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Essay 2

**“WE, THE NATIONS, NATIONALITIES AND PEOPLES OF ETHIOPIA...”**  
**MEMBERSHIP IN THE NATION AND ETHIOPIAN ETHNIC-BASED FEDERALISM.**

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## INTRODUCTION\*

A new Ethiopian Constitution was ratified on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1994, becoming effective on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1995. It established Ethiopia as a parliamentary, democratic and ethnic-based Federal Republic, in which the rights to self-determination and to secession were guaranteed to all ethnic groups. The ethnic-based federalism was welcomed as a radical innovation and a model for multi-ethnic countries (Turton 2006). It seemed to represent the end of ethnocracy (Young 1996) and a promise of empowerment of the periphery (Nahum 1997).

However, questions about its implementation early arose and seem to have been negatively answered: the 2005 parliamentary election represented a dramatic turn which unveiled authoritarianism, neo-patrimonialism, centralization, *encadrement* (Abbink 2006).

The essay aims to discuss how the membership in the nation works within this institutional and political context. In so doing, it starts from the constitutional text to sustain three argumentations. Firstly, the Constitution is a cultural product shaped by the TPLF's ideology about ethnicity. Secondly, the constitutional text contains some serious ambiguities. Finally, the latter was magnified in the process of implementation of the Constitution, as demonstrated by looking at specific groups.

The essay necessarily revolves around the notions of ethnicity, nation, ethnic and national identity, national membership, and nationalism.<sup>1</sup> From an anthropological perspective, it is relevant to focus on the micro-level and grasp what is considered so meaningful by people that it becomes part of their own identity. However, the theoretical debate about these notions is not summarized here. On the one hand, the literature is immense and diverse. On the other, the essay focuses on the specific ideas of nation and national membership devised by the Ethiopian government, not on the notions of nation, ethnicity, and nationalism as such.<sup>2</sup>

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\* Throughout the essay, abbreviations of parties and movements are employed. In order to make the reading easier, their meanings will be made explicit now. TPLF stands for Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, while EPLF stands for Eritrean People's Liberation Front. Both of them were liberation movements which fought Mengistu's regime or Derg and, after 1991, took the control of Ethiopia and Eritrea. EPRDF stands for Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and is a coalition of ethnic-based parties which have been ruling Ethiopia so far. CUD stands for Coalition for Unity and Democracy, while UEDF stands for United Ethiopian Democratic Forces. They are coalition parties which represented the main opposition to the incumbent during the 2005 election.

<sup>1</sup> Even though it has been approached from different perspectives, each of these concepts tends to be defined through lists of similar features. However, from a theoretical point of view, what makes the difference are not these enlisted characteristics as such, but the way in which they, in turn, are approached and conceptualized.

<sup>2</sup> For syntheses about ethnicity, see Vail (1989), Lentz (1995), Glickman (1995), Tronvoll (2005), Chan (2007). For studies of ethnicity centred on the micro-level, see Cohen (1994a), Cohen (1994b), Cohen (2000), Tronvoll (2005). About ethnicity, nation and nationalism see Lonsdale (1968), Lewis (1983), Smith (1994), Smith (1996), Blommaert (1996), Jacquin-Berdal (2002).

## THE 1995 CONSTITUTION

The last Ethiopian Constitution<sup>3</sup> established a federal system based on ethnicity. Sovereignty “resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia” (Art.8.1) and not in the citizens, considered as individuals. This means that Ethiopia is not considered a nation, but rather an *ensemble* of nations defined in ethnic terms.

Article 39<sup>4</sup> provides the constitutional definition of the foundations of Ethiopia: the “Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples”. Their defining features are a common culture or similar customs; mutual intelligibility of language; belief in shared or related identities; a common psychological make-up; an identifiable and predominantly contiguous territory. All these elements, in turn, must be shared in large measure within the group.<sup>5</sup> The problems related to such a definition will be considered below.

