiopian government. In speaking with him since I have been back in the country, it is clear that the happiness of being in a country with free expression is counter-balanced by the painful psychological weight of exile. For many Oromo, this conflicted state of mind IS the diaspora.

In the diaspora, away from the persecutions of successive Ethiopian regimes, the Oromo are more fully able to organize themselves *as* Oromo. With the foundation of the Oromo Studies Association in 1986, numerous Oromo scholars working on Oromo history and culture, and the freedom to criticize the Ethiopian government, one could argue that in many ways the focus of an emerging Oromo identity lay outside Oromia (Gow 2002: 63). In this chapter I will discuss my experiences with both Oromo-centered organizations, as well as individual scholars and musicians. In doing so I will explore the role of these various organizations and their ideologies to get a clearer understanding of the processes of social formation contributing to the diasporic identity of the Oromo, whose influence reaches all the way back to Oromia. With the newfound freedoms of their adopted homes in places like the U.S., Canada, Norway, Germany and Australia, the resulting Oromo music, according to Asafa Jalata, represents a new chapter in Oromo cultural nationalism (ibid., 64).

In many ways "diasporas depend on expressive cultural practice for their very existence" (Turino in Turino & Lea eds. 2004: 4). With the dispersion of a cultural group from an original homeland to multiple host sites, the impetus towards *Oromummaa* is arguably greater in the diaspora than in Oromia. Artistic practices, especially music, play a huge role in solidifying *Oromummaa* on a personal, social and political level. For this reason, most of this chapter will deal with my experiences at various Oromo academic and cultural events, particularly in Minneapolis. But first, I will give a brief account of the relatively recent history of the Oromo diaspora.

Movements of a Nation without a State

While there have long been movements of Oromo peoples away from their homeland, a specifically "Oromo" diaspora in which a large forced migration (rather than isolated sporadic ones) occurs is in the 1960s. And yet even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there are records of mass forced migration of Oromos across southern Ethiopia as a result of the consolidation of Amharic imperial rule. The earliest archival evidence of this dates back to 1910, when the British recorded four thousand Borana Oromos fleeing to the British East Africa Colony (Kenya) in an effort to escape the Abyssinian *nafxanya-gabbar* system (Bulcha 2002: 159). Documents from the British and Kenyan archives maintain that from 1910 to 1935, the Ethiopian government maintained a claim on the Oromo refugees, and sought to forcibly repatriate them. Fortunately for the refugees, the

British colonists (in a somewhat ironic stance given its status as a harsh imperial colonizer), saw forced repatriation as morally objectionable. Interestingly, the Oromo refugees saw their movement to Kenya not as an external, but an internal displacement, since Oromo speaking communities can be found from central Ethiopia to northern Kenya (ibid., 160).

The first large-scale movements of Oromo people, relocating specifically because of the complications arising from their identities as Oromo, began in the 1960s. As neighboring countries like Somalia, Sudan and Kenyan won their independence, the Oromo were making similar calls for equal rights and citizenship in Ethiopia. These grievances were voiced through two social movements, the Macha Tulama Self-Help organizations (already discussed previous chapter) and the Bale peasant uprising (in which Oromo peasants reacted against the exploitative system of the *nafxagna-gabbar* system). The resultant persecution of Oromos by the government led to the mass flight of refugees in large numbers (ibid., 164). The leasing of Oromo lands to commercial farmers pushed its inhabitants further away into less hospitable climates. Some of the internally displaced became externally displaced, by crossing the Somali border and joining armed liberation/resistance movements there. The association with the Macha Tulama with Oromo nationalism, and its subsequent illegalization, forced Oromo nationalist sentiment underground in its nascent stages.

In 1974, the overthrow of the Derg had many Oromo excited, feeling that the end of imperial domination and the beginning of cultural and economic freedom

was nigh. Sadly, despite the support of the revolution by Oromo and other oppressed groups, the new socialist military government proved to be a disaster on almost every level. Although the *nafxagna-gabbar* system was dismantled, the nationalization of land saw even greater taxation on the rural Oromo. Though initially sympathetic to the plight of Ethiopia's oppressed minorities, the Derg's Marxist ideology (which saw economic equalization as the key to mitigating Ethiopia's internal problems) came to see ethno-nationalist movements as "counter-revolutionary," and labeled them "narrow nationalists." In 1977 the Derg unleashed its first Red Terror (*kay shibir* in Amharic) in which even suspected dissidents were brutally massacred, often in public settings. Two results of this atrocity were the founding of the Oromo Libration Front, and the mass exodus of young and educated people from Ethiopia (ibid., 167-168).

Most Oromo were, and still are, forced to relocate in one of Ethiopia's neighboring countries (Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, and the majority to Somalia). Only a small number went to the Middle East, North America, Europe and Australia, and even these only established a substantial exilic population by the year 2000 (Gow 2002: 9). With the overthrow of the Derg in 1991, there was yet another chance to establish full participation and representation of Ethiopia's many ethnic groups in Ethiopia's newly forming, and a Transitional Charter was written up to this effect. As with the Derg, this would not last. In late May/early June the OLF attended the London Conference in which the terms of the four-year Transitional Government would be set. In July 1991 in Addis Ababa at the Peace and Democracy Conference,

the transitional charter was adopted. After having negotiated peace and encamping their soldiers, the agreement was violated when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) moved into previously OLF held regions of Oromia and began violently clashing with them (ibid.). The OLF was forced to go underground, and a combined Tigray and OPDO force systematically rounded up suspected OLF and their sympathizers and had them imprisoned, tortured, or extra-judicially killed, events which were reported by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other human rights monitors (Bulcha 2002: 170, Gow 2002: 9). Thus, in 1992, yet another wave of Oromo forced migration commenced as the Tigray-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), headed by Meles Zenawi, set up to crush what it also labeled "narrow nationalism." It was in this post 1992 wave of exile that the majority of the Oromo artists and musicians I interviewed in diaspora left their homeland.

Over 500,000 exiled Oromo are now scattered around the Middle East, North America, Europe and New Zealand, the majority having left in the 1990s (Bulcha 2002: 218). Some of the major problems for Oromo in Ethiopia's neighboring countries is the danger posed in getting to the destination, the possibility of getting sent back, and even cross-border raids where Ethiopian soldiers cross the Ethiopian border to kill Oromo exiles.[78] Sudan had a generous refugee policy in the 1970s and 1980s, but with the expulsion of the Oromo Relief Association in 1998, things have

[78] It is Ethiopia's neighbor to the south, Kenya, which has had the most problems to this effect. Yet because Ethiopia is the mightiest military in the region, few dare to protest.

gotten worse. Since 1983 Djibouti has, at the forceful request of the Ethiopian government, been forcibly returning Oromo refugees to Ethiopia. The latest "refoulement" as it was known, was in the year 2000, and sent back over 1000 Oromos. Because of the lack of safety, killings, rapes, and slavery by border guards and officials is quite common. Although the Somali government was welcoming to the Oromo, it refused to recognize their Oromo identity, registering them as Somali and even banning the use of the Oromo language in refugee camps (ibid., 173-176).

As early as the 1970s in Europe, Oromo communities and scholars were beginning to set up both self-help and scholarly associations, many of which continue to be the driving ideological force behind the preservation and dissemination of Oromo culture. One of the primary goals of the more academic organizations is to write against Ethiopianist historical claims that denigrate the Oromo culture, labeling them outsiders, invaders, pagans and barbarians. Wanting to present a clearer picture of Oromo history and culture, organizations like the Oromo Studies Association (1986), have aimed "to valorize what was denigrated" (ibid., 196). It is to my personal experience at an international meeting of the OSA in Minneapolis that I now turn.

The Oromo Studies Association Conference, Minneapolis 2008

I was first introduced to the Oromo via the major works of Asafa Jalata (Jalata 1993) and Mohammed Hassen (Hassen 1994). Asafa Jalata is a sociologist whose work on the Oromo focuses largely on understanding the larger social, economic

and political forces shaping ethno-national formation and its consequent anti-colonial struggles. Mohammed Hassen's most famous text (Hassen 1994) is a historical work exploring the Oromo and their culture from the sixteenth century until the beginning of Amhara colonization. Both are still active in the Oromo Studies Association in many capacities (publishing, editing, lecturing). After years of studying Ethiopian music in a variety of forms since the beginning of graduate school, I was fascinated at how an ethnic majority in a modern nation-state could not only be completely unknown even in a great deal of Ethiopian studies, but how a majority could become socially, economically, and politically disenfranchised in a manner similar to ethnic minorities in the West. How was this historical dominance of the *Habeshas* achieved? How did this shape Oromo music, and how was Oromo music being used in reaction to such external pressures? I was living in San Diego at the time, and managed to locate Asfaw Beyene, an Oromo professor of physics at San Diego State University. He said that he couldn't be of much help with music specifically, but that I should attend the OSA bi-annual conference in Minneapolis. The highest concentration of Oromo in the U.S. is in Minneapolis. As such, it has become a central location for meetings of Oromo scholars and students, as well as musical performances by Oromo musicians expressing nationalist sentiments. I was to meet many scholars in person that I'd previously only spoken with via email. In my mind, this conference was the test of whether or not I would pursue Oromo music as a dissertation topic, knowing full well that since mine would be the first dissertation on Oromo music, it would be an incredible challenge.

