Cultural identities and unequal citizenship

Clans, status groups and the capability to claim rights

On March 6, 2004, Waka town of Mareka woreda in Dawro zone of southern Ethiopia hosted a boisterous cultural event – Day of Social Equality. This was an aspirational event intended to draw attention to the stubborn reality of social inequality. The event was jointly organized by Action Aid Ethiopia (AAE) (a British NGO working on a broad range of development issues) and the Mareka woreda (district) administration of the Ethiopian state. By any measure, this was a well-organized event attended by a range of stakeholders including high-ranking government officials, dignitaries from the AAE national headquarters, notable zonal and woreda state employees, traditional authority figures, and importantly, by representatives of the most marginalized occupational minorities in the Dawro society, namely, the mana and Manja cultural groups (see pp. 68–69 for description). The head administrator of the Mareka woreda, Mr. Alemu Meshesha, started his opening remarks by quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela as exemplars of the struggle for inclusion and equal rights. Mr. Alemu also noted that preceding Ethiopian state regimes had used a system of inequality as an instrument of maintaining their power. After all was said and done, what came out as the villain responsible for the prevalence of inequality in Dawro was the Dawro culture itself.

In 2000, I interviewed regional and zonal state officials and social sector experts who all acknowledged that social discrimination was a prevalent challenge throughout southern Ethiopia. But its severity varied within this vast region. Although there was no systematic, consistent, and sustained government policy on the issue, a review of relevant provisions in the federal and SNNPR state constitutions, as well as policy documents such as the Federal Cultural Policy and Social Sector Policy Purview, suggest that the EPRDF government recognized inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion as important challenges that need to be addressed (Teshome 2008; MOCI 1997; FDRE constitution especially articles 34, 39, 41; SNNPR constitution especially articles 25, 34, 35). The noted documents speak about “the principle of equality and justice,” “warding off cultural practices that negatively affect dignity and democratic rights of citizens,” and the need to “abolish cultural practices that violate human rights.” Stressing that there were ample legal provisions on these issues, one zonal government official I interviewed insisted that “rather than being a legal
problem, social discrimination in places such as Dawro is a cultural problem” (interviewed in Arba Minch, July 2000). But this was not just a problem of ethnic minorities such as the Dawro; it was a nationwide cultural challenge (Epple 2018) and in many ways a continental challenge (Constantin 1989; Evers 2002; Obinna 2012). Here political history gets perhaps its most troubled cultural expression. A range of distinct issues (pertaining to their origin and persistence) such as slavery, occupational stratification, kinship, and legacies of kingship all intractably intermingle here.

In Chapter 2 I outlined that while Ethiopia fiercely resisted European colonialism and neocolonial desire for cultural domination, the Ethiopian empire remained a slave owning society for much of its extended tenure. It is also important to note that the intent to abolish slavery goes back to the beginning of modern Ethiopia when Emperor Theordos II declared slavery illegal in the 1860s (Marcus and Hudson 1994). Every succeeding Ethiopian emperor also made, partly in response to a changing international context (e.g., to be accepted in the League of Nations), some effort at outlawing slavery in the empire. However, not just slavery’s longstanding legacies but the practice itself lingered in Ethiopia until the 1974 revolution (Allain 2015; Marcus and Hudson 1994; Levine 1974). While Ethiopia’s encounter with slavery and its legacies are yet to be fully understood, a few points are established well enough. Most notable are: (1) slavery was practiced in the majority of east African societies (Sudan being the most notorious, holding the practice until the present era); (2) in Ethiopia, the highest ‘consumers’ of slaves were the Christian highlands, which also happen to be the self-proclaimed core of the Ethiopian mainstream; and (3) the region that later came to be known as the Ethiopian periphery (both politically and geographically) was the primary source of slaves:1 This history, coupled with the modeling of modern Ethiopian national identity on a narrow core of the highlander Amhara cultural ethos, created a nation that denied equal citizenship to non-Amharic speaking ethnic communities and their members in the south, east, and western regions (see also Donham and James 1986; James et al. 2002, Smith 2013). The subjugated ethnic communities resiliently held on to their respective ethnolinguistic identities and cultural practices, partly as resistance against the reality of political marginalization and cultural subjugation.