By establishing ethnicity as the foundation of the Federation, the Constitution elevates ethnic identity and membership to the status of defining characters of individuals and, consequently, of Ethiopian citizens (Nahum 1997, 51; Aalen 2006).<sup>6</sup> Hence, ethnic identity and ethnic membership are superior to any other individual or collective feature, identity and membership. Indeed, the nations constituting Ethiopia are defined in ethnic-genealogical terms (Smith 1994),<sup>7</sup> consisting, therefore, in ethnic-nations. Consequently, in order to be a member of them, one must belong to a *recognised* ethnic group (Young 1996: 534; Donham 2001, 6).<sup>8</sup> The latter is not a “given”, but is moulded by the constitutional notion of ethnicity and by a series of reactions and counter-reactions to official attempts of definition and demarcation. Any supra-ethnic “Ethiopian nation” and “Ethiopian national membership” are subordinated to their ethnic pairs. However, such an

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<sup>3</sup> The current Constitution represents a peculiar mixture of constitutional models: on the one hand, it largely echoes the American Constitution (Mattei 1995); on the other, it follows the ethnic path experimented by the Soviet Union (Turton 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Article 39 also enlists the rights of each “Nation, Nationality and People”, which consist of “unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession”, “the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language”, the right “to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history”, “the right to a full measure of self-government”.

<sup>5</sup> Many other articles or sub-articles of the Constitution are substantially either specifications or elaborations of Article 39, or contextualizations of ethnicity within the state structure. See Constitution’s “Preamble”; Art.2; Art.3.2; Art.5; Art.8.1; Art.34.6; Art.35 Art.40.3; Art.41.9; Art.46.1-2; Art.47.2-9; Art.61.1; Art.88.1-2; Art.89.4-6; Art.91.1; Art.94.2.

<sup>6</sup> The priority recognised to ethnic elements is confirmed by the EPRDF Statute. It claims that, since “Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples” are the beneficiaries of rights and duties, ethnic-based parties are the best defenders of the interests of their own ethnic group and likely to “gain support from their people easily” (Introduction II.2.b).

<sup>7</sup> According to Smith, the ethnic-genealogical model of nation is characterised by a strong emphasis on presumed ties of descent and associated myths of genealogical origin; by the importance recognised to native culture, languages, rituals, customs; by the insistence on the distinctiveness of the community and its history; by a strong appeal to the masses (Smith 1994, 718).

<sup>8</sup> For the case of the Konso, Watson states: “the reconceptualization of Konso [...] as a nation with its own identity and independence” (Watson 2001, 204).

apparently simple equation raises many problems with regard to the membership in the nation, defined by the Ethiopian Constitution in ethnic terms.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

As the leader of the EPRDF, the TPLF was able to impose its own views on the EPRDF itself, on the Constitution, and on the country.<sup>9</sup> Every Constitution is a cultural product and, in the Ethiopian context, it echoes the TPLF's ethno-nationalist ideology<sup>10</sup> (Young 1996), which, in turn, is embodied in the ethnic-based federalism.

The TPLF emerged as an ethno-nationalist movement in 1975 (Berhe 2004)<sup>11</sup>. It considered the oppression of nationalities as the source of every economic, social, and political problem (Negash and Tronvoll 2000). Specifically, the ethnic domination by the Amharas, who suppressed and exploited the other Ethiopian nationalities, was regarded as the main cause of problems in contemporary Ethiopia. Because of this belief, the TPLF began its struggle for the self-determination, in the first place, of the Tigrayans and, secondly, of the other nationalities (Young 1996; Negash and Tronvoll 2000).

The TPLF was not a homogeneous movement. Despite the shared emphasis on self-determination, intestine tensions developed, on the one hand, between the supporters of the secession of the Tigray and those who wanted a united multi-ethnic Ethiopia; and, on the other, between an ultra-leftist wing and a more moderate one (Lewis 1983, 15; Berhe 2004). The secessionists were thought to have been silenced (Berhe 2004, 591). Nevertheless, the present Constitution, and its Article 39 in particular, express not merely ethno-nationalist but also secessionist claims, embodied by Meles Zenawi (Berhe 2004, 592; McCracken 2004).