Everyone agreed that this was an interesting topic, but nobody (at the time) mentioned the possibility of having any government related difficulties unless I walked around asking about the OLF. I found this odd since many of the presentations themselves centered around the Ethiopian governments past and present as a force inimical (and sometimes hostile) to Oromo cultural, economic and political progress. There was even one lecture recounting the life of an Oromo activist who, despite moving to Germany, was almost assassinated by the Ethiopian government at the time. The government actually sent an assassin to Germany to kill him, but the assassin didn't go through with it. I had certainly never considered that the Ethiopian government might have any sort of international reach like this. There was a lecture given of Oromo music, which only made me more interested in the topic because not one musical example was played, it was more a discussion of the poetry. I spoke briefly with the speaker and received yet another confirmation that Oromo music was a great research topic, and that I would find no shortage of instances to demonstrate the link between music and nationalism.

More than any other conference I've been to before or since, there was a palpable sense of urgency and the direct correlation of every panel and paper to everyday concerns of Oromo on an everyday level. Panels ranged on everything from the struggle against iodine deficiency by Begna Dugassa, to why all Oromo must have permanent last names (unlike the system now in which the fathers first name becomes the sons' last name, common throughout Ethiopia) by Haile Hirpa (Hirpa ed. 2009). And yet by far the most populated panel was the one of Oromo Art

as political resistance, featuring a paper on Oromo music and poetry by Demitu Argo. In it she discussed how Oromo music has played a pivotal role in the struggle against the policies of various *Habesha* governments, drawing parallels between that and the role South Africa's freedom song "Kosi Sikele'le Africa" (God Bless Africa) played in the anti-apartheid struggle there, as well as *chimurenga* music in Zimbabwe, *Maumau* songs in Kenya, and others from the Philippines and Tibet. "Through music," argued Demitu in her abstract, "Oromo artists have revealed and developed their social, political and moral identities" (Demitu in Hirpa ed. 2009: 85). Beyond offering an avenue for political and cultural resistance, Oromo musicians have also done much to keep dying traditions alive. One of these traditions, the *gadaa* system, was of great concern to Ali Birra, perhaps the most internationally renowned Oromo singer/musician. In one song he even sang "karaan mannii Abbaa Gadaa eessaa?" which asks, "where is the pathway that leads to the Gadaa hall?" Argo claims "Ali's work paved the way for the contemplation and the study of Gadaa system in particular, as well as Oromo culture in general" (ibid., 88).

It was during this point of the conference that I was at once excited that Oromo music was such a rich and largely academically unexplored topic, and a bit nervous as to how I might come to have anything to say on the matter, given the rather unsafe situation that was being reinforced through presentation after presentation concerning revolution, torture, and imprisonment. In speaking to panelists and scholars I was told that simply going to study Oromo music or culture would not necessarily throw up any red flags to the Ethiopian government, but

warned that I better make sure that I don't mention the OLF or nationalist politics. They said that even a study not dedicated to music and nationalism would still be of great importance, since Oromo music was hardly written about at all. This, combined with the advice of Kay Kaufman Shelemay (Ethiopianist scholar, G. Gordon Watts Professor of Music and Professor of African and African American studies at Harvard) and her husband Jack Shelemay that the political angle would be a "real non-starter," I decided to try and pursue a more cultural, politically neutral angle. Whether fortunately or unfortunately, this did not work out. As much as I wanted to stay away from politics and a presentation of the Oromo as one side of a hostile binary against the *Habeshas*, these proved to be the primary forces that shaped my experiences. After those experiences (detailed in the previous chapters), I again returned to Minneapolis, this time to attend a concert. I went, armed with both a personal experience of the tense and oppressive atmosphere of inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopia, but also with a newfound sense of the importance of the role artistic/performative practices play for diasporic Oromo on both personal and group levels.

Minneapolis Concert 2011

This particular concert was at a Days Inn in Minneapolis, and I was told by Mohammed Hassen that if I went I would be able to interview a number of leading Oromo musicians. What I was especially interested in, besides meeting these Oromo musicians and having them sing for me, was ascertaining the purpose for this

concert in the first place. I was only told by Mohammed Hassen via email that I should get out to Minneapolis on that date to attend the concert, as I would find a number of important Oromo musicians there. But why were they having a concert in the first place? Just for fun?

Minneapolis in January is intimidating. Having spent my life in central and southern California, I was impressed by the cold that seemed to emanate from the very ground into my bone marrow. With all the Oromo immigrants originating from similar climate backgrounds as myself, I found it an easy point of departure for conversation. All of the interviews I had scheduled the day I arrived canceled, or the interviewees called later to say that had forgotten. I was already getting terrible flashbacks to fieldwork in Ethiopia. I had long ago considered that maybe nobody wanted to speak to me on this subject, and that the polite face and seeming interest were just to placate me while I was there. But all of the people I talked to seemed very excited to talk to me. I arrived at the Kelley Days Inn at 6pm, leaving plenty of time to interview anyone who was there early before the show started at 8pm. Instrument and stage set up did not start until 9pm.

Around 8pm, when people started arriving, I spoke with some college age Oromo youth about my experiences in Ethiopia doing fieldwork. It was definitively agreed upon that all of my troubles during fieldwork were completely the fault of the government, or the *Habeshas*. This was an opinion vocalized by some Oromo while I was doing fieldwork. Aynalem, my Afaan Oromo instructor for a short while, said that it was quite possible that although the government had allowed me to be in

the country studying Oromo culture, that they really did not approve and thus were trying to make it difficult for me. She warned me that while on campus I should not talk to any of the cleaning staff, as they were often informers for the government, especially during an election year. Ifa seconded this opinion, adding that the person who spit on me near Arat Kilo could only have been an Amhara, as the Oromo were incapable of such lack of civility. My new Oromo companions that evening in Minneapolis enthusiastically agreed with these assessments. As the sound check went on, Dagim Makonen and Mohammed Sheika arrived. They were the two main people I was supposed to interview. Both said that it would have to wait until the next day (the day I was leaving). The stage was ready to go, only a keyboard, a bass guitar and two microphones. The room was mostly split between two rather conspicuous demographics; the college age Oromo dancing, and the middle-aged Oromo sitting at the many tables behind the dance floor watching and talking. The concert, I later found out, was for both groups of people, but aimed primarily at those older Oromo sitting and talking.

The first performer, Mohammed Sheika, was described to me as having a great deal of political music. His songs did not disappoint in this regard. His first song sung after the relatively small crowd let out a relatively large and enthusiastic cry as he took the stage, translates as follows:

> OLF, the path, the light
> The vanguard, the truth
> You're bright
> Thou will lead me to Freedom
> You're determined to uproot

The Century old brute oppression and enslavement
You're born out of resistance
Survived and thrived by the blood of the patriots
We shall ensemble around your leadership
For you're the only hope for our Freedom
OLF is the vanguard leader
For the struggle of the Oromo people
The flame for Freedom is lit and passed from generation to generation
Let's all follow this Leadership
We rely and depend on you
Ensemble around you
For you are the cradle
The Foundation of the struggle
For building Oromia by Oromos for Oromos
For liberating Oromia from a century old subjugation
We seek your guidance
For you are the hope for the achievement of our goal
For liberty and Freedom.[79]

Sonically this piece is, or course, firmly in popular music territory. The use of the drum track sound of the keyboard is a big part of the Oromo sound, though it could hardly be considered unique since there has been an increasingly widespread global use of digitized drum-tracks in a great deal of popular musics in the Global South (Greene in Greene & Porcello eds. 2005: 13). The timbre heard in the melodic aspects of the song is one that I never learned the name of, though it is clearly available on multiple types of keyboards. It seems to have the timbre of more than one instrument on it, giving it a fuller sound, though the primary timbral characteristic is brass. Often this melodic element will go back and forth between doubling the melody of the singer, and punctuating spaces in between lines of text

[79] See CD track 16 "Minneapolis-4." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.

with short melodic phrases.[80] Although this sound doesn't seem to be well liked by many of the Western ears I have exposed this music to, there must be some reason why Oromo seem to gravitate towards it. As I said, even when I have seen different brands or models of keyboards used, something approximating this sound is always used for melody and melodic embellishments in Oromo popular music. What this may be, I cannot say.