While Ethiopia’s imperial policy held together a weakly integrated empire for as long as it could, by the late twentieth century new notions of citizenship were needed in which different cultural identities were recognized (Donham 2002). The 1974 overthrow of the Ethiopian monarchy and subsequent declaration of the wholehearted adoption of socialism promised new conceptions of nationalism and citizenship. Although Ethiopia’s socialist regime (1974–1991) put an end to extreme structural injustices upheld by Ethiopia’s monarchic regimes such as landlordism and de facto slavery, it failed to meaningfully address identity-based demands for equal citizenship. In the words of the late Kinfe Abraham, an authoritative EPRDF mouthpiece, “…Mengistu’s [leader of Ethiopia’s military socialist state] fatal error was that he fiddled with the shadow of the nationalities question, but he never really addressed it” (Abraham 1994, 7).
Cultural identities and unequal citizenship

In Chapter 2, I outlined how the EPRDF government officially acknowledged the prevalence of ethnic inequality in the country and hence launched what appeared to be a radical kind of ‘citizenship project’ that boldly embraced ethnic identity as something to be celebrated rather than repressed. In more than one way this was a controversial path to identity mobilization and cultural politics as analyzed in Chapter 2. In the same chapter, I also pointed out how the Ethiopian mainstream and the historically marginalized regions responded differently to the EPRDF’s identity politics. Since I devoted Chapter 2 to an analysis of political aspects of the EPRDF’s (ethnic) identity politics, in this chapter I focus on the cultural struggles underlying these political and historical processes and examine their implications for how various subethnic and tranethnic identity groups, specifically clan and quasi-caste identities, struggle for realization of equal rights.

More specifically, this chapter examines the resilience of two cultural institutions, locally referred to as yara (status groups or quasi-castes) and qomo (clans), in relation to the politics of ethnic group rights in southern Ethiopian societies. As much as they are cultural institutions, qomo and yara are deeply entrenched bases of ‘micro-identities’ in this region. Although their nature and changes therein are the subject of ongoing debates, across the African continent especially in West Africa, the Sahel region and the Northeast African region both clans and quasi-castes are salient in a range of spheres including politics, economy and religion (Markus 2015; Hutchinson 1996; Pankhurst 1999; Schlee 2002; Lentz 2013). In light of these broader conversations, this chapter probes into how qomo and yara, as salient ‘everyday identities,’ have responded to the radical political changes and consequent policy interventions spanning the last century. Building on the analysis of political changes presented in Chapter 2, in this chapter I explain how the two cultural identities have withstood various forms of state, missionary, and activist NGO intervention projects that have sought to undermine indigenous cultural institutions they deemed deleterious. In this chapter I argue that: (1) despite sustained campaigns against the institutions of qomo and yara, the local people’s sense of belonging to either or both of these institutions continues to permeate everyday sociality in such a way that unequally enables claims to, or violations of, basic rights; and (2) these cultural institutions and associated identities play a considerable role in contemporary socio-political contestations. The chapter concludes by highlighting the implications of the resilience of these cultural identities for democratic local governance as well as for the general aspiration of entrenching the ideas of equal rights into cultural institutions.

Belongings and becoming in Dawro, SNNPR: a snapshot of cultural personhood

Solomon and Oltaye were unemployed young men in the village of Wachi in highland Dawro where I spent a significant chunk of my field research time as described in Chapter 1. Solomon was a high school dropout whereas Oltaye was a high school
A graduate who could neither pursue post-secondary education nor find a job after high school. On conventional measures, both of these young men are unemployed youth. During my field research, I regularly socialized with these two young men as I did with many other villagers. Conversation between these two was almost always a dramatic comedy, entertaining as well as incisive. One day they spoke about another young man named Assefa who had just built a corrugated iron-roof house. This was a very expensive but worthy undertaking that augmented the family’s social status. Solomon jokingly remarked that their neighbor, Assefa, had become a real man this year (halayit atumasa gideda). Solomon partly credited Assefa’s success to his uncle who was a government official in the state capital, Hawassa, and who had remitted, per cultural expectations of family support, to Assefa the cash equivalent of a fully grown ox (at the time about US$50) to build his new house. Oltaye then added, “daboi dabua hatsa pinte” (“relatives help each other cross a [bridgeless] river”). In this particular context, dabo refer to relatives, or specifically, lineage members. Solomon further remarked, “You would have found a job if you had a dabo like Assefa’s uncle.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

This ordinary conversation between two young men, that in passing makes a critical commentary on relatedness in contemporary Ethiopia, touches on one of the most important cultural institutions, in Dawro and across Africa – kinship. It’s specific expression here is the lineage that buttresses the nuclear family (or the household as an economic unit). All the same, the lineage (and the nuclear family below it or the clan above it in kinship terms) works in conjunction with a range of other village institutions but it most especially interlocks with yara. The sum total of a person’s position, especially in these two cultural institutions and the strong feeling of relatedness they create renders some people unequal to others. Below I outline the basic structures of these cultural institutions in the highland Dawro and expand my analysis outwards to other parts of the region as well as point out comparative elements from elsewhere in Africa.