The TPLF's ethno-nationalism and its consequent ethnic-genealogical notion of nation (Smith 1994) were the result of at least three factors: a long history of uneven relationships among ethnic

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<sup>9</sup> Among the supporters of this idea of TPLF's monopoly, see Gudina (1994), Mattei (1995), Negash and Tronvoll (2000), Kinijit (2006). The Kinijit *Manifesto* state: "The existing constitution was drafted, approved and imposed on the people by a single party, without the participation and discussion of all groups of the society. The constitution, though wrapped up in a list of insincere human rights items, is in effect a copy of the political programme of the ruling party" (Kinijit 2006, 44). Contrary to this vision, McCracken (2004) suggests that the Constitution mirrors the position of all the regional movements that took part in its draft. Note also that, in occasion of the 2005 election, Merera Gudina was one of the leaders of the UEDF, one of the main opposition coalitions (Abbink 2006). Therefore, his political position must be kept in mind when considering his ideas.

<sup>10</sup> Here "ethno-nationalism" is defined as a type of nationalism in which ethnic identity and membership plays a key role to shape the ideology, the claims and the actual composition of the nationalist movement itself. This definition is not consciously borrowed from any scholar and aims to take a distance from Smith's definition: "[nationalism is] the process by which *ethnies* become nations and then go on to claim either autonomy in a more federalised state, or outright independent statehood" (Smith cit. in Jacquin-Berdal 2002, 42).

<sup>11</sup> Berhe is an ex member of the TPLF who developed discrepancies with the movement. When considering his ideas, it is necessary to always keep in mind his particular position with regard to the TPLF itself.

groups (Gudina 1994); the social, cultural and geographic characteristics of the Tigray (Clapham 2001); the Derg's projects about nationalities.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the first point, Negash and Tronvoll (2000) describe the core of the Ethiopian Empire as mainly composed of two related ethnic groups: the Tigrayans/Tigrinya<sup>13</sup> and the Amharas. Although the origins of the Empire were rooted in the Tigray (Berhe 2004), the Amharas tended to detain the imperial power (Negash and Tronvoll 2000). In their relation with the Amharas,<sup>14</sup> the Tigrayans suffered from a condition of subordination and hardships, which clashed with their pride for the glorious Aksumite past (Young 1996). Firstly, the Tigrayans were treated as an “inferior” ethnic group (Berhe 2004). Secondly, the Tigray’s border position made it particularly subject to both internal and external pressures and conflicts, raids, and to predatory armies (Berhe 2004). Thirdly, even though its population enjoyed land rights and a certain political protection,<sup>15</sup> the level of destitution, poverty, underdevelopment and unemployment in the region worsened under the last Emperors. Finally, the Tigray was excluded from the process of state-formation and from the incorporation of Ethiopia in international economic networks (Clapham 2001, 11-12).

After the fall of the Amhara-centred imperial power, the new hopes of the Tigrayan population soon vanished into the violence of the Amharized and centralist Derg (Abbink 1995) and its policy of *encadrement* (Clapham 2001). Although it eventually paid formal recognition to the question of nationalities, the requests for self-determination were considered detrimental to the unity and interests of Ethiopia and answered with brutality (Berhe 2004). The popular resentment progressively took the form of ethno-nationalist sentiments (Berhe 2004, 572) and, eventually, in February 1975 the TPLF was officially established.

With regard to the second point, the way the Constitution conceives the “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” is the result not only of rooted political and historical issues, but also of the specific experiences and characteristics of the Tigray. The latter has been the most homogeneous area in Ethiopia from a social, cultural, religious, and linguistic point of view and the Tigrayans have enjoyed more or less distinctiveness from other groups and, above all, from the previously dominant Amharas. Moreover, the Tigray did not attract immigrants, was economically marginalize, and was able to maintain a certain political autonomy. Because of all these factors, the TPLF could mobilize people through the appeal to their distinctiveness and common identity, but it could not aspire to the

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<sup>12</sup> About this last point, see Donham (2001, 3-4), Clapham (2001, 21), Triulzi (1983, 123).

<sup>13</sup> Negash and Tronvoll (2000) use the ethno-name “Tigreans” to indicate the ethnic group living in the Tigray area and speaking Tigrinya. However, to avoid confusion with the Eritrean language “Tigre”, similar to Tigrinya, this essay employs the ethno-name “Tigrayans” instead of “Tigreans”.

