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## 2 Contested conceptualisations of Ethiopian statehood

In this chapter, I discuss why I chose Ethiopia as a case through which to study state formation in Africa. Moreover, in working towards the ethnography of the state, this chapter, and this book in general, attempts to highlight and challenge several bodies of literature that, in various ways, focus on making sense of the nature and role of the state in Ethiopia. My analysis takes its point of departure from two difficulties faced when conceptualising the state in Ethiopia. One is the problem of pinpointing its location in African studies. Scholarly discussions about the state in sub-Saharan Africa have tended to afford only a marginal place and level of analysis to the Ethiopian state because, for many scholars, it is considered an anomaly. In the first part of this chapter, I will make the opposite point: Ethiopia represents one sociocultural and political formation in a diverse continent.

We also face the second problem of locating the historical and conceptual specificity of the Ethiopian state. Indeed, there is no shortage of historical literature relating to state formation in Ethiopia. But even the term 'state' is taken for granted by many as a very straightforward concept, to the extent that it was wilfully avoided or reduced to a mere reflection of ethnic politics. To move beyond this impasse, in the second part of the chapter, I address the following relevant questions: how can we locate the historical specificities of state formation in Ethiopia? Can we use the

category of state to describe the political systems over several centuries? Can we make a clean break and avoid employing the concept of state to explain historically specific collective politics? In addressing these questions, I highlight several bodies of literature across a wide range of disciplines – anthropology, history, politics, sociology, and so on. In so doing, however, my intention is not to provide a full account of the history of Ethiopia or debate how the Ethiopian state has evolved over time. Rather, my aim is to examine some of the dominant perspectives on the conceptualisation of the Ethiopian state in light of the book’s theoretical perspective, and establish the broad context for an ethnographic study.

## **The Ethiopian state in African studies**

In the introduction to *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: monarchy, revolution and the legacy of Meles Zenawi*, Prunier and Ficquet (2015: 1) wrote:

Ethiopia is a land which, like Israel or Tibet, is often thought of first and foremost through myths before it is seen as a real country. Many people who would have some difficulty in precisely pinpointing Ethiopia on a map of the world have nevertheless heard about our hominid ‘grandmother’ Lucy, the Ark of the Covenant, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the medieval quest for Prester John, as well as the more recent imperial figures of Menelik II and Haile Selassie I, the independence of the country during European imperialism in Africa, and the Lion of Judah, a symbol of sovereignty that has been used on covers of Rastafari reggae albums. The public at large also remember the images of recurrent famines that often end up negatively symbolizing Africa. The Power, the Glory and the Tragedies. Ethiopia is oversized in the public mind and it often tends to be oversized in the minds of its own inhabitants, who are the first to believe in the mythical quality of their motherland. It is one of the few countries in the world which has an Encyclopaedia devoted to it ...

The ‘mythical quality’ that Prunier and Ficquet refer to is not only implanted in popular imaginations but also has long defined academic discourses surrounding the Ethiopian state. Many writers consider it to be ‘the oldest African country, yet in many respects it is in rather than of Africa’ (Jesman 1963: 10). Ethiopia has predominantly been seen as more oriental than African, so much so that ‘more is written on Ethiopia in the *Journal of Semitic Studies* than in the *Journal of African History*’ (Teshale 1995: xvi). The discussions about the state in Africa, largely informed by this perspective, are reluctant to consider Ethiopia as a fully African state.

While political organisations in sub-Saharan Africa are predominantly conceptualised in relation to European colonial legacy, where the state is viewed as an imported alien supra-institution grafted onto indigenous social and political structures, Ethiopia is said to have maintained a culturally rooted state for more than three thousand years (Teshale 1995; Toggia 2008). Ethiopia, alone in the continent, successfully forestalled colonial domination and thereby avoided direct imposition of colonial institutions. As a result, the state is often bypassed in mainstream analysis. Jean-Francois Bayart (2009), for instance, treated Ethiopia as an exception on account of the existence of a long and continuous tradition of power that, he believes, does not correspond to the rest of the ‘Black African’ state experience.<sup>1</sup> In his global order of cultural essentials, Samuel Huntington (1996: 47) described Ethiopia as a ‘civilisation of its own’ in contrast to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, which, he argues, lacks a distinct indigenous civilisation. Teshale Tibebe (1995: 31), an Ethiopian historian and advocate of Afrocentric analysis of Ethiopia’s past, wrote:

Ethiopia is not like Chad or Burkina Faso, Central African Republic or Malawi — a piece of territory carved out by a European power and given a name. Ethiopia is like Egypt, China, Iran; very old, but also very young. True, Ethiopia did not have the same degree of

centralization as ‘seventy-centuries-old’ Egypt. It was more akin to China, where parcellized and centralized sovereignties changed place intermittently, as dynasties rose and fell within its cultural universe.

Although Teshale acknowledges that Ethiopia possesses some of the attributes linked to African states, he saw the organisational form and history of the Ethiopian state as fundamentally different from those of its African counterparts. Much of the literature on the state in Africa generally identifies, the Ethiopian state as a ‘state’ in the true Weberian sense of the term, unlike the African state, which is described as neither ‘African nor state’ but as, instead,

a dubious community of heterogeneous and occasionally clashing linguistic, religious and ethnic identities; their claim to force is rarely effective and much less monopolistic; their frequent predatory nature fails the test of legitimacy; and their territoriality is generally at best hesitant and contested.

(Englebert 1997: 767)

Postcolonial African states, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) argue, do not have a legitimate monopoly on the means of violence in their territorial jurisdictions; therefore, Weber’s empirical definition is insufficient to adequately explain their nature and survival. Rather, they are juridical entities protected by international law. Ethiopia, on the other hand, is described as ‘the lone continental exception to juridical sovereignty’ (Englebert 2009: 155).

Indeed, the Ethiopian state is relatively specific in the sense that, unlike the rest of the sub-Saharan African states, its historical trajectory includes no experience of colonialism. However, although it remained independent throughout European colonial rule in Africa and developed a long-lasting

and relatively well-organised political system, this does not necessarily indicate that it is organised differently from the rest of Africa (Donham and James 1986). Most significantly, the appropriation of European instruments of rule, as I demonstrate later, by the ruling elites in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa, which resulted in the centralisation of state power in the nineteenth century, generated parallel structures and trajectories in the contemporary era.