While sonically the piece sounded very much like something I would have heard in Ethiopia, the text is something I would almost certainly not have. The ideas it expressed are also clearly the reason why. The OLF is considered by the Ethiopian government to be a terrorist organization. Singing its praises would, and has as we've seen earlier, land its singer in a very dangerous situation. This is why, as I have claimed, in the diaspora there is a great deal more political music, because there can be. All of the songs were performed by a bass guitarist, a keyboardist, and a singer.[81] It was a fairly small conference room in a hotel, but his just helped encourage the kind of intimacy and group participation that is key to such events. Some would occasionally go down the hall to the bar, but would come right back to dance. It was in the dancing that I could see a major link between my experiences in the rural areas, the performances of Biftu, and the diaspora. I could see the dances of multiple regions, from Jimma, to Shewa, to the more well known (to me anyway)

[80] See CD track 16 "Minneapolis-4." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.
[81] See photograph 27.

Arsi. Dancers did both the circular and line formations[82]. I could not help but think of watching the government-sponsored group Biftu. In their performances, the dancing was very well choreographed, keeping to the major gender dynamics and physical movements of the dance, while adding in transitions and shifts to increase the dramatic input it would have on stage. Here in Minneapolis, there was no such choreography, but they were dancing to music that, if performed in Ethiopia, would land both the performers and the audience in a world of trouble. I found one of the young (college age) Oromo men with whom I was speaking earlier in the evening and relayed this thought to him. "Oh yes," he said, "here we can truly be Oromos!" This deep satisfaction with the freedom to express one's self probably accounted for the pleasure many seemed to take in singing along with the highly nationalistic songs. Even without the political nationalism, the joy in expressing cultural pride was clearly a major factor of the evening.

The evening ended around one o'clock in the morning, when hotel staff came in and said that they could not play anymore since their allotted time was up and that hotel guests were starting to complain about the raucous noise. Everyone was allowed the joy of an encore, and I returned to my hotel in a taxi. Because I did not yet know the purpose behind having this concert, I did not know whether or not it had achieved its goal. If the goal was simply to celebrate Oromo identity freely and enjoy, then it seemed as though this was achieved. But I was told by Mohammed Hassen to come to this concert specifically, this after a long conversation about

[82] See photographs 28 and 29.

Oromo music and politics. I was told by Sheika, in an interview with him the next morning, that the purpose of the concert was to bring together two groups of Oromo leaders that had been in a disagreement.

The next day I interviewed Mohammed Sheika. He verified to me that the link I had suspected was of great importance between the musical and the social in Oromo culture, was indeed strong, and indeed crucial to both the personal and the group mentality. He was born in 1972 near Harer. He started singing in school at age fourteen. He won a district singing competition and used his newfound fame to join the Goa Band based in Harer at only seventeen years old. After performing with them for a while, he went back to his home district and began his recording career. Echoing what I knew about the current relationship between Oromo music and recording studios and music shops, Sheika said at first "they ignored me, and gave me a cheap price." Also echoing the claims of the popular musicians I had interviewed before I left Addis Ababa, he claimed "When you compare it with world rhythm, there is much in common with our rhythm." He also claimed that in Oromia, there is music for everything. "Songs from cattle, to weddings, to preparing food, to riding a donkey are a part of Oromo life" (Sheika 1/9/11).

Sheika also discussed girarsa as being of primary importance. He sang a girarsa for me. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, girarsa is a type of folksong that was originally sung by warriors returning from a successful hunt, or preparing for war, to becoming utilized by nationalists to engender support for the cause. The girarsa translates:

> This is praise for a warrior. Bravery is praised not only by mothers and peers but even by birds of prey.
>
> Man's bravery is measured by his ability to travel to the unforgiving land of the wilder beast and kill big games like wild buffalo, lion, elephant etc with spear and return home safely.
>
> He who achieves will attain the highest social status (marries the most beautiful girl, etc) in the community. He is the true hero.[83]

This particular girarsa even calls attention to traditional contexts/uses of the song style. In doing so he also makes use of imagery that recalls the rural Oromo past (e.g. wild buffalos, lions, elephants). Like the girarsa I heard while in Ethiopia, the rhythm is free, largely dictated by the text, and features a primary recitation tone around which melismatic embellishment is set. The themes of bravery, warrior prowess, and hunting are of course central. Heroism is defined, at least in part, by ones ability to attain status within the community. It is not difficult to understand why this particular song type eventually became one of the primary performative avenues for the expression of political dissent.

In terms of his political music Sheika, like many others in the early 1990s during the period of the transitional government, was imprisoned twice. "I released my CD in 1993, and that year they took a lot of people to jail, even those who just listened to the political music," said Sheika. The first time he was imprisoned in 1993 was after this performance of a song with the following lyrics:

> O, Sons of Oromo
> How many have enslaved us
> Sat on our heads

[83] See CD track 18 "Minneapolis-12." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.

Devoid of our rights
Did every evil to us
Enough is enough
We stand up for our rights
We say NO MORE
NO MORE subjugation, being driven like a donkey
Every Oromo of all the 11 Regions
Is nothing but a Warrior
Brave and staunch defender
We will defeat our enemies
Be Joyous and Victorious.[84]

This landed him in prison for two years, but served only to further solidify his nationalist proclivities. In 1997 he, along with two other musicians, was imprisoned for one month for his performance of the following lyrics on stage:

Rise, wake up Oromo
Fight for your right, dignity and Freedom
We have learned from history of liberation struggles
That Freedom comes through struggle and resistance
Fight with your machete, stone, and sling
For the wall shielding the oppressor is rotten & leaning.[85]

After being released from prison, after a relatively short period of time, he decided to flee the country. With the help of a government worker with the OPDO, who shall remain nameless, he was taken from Addis Ababa to Moyale, a town on the Ethiopia/Kenya border (a drive that took a couple of days). From there he crossed into Kenya and made his way to Nairobi, where he stayed until he was able to declare asylum in and go to Norway. "Some of my family was in a refugee camp in Kenya at the time, so I stayed with them until I could file the paperwork to declare asylum or resettlement," Sheika told me. This process took him a while. "It was hard

[84] See CD track 19 "Minneapolis-13." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.
[85] See CD track 19 "Minneapolis-13." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.

in Norway, I didn't like it. It is too cold," he commented, noting that Minneapolis was not that much warmer. "I used my family connections in the U.S. to come here and declare asylum," he said. Once again, as in Kenya, the fact that some of his family had already been scattered or relocated had helped him greatly. Now that he is here, he performs all over the U.S. (Minneapolis, Washington D.C.), in Canada (mostly Toronto), and even in Norway (Bergen, Skevanger and Oslo) for the Oromo communities living there. So what is the purpose of the efforts of him and a handful of other musicians in continuing to make this music?

"Our purpose is to help the community." He said about the night before that "We have many Oromo political groups, but they're always fighting with each-other. We perform on stage to bring them together as a group." The "we" here are musicians and others who are part of the Oromo Artists Association, established in 2006 by various performers, writers, photographers etc. Among their stated goals are; developing and enhancing Oromo cultural and ethnic heritage, encouraging professional growth and development of all Oromo artists, and providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and methods[86]. The primary disagreements stem from the OLF, which itself is divided. That half of the room that I had seen at the concert the night before, were members of the Oromo community who were having some disagreements over policy issues. "We did this in Washington D.C. too" Sheika said, referring to a New Year's concert he gave in which disagreeing factions of the Oromo community there were putting a strain on the Oromo community. And yet, it

[86] http://oromoartists.org/

is not always about the political. The primary role of a musician in the diaspora, according to Skeika, is as an agent of memory.

"We perform to keep this culture and this language alive," said Sheika. He said that he spent $11,000 on an album he recorded in 2009 that saw no significant returns. He also mentioned that in Ethiopia, Oromo music has similar problems, where Oromo musicians cannot get a lot of money for their musical endeavors. "Even Ali Birra, our top musician, is still poor. Especially in Oromia, the music shops will not pay very much money for something in Afaan Oromo" he said, further bolstering the assertions of the musicians I spoke with in Ethiopia. It is more important that they keep the language alive. This is still fresh in the minds of many Oromo who I have met, who were not allowed to speak their language in public schools in Ethiopia. As mentioned by Demitu Argo (Demitu in Hirpa ed. 2009) Ali Birra played a large role in encouraging people to research and maintain the *gadaa* system.