<sup>14</sup> With regard to this point, the history is differently described: compare, for instance, Negash and Tronvoll (2000) and Berhe (2004). Moreover, it is worth noting that neither the TPLF nor its predecessors appealed to *the* history of the relations between Tigrayans and other groups, but to *a* history that they were free to reinterpret according to their needs (Young 1996; Donham 2001, 4).

<sup>15</sup> While this sort of privileges was not enjoyed by the Southern populations conquered in the late XIX century.

independence of the Tigray. Therefore, it made itself the champion of regional autonomy and, in so doing, met the needs, aspirations and constraints of other small nationalities (Clapham 2001, 27-28).

With regard to the third point, the ethnic-based federalism did not represent a neat rupture with the previous period. The TPLF was partly indebted to the projects about nationalities conceived by the Derg, at the end of its regime.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the mobilization of the TPLF against the Derg regime was based on an ethnic identity “that had been accorded at least some legitimacy by the state itself” (Clapham 2001, 25).

After having considered the roots of the current idea of national membership, championed by the TPLF, the essay questions its effects both at the constitutional and at the implementation levels.

## THE AMBIGUITIES OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL TEXT

As recognised by Aalen (2006), ambiguities are innumerable at different levels of the constitutional text.

First of all, although it revolves around the expression “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”, the Constitution ignores its problematic meaning. Some scholars consider the whole expression as synonymous with “ethnicity”,<sup>17</sup> while others take it for granted that “nationality” is equivalent to “ethnic group”.<sup>18</sup> However, neither the Constitution nor the abovementioned scholars explicitly recognise the terminological issue. Moreover, they do not clarify the meaning of each notion nor the need to use such a circumlocution instead of the term “ethnicity”. Such a terminological ambiguity is substantial, since the expression “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia” is at the core of the whole Constitution and of its implementation.

Secondly, the Constitution’s definition of “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” generates a vicious cycle. Attempting to define a problematic concept such as ethnicity, the document resorts to a series of notions that are even more problematic to define, but it completely ignores the *impasse*.

Thirdly, the Constitution expresses a primordialist view<sup>19</sup> of ethnicity (Aalen 2006), which does not mirror the situation of Ethiopian ethnic groups (Triulzi 1983; Gudina 1994)<sup>20</sup> and has heavy

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<sup>16</sup> The Derg inspired to the Stalinist conceptualization of the national question. On this point, see Triulzi (1983, 123), Young (1996), Donham (2001, 3-4), Clapham (2001, 21).

<sup>17</sup> See Mattei (1995), Nahum (1997), Aalen (2006). The essay follows this trend for pragmatic reasons, i.e. for making the whole current argumentation as fluent as possible.

<sup>18</sup> Although not necessarily in the context of the present Constitution, see Lewis (1983) who also distinguishes “nation” and “nationality” (1983, 10); Gudina (1994), Young (1996), Clapham (2001), Berhe (2004).

<sup>19</sup> For considerations about the primordialist approach, see, for instance, Lentz (1995), Smith (1996), Abbay (1998, 10-19), Jacquin-Berdal (2002, 7-42).

consequences since it is politicised and institutionalized. In the Constitution, ethnicity is presented as “inborn, fixed and stable” (Aalen 2006, 246-247). Ethnic groups are thought to live in “geographically concentrated areas” and to be “homogenous”. They are also “equated with political units” (Aalen 2006, 247). The primordialist definition of ethnicity is dissonant with any kind of mobility, either physical or social, and inter-ethnic intermingling.<sup>21</sup> Institutionalizing such a view means anchoring individuals to super-individual entities and freezing them on a chessboard of “common cultures” and bounded “territories”.

Fourthly, Article 6.1’s definition of “Nationality” contrasts with the general focus on “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”, since it defines “Ethiopian Nationality” in terms of *ius sanguinis*.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the entire Constitution insists on the priority of ethnic identities, demarcates ethnic-nations, and makes national membership dependent on ethnicity. Furthermore, Article 6.1 and Article 33 represent the only passages in which the Constitution mentions “*Ethiopian* national(s)” and “*Ethiopian* nationality”.<sup>23</sup> Considering these two articles, being born from Ethiopian parents is the precondition for having Ethiopian nationality and enjoying specific rights. All this can be made coherent by thinking that the Constitution is referring to two different levels: the supra-ethnic level, when defining “Ethiopian nationality” and its consequences; and the ethnic level, whenever referring to “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”. If this consideration were founded, however, the abovementioned terminological ambiguity would increase.