Recent studies have shown that colonialism neither suspended the historicity of African societies nor lessened their capacity to pursue strategies to produce their modernity (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Bayart 2009). Instead, it brought political, economic, and military access to the dominant indigenous groups. African actors seized an open opportunity introduced by colonisers, traders, and missionaries to amass wealth and gain power. Therefore, Africa was not just a passive victim of colonialism but also active in the pursuit of economic gains through what Bayart (2009) terms strategies of ‘extraversion’ – a process through which political actors are disposed to mobilise resources from their relationship with the external environment as a result of weak productivity and internal social struggle.

In a comparable way, despite the claim of three centuries of state experience, it was the import of exogenous ideas such as mechanisms of the modern bureaucratic machinery, the adoption of modern European law (the penal and civil code that was introduced in 1958), and the notion of constitutionalism that profoundly moulded Ethiopia’s current shape.<sup>2</sup> While it was colonialism that introduced new areas of domination – both ideological and technological – to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the indigenous elite, particularly Emperor Menelik and Haile Selassie I, have been credited with the introduction of modern instruments of rule in Ethiopia (Bahru 1991; Andreas

2003). As Addis Hiwet (1975) observed, imperialism offered the Ethiopian elite ‘real advantages in the modification, rationalisation and organisation of a modern state apparatus – ministers and bureaucracies and military power ... their own socio-economic needs were more than sufficiently catered by the goods of the world capitalist system’ (78). The desire of the ruling class to ‘modernise’ itself, i.e. to imbibe the Western system of knowledge and lifestyle, and the ambition to create a European modernity (Clapham 2006), was important in shaping the state.

In this sense, the centralisation of Ethiopian state power was realised in the same way that it was realised in other sub-Saharan African countries, where, as Bayart (2009) tells us, foreign contact and the appropriation of European modes of rule were a major resource for ‘the centralisation of power and accumulation of wealth’ (23). One can include Ethiopia in Bayart’s claim that the articulation of African politics and societies, in this particular context, ‘could no longer be distanced from the technological civilisation of the West’ (24). The substantive difference seems to be more the mode of the appropriation of exogenous institutions and ideologies. While this was direct colonial intrusion through conquest in the rest of ‘Black Africa’, in Ethiopia the state elite was responsible for the appropriation of the ideologies and institutions of Europeans through strategies of ‘extraversion’.

Such parallel trajectories have contributed to the emergence of comparable political processes and economic conditions in both the Ethiopian state and other sub-Saharan African states. As such, Ethiopia possesses most of the characteristic features that are currently used to identify Africa: ethnic and religious diversity, poverty, famine, indigenous polity, economic growth, and so on. However, I do not want to imply that colonialism and the incorporation of global resources and

technologies within a state are similar. As mentioned earlier, Ethiopia possesses a distinctive history of state formation that distinguishes it from the rest of Africa. I further acknowledge the immense importance of its peculiar features (the presence of a specific tradition of power, the conceptualisation of politics through ‘graphic reasoning’ (Bayart 2009), and so on) in shaping its composition and the popular ideas of the state. Yet, viewing Ethiopia as an exception based on such traits and counterposing it with the rest of the sub-Saharan African states presupposes that the latter is a singular category.

It is important to note here that much of the discussion in the literature regarding postcolonial African states and Ethiopian exceptionalism is based on the assumption that colonialism had a homogenising effect throughout the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Recently, however, scholars have raised questions about the homogenising effect of colonialism, pointing out that ‘the influence and effects of colonialism have been extremely varied throughout post-colonial Africa’, and as a result ‘pre-existing diversities – although hardly unchanging – persisted throughout and beyond the colonial interlude’ (Harrison 2010:15). Thus, Ethiopian exceptionalism becomes less convincing as one questions the importance of the homogenising effect of colonialism on the composition and nature of the postcolonial Africa states. If anything, the Ethiopian state represents one sociocultural and political formation in a diverse continent. Therefore, rather than viewing it as an anomaly, this study takes Ethiopia as a case through which to elucidate how the state is constituted in the mundane materiality of everyday life. However, Ethiopia is not taken as a representative case, that is, this study does not attempt to make any empirical generalisation on either African states or Ethiopia. Rather, it aims to outline those principles that underlie the *modus operandi* of the state, which can be analytically and theoretically significant in understanding the state in Africa.

## **The conceptualisation of the state in Ethiopia**

This section discusses the conceptualisation of the Ethiopian state. It provides important background information and insights into problems with the existing literature. It does this by bringing together an ambitious set of dispersed literature from different disciplinary fields and presenting them thematically.

### **The great tradition**

Much has been written about the historical origins of the Ethiopian state. One predominant and classical approach, known as the ‘Greater Ethiopia’, provides an account of a transcendental state. This conceptualisation is anchored in a historical metanarrative of what Christopher Clapham (2002a) aptly termed ‘the great tradition’ – a belief in the continuity of ancient state tradition. The ‘great tradition’ projects an image of a long territorially unified state into the biblical past.

The core narrative of ‘the great tradition’ oeuvre often begins with Aksum, an ancient kingdom that flourished in the present-day Tigray province of Ethiopia and Eritrea between the first and seventh centuries, as the first recognisable Ethiopian state. Aksum is seen as a ‘bedrock state’, so much so that the origin of the institutions of imperial Ethiopia, such as the office of the Emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Clapham 1969), as well as Christian culture, the ox-plough agricultural system, and Ethiopic script, are imputed to it. The narrative continues linearly to relate the history of the fall of Aksum and the rise of what is considered an ‘illegitimate’ non-Solomonic<sup>3</sup> dynasty known as the *Zagwe*, whose extraordinary achievement and enduring legacy is the construction of rock-hewn churches. By 1270 the ‘legitimate’ Solomonic dynasty was restored, and it consolidated state power, expanded its territory, and defended itself against its historic



enemies – its Muslim and Pagan neighbours – for the ensuing six centuries until its last emperor, Haile Selassie I, was deposed in 1974. After the fall of the Solomonic dynasty in 1974, history continued to serve to reify the state by narrating the story of the military regime that was in place until 1991 and the Federalist regime that has been in place since 1991 (Marcus 1994; Clapham 2002a; Toggia 2008).