As noted in Chapter 2, the current Ethiopian government structure is organized into a top-down federal hierarchy composed of ethno-regional states. These regional states, in turn, are composed of zones, which are divided into woreda, which are divided into the newly revamped bureaucratic units of kebele administration, which are divided into budin (villages). I undertook my most detailed field observations in Wachi and Gullali villages of Arusi Gozo kebele of Mareka Gena woreda, in Dawro zone, SNNPR. In the official Aruzi Gozo kebele registry, Wachi village had 119 households. These households belonged to 34 different qomo and four yara (Table 3.1). As shown in Table 3.2, social grouping in my second site of Gullali village in the same kebele, follows the same broad pattern as in Wachi village except that Gullali had Manja households but no smith or potter households.

Earlier I simply translated the indigenous concept qomo as clan, and yara as status groups or quasi-caste. In everyday conversation, some people use the local terms komo, yara, and zaria somewhat flexibly, or even interchangeably depending on the context. When informants were pressed to be specific and consistent about the meaning of these local terms, a great deal of debate and
even confusion arises around the conceptual content different people attach to these terms. After grappling with these vernacular debates, ultimately my assistant and I decided to formulate our question to informants as “asa qomoy apune” (literally: “How many qomo of people are there?”). The question is about how people here make distinction between, as they sure do, categories of persons. In response to our questions some informants would start with a scolding laugh, wondering why we were asking about qomo or yara after so many years of campaigns against these institutions by revolutionary zealots, democracy preachers,
missionaries, and even NGO workers. On the ground however, both yara and qomo as institutions and identity categories remained defiantly alive.\textsuperscript{8}

The \textit{Yara} – status hierarchy

\textit{Yara} may be translated as status groups, strata, or even quasi-castes. \textit{Yara} categories in Dawro include (from top to bottom): Malla (farmers, administrators;
also includes slave descendants), wogatche (smiths), degella (tanners), mana (potters), and Manja (people whose livelihood depended on forest resources such as hunting, woodwork, honey production, and sale of firewood). Since the late nineteenth century incorporation of the Dawro into the Ethiopian empire, the politico-cultural category of naftegna, the Amharic-speaking elite, emerged as a super-yara perched above the highest Dawro yara of Malla. During the time of my fieldwork, the naftegna as a yara were slowly fading out of the public eye, at least in Dawro. Hence, only occasional references were made to them.9

Part of what is taken for granted by the Dawro society broadly is that the yara differ from each other in material wealth, power (as in access to political offices), ritual purity, and prestige (respect accorded to members of each yara). Per the typology of inequality I outlined in Chapter 1, yara comes close to what Therborn (Therborn 2013) calls existential inequality. As such, yara was relevant across a range of social fields. During my field research, yara relevance was empirically observable in settlement sites, marriage, occupations, work group constitution, greetings, path taking, and sitting arrangements at public gatherings, to name a few areas. During my first trip from Waka town to the village of Wachi, for example, I witnessed aspects of yara when my assistant and I came across a group of five men in a work party, hoeing the soil for an upcoming planting season. I learned that all five men were mana (potters). I also learned that Malla in the village did not join a work party with the potters. When we got closer to Wachi village, we reached the top of a hill with a breathtaking view of the beautiful green ensete and bamboo dominated landscape. From this vista, my assistant pointed out that the settlement pattern of Wachi village clustered around yara categories – that is, he could tell hamlets of Malla, tanners, smiths, and potter households. He also pointed out important status symbols such as the quality of the house (e.g., corrugated iron-roof vs. grass-thatched houses), farm size, and amount of ensete planted in the backyard. On a closer look, however, there was no simple or straightforward relationship between the yara background and material indices of status. For instance, of the five iron-roof houses we saw, two belonged to Malla and three belonged to smith families. The Mana households were invariably poorer than all other yara in the village.

In recent works that one way or another address the challenge of status stratification, there is a tendency to analyze the lower status groups as occupational castes, marginalized minorities, etc., as if they can easily be isolated from the society they are part of. My methodological choice is to examine yara relations in their entire socio-cultural context. This choice draws on Barth’s (Barth 1993, 1981) classic works that analyzed status groups as part of a larger social system. I also draw on Tsehai (Berhane-Selassie 1994) who exemplified a relational analysis of occupational groups. This methodological choice could usefully be blended with methodological implications of recent research on intersectionality as applied in an analysis of multiple forms of interacting social inequality (Chow et al. 2011).10 Accordingly, I ethnographically examine the condition of all status groups as parts of a single, larger system embracing the whole community, and not each status group as an isolated social unit. That is, in Dawro for example,
the Malla, iron forgers, potters, etc., and their privileges or disadvantages make sense only relative to other status groups and the position of each yara vis-à-vis others.