Fifthly, Article 91.1<sup>24</sup> explains that cultures and traditions must be preserved and enriched as far as they are *compatible* with democracy, human rights, and human dignity. However, this is in sharp contrast with the primordialist foundation of the ethnic-based federalism: on the one hand, the Constitution defines ethnicity in essentialist terms, presenting it as immutable; on the other, it gives the state the authority to establish what is acceptable and to make ethnic groups undergo a process of selection, approval, and even prohibition of certain practices.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gudina (1994) opposes other Oromo nationalists’ emphasis on the oppression and colonization suffered by the Oromo people. He rather stresses the Oromos’ integration in and interaction with the North, where they even penetrated the power structure. Indirectly, if not intentionally, he points out the unavoidable “contaminations” occurred among ethnic groups.

<sup>21</sup> The Constitution itself allows inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages (Art. 34.1), although this is in contrast both with the primordialist view and with the fear of “ethnic mixture” expressed in occasion of the 2005 election (Aalen 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Article 6.1: “Any person of either sex shall be an Ethiopian national where both or either parent is Ethiopian”.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular the following statements: “No Ethiopian national shall be deprived of his or her Ethiopian nationality against his or her will. [...] Every Ethiopian national has the right to the enjoyment of all rights, protection and benefits derived from Ethiopian nationality as prescribed by law. Any national has the right to change his Ethiopian nationality. [...]” (Article 35).

<sup>24</sup> It recites: “Government shall have the duty to support, on the basis of equality, the growth and enrichment of cultures and traditions that are *compatible* with fundamental rights, human dignity, democratic norms and ideals, and the provisions of the Constitution” (emphasis added).

<sup>25</sup> See Article 35.4, which, establishing the rights of women, recites: “The State shall enforce the right of women to eliminate the influences of harmful customs. Laws, customs and practices that oppress or cause bodily or mental harm

Finally, the ethnic foundation of the Constitution cannot be completely and coherently implemented, as it is demonstrated when considering the states which form the Federation. Because of the huge number of ethnicities and the small dimensions of some of them, different ethnicities were made to join and form multi-ethnic states (Nahum 1997, 52). At the same time, administrative entities, such as the *wereda* and the *qebele*, were devised in the attempt to safeguard the right to self-determination. In this way, the primordialist principle of one-to-one correspondence between group and territory is somehow satisfied at the low administrative level, while it is not at the state level. The creation of multi-ethnic states, therefore, is inconsistent with primordialism, although it is a pragmatic solution.

## THE PROBLEMS EMERGED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONSTITUTION

The politics of ethnicity, imposed by the government on the population, has had a variety of effects on the latter. The peoples could not ignore the change, since their territory and their very identity were officially redefined.

With the establishment of the ethnic-based federalism, the state arrogated itself the right and power to decide what counted for the definition of ethnic identities. Some effects of the new system may be grasped by focusing on groups and communities, such as the Muguji and the Konso.<sup>26</sup>

The Muguji's case demonstrates that ethnic groups may be defined as such through the devolution of administrative and political power (Matsuda 2001). Once administratively defined and created as an ethnic group, the Muguji officially obtained a status which sanctioned their equality with other ethnic groups and gave them a power without precedents, not only in political terms (Matsuda 2001).

With the establishment of their special *wereda*,<sup>27</sup> the Konso were officially recognised as "ethnically too distinct to be grouped together with any of [their] neighbours" (Watson 2001, 199).<sup>28</sup> This changed status made "the reconceptualization of Konso [...] as a nation with its own identity and independence" (Watson 2001, 204; emphasis added) necessary. Consequently, the

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to women are *prohibited*" (emphasis added). On these issues, see also Nahum (1997, 191-192), Donham (2001, 151), Abbink (2003).