In line with the dominant Western perception of Ethiopia as an orientalist civilisation, early scholars and philologists attempted to codify a linear history of its statehood based on their encounter with the Geez high scriptural traditions that had produced the bulk of historiographic texts (see, for example, Ludolf 1684; Jones and Monroe 1955; Tadesse 1972; Sergew 1972; Ullendorff 1973). Many of these studies present historically disparate sets of activities, political discourses, and institutions as a coherent and unified political entity contained within the concept of ‘state’. The problem is that, in this historiographic articulation, the Ethiopian state becomes a punitive discourse. The account simply banishes and glosses over germane anecdotes of governance practices among non-Christian communities and occupational groups, and informal and alternative political power structures, such as banditry,<sup>4</sup> traditional political systems, and the historically variable territoriality of various political entities. Political writers and historians working within this tradition invariably use the notion of state to refer to all ‘kingdoms and empires in ancient and medieval periods, as well as the modern Ethiopian states’ (Toggia 2008: 331). In other words, the modern concept of the state is simply projected onto the historical past, and, as such, the Ethiopian state is represented more as an already formed and organised trans-historical entity that evolves linearly and steers the course of social life than as a social formation produced at a specific and recent historical juncture or one that is in a constant process of construction based

on social struggles and cultural idioms. This approach suffers from what Derek Sayer (1987) calls the ‘violence of abstraction’, that is, the disentanglement of concepts from historical facts.

In general, the Ethiopian state has historically displayed a tendency toward diversity. This is not to say that communities did not have shared cultural notions of the state. Rather, the point is that the state naturally signifies multiplicity as well as unity. Hence, attending to Ethiopia’s legacy of political diversity keeps us from reproducing a totalising nationalist teleology or restricting its statehood to one socio-political formation.

In a typical Western epistemology of the time, the grandiose assertions of the great tradition thesis subsequently enabled Ethiopist scholars to construct a civilizational hierarchy, which orders cultural differences in Ethiopia into systems of centre and periphery: between Christian and non-Christian communities, Semites and non-Semites, and Geeze civilisation and barbarian traditions (see, for example, Ludolf 1684; Ullendorff 1973). This language was furthermore linked to racial category – in particular, in terms of a nested set of racial oppositions between Semitic immigrants and members of African tribes:

... the Ethiopian Empire of the twentieth century consists of a number of previously autonomous and distinct ‘African’ tribes subordinated under an alien Semitic minority. This view is a natural consequence of beginning Ethiopian history, as scholarly convention has had it, with the supposed Semitic immigrations of the first millennium B.C. (Levine 2000: 26)

Thus, the Ethiopian state is understood as a bifurcated structure, as we shall see when we examine the centre-periphery approach, which found its expression in a sharp civilisational split based on tradition, culture (Christian and non-Christian), and space (highland and lowland). The result is that, in the words of Christopher Clapham (2002a: 40–41), the Abyssinians, ‘notably those who

speaking Amharic and Tigrinya’, are constructed as true ‘Ethiopia, whereas other peoples [are seen to be] [...] *part of Ethiopia*’.

The idea that a centralised state with roots in Abyssinian core remains central to contemporary Ethiopian scholarship (Donham and James 1986; Clapham 1988, 2017; Bahru 1991, Teshale 1995; Markakis 2011). While most contemporary critical studies reject the Semitic thesis, they present an image of the state that is organized around what Teshale Tibebu (1995) calls ‘Geeze civilization’. As I will show later in this chapter, the orientalist construction of cultures of power remained in the realm of the undisputed, even for ethnographers.

### **The great man approach**

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the study of state and society had been ignored by Ethiopianist scholars in their drive to account for the personhood and power of the great emperors. This tradition was set in motion, according to Markakis (2011: 20), by Thomas Carlyle’s (1841) ‘hero-worship’ approach, which inspired numerous ‘encomiastic portraits of past leaders’, especially of Haile Selassie. Many scholars working in this tradition, as Bahru Zewde (2008) remarks, were infatuated with the late Machiavellian Emperor and so eschewed any broad social analysis. The state, rather, was predominantly discussed in relation to the purportedly ‘modernizing zeal’ (Perham 1969: 62) of a man who is said to have ‘shaped rather than waited upon events’ (Mosley 1965: 151). Even Halliday and Molyneux (1981), who took a structuralist political economy approach to the study of Ethiopia, said that ‘the history of modern Ethiopia has to a considerable degree been encapsulated in the biography of the man who, for many years, ruled it and represented it to the outside world.’ Haile Selassie is represented as the ‘singular and transcendental’ figure of a Machiavellian prince (Foucault 1991: 91) who embodied not only the

state but also its history and rules to maintain personal control over his territory. While his progressive view (which Bahru Zewde (2008) rather scathingly characterised as ‘panegyric of money’) contributed to the transformation of the imperial government, it is too reductionist to regard the monarch as a ‘quintessence of the state’ (Raphaeli 1967: 422) and study him instead of the state and society. In these studies, analysis of the state is highly tethered to what Foucault (1991) conceptualised as a sovereign understanding of power – i.e. power is assumed to be a centralised force wielded by great emperors who oppress, impose laws, and build institutions.

### **The modern state: two approaches<sup>5</sup>**

Over the years, scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines – history, political science, anthropology, etc. – have paid a great deal of attention to the genesis of the modern Ethiopian state. The emphasis of these studies has broadly been on the making of imperial Ethiopia, especially on the nature and consequences of Menelik’s conquest<sup>6</sup> of the south during the last quarter of the 19th century. In order to describe the conquest, many scholars draw on a wide range of aphorisms and appellations, including ‘enlargement of the state’ (Markakis 2011), ‘imperial expansion’ (Donham 1986), colonisation (Holcomb and Ibssa 1990), ‘military feudal colonialism’ (Addis Hiwet 1975), and restoring and uniting the ‘medieval territories of Ethiopia’ (Teffera 1997: 37) that were lost in the aftermath of Gagn and Oromo expansion<sup>7</sup> (Getachew 1986). These aphorisms, broadly speaking, are expressions of a wide range of divergent and competing views and positions on the Ethiopian state.