Ali Birra and Khamer Yusuf are two musicians whose music features Oromo nationalist themes quite prominently. I asked why it was that these two were allowed to sing Oromo nationalist songs in Ethiopia. Sheika explained "A lot of Oromo refugees live in Nairobi, Djibouti, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia. When Khamer sings in Ethiopia, the government wants to show this because it makes people think that the Oromo have rights, hoping that some of them will come back. They (the Ethiopian government) have asked me twice to perform in such a way," claimed Sheika. A member of the OPDP named Feysal, working at the Ethiopian embassy in

Washington D.C., approached Sheika with an offer. Sheika paraphrased him as saying "The OLF is destroyed. If you come back, I will set up a stage for you to perform, I will give you a car, a house in Addis Ababa and Nazret." Sheika refused. So what is his opinion on the future of Oromia? Should Oromia become its own country, or is it possible to live as an Oromo and Ethiopian?

"Oromo people ARE Ethiopian people, but we do not have the rights we need and deserve in our country. We don't need to cut Oromia away from Ethiopia, but we need to have equal rights," he responded. "When I was a young school child, about ten, myself and some other students were forced to go to a local soccer field where we witnessed sixty four blindfolded people being shot," said Sheika referring to an incident in which the Derg used public execution to make sure the young Oromo knew the consequences of being an Oromo before being an Ethiopian. Sheika is not the only musician who was described to me by others as "very nationalist," who turned out to be more of a cultural nationalist with an extreme distaste for politics. Another was Dagim Makonen.

Dagim Makonen. Currently thirty-nine, was born in the western region of Wellega. Although he grew up hearing music often, he did not begin singing until relatively late, at age twenty. In 1997 he obtained the much coveted DV, or diversity visa, which brought him to the U.S. "I declared asylum because of the situation in Ethiopia. I'm sure you've seen what is going on there, so that's why I stayed here," said Dagim. That evening he performed one of the most famous songs from the

Wellega region, "Iyase."[87] Although he was described to me as a political singer, he expressed an extreme dislike of politics. While he may be a nationalist, he is more of a cultural one, not particularly caring for politics. He does say about the relationship between Oromo music and nationalism, "I cannot separate the two." Under colonization, music was one of the primary ways to continue to maintain older cultural practices, maintain their language, and voice their dissent, even if only amongst safe company. He remembers that he was not allowed to speak Afaan Oromo in school, and was told he must sing the national anthem in Amharic. Additionally, all of the courts are run in Amharic[88], so they can't even sue somebody or have access to justice. In an effort to retain his language and his culture, Dagim says that music is among the best vehicles through which to do so. Unfortunately, life in the US necessitates working long hours simply to survive, and leaves little time and money for musical endeavors.

"I have to work, pay my bills, and there is little time for music. It is not like when I was back home where I had more time," said Dagim. Although he celebrated by Oromo internationally, he wishes he had the money to do the kind of research that he feels needs to be done on Oromo music. Working full time on an assembly line for a medical manufacturing company, however, leaves little possibility that either more money or more time will soon come his way. "I don't have money to pay for instruments to create my own band. But if I can get money I can keep this culture

[87] See CD track 17 "Minneapolis -9." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.
[88] This is changing now.

for the next generation, by research, by training. Oromo music is partly about preserving our culture, but it is also about bringing the plight of the Oromo to the attention of the world" (Makonen 1-13-11). And yet, he mentioned that he hates being expected to be political all of the time, and wishes he could just make Oromo music. In discussing the breadth and depth of Oromo music, he imparted to me the urgency of doing what can be done to save the culture, and giving me some of the few reassuring words that the work I was doing was important.

"Music is the most important thing to me. Oromo music is huge, it is an ocean. We have to do a lot of homework. Music is a good thing for the nation. People like you working on this subject make me happy, and I want to thank you. Keep going. Oromo music is an undiscovered goldmine. I am with you" he said. This remark was similar to what Asafa Jalata had said in an interview when he encouraged me to continue with Oromo studies despite my difficulties. "It (Oromo Studies) is fertile ground, and we are proud to have you with us, and we are with you" said Jalata in an interview (Jalata 9/26/10). One of the ways in which Oromo scholars and musicians alike have attempted to present this huge field to Oromo and non-Oromo has been with the establishment of an online presence. Besides functioning as a repository of culture, it is also a mechanism by which diaporic communities maintain international dialogue.

Oromo online

Another significant feature of the diaspora is the on-line presence. Its significance is not lost on the Ethiopian government either, since all of the sites I will mention are blocked in Ethiopia.[89] These websites are definitely semiotic battlefields, in which alternative histories and claims made by the Oromo are draped in Oromo symbols, language, and expressions. Like in other diasporic communities, new electronic media are important in connecting trans-national communities, providing a "common semiotic environment" (Turino in Turino and Lea eds. 2004: 8). This is a compelling example of the displacement of peoples (in this case the displacement of Oromo immigrants and refugees) challenges the isomorphism of space, place and culture. As Akhil and Ferguson have observed, "peoples" and "cultures" are ceasing to be plausibly identified as places on a map. "The irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps more salient" (Akhil & Ferguson 1992: 10). This is well demonstrated in the Oromo diaspora, where claims to a specific homeland and a united Oromo culture are part of the dialogue of Oromo identity. In this case an alternate version of history in the Horn of Africa has served as a "symbolic anchor" (ibid., 11) of the

[89] Besides being incredibly slow, the Internet in Ethiopia is also apparently heavily monitored. Not only was I told this by Ethiopians but even the person leading the Ethiopia section of the Fulbright IIE pre-departure orientation, who has been working in Ethiopia on and off for years. I was told that emailing sensitive material was never a good idea. This added to my claustrophobia as the months went by when I needed to tell my primary advisor about the problems I was having, but couldn't do so in any real detail.

Oromo community, one that despite the attempts of the Ethiopian government to block it, is informing the discussion in Ethiopia as well. It is my contention that these internet sites are a kind of performative space, in which being Oromo is as much an act of *becoming* Oromo through articulating the terms of one's self-conception of identity.

The web presence of various factions of the Oromo community in diaspora range from those whose primary aim is to inform about the Oromo people in general, and those with more immediate political aims or angles. All websites do contain a bit of both, which is likely why they are blocked in Ethiopia. One of the most comprehensive and interconnected is the gadaa.com.[90] Not only is the name itself thoroughly Oromo, but once on the web page, the upper-right hand corner displays possibly the most common visual symbol of the Oromo, the *Odaa* tree. The home page is filled with updated news briefs on Oromo uprisings in Ethiopia and the government's consequent crackdown, public demonstrations against the Zenawi regime in diaspora, stories of mass arrests, etc. There are even stories and opinion columns dedicated to drawing lessons from the uprisings that are, as of the writing of this dissertation, still sweeping across Arab North Africa. The graphics and artwork on the home page alone tell much of the story. Not only does one see the *Odaa* tree, but also a cartoon referring the recent election in Ethiopia, in which a large and overbearing Meles Zenawi is depicted as forcing the hand of a small

[90] See bibliography for full website address.

helpless voter.[91] In the election that occurred shortly after I left Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi and his part won 99.6% of the vote. Not surprisingly, this is largely contested by the Oromo. In another cartoon, a map of Oromia has police crime scene tape over it.

Besides the many political cartoons and videos of rallies and demonstrations, perhaps the most threatening to the *Habesha* hegemony is the section one is brought to when one clicks on "Oromia and the Oromo People." This particular section presents Oromia in much the same way as the country profiles one can click on when on the BBC world news website. The more Oromo-centric presentation (quite idealized of course) is perhaps not as immediately and viscerally challenging as the photos and stories of atrocities in the state of Oromia, but are just as strong a challenge to the "Ethiopianist" histories still propagated today. In the overview it lists the capital as Finfinnee, the *Afaan Oromo* term for Addis Ababa. The primary language is *Afaan Oromo*, and the first religion it lists Waqqeffetna (the traditional animist belief) before Christianity or Islam. Right away the overview positions the Oromo as the largest ethnic group in the Horn of Africa, and details their subjugation under Abyssinian colonial rule. It points out that the uniqueness in their being colonized not by a European power, but a black African one with the aid of European power. The rest of the overview details the struggle and then refers you to a link to the book from which the thrust of the website's text is taken, Gadaa Melbaa's book (Melbaa 1999). Other links provide the browser with serious reports,

[91] See website.

conferences and academic papers written on Oromo topics. There are also links to books, events, and pictures related to the Horn of Africa in general, and local event guides.