<sup>26</sup> The Muguji are a Surmic-speaker group living in the Lower Omo Valley (Matsuda 2001). The Konso form a special *wereda* in south-west Ethiopia (Watson 2001).

<sup>27</sup> The *wereda* is the third administrative entity after the Federation and the member states and before the *qebele*. For the privileges enjoyed by a special *wereda*, see Watson (2001, 198-200).

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Watson supposes that the visibility of Konso culture and their geographical isolation could play a key role in making them perceived as a distinct ethnic group (Watson 2001, 199).

Konso needed to engage in a process of reinvention and redefinition of themselves,<sup>29</sup> which had an ambiguous nature. On the one hand, being themselves a product of administrative needs, the Konso were urged to produce a standardization of the language, the culture “and also the experience of being Konso” (Watson 2001, 207). They were asked to crystallize and fit in the primordialist definition of ethnicity which founded the Federation. On the other hand, they were implicitly prompted to meditate about the meaning of belonging to an ethnic group and its defining features. Therefore, the state’s attempt to demarcate ethnic-nations has paradoxically established the conditions and the necessity for the groups to question and redefine themselves.

The ethnic-based federalism did not produce an emancipation of ethnicities nor a rediscovery of alleged ethnic roots. However, it has generated a variety of diverse reactions on the part of ethnic groups: refusal of perceived “backwardness”, re-invention, negotiation, or standardization, according to the unique situation of each people.

Because of its primordialist definition of ethnicity, the Constitution itself required to demarcate the territory of each ethnic group, following the guiding principle of the one-to-one correspondence between territory and ethnic group (Clapham 2001, 29). Consequently, the state had the power to decide who was to live where, but the concrete definition of such physical boundaries<sup>30</sup> turned out to be highly problematic and fuelled conflicts for the “ownership” of a territory. Moreover, the principle of the one-to-one correspondence clashed with the reality of some highly dispersed or intermingled groups. In some cases, huge administrative units were established, despite the consequent administrative difficulties. In others, the same group was included into different regions, as in the case of the Majangir,<sup>31</sup> who have reclaimed their right to establish a Majangir Zone and struggled to incorporate specific centres, like Tepi (Sato 2001, 192). The territorialisation of Majangir’s memory (Smith 1996) has been neglected by the government, demonstrating its incapacity to recognise subtle and complex identity features and to understand that certain places are functional to the group’s identity.

Schlee (2003) emphasises that the demarcation of ethnic-nations could clash with the identity and affiliation perceived by the population. To establish ethnic borders, language was adopted as a main defining feature.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the Oromos were compacted within a single nation, because of their *alleged* common language but ignoring, for instance, their different religious and

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<sup>29</sup> For instance through aware discussions about language, the count of time, the role of indigenous institutions (Watson 2001).

<sup>30</sup> On the drawing of boundaries and maps on the part of states, see Scott cited in Donham (2001, 2-3, 6), Clapham (2001), Schlee (2003).

<sup>31</sup> The Majangir form a group that was included into three different regions: Oromiya, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People, and Gambela (Sato 2001).

<sup>32</sup> On the importance of language as a major identity factor, see, for instance, Lewis (1983, 8-10) and Blommaert (1996).

genealogical affiliations. Such a language-based demarcation was challenged by those Oromo-speakers who perceived themselves as members of non-Oromo groups, since they attributed a secondary value to language in defining their identity (Schlee 2003, 346-347).

The task of giving each group its territory was actually impossible to realize (Watson 2001, 199) and problems have risen for people who live in the “wrong” place. On the one hand, they could be targets of intolerance and vandalism; on the other, the laws of each state have tended to favour the citizens belonging to the “right” ethnic group. This has limited the opportunities of individuals: only those who had sufficient qualifications and knew both the “right” local languages and English, have had a chance to find a job in any member state (Capoduro 2008). Moreover, the case of the election of the Surma council further demonstrates the ambiguity of the national membership in the current ethnic-based federalism. Although Amharic is not the local language, Amharic-speakers enjoyed privileges in this election (Abbink 2001): this contrasts with the official role that ethnic identity and, particularly, language were given to define national membership.