Most of these writings can be placed in two major categories: modernist or constructivist and critical. However, the distinction between these two approaches is a very rough-and-ready one. The approaches constitute two broadly overlapping realms of literature. The constructivist

perspective imagines the Ethiopian state as a somehow modern phenomenon, which is mainly associated with statist institutional practices, conquest, and war (Donham 1986; Clapham 1988; Bahru 1991; Keller 1991; Teshale 1995). Clapham (1988), for example, locates the emergence of the modern state within a set economic, political, and social shifts, and transformations wrought by modernity and direct contact with Europe. This involved the introduction of ‘a standing army, ministerial bureaucracies, national taxation, and a codified law to protect landed elites’ (Donham 1986: 25), and the transformation of what had been the traditional elite into a European-educated bureaucratic elite. This process, Clapham argues, ensured that Ethiopia would be recognised as a ‘sovereign jurisdiction existing on terms of formal equality’ (1988: 26–27) with European states. This socio-political development has led to further discussions among Ethiopianists concerning where it fits in the international system of states. Bahru Zewde (2008), for instance, drew comparisons between imperial Ethiopia and Perry Anderson’s late European absolutist states during their transition from feudalism to capitalism. Similarly, Teshale Tibebe (1995:30) sought to investigate: ‘In the global survey of modern state formations .... Where does the Ethiopian variety fit in?’ In brief, Teshale claims that the Ethiopian state fits within three different models: ‘the modern Western, the historic old states, and the new fragile states of nineteenth-century Africa’ (49).

Moving away from model-driven approaches, others sought to explain the contradiction between structural changes brought about by rationalisation of the state and traditional patterns of social organisation in the late imperial period. The paradoxical structural transformations that the Ethiopian state system underwent from 1896 to 1974 – namely, ‘the creation of a stronger and more centralised bureaucratic state and the increasing commercialisation of the economy’

(Donham 1986: 25) on the one side, and the concomitant entrenchment of the ancient aristocratic class system on the other – has made scholars question the liberalising and modernising capacity of the state as an actor. Many have concluded that the imperial state’s capacity to modernise society and transform the economy (especially the agricultural sector) was impaired by its ‘semi-bureaucratized’ structure (Gebru 1996), i.e. by contradictions between ‘commercial purists and patron-client relationships’ (Donham 1986).

Writing about class and revolution, Markakis and Nega (1986) described the late imperial state as beset by a conjunction of national and class antagonisms. The first, they argue, was a product of the strain caused by the imperial expansion into the south and the subsequent drive by national leaders to centralise state power. Second, they saw class antagonism as a product of the introduction and expansion of Western capitalism. They argued that the foreign domination of the economic sector prevented the formation of a national bourgeoisie and radicalized the petty bourgeoisie (the salariat in the public and private sectors, and the self-employed in the retail trade. They argue that this group, along with the students, was able to find a ‘common cause with the workers and the peasants’ (53) by politicising the issues of land and worker exploitation. This laid the groundwork for the revolution of 1974. Similarly, Halliday and Molyneux (1981) saw contradictions between the advanced administrative system and the backward economy producing the conditions that would lead to the demise of the imperial state. Writing about the cause of the 1974 revolution, Halliday and Molyneux (1981) described imperial Ethiopia in terms of radical division between two economic sectors: the agricultural sector, which was attached to the pre-capitalist mode of production and administration system, and the industrialising sector, represented by the expansion of industries in urban areas and large-scale commercial farms in some rural areas:

The state apparatus became a partial promoter of capitalist development and, at the same time, the site of a conflict between groups associated with this capitalist development and those associated with the pre-capitalist order. The gulf thus created within the state was to be more than a reflection of the conflicts within the socio-economic formation as a whole; it became the politically most acute contradiction within Ethiopian society, the conflict that was to determine the fall of the *ancient regime* and the nature of the new post-revolutionary system (Halliday and Molyneux: 1981:69–70).

The immediate social conditions included a wave of student protests and public demonstrations over a 50-per cent oil price hike, corrupt officials, and the infamous deadly famine in the north, the victims of which the emperor allegedly said defamed his reputation by dying of famine (de Waal 1991: 57). Halliday and Molyneux (1981) argued that it was not these conditions but the insoluble contradictions in the state system that produced a ‘revolution from above’ in 1974.

While many scholars within the modernist tradition have studied state transformation, some analysts of the Derg period focussed on historical continuity in state representation. A number of writers have suggested that the idea of an ancient Ethiopian state and its ‘message of domination’ was appropriated and portrayed by the Derg during the regime’s revolution period. In his book *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*, Donald Donham (1999) outlines how spectacular ritual and pageantry formed an essential part of the state’s authority. He describes an occasion in 1984 in which the Derg organised a splendid celebration for the tenth anniversary of the revolution at a cost of US \$50 million dollars. One of the programmes involved a museum exhibit:

The exhibit was placed along a wall, in front of which a red carpet led viewers from one installation to the next. The first stop was the bones that American palaeontologist Donald Johanson had found in Hadar, Ethiopia, of an individual he named Lucy (after the Beatles' song), supposedly the earliest evidence of our hominid ancestors ... After [which] came photographs of stelae from the earliest civilisation in Ethiopia, Axum. After Axum came the famous rock church of Lalibela from the twelfth century. The exhibit continued to the battle of Adwa in 1896, in which Ethiopia defeated Italy and thereafter, alone in Africa, managed to remain politically independent during most of the twentieth century. Finally came the overthrow of Haile Sellassie in 1974 (1999: 14–15).