Probably the most overtly political and nationalistic is the page for the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).[92] This page has an overview of the Oromo people that goes into even greater detail than the gadaa.com website, and focuses especially on the colonization of the Oromo at the hands of *Habeshas* with European money and weapons. The home page has links to stories in *Afaan Oromo* in the right-hand side of the page, and English on the left-hand side. The most recent incidents of violence against Oromos in Oromia are the primary updates. There is a section on the origins and objectives of the OLF, which include no less than the "inalienable right to self-determination." As if sensing that there would be an accusation of anti-*Habesha* sentiment, the statement is clearly made, "The OLF reiterates the struggle of the Oromo people is not directed against any people but the system of oppression." This point of clarification is nearly always made in nationalistic writings, and in discussions with nationalists I have had personally. In a section featuring links to *Afaan Oromo* and Amharic speaking radio programs, there are links to a number of videos in which the activities of the OLF still operating in Ethiopia can be seen, and are, of course, set to music. OLF soldiers can be seen dancing and singing to keep a positive attitude and continually reinforce unity. Pictures of the OLF can also be seen, with Oromo soldiers marching in the harsh Ogaden regions. Through these

[92] See website for full address.

links, one can find many videos of OLF activities, including one short piece by a Kenyan television station on the activities of the OLF, who are occasionally blamed for problems in northern Kenya.[93] Calls for mass demonstrations that have already passed still dot the webscape here.

The website for the Oromo Studies Association, by contrast, presents far less in terms of overtly nationalistic and/or politically charged photos and rhetoric. The upper left-hand corner still shows an *Odaa* type tree, but it is a photograph, not the exact symbol used other places. Next to this tree is a pile of books, and the first picture that acts as a backdrop for the introductory text is one of Oromo elder males sitting in a row wearing traditional clothing. While the mission of other organization like the OLF has a more political and confrontational tone and set of objectives, the OSA site defines their mission in terms of promoting studies relevant to the Oromo people. They define their primary objectives as:

> -Develop and promote serious scholarship on the history, economy, culture, health, education, politics, law, and social welfare of the Oromo people.
> -Promote critical thinking and well-rounded intellectual life among scholars of the Oromo studies.
> -Provide a forum for Oromo scholars to cooperate and support each other.
> -Provide the opportunity and mechanisms for non-Oromo scholars to actively participate in the development of scholarship about the Oromo people.
> -Identify and solicit resources and research funds for scholarly works for Oromo Studies.

While these websites are not necessarily centered around music, it does feature prominently on many of the websites. Links to YouTube videos of Oromo

[93] See website..

music or places to keep abreast of the latest albums and concerts do play a role in the presentation of Oromo identity. Even though these sites are not entirely centered on music, they are incredibly performative, an amalgamation of self-circumscription and identification. As Deborah Wong says, "the performative is a consequence of the performance: performance constructs new critical realities and the operationalization of the process of performance is key to this" (Wong 2004: 5). With a set of rural, partially idealized, pre-Amharization identity markers (e.g. the *gadaa* system, the *Erecha* ceremony, the *Odaa* tree), the Oromo are consciously conscripting aspects of an Oromo culture for expressive AND instrumental purposes. Besides helping to establish a discourse for Oromo on a personal level, Oromo are using "information sharing and resource mobilization in order to make their claims heard and felt by the international community (Bulcha 2002: 205).

On the future of the Oromo diasporic project

In creating a space reminiscent in some way of aspects of the "homeland," many diasporas throughout first world Western countries have struggled on a number of social levels to make sense of and in some way control the terms of their existence. Unlike my previous ethnographic work with an Ethiopian Orthodox Church in San Diego, whose members were strongly bonded through a primarily religious identity, many Oromo in diaspora seem to have largely defined their presence in cultural, ethno-linguistic terms. While there are some Orthodox Oromos, most are Muslim. Despite this, great effort is taken in OSA meetings and academic

writing to focus instead on the common histories and cultural practices of the various Oromo groups.

Public rallies to bring awareness of the plight of Oromo still in Ethiopia are also a major part of the Oromo diaspora. Greg Gow, in doing fieldwork among the Oromo in Australia, writes about the tensions between academic and activist goals. "Whether I like it or not, the political was forced onto the research agenda" (Gow 2002: 20). This proved to be exactly the same case with my research, both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora. Because of the hostilities, Gow initially sought be a sort of non-person, so as to avoid the tangles that he eventually had to deal with when he was told that the OLF were discussing him and was asked if he was just a researcher or if he would care to join the struggle. Coming of age in fields of study currently as interested in activism as ethnomusicology/anthropology, it was my natural desire to be an activist for the just cause of a peripheralized people. However, the U.S. government is still a firm ally of Ethiopia, and the OLF is considered a terrorist organization by the Ethiopian government. I recall that in my security briefing in Ethiopia, the OLF was listed as a terrorist organization by the US as well (at least in Ethiopia. It must be different here on US soil because the OLF have offices in Washington D.C. and meet in Minneapolis on a regular basis). Additionally, Meles Zenawi's Ethiopia is seen as a key ally in the US war against Islamic fundamentalism in the Horn of Africa. Thus, I'm in a difficult position. It is not only the political, but also academic difficulties that create a great sense of cognitive dissonance in my consideration of how and how much to support Oromo nationalist/liberationist

agendas. My feelings are best captured in the words of Gow, who under similar conditions wrote:

> While I support and would in no way pronounce as illegitimate the Oromo claims to nationhood, the following pages demonstrate my antipathy towards the overheated 'nativism' that underpins much of what passes as Oromo nationalist sensibilities. (ibid., 30).

He goes on to say:

> Nevertheless, even if anti-colonial nationalism, fueled by an indomitable will to difference, is theoretically 'outmoded,' it remains – as Franz Fanon militantly argued- the principle means by which the colonized culture overcomes the psychological damage of colonial domination" (ibid).

Foreign policy of the U.S. towards the Ethiopia has come under fire from Oromo academics as well, so far with very little success in changing policy. Hamdesa Tuso writes that the U.S. doctrine of supporting democracy and human rights around the world has been clearly demonstrated to be a selective sideshow (Tuso 2006: 150). He cites the example of the U.S. airstrike against Slobodan Milosevic to save two million Kosovo Albanians, and then asks "Is the US going to apply the same standard of ethnic persecution in Africa?" (ibid). He argues that since Portugal saved Abyssinia from Muslim invasion in the sixteenth century, Ethiopia has always depended on the West to save them from external and internal enemies. He argues that this is still the case, and that Mr. Benjamin A. Gilman, a Republican from New York and the chairman of the International Relations Committee of Congress, is the only American politician to have called on the U.S. to condemn the Zenawi regime (ibid., 182). So far, this has not happened. Tuso calls attention to the fact that recently, Oromo nationalism has been portrayed as a potential breeding ground for

Islamic fundamentalism. Is this just another example of the ruling elites using common interests to gain the support of the West?

As of the writing of this dissertation, no intervention on behalf of protection of the Oromo has taken place, despite the many investigations of human rights violations by the Zenawi regime (Smith 2007, United States 2005 and 2007). Nor has there been intervention in Sudan, though the vote of the south to split is due to create Africa and the world's newest nation in a few months. U.S. military intervention in Africa has occurred in Libya, where U.S. and allied forces have undertaken first to protect civilians, and recently to more proactively aid anti-Khadafy rebels. With continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a bad economy, the low morale and critical financial status of the U.S. makes it increasingly unlikely that the U.S. will intervene in Ethiopian politics any time soon. Though lacking the sovereignty of internationally recognized borders for their own political state, the Oromo have a very strong sense of themselves as a nation, and music functions as one of the primary vehicles through which this identity is both preserved and manifested.

Conclusions

"Cultural identity requires, as it were, a stage—a context—on which the performance can be enunciated;…"
--Greg Gow *The Oromo In Exile*

"Artists are to my mind the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact."
--William S. Burroughs

Music among the Oromo people of present day Ethiopia functions as a system for socio-cultural preservation, negotiation and resistance. I have shown how a century and a half of being largely in a subordinate economic/social role in present day Ethiopia has caused the music to be used as a means of exercising cultural memory and re-negotiating the past so as to aid their struggle in the present. In discovering the roots of the conditions in which these hierarchies were set in place, I have also shared a side of history in Ethiopia that has hitherto been largely unknown, even in academic circles. I therefore answered the question of how it is that the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, and the third largest in Africa, came to be almost completely unknown.

In providing an alternative history to that of the Orthodox Christian *Habeshas*, the Oromo have positioned themselves in such a way as to reclaim their ancestral past. In the context of the festival of Erecha, we saw how a number of different visual and audio markers are brought together in an effort to emphasize the common history and ethnicity of the many Oromo speaking groups, while de-emphasizing the importance of religion, regional dialect, etc. Music plays a large role in this festival, with Oromo music and dance from every region featured as one of

the primary non-traditional events. Music plays a similarly important role of memory, especially in rural areas. Disappearing modes of existence are remembered through song. Not only is an historical aspect of the culture remembered through song, but the act of singing in *Afaan Oromo* is itself a kind of defiance towards the hegemonic encroachment of Amharic as the official language.