The abovementioned difficulties connected with the establishment of boundaries demonstrate that the ethnic-based system does not mirror any alleged “ethnic reality”. It rather strives to create it according to its own models and notions, while the local level is highly responsive to them and creative.

After a long ethnocracy (Young 1996), the project of a federation in which, eventually, any ethnicity would enjoy equality, political representation, self-determination, and self-government, generated high expectations. Nevertheless, every attempt to obtain independence, particularly in the Oromo and Ogaden regions, failed. The TPLF/EPRDF itself silenced any request for secession through violence, the sponsorization of *philo*-government local administrations (Adem 2004), or through the creation of “puppet” parties as the representatives of unruly nationalities within the Federal institutions (McCracken 2004; Clapham 2001, 29).<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, although the right to self-determination was an integrant part of the TPLF ideology and despite the constitutional emphasis on ethnic self-determination and decentralization, not only the government has not allowed its implementation<sup>34</sup>, but it has also increased the centralization of power (Aalen 2006) and the *encadrement* of the population (Donham 2001, 154).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The state’s repression of the Oromos’ requests for independence appears even more problematic when compared with the Eritrean case. Both the Eritreans and the Oromos took part in the struggle against the Derg and in the following diplomatic processes. Nevertheless, the TPLF accepted the independence of Eritrea, even despite the commonality of Tigrayan ethnicity, but not that of the Oromos. McCracken (2004) argues that this was due to previous agreements between the TPLF and the EPLF. But at least two problems remain. On the one hand, the government loosely contradicts the right to self-determination up to secession. On the other hand, its definition of ethnic and national identity is problematic: the Tigrinya Eritreans were recognised as members both of a different nation and of the same ethnic group of the Tigrayan “fathers” of the ethnic-based federalism.

<sup>34</sup> With regard to this, Mattei (1995) considers the inclusion of this right in the Constitution as a potential way out for the TPLF itself in case of defeat. McCracken (2004), however, argues that the right to self-determination is part of a

However, the TPLF/EPRDF is becoming a victim of its own policies which could come to undermine the unity and stability of the country. Firstly, the politicization of ethnicity has had serious consequences on the previous relationships among ethnic groups and has revealed as a source of escalating regional conflicts. It has intensified the lines of division between groups and infringed upon processes of local conflict-solving (Turton 2003).<sup>36</sup> Secondly, ethnic identities and claims have been exacerbated at the local level and today any issue is likely to be “ethnicised”, even the electoral rivalry between EPRDF’s and CUD’s supporters. Indeed, during the 2005 post-electoral crisis, a group of Amharas, which lived within the Oromo region, was accused to support the CUD and *chased out* from its district (Kinijit 2006). This example not only shows the consequences of the ongoing ethnicization of political conflicts, but also demonstrates further effects of the current official definition of nation and national membership. The latter makes those Amharas susceptible to be “legitimately” chased out, since they were living in the “wrong” place, i.e. the ethnic territory of the Oromo people. Finally, the emphasis on ethnicity has been hindering the emergence of a pan-Ethiopian national identity, a commitment to the country as a whole, and of a sense of Ethiopian citizenship (Abbink 1995, 71-74; Aalen 2006).

Because of the institutionalization of ethnicity, the creation of ethnic-nations, and the missed implementation of the rights promised, regional ethno-nationalisms have been spreading (Gudina 1994; McCracken 2004). Therefore, the government created and fuelled an ethnic-based national membership which, when combining with nationalist requests, threatens the unity of the country.

The emergence of a competing model of nation embodied by the CUD, or Kinijit, is a reaction against the ambiguities inherent in the implementation of the TPLF’s ethno-nationalism. The CUD is “a coalition of four *multi-national* parties” (Kinijit 2006, 13) and has a national, not an ethnic, agenda: it harshly refuses the ethnicism of the ruling party and asks for the elimination of the ethnic foundation of the federal system, but not of the federalism itself (Abbink 2006; Kinijit 2006, 14).<sup>37</sup>

The CUD does not “deny ethno-regional and cultural rights” (Abbink 2006, 194), but it focuses on *individual citizens*, not on “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” (Kinijit 2006, 7).<sup>38</sup> The citizens

huge conspiracy: it will benefit the TPLF itself, which aims to loot Ethiopia as much as it can and to secede when time comes.