Progressing through the exhibition from beginning to the end clearly showed Ethiopia as a cradle of humanity and attempted to sustain the powerful myth of a trans-historic idea of the state. Moreover, the Derg appropriated the symbolism of imperial power as integral to the idea of the ancient Ethiopian state. In this regard, Clapham (1988: 79) draws a parallel between Mengistu Haile Mariam and Haile Selassie:

In the time of the imperial regime, it was common to see pictures in which Father, Son and Holy Ghost, enthroned in the clouds, projected a beam of light onto the emperor (symbolically situated at mid-point between heaven and earth), who in turn diffused it to a waiting people. At the tenth anniversary celebrations [of the Ethiopian revolution] along with the official decorations provided by the North Koreans, it was also possible to find homemade tributes in which the gift of grace, embodied in a celestial trinity of Marx, Engels and Lenin, similarly descended to the graceful masses by way of Mengistu Haile-Mariam.

Similarly, David Korn (1986: 107), who was in charge of the American embassy in Addis Ababa at the time, observed:



... in his rare public appearances in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian leader sits on a kind of throne, a red velvet upholstered gold-lacquered chair emplaced above and in front of the less ornate seats provided for the other senior figures of the regime. In these and in other ways, Mengistu Haile Mariam can be looked upon as a monarch, an emperor, a successor to Haile Selassie and to Menelik.

According to Paul Henze (2000), in an attempt to project himself as a champion of Ethiopian unity (and a guardian of the ancient Ethiopian state idea), Mengistu compared himself to the fiery 18th-century Emperor Tewodros II, who initiated the unification of the country following its fragmentation by provincial warlords. I. M. Lewis (1983: 8) also commented that Mengistu's obsessions with staging state ceremonies on the statue of Menelik was 'hardly accidental' but rather a projection of equivalence with his 'illustrious predecessor, the founder of the expanded Ethiopian empire.' More generally, these spectacles, through their performance and cultural projection of power and tradition, stressed the continuity of the idea of the historic Ethiopian state. The critical approach stands in sharp contrast to the description of Ethiopian statehood offered by the modernist/constructivist approach. Much of this scholarship focusses on issues of ethnic identity, nation, and nationalism, and how these are related to the historical narrative of Ethiopian statehood. Characteristic of this approach is revisiting the Ethiopian past and attempting to provide more nuanced and variegated accounts of its history – particularly with a view to critiquing essentialist notions of statehood. The work of Holcomb and Ibssa (1990), for instance, complicates the constructivist/modernist narrative by highlighting state practices of domination. They described Ethiopia as a 'dependent colonial empire' created as a result of an alliance formed between European capitalist states (Britain, France, and Italy) and the Abyssinian kingdom in the interests of the former. They argue that the state is not an ancient indigenous entity but rather as

much a child of colonialism as any other African state, spared from direct subjugation because it was an agent for colonial powers in the Horn of Africa:

Ethiopia is the name that was eventually given to the geographic unit created when Abyssinia, a cluster of small kingdoms in northeast Africa, expanded in the mid-1800s by conquering independent nations in the region using firearms provided by European power (1).

The predominant image of the state in such discussions of Ethiopian politics and history is that of an alien force imposing itself upon independent ethnic nationalities (see Asafa 1993; Sorenson 1993; Mohammed 1994; Baxter, Hultin and Triulzi 1996; Mekuria B. 1996; Leenco 1999). These studies bring to the fore the question of national and cultural oppression, and other forms of inequality inherent in the state system, which have been disguised by the grand ‘great tradition’ narrative. There is, however, a profound irony in this approach to Ethiopian statehood and historiography because of its structural similarity to the Manchurian discourse of Semitic/non-Semitic dichotomy propounded by the great tradition writers. A number of scholars have simply turned the orientalist epistemology on its head by adopting the same flawed and essentialising approach to Ethiopian statehood that objectifies linguistic and cultural differences. Their sweeping critique of the great tradition thesis has much in common with the cultural and ethno-nationalist assertion of indigeneity and epistemology (see Surafel 2018).

Other studies undertaken by scholars such as Merera (2006), Vaughan (2003), Yates (2009), and Abbink (1997) focus their argument on the complexity of the interface between state power and ethnicity. For example, with respect to the Oromo, Merera (2006: 104) wrote, ‘the irony of Oromo history therefore is that they were among of the conquerors and the conquered, that they produced

kings and queens while at the same time reduced to “*gabbar*” (serf) and tenants alienated from the land of their ancestors’.

To conclude, it seems that thus far, at the centre of Ethiopian studies about the state, society, and governance lies the question of whether we have to conceptualise the state in terms of a broad historical continuum of some two thousand years or whether it has to be understood as a ‘dependent colonial’ entity carved out to meet European imperial interest or as a set of institutions dominated by class and ethnic interests and yet separate from and acting upon society. Although extremely rich and interesting, most of these studies have offered only a top-down analysis of the state in Ethiopia. They pay little attention to local governance practices or to how the people interact and negotiate with the state authority. In their attempt to historicise the Ethiopian state, they have become susceptible to sweeping generalisations, and, as a consequence, they conceal dispersed and localised patterns of governance practices.

### **Centre-periphery approach**

Another perspective often take to study Ethiopian statehood is the frontier, centre-periphery approach. This, according to Donald Donham (1986: 4), ‘connects centre to periphery, and so provides a way of linking the history and social anthropology’. Scholars working within this framework define the Ethiopian centre as the locus of state power which is constituted through the cultural idioms of Orthodox Christian followers of the Amharic- and Tigrinya-speaking groups of highland Ethiopia. The periphery, on the other hand, is seen to be the marginal domain of non-Abyssinian groups who are identified in terms of their physical proximity to the capital, Addis Ababa, as a nodal point of communication, their level of incorporation to the state structure and their degree of self-identification with the ‘Greater Ethiopia’ myth (see Clapham 2002a). This

cleavage is understood to be the most important defining feature of the Ethiopian state and history (see Donham 1986; Clapham 2017).

However, Donald Donham (2002) also wrote that, with the secession of Eritrea and a large number of Ethiopians' being abroad, the shape of its space has shifted from 'a hierarchical arrangement of cores and peripheries', a political dynamic that 'remained stable for roughly three-quarters of a century' up until the 1974 revolution, into 'a more open series of interactions drawing upon partially shared and intersecting "ethnoscapes" of the imagination' (2). He suggested James Scott's concept of 'mapping' as an alternative approach to the study of the state. Christopher Clapham (2002b) made use of this concept and provided a cogent analysis on how Haile Selassie and the Derg and EPRDF regimes attempted to spatially reconstitute the Ethiopian state. He coined the concept of 'encadrement' or 'incorporation into structures of control' to explain how the Derg regime controlled its territory through land distribution, villagisation, state farms, and other projects.