The power of music to help create and sustain a sense of group identity was not lost on the Ethiopian governments with which it has had a bloody, and sometimes contradictory relationship. I have shown how under the Derg, the initial openness to the histories and place of non-Amharic peoples prompted them to put on a cultural show by and for the Oromo. The ensuing concert became one of the most important musical/national events in Oromo history. Themes of Oromo pride and anti-government sentiment, combined with the newfound sense of inter-ethnic unity has helped to feed the flames of nationalism and cultural pride ever since. And yet even during this time there were some Oromo who wrote songs during the Ethio-Somali was to bolster Ethiopian nationalism, only later to be arrested, disbanded and exiled by the very government who they helped, but were feared by.

When the transitional government and eventually the Zenawi government came to power, freedom of expression was officially enshrined in law. But of course in practice, it is widely acknowledged to be taking a great risk performing or even discussing certain topics (as evidenced by my interview with a government worker in Asele, and the imprisoned musician Giorgis). Oromo popular music has an especially hard time dealing with this, since there are no Oromo music schools or

dance clubs, or indeed any Oromo performance group allowed outside of the government sponsored group Biftu Oromia. And yet many I spoke with seemed to be torn as to whether this cultural performance troupe was a genuine act of preservation, or an attempt to keep and eye and a bit of control over the Oromo. I am in no position to say which of these it is, but given the often contradictory nature of many social endeavors in Ethiopia, it wouldn't surprise me if both were true.

Ultimately this dissertation, much like any attempt at analysis in any field, is an attempt to come to a greater understanding of some aspect of human existence. It was the very nature of the Oromo/Amhara ethnic conflict, and the circumstantial of how ethnicity seemed to be constructed that appealed to me personally. Just from reading the histories it seemed as if the driving force behind the creation/recognition of an Oromo identity was sometimes external to the Oromo themselves (i.e. Amhara colonization which circumscribed the Oromo as an individual group). And yet sometimes the force behind the essentially one-ness of Oromo identity (Jalata's *Oromummaa*) was in the hands of the Oromo themselves. However, it seems as though these attempts to widen or constrict the lens of group identity were always related to politics, class, and colonization. This idea that ethnic or group identity was circumstantial and/or fluid naturally appealed to someone like myself. I have often wondered if there were other approaches to a fluid sense of ethnic identity that didn't hold as much cognitive dissonance as my own. It seems as thought there is not.

Indeed, the dynamics of ethnicization seem to be similar all over the world. In her book on Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania, Lisa Malkki detailed how a group of exiled people, in different circumstances will desire to widen or constrict the lens of identity to suit their needs. Refugees that lived in the camps held onto and reified the very categorizations by which they were displaced, while refugees who were able to live in the towns challenged and dissolved these totalizing identities to attempt to form new ones (Malkki 1995: 4). Camp refugees responded to national displacement by creating another nation. Town refugees, on the other hand, dissolved national categories and adopted a more cosmopolitan identity. "The first is an attempt to fit. The second is a refusal to be categorized" (ibid). These choices resonated with me personally, and seem to be applicable to every person for whom their ethnic identity creates some cognitive dissonance. One can either attempt to place one's self into some category, or refuse to be categorized. The dynamics of how and why one chooses to do one more than the other creates, in my opinion, a vastly more interesting approach towards interrogation of the concept of ethnicity or indeed any sense of group identity. As Malkki states "the very ability to 'lose' one's identity , and move *through* categories was for many a form of social freedom" (ibid., 16).

The whole nature of the conflict between Oromo and Amhara, echoes much of the black/white, nativist/immigrant rhetoric in the US, and the whole concept of multiculturalism in the West in general. Who belongs? Who is the real American/Ethiopian/European? Is the focus on creating equal opportunities for

minorities itself only serving to reify such distinctions? It is a touchy subject to be sure, and it is difficult to navigate these debates both in academic and everyday situations. While I wish I could prognosticate a noble future in which Oromo and Amhara resolve or work past their differences using music as a means through which to break down the walls of difference, I'm afraid I lack the optimism. It does often seem like ethnic tensions in particular, and differences in general, tend to fall into a reactionary cycle of wherein each is reified in opposition to the other.

In his book *A World Beyond Difference: Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization*, Ronald Niezen explores the contrast between two intellectual currents attempting to define a global identity, cultural universalism and cultural particularism (Niezen 2004). He paraphrases Seneca, saying:

> [T]he utopian imagination tends to run in opposite directions, towards either a universal commonwealth or to restored, autonomous communities; but the story that he does not, and in his time could not, tell is that each ideal tends to feed off its contrary, and that the efforts to combine or accommodate them then tend to fall into irresolvable dilemmas (Niezen 2004: 1-2).

As the ideas of multiculturalism are being tested in Ethiopia and throughout the West, ethnicity, far from disappearing as many Marxists thought it would, has become an increasingly salient category. Scholarly work demonstrating the subjectivity of ethnic affiliations, seems to have made little headway in tempering the clashes between groups so common throughout the world, many of them on the continent of Africa. I don't know where the answer lies on the questions of difference and its inherent qualities or implications. I have tried to show not only the processes, but also the motivations behind the contestation/negotiation of

difference with regard to the Oromo. Often left with little to hold onto in challenging circumstances, the Oromo people continue to demonstrate an astounding resilience to those forces challenging their very existence. One of the best weapons for this battle, as the following quote from a girarsa demonstrates, lies in the performative practice of song.

> "They tell me to sing gerarsa.
> I don't need to be reminded to sing.
> For a brave warrior can neither hold his breath,
> Nor suppress his emotions to sing."[94]

[94] See CD track 14 "Dima-Girarsa." Translation by Obbo Dawit Bulcha.

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http://allafrica.com/stories/201003251162.html

http://www.freemuse.org/sw26658.asp

http://www.gadaa.com/index.html

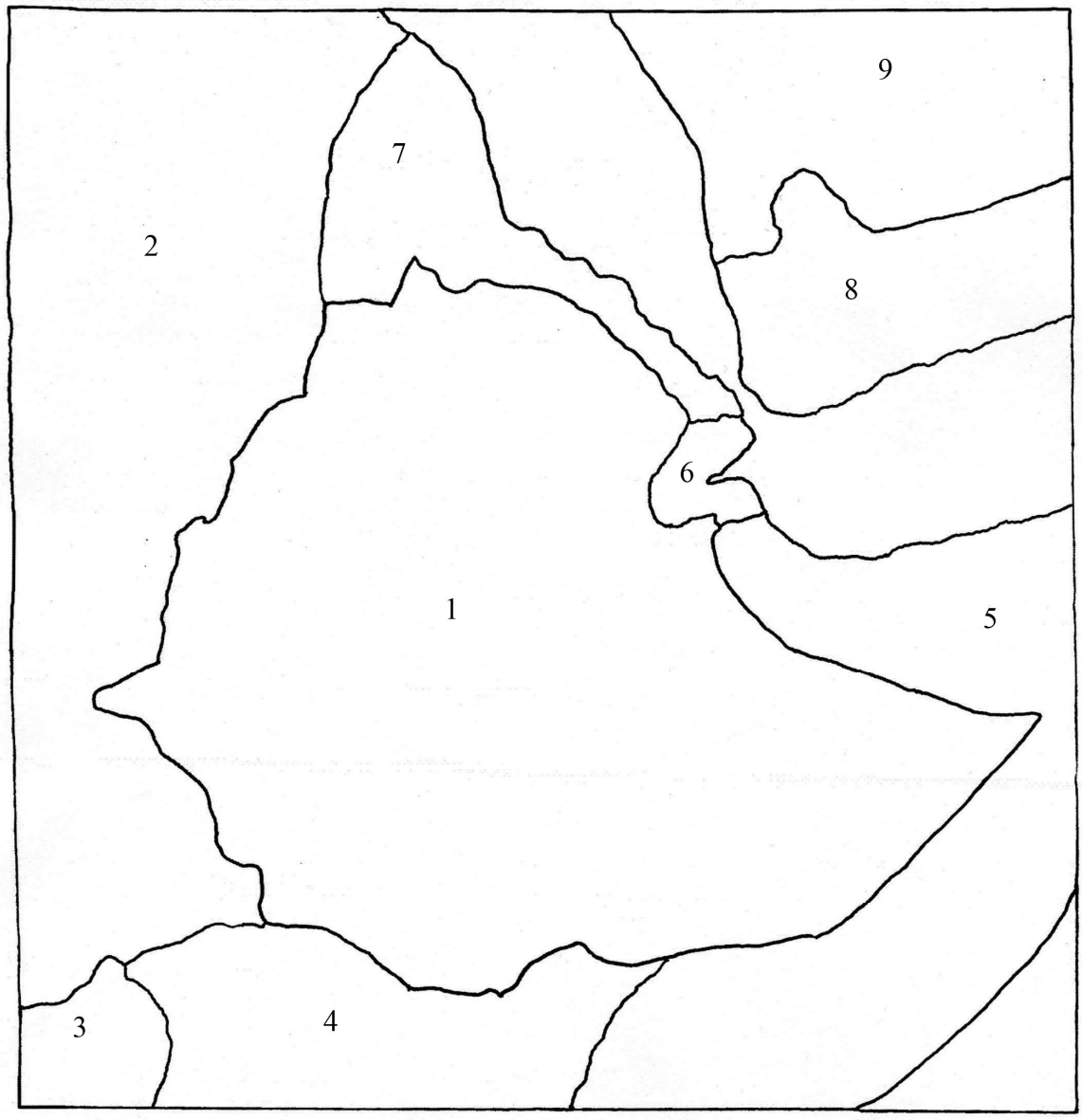
http://oromoartists.org/

http://www.oromoliberationfront.org/index.htm

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj3_-e37ygM&feature=related
(This is a short journalistic piece on the OLF by Nairobi Television, broken up into three parts and placed on You Tube.)