<sup>35</sup> For a compromise view about the centralization *versus* decentralization operated by the government, see Adem (2004).

<sup>36</sup> For the violent consequences of the politicization of ethnicity and the exacerbation of regional conflicts, see Gudina (1994), Mattei (1995), Clapham (2001, 13), Abbink (2003, 2006), Kinijit (2006, 50), Aalen (2006).

<sup>37</sup> The two main opposition coalitions had significantly different characteristics and agendas. “Compared to the UEDF [the second opposition coalition], which is more ethnic-particularistic although committed to an agenda giving space to all ethnic groups within the state, the CUD is more nationally oriented, adhering to a pan-ethnic programme aimed at issue politics and for liberalized, equitable economic development” (Abbink 2006a, 182).

<sup>38</sup> “To enable *citizens* to consciously participate in the affairs of their country [...] By fully developing the potential of every *individual citizen* to enable him/her to fulfil his/her desire to equally compete at the provincial national and international levels [...]” (Kinijit 2006, 7). See also “a vision of giving to *all of its citizens* an opportunity to fulfil their dreams and to have an equal and respected place in *their common country*.” (Kinijit 2006, 78).

are named “Ethiopians”, never specifying ethnic affiliations, because the CUD claims a multi-ethnic Ethiopian identity, instead of an ethnic one. Therefore, a civic-territorial model of nation (Smith 1994) and a multi-national type of nationalism (Lewis 1983, 8) emerge throughout the CUD’s *Manifesto*<sup>39</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Within the Ethiopian ethnic-based federalism, the notion of nation and national membership are culturally defined in primordialist ethnic terms. Indeed, they are rooted in the primordialist definition of ethnicity conceived and institutionalised through the Constitution. The latter, in turn, is the cultural and historical product of the unique experience of the Tigrayan ethno-nationalism. On the base of this definition of the problem, the essay questioned the consequences of such an idea of national membership and, in so doing, distinguished what one can observe at two different levels. Indeed, at the formal constitutional level, the abovementioned type of national membership works, in spite of many ambiguities. However, at the implementation level, it proves ineffective: on the one hand, its inherent contradictions are magnified; on the other, the current notion of national membership paradoxically allows both the government to instrumentalize it and the population to engage in initiatives which escape official control.

Fifteen years ago, the Ethiopian government defined ethnic groups through a top-down selection and imposition of key features, leaving the insiders’ view aside. It institutionalized a notion of nation and national membership defined in ethnic terms. It shaped the country and its population according to its own design. It promoted a *plethora* of ethno-nationalist movement and parties according to its own image. When all this was created, it merely echoed the TPLF’s ideologies, not a nation-wide view. However, today such artificially hetero-imposed system has rooted and has an existence on its own. The Ethiopian government seems to be losing control on its own creatures, which are rising against it in order to reclaim what was promised.

If the regional ethno-nationalisms share the TPLF/EPRDF’s model of nation and national membership, an opposite one has emerged and seems to obtain support. The problematic implementation of the TPLF’s ethno-nationalism left room to the emergence of a competing civic-territorial model of nation embodied by the CUD. Therefore, the 2005 Ethiopian election did not

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<sup>39</sup> It is not possible to make all the relevant points of the *Manifesto* explicit here. But see (Kinijit 2006, 7) on the collective rights and on the priority of the individual; (Kinijit 2006, 8) and (Kinijit 2006, 8) on the unity in diversity; (Kinijit 2006, 9) on equality; (Kinijit 2006, 53, in particular)with regard to the Eritrean question; (Kinijit 2006, 54) on constitutional amendments; (Kinijit 2006, 71) on the national youth policy and the kind of citizens it should shape.

merely represent a contest between an incumbent and the opposition (Abbink 2006), but a more profound confrontation between two notions of nation (Smith 1994).

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<sup>1</sup> Eritrean and Ethiopian names do not mirror the structure “name-surname” and persons are called with their first name, since the second one is the name of the father. This use is not adopted by publishers. Hence, to avoid confusion, this last trend will be followed, although it is incoherent.

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