The centre-periphery perspective, however, gained renewed interest after the publication of Markakis's (2011) book *Ethiopia: the last two frontiers*. In this book, Markakis argues that, instead of geography, the centre should be seen in terms of a monopoly over power and the state apparatus, and the periphery should be seen in terms of its relative absence. He identifies two frontiers in the periphery: the highland periphery and the lowland periphery. While the Ethiopian state is successful, he argues, in both politically and economically integrating the highland periphery, the 'integration process has barely begun' in the lowland periphery:

... neither the civil code nor the penal codes of the state have much currency here, every man is armed, no one pays taxes and the people rely on themselves and traditional leaders for justice ... the people subsist on the side of the state, outside the national economy, cut off from highland society and culture, and at the whim of a political system whose periodic dramatic swings they scarcely comprehend (16–17).

Underlying this conceptualisation and characterisation seems to be an understanding of the state in terms of the existence of bureaucratic institutions. However, as Nielsen (2007) pointed out, in the case of Mozambique, local understandings of state exist even in the relative absence of government institutions. This approach therefore fails to recognise that the state is more than a physical political structure. Moreover, in most Ethiopian peripheries, the absence of government institutions has not kept the government from collecting taxes or making its presence felt through recurrent military incursions (Hagmann and Korf 2012).

A similar approach of a centre-periphery binary is used in the recent work of Christopher Clapham (2017) as a fundamental factor in the process of state-building in the Horn of Africa. Such an approach, from the point of view of this study, is fraught with the problem of what Joel Migdal (2001: 199) termed the ‘beachhead imagery’, an analytical construct in which a ‘Great tradition’ or the centre – the beachhead of change – is assumed to impose its will over the periphery. People at the periphery are depicted as lacking agency and only passive ‘... recipients of commands and of beliefs which they do not themselves create or cause to be diffused, and of those who are lower in the distribution or allocation of rewards, dignities, facilities, etc.’ (Shils 1982: 59). In other words, the relationship between the centre and the periphery is seen only in terms of a relationship of control, domination, or isolation. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in the following section,

such a perspective has significant implications for critical engagements with an essentialist concept of political culture because many scholars juxtapose practices of Abyssinian political culture with ‘egalitarian’ traditions of ‘peripheral’ societies.

### **Abyssinian culture and state formation**

Some of the most detailed studies on Ethiopia have focussed on political culture, including the classic works of Donald Levine (1965a, 1965b, 2000) and Allan Hoben (1970). While scholars working within this approach, as I will demonstrate later, have not explicitly theorised on the state, they do describe the political culture around which the Ethiopian state is organised and the mechanisms and system of meaning through which ordinary people make sense of politics, social relations, and state institutions.

In what follows, I elaborate on the ideas of Donald Levine. I have chosen to focus on Levine because of his substantial influence on those working on Ethiopian politics, society, and history. In his article *Ethiopia: Identity, Authority, and Realism* (1965b), Levine outlined the cultural conditions that inform political life in North Ethiopia. He begins with the argument that since Ethiopia was ruled by the Amhara for such a long period, any attempt to understand its politics should start with the ‘fact of Amhara dominance’ (248). He states, ‘... the ideas, symbols, and values which govern Ethiopian politics are drawn from Amhara culture. The national politics of Ethiopia have on the whole been shaped in accordance to what may be called *Amhara political culture* ...’ He further points to three features that define Amhara political culture: ‘orientation to authority, to human nature and to polity’, which, he believes, ‘have changed very little over the centuries<sup>8</sup>’. Regarding the first component, authority, as an essential defining characteristic of the Amhara political culture, Levine (1965b: 250) wrote:

... the complex of beliefs, symbols and values regarding authority constitute a key component of Amhara political culture. Throughout Amhara culture appears the motif that authority as such is good: indispensable for the well-being of society and worthy of unremitting deference, obeisance, and praise. Every aspect of Amhara social life is anchored in some sort of relationship to authority figures, and the absence of such a relationship evokes feelings of incompleteness and malaise.

He draws our attention to the pervasiveness of hierarchy in a whole range of social contexts, including family relations, manners during mealtimes, obedience to parental authority, in children's playing groups (dominated by the eldest), school discipline, and gestures of respect to superiors (250–252). For Levine, the exercise of authority in social and family relationships in the Amhara society resembles that found in institutional contexts: 'the household is less a family unit than it is a vertically ordered set of status-roles' (2000: 123). He describes the nature of life in Amhara society as 'highly political in that the wielding of authority is a basic and pervasive feature of their social relationships' (1965b: 251).

The second component has to do with the Amhara conception of human nature, which Levine characterised as 'realistic humanism'. Levine argues that this view is 'radically unegalitarian' (257) and that this is reinforced by the Amhara fatalistic conception of the universe. He argues that *Edel*, or fate, which has to be accepted, is tethered to divine authority and conceived of as more important than human effort. This buttresses 'a disposition to respect and obey figures of authority' (261). The wider political implication, he emphasised, is that 'society no more than human nature is to be made the object of systematic efforts to apply transcendent principles or to transform the status quo', so the process of governing is based on the ability 'to accept such conflicts and strains

as exist and to work, by skilful manipulation, adjudication, and occasional coercion, to maintain a minimum of order and retributive justice' (261).

Finally, Levine draws attention to national politics by suggesting that the Amhara culture does not value 'the notion of civil community' (262). Thus, social cohesion is maintained by a 'sharing of common religious, territorial and linguistic identifications', and 'subordination to individual authority figures' (262). On the other hand, Levine argues, national sentiment is tied to the tradition of the monarch and to that of the church. Taken together, the three elements representing the Amhara political culture, 'furthered the establishment of legitimate national government' but also obstructed its 'rationalisation' and 'affected both positively and negatively the receptivity to social change' (271).