http://www.oromostudies.org/default/index.php

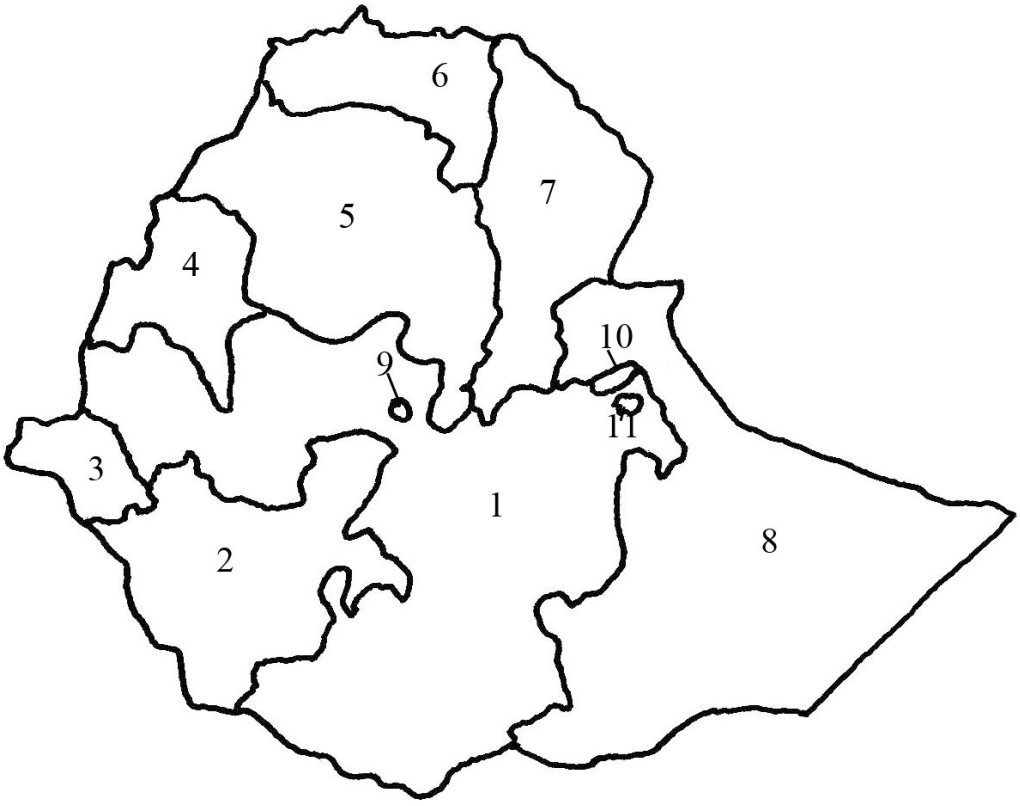
Apendix 1: Map 1



Map 1: Map of the present day borders of Ethiopia (and neighboring countries).

1. Ethiopia
2. Sudan
3. Uganda
4. Kenya
5. Somalia
6. Djibouti
7. Eritrea
8. Yemen
9. Saudi Arabia

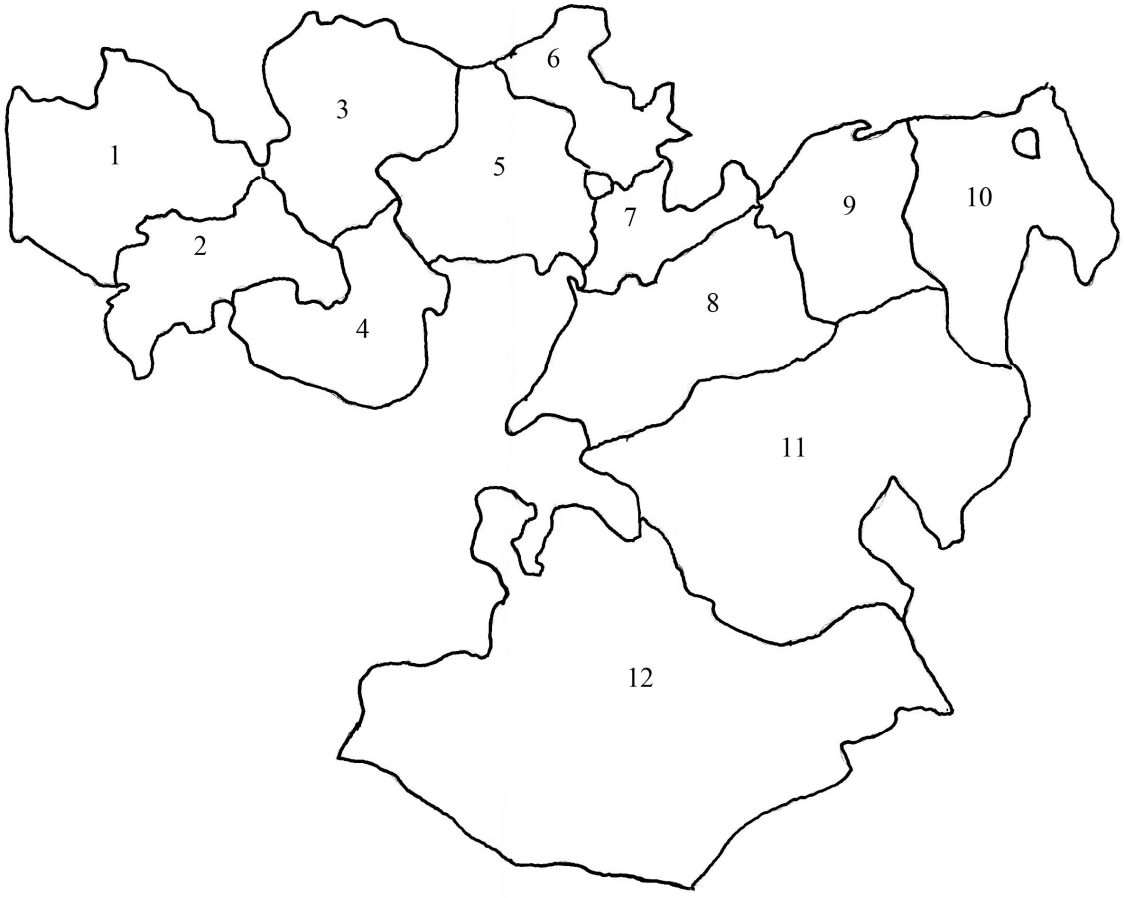
Map 2



Map 2: Map of Ethiopia's regional states under "ethnic federalism." Although Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and Harer are cities, they are also considered their own federal regions (like Washingon D.C. or Mexico D.F.).

1. Oromia
2. Southern Regional State (SNNP)
3. Gambella
4. Beneshangul Gumuz
5. Amhara
6. Tigray
7. Afar
8. Somali
9. Addis Ababa
10. Dire Dawa
11. Harari

Map 3

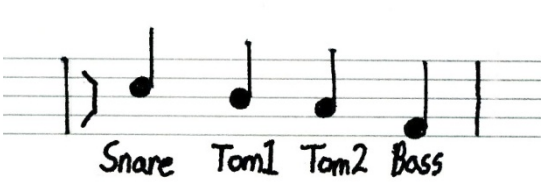


Map 3: This is a map of the divisions of the larger Oromo ethnic groups in the state of Oromia.
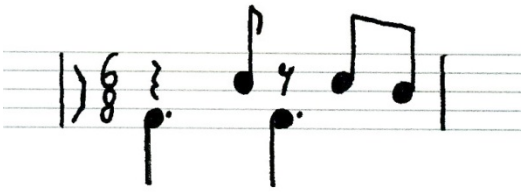
1. Western Wellega
2. Illubabor
3. Eastern Wellega
4. Jimma
5. Western Shewa
6. Northern Shewa
7. Eastern Shewa
8. Arsi
9. Western Harerghe
10. Eastern Harerghe
11. Bale
12. Borena

Appendix 2: Notation examples
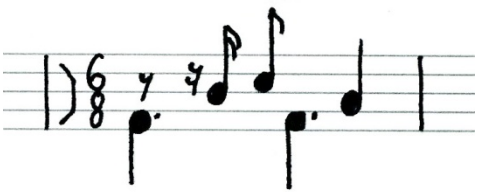
1. Drum notation key.
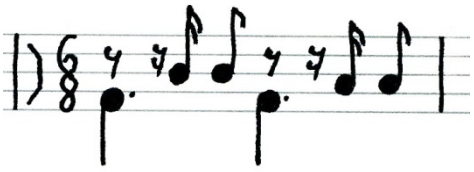


2. Harer rhythm



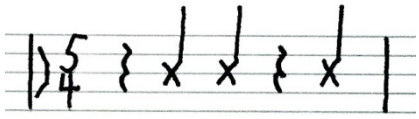
3. Jimma rhythm.



4. Kamise rhythm.



5. Clapping part for *langanicha.*



Appendix 3: Glossary

Afaan Oromo- the Oromo term for their language. *Afaan* is the word indicating "the language of." Thus *Afaan Amhara* is the Oromo term for Amharic, *Afaan Inglizenya* for English etc. The use of this term instead of *Oromigna* indicates the refusal to accept the Amharic language to describe themselves. In Amharic the suffix "gna" indicates language. Thus *Oromigna* for Oromo, *Amharegna* for Amharic, *Englizegna* for English, etc.

Derg- Amharic for committee, it refers to the socialist regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.

EPRDF- Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

Gabbar- name for the Oromo serfs created following the conquest of Oromo areas by Menelik II

Gadaa- the Oromo system of government based on generational grades and rotating leaders

Habesha- a term used to refer to people of the Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups.

Nafxanya- the term for an Amharic landowner who ruled over a plot of Oromo land and people in a feudal-like system installed after the conquests of Menelik II.
OLF-Oromo Liberation Front

OPDO- Oromo People's Democratic Organization

Oromumma- coined by Dr. Asafa Jalata as a term for Oromo cultural identity and nationalism

Appendix 4: Translation of Abba Gadaa's Erecha speech

… Kept three things and gave everything else to mankind. Waaqa[God] delegated Man on his behalf on earth. We can't see or touch Waaqa. Had it been so, we would have anointed him with butter and presented him a sacrificial bull. Due to this fact, we anoint Odaa [sycamore tree], a big rock, and gather at a big river for thanks giving.

Waaqa means love. Oromos and all human kind ought to love each other. They should refrain from theft, deception, rape, abducting girls, looting and becoming anti-social. They should follow the established mores and observe cultural values. Oromo people have a beautiful culture. Religious beliefs emanate from culture. Respect and uphold the cultural values that were handed down to you from your ancestors over the past 7, 8 generations. Do not give up your own culture simply to be replaced by that of aliens. Never change your name and adopt foreign names. Value what is yours; uphold your dignity. Be proud of your way of life.
Care for your health and wellbeing; care for your reproductive organs. Protect yourself from contagious and [sexually] transmitted diseases. He who is healthy and fit begets fit and healthy off springs. Respect each other. Don't kill one other. Value women; women are our mothers. Educate your children. We seek help from the Faranjy[White men] for they are educated. Remember that it is only our colour that is black; we are better than the Faranjies. If we believe in ourselves, if we can have self-respect, if we are able to educate ourselves, if we uphold our culture, we are the Faranjy.

Let's care for our land; let's value our tradition & culture. Foreigners do not know our culture. Enemies work hard to destroy and undermine our way of life; they want us to change our names and take theirs. Let's make them know who we are; let's introduce ourselves. Do you hear me, Children of Oromo?
As regards this Irrecha ceremony, some come to celebrate; some come to observe; some come to dance and enjoy themselves. Yet others come to create chaos and trouble. This is no place of chaos. This is a sacred place, a centre for Waaqeffanna [thanks giving, prayer].

As regards Oromo religion, Oromos believe in Islam; Oromos believe in Orthodox [Christian]; Oromo people also believe in the Bible [Protestant?]. Waaqa is a special entity for Oromo people. We can't see Him, we can't touch Him. We don't have a written book about Him. Yet we believe in Him. We know his presence when He gives us rain and transitions the seasons; when He ensures the reproduction of our kind and multiplication of our race. That is how we feel and sense the omnipotence of Waaqa. Waaqa does not kill or err. We ought to know this and pray to Him with our open arms and clean hearts. We Oromos thrived by believing and not by reading

books of scriptures. That's how we became lords of the Land, possessors of the Chaffe [meadow], and owners of the herds.

Thus, here are my final words: beware of the looters and pickpockets. They could be all around you. A celebration of this type is to be accomplished when all goes well and peaceful; when each everyone returns home safe and joyous. That is what Waaqa loves. I wish you all a peaceful and joyful Gadaa.

Thank you.

Appendix 5: CD Tracks List

1. “Asri Oromo-Langanicha.” This track was recorded somewhere about an hour (by car) outside of Shashemane in a small village near a wildlife sanctuary. The song style is called “langanicha” and, I was told, is largely a type of cattle song.

2-5. “Arsi Oromo 1,2,4,& 7.” Tracks 2 through 5 were recorded outside Kofele (just outside Shashemane in Arsi Oromo territory). This group was made up of 8 to 10 young men and women (mostly teenagers).

6-7. “Siamti” and “Harer Oromo Song 2.” These tracks were recorded in Harer.

8. “Erecha Track 9.” This track was also recorded at Erecha.

9. “Erecha Track 12.” This track was recorded at Erecha near Lake Hora outside Debre Zeit. The speaker is the Abba Gadaa, a high ranking spiritual leader of the Oromo.

10. “Kota Arama Aramna” by Zerehun Wedejo. This was a song he sung at the first Oromo music concert in Finfine in 1977. Though only 15 at the time, he was imprisoned for 8 months following the concert.

11. “Girarsa.” This is a girarsa sung by Zerehun Wedejo.

12. “Iyase” by Zerehun Wedejo.

13. “Legesse Abdi Song.” This song was recorded in my home in Finfine.

14. “Dima-Girarsa.” This is a girarsa sung by Obbo Dima, one of the workers at the government office. He was mostly helpful, and eventually told me that I would never be able to ask the members of Biftu certain questions, since they exist mostly for the purpose of propoganda. Even if they wanted to answer me, they dare not.

15. “Arsi Song.” This track is a recording of Biftu Oromia, the government sponsored group. This particular track is an Arsi song. I recorded this at a home the group uses as a rehearsal space. Naturally, I never got to interview them individually face-to-face, and of the written interviews I handed out, I received only two back. This could be just carelessness, but the government office had six months to get them back to me, but could never seem to.

16. “Minneapolis-4.” This was a track sung by Mohammed Sheika at a concert in Minneapolis on 1-8-11. It was a big hit at the concert which was all pop-music.

17. “Minneapolis-9.” A pop version of “Iyase” sung by Dagim Eticha.

18. “Minneapolis-12.” This was a girarsa sung by Mohammed Sheika during our interview the next morning. I had told him that many people in Oromia were hesitant to sing girarsas for fear of government persecution.

19. “Minneapolis-13.” Two songs sung by Mohammed Sheika during the same interview. He was imprisoned for a year and a month for singing these songs in public.

Appendix 6: Photographs

1. Ali and I at his home in Harer.



2. Myself navigating the *jegol*.



3. The pathway to Asefa's family's house. The people are his uncle, aunt, and their children.



4. Picture from the bus to Harer. Typical round homes.



5. View of the city from a hillside cemetery near a friends home.



6. A post-breakfast meal of *tere sega* (raw beef).



7. Myself and Legesse Abdi.



8. The *washint*.



9. The *krar.*



10. The *masenko.*



11. Group of Oromo singing and dancing towards the main event. The distinctive lion headdress is part of traditional Shewa Oromo attire.



12. View of the crowd from the hillside stage. This is less than ten percent of the attendees.



13. Biftu Oromia.



14. Biftu's musicians.



15. Jambo Jolte.



16. View of the lakeshore from a boat I took a ride in.



17. Horse ride.



18. Group near Kofele.



19. Biftu Oromia (in the other form of Arsi traditional clothing).



20. A hartebeast near the village.



21. One of the main huts in the village.



22. The central tree.



23. The first gatherings in song.



24. The news crew gets in on the action. I was interviewed shortly after these women.



25. Gathered around a hut for lunch and music.



26. Sunset.



27. Master Sound Studios.



28. Musicians at the concert in Minneapolis. The singer is Dagim Makonen.



29. Circular dance formation.



30. Line formation (note the female and male lines).



31. From left to right; Kamal Ibrahim, Mohammed Sheika, Dagim Makonen.