Levine has helpfully identified two aspects that characterise political culture in North Ethiopia: the pervasiveness of hierarchy and the complex beliefs, symbols, and values regarding authority. What I find particularly striking about Levine's analyses, however, is that they say so little about values and norms prescribing appropriate behaviour embedded in hierarchical power relations. His analysis of the belief system fails to take into account complex relational principles and ideas that shape power relations and hierarchical transactions.

Echoes of Levine's analysis of Ethiopian politics and society have been noticeable in political and cultural studies since the publication of his work (see Molvaer 1980, 1995; Lefort 2007). One notable example is the work of Donald Donham (1986: 4),<sup>9</sup> who saw the Abyssinian (Amhara and Tigray) sociocultural formation of '... the pre-nineteenth-century period [as] the basis for the new



Ethiopian state'. He (1986) sought to describe the Ethiopian state in terms of a system of surplus extraction that, he believes, defines the centre-periphery assemblage, building on the Abyssinian notions of domination, constraint, and extraction. He wrote:

The very word in Amharic for nobility, *mekwannint*, derives indirectly from the verb *konene* which means to discipline, to constrain, to inflict pain. The word for lord, *melkenya*, derives indirectly from the verb *meleke* meaning variously to vanquish, to govern, to expropriate. The notion of extraction in particular was evident in the phrase commonly used to describe the appointment of lords to fiefs: they were sent to eat their respective countries (6).

Donham went on to explain what he described as the 'unadorned system of force and extraction' (6) that imbues the imperial Ethiopian state system:

The notion of constraint and extraction to prevent 'satisfaction' seems to have pervaded the major inequalities in Abyssinian society: the relation between God and his Orthodox Christian believers, that between lords and their following, and finally between husband-father and their wives and children. With regard to the first, fasting was and is the symbol of adherence to Ethiopian Orthodox faith. Its centrality can be appreciated when fasting is seen as God's extraction designed to constrain sinful human nature, to keep believers in line, and to prevent the 'satisfaction' that encourages people to take more than they have a right to. The relationship between lord and their following was seen in much the same light; in fact, the word for the lord's demesne, the field worked by the *corvee* labour of his peasants, was *hudad*, the same word for the difficult and long Lenten fast. Finally, husband-fathers played the same role of disciplining their wives and children. According to a common saying: *setinna ahiya yale dula aykenam* ('A woman and a donkey can't be kept straight without the stick') (1986: 6).

According to Donham's analysis, the hierarchical relations that frame the Abyssinian society are ordered, based on the principles of domination and extraction, into a whole. In this formulation, the whole is the phenomenological world – that is, God's desire to extract sinful human nature – and the social and political system is simply its material expression. In other words, the whole contains within it and serves as the basis upon which social and political distinctions are established.

Recently, Teferi Adem (2004) explored the gaps between the objectives of the national agricultural extension programmes and the reality of their implementation in Wollo through the lens of 'national political culture' (85). Building on Levine's analysis, he argued that the problem of implementing extension programmes was complicated by the pervasiveness of cultural dispositions, such as habits of suspicion and distrust, a masculine and militaristic ethos, and the tendency of national leaders to import foreign ideologies and development programmes. These encouraged the tendency to assume the existence of certain cultural dispositions and national political culture, rather than testing for it, implying that the nature of political culture is the same everywhere.

Other contemporary scholarship has recognised the complex overlap and interface between traditional values and formal institutions (see Aalen 2002; Pausewang 2002; Hagmann 2006). The study of political culture was given a different theoretical shape by Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll (2003), who, using Barnes's theory of power, moved beyond the 'waxen form of politics in Ethiopia, to illuminate its "golden" alternate [i.e.] the relations and systems of power and convention which underpin and give it life and meaning'. They treated power as 'both function

and constitutive feature of the interaction of a social collective' (25). In so doing, they demonstrated the social processes that lead to power relations' being rooted in the system of social networks. Culture holds explanatory value only when we take into account the relations of power that shape its production; the different ways in which it is deployed; and the ways in which it changes according to different contexts of social life and history, and different circumstances (see Vaughan 2003).

This book explores this process and refines these insights by exploring the complex process in which hierarchy, culture, and 'counter-conduct' (Foucault 2007) intersect. While recognising the importance of the hierarchical conception of authority in North Ethiopia, I also suggest that our theoretical frameworks for studying power relations, authority, and the state in Ethiopia need to take more account of resistance and the relational principles that are embedded in the cultural conception of hierarchy. Ethiopian history is replete with resistance, including peasant revolts (Gebru 1996); banditry (Crummey 1986); armed resistance (Young 1997); and other everyday forms of resistance, such as oral poetry (see Getie 1999). It seems to be necessary to ask ourselves how one accounts for 'the endless succession of revolts, part peasant rebellion, part feudal *jacqueries*, repressed in one place only to break out in another' (Chojnacki 1993: 61)? How does one harmonise 'unremitting deference' (Levine 1965b: 250) to authority and the pervasiveness of resistance? What does the latter tell us about the nature of power relations and the state in Northern Ethiopia?

Messay Kebede (1999) offers us a clue to the nexus of power and resistance, i.e., how 'the art of being governed' and 'the will not to be governed' (Foucault 2007) are conceptualised in traditional

Ethiopia. Writing about land tenure and governance, he makes a distinction between peasant protests that arise due to the abuse of governors and ‘peasant rebellion emerging from deep discontent with the system itself’. He argues that while the ‘latter never occurred in Ethiopia, the former was frequent’ (Messay 1999: 171). An important implication of this insight is that people take the land tenure and hierarchical system of authority for granted, whereas individual actors occupying a position of authority are subjected to ‘critical attitude’ (Foucault 2007) and resistance. Messay continues that in traditional Ethiopia patrons are expected to be ‘beneficent for the sake of justice, in the name of clientship’, and those who refuse to do so end up either betrayed or abandoned. However, the patron is not expected to be beneficent on the basis of the principle of equality because ‘the high respect for social hierarchy empties justice of the notion of equality’ (203). Hierarchy is thus seen to represent the natural order of things. However, at the same time, the bases of power and the legitimacy of leaders are not defined by their position within the hierarchy but by how people imagine good patrons and good relations with them ought to be, and what obligations they think these relations entail. Hence hierarchy, as I demonstrate in Chapter 7, is encompassed by cultural and religious values, and the notion that the higher one (God, *mengist*, husband, etc.) encompasses the lower one (the people, family, etc.) in terms of being both more powerful and more responsible. This book further expands these insights by exploring the myriad ways in which *mengist* vis-à-vis local officials are culturally constructed in Degga in relation to discourses of development and corruption.

The discussion so far has allowed us to see the ways in which power is entailed in culture. Here, the distinction made by the Comaroffs (1991) between hegemony and ideology is instructive; the former is the nonagentive and hidden face of power, and the latter is the agentive face that refers

to highly articulated world views and systems of meaning within a cultural field. To ground these ideas in the case at hand, the values that encompass hierarchy constitute the agentive face of power in culture (i.e. ideology, which is a self-conscious systems of values and hence contestable), whereas hierarchy constitutes the non-agentive aspects that people take for granted as natural. Thus, the people and principles (ideologies, value systems) that are embedded in unequal relations of power are subject to resistance, while hierarchy or the system that underpins it operates unnoticed. Hence, the concept of culture used in this book views culture in terms of power relations. It can thus be understood as ‘the space of signifying practice, the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others - and, hence, society and history’ (Comaroffs 1991: 21). It is a field in which ‘critical attitude’ (Foucault 2007) is formed, and domination and resistance take place.

Chapter 7 demonstrates how critical discourse is articulated in corruption discourses and through the religious metaphors and idioms that define the roles and obligations involved in governance. It informs the ways in which people understand hierarchy and experience and conceptualise the state.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined conceptual problems related to the idea of Ethiopian and state-society relations. It also summarised several decades of discussion about the state and society in Ethiopia by drawing on a wide range of academic fields. One important question from the literature is whether one can describe the state without analysing the politically constructed and idealised image whose origins lie in the state itself. In the view of this study, the literature on the Ethiopian state, especially ‘the great tradition’ and ethno-nationalist perspectives, are partly categories of

thought produced and imposed by successive political regimes. Therefore, in seeking to escape such a problem, this book heeds Bourdieu's (1999: 53) caveat and attempts to avoid '...the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state, that is, of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognize its most profound truth'.

On the other hand, the literature concerned with an understanding of the history of the Ethiopian state is quiet about the nature of relations between state and society at the local level. Recent anthropological writings are also comparatively biased towards what are described as 'peripheral' parts of the Ethiopian state and rarely focus on the broader question of local governance practices in relation to the concept of the state. By contrast, as I have highlighted in this chapter, the 'core area' is described largely in terms of Levine's classic work on the Amhara political culture. This book, in an explicit endeavour to counter this impasse, attempts an ethnographic account of the Ethiopian state in both the core and the periphery areas, with a special emphasis on the former.

The state in Ethiopia is largely viewed in the literature as a centralised apparatus of power which acts upon society in the interest of one class, world power, or ethnic group, or another. Viewed from an anthropological perspective, these approaches provide us with a limited grasp of the nature of the state in Ethiopia. It is therefore imperative in studying the state in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and in Ethiopia in particular, in Foucault's (1980: 121) words, 'to cut off the King's head' in favour of examining the state from below. The remainder of this book attempts such an analysis in order to empirically demonstrate the nature of the state as it is experienced and lived by local people in Ethiopia.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Bayart's famous metaphor of 'the rhizome state' did not include Ethiopia in its analysis, the nation is typical of the type of patronage politics that he describes (see de Waal 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the literature relating to how Ethiopia imported the various instruments of modernity, see Markakis 1974; Addis Hiwet 1975; Bahru 1991, 2008; Andreas 2003; Clapham 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The Solomonic dynasty consists of rulers of Ethiopia who claimed to trace their roots back to Queen Sheba of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel (Marcus 1994).

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<sup>4</sup> Historically, the practice of banditry was widely entrenched throughout Northern Ethiopia. Bandits operated with impunity within their ‘jurisdictions’ and exercised sovereignty over a segment of the population through, at times, a monopoly of violence. Banditry, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was, as Crummey (1986) argues, ‘a tool for career mobility’ (33). For example, the first two most prominent modern Ethiopian Emperors, Tewodros II (r. 1855–1868) and Yohannes IV (r. 1872–1889), came to the throne through banditry. Once they assumed power, it was the idea of the state that gave them credibility – or, to use Abrams’s (1988) term, ‘legitimized the illegitimate’ (76). According to Crummey, the use of banditry for political office competition by the Ethiopian ruling class is proof of the ‘criminal undercurrents of all forms of state power’ (1986: 133).

<sup>5</sup> In Ethiopian historiography, the state that emerged following Menelik’s conquest (see below) is commonly considered to be the modern Ethiopian state (see Bahru 1991). The use of the word ‘modern’ also signifies the inculcation of European instruments of governance, such as constitutionalism (see Clapham 2006)

<sup>6</sup> Ethiopia acquired its contemporary shape between 1896 and 1906 through imperial conquest. At the turn of the century, Menelik II subdued several kingdoms and societies, including the emerging Oromo monarchic states, such as Gera, Gomma, Garo, Gumma, Jimma, and Limmu-Ennarea as well as other kingdoms, like Kefa, Sidama, Kembata, Wolayta, and the Omotic-speaking peoples (Bahru 1991; Markakis 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In 1529 the Muslim sultanate of Adal, led by Ahmad ibn Ibrihim al-Ghazi (nicknamed *Gragan* or the left handed), invaded the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, leading to the partial occupation of the Ethiopian highlands for a little more than ten years, between 1529 and 1543 (Bahru 1991;

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Henze 2000). The eventual defeat of *Gragn* was immediately followed by the Oromo clan's expansion towards central, northern, and western Ethiopia (see Bahru 1991; Mohammed 1994).

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Levine wrote this in 1965, and he would probably not make the same comment in the context of current circumstances.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Donham relies prominently on the works of Donald Levine. He also cites accounts of early European travellers to substantiate his analysis.