The Malla of Dawro

Malla is an internally heterogeneous category. It includes the (now-defunct) royal clan, warriors, landowning farmers and ex-slaves. At present the term Malla is a relational category that denotes a non-artisan and non-Manja. In this reference, the Malla form the most prestigious and dominant stratum in Dawro society, like the Goqa of Wolaita (Seba 1996; Chiatti 1989), the Oge yero or Gomaro of Kafa (Lange 1982; Petros 2003), or the Wallabicho of Sidama (Aalen 2008). As also documented among the neighbouring communities such as the Gamo (Olmsted 1973), in the past, to be a Malla in Dawro, was to be a citizen of a dere (an autonomous political unit before incorporation into Ethiopia); hence only the Malla had the right to own land and compete for political offices. Both of these privileges have been legally disallowed since the 1974 government change. But still, the Malla (and especially certain clans of Malla) are situated in a relatively favorable position vis-à-vis other yara regarding access to material resources such as land (Chapter 5) or access to employment or access to political offices (Chapter 2).

The Malla yara is divided into Tslata Malla or Womano (‘pure Malla’) and A’lia (former slaves and their descendants). In both Wachi and Gulali villages there were a large number of Dawro people whose lives are negatively affected by the legacy of internal slavery. While 19 percent and 28 percent of the villagers of Wachi and Gulali respectively were Tsalta Malla, 36 percent and 39 percent of households of Wachi and Gulali villages belonged to the category of slave descendants (Table 3.3). Some educated Dawro informants estimate that across the Dawro region one can find 3–4 persons out of every ten to be a descendant of a formerly enslaved Malla. Among the neighboring Wolaita, Haberland (1992) estimated the formerly enslaved to be about a third of the population. At the time of my field research it was politically incorrect to use this term A’lia (slave) in local conversations, but the reality of its legacies could not be hidden. The descendants were dismayed by the stigma and want it to be erased from social memory. But empirically A’lia-ness remained an open wound, bandaged but not seeming to be healing well. Intermarriage between Tsalta Malla and A’lia was still extremely rare. And when it did happen, it was usually accompanied with tensions and even violent conflicts between the respective families.

Since slavery is understood in historical rather than cosmological terms (the latter applies to the distinction between Malla and occupational groups), with the exception of marriage, there is not much cultural restriction on everyday interaction between A’lia and Tsalta Malla. Historically, although an enslaved former Tsalta Malla person would remain a member of his/her original Malla clan, such a person did lose many of their Malla privileges. In contrast to smiths,
### Table 3.3 Status group composition of Wachi and Gulali villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Yara</th>
<th>Tslata Malla</th>
<th>Formerly slave Malla</th>
<th>Smith</th>
<th>Tanner</th>
<th>Potter</th>
<th>Manja</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wachi</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulali</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
potters, and the Manja (see below), the A’lia were agriculturalists, although it was only after the land reform of 1979 that they were entitled to usufruct rights over the land they tilled (see Chapter 5 for details).

Slavery in Dawro, and in the broader Horn of Africa, was upheld by an elaborate system of cultural and institutional arrangements. This included using a distinctive vocabulary (in Dawro dialect there were at least six subcategories of slaves), denying access to property, marriage restrictions, and exclusion from political power. As much as they were Malla at some time in their history, and had a theoretical possibility of regaining a ‘free Malla’ status, the A’lia were a dynamic subgroup resisting domination in all its forms. Though I do not have quantified data, there are local claims that slave descendants have on average excelled beyond even the so-called ‘pure Malla’ in the fields of economy, educational achievement, and politics. And they have been early adopters of exogenous ideas such as Evangelical Christianity (Chapter 4) and socialist revolution (Chapter 2). The A’lia were reported to be active supporters of the (now-failed) policy that was intended to dissolve Dawro, Wolaita, etc., and replace them with the new ethno-regional concept of WoGaGoDa.

**The Hillancha (occupational specialists)**

Below the Malla are the *yara* of three occupational specialists ranked in descending order: smiths, tanners, and potters. In Dawro there was no generally accepted term to refer to these occupational specialists together as a single group. During the time of field research, most of the occupational specialists insist on being addressed with one of two new terms, *hillancha* (dexterous, skillful) or *serategna* (derived from the Amharic term for worker). The term *hilancha* was also gaining wider currency given its use in political rhetoric, Dawro music (now being used in professional recordings), and everyday conversation. This is a positive response for occupational specialists who came to reject the antiquated terms such as *wogache* and *degella* that had become derogatory. Although an improvement, an important limitation of the new term *hilancha* is that it does not reflect recognized social distinctions and functional differences between the occupational specialists. Despite this limitation, I will use *hilancha* I, II and III to respectively refer to the smiths, tanners, and potters, as *hilancha* is the term preferred by the occupational specialists themselves.

**Hilancha I: iron forgers/blacksmiths**

In Wachi village the iron forgers were also referred to as Inadina. Inadina was the name of the most populous smith clan in Wachi; 16 out of 26 iron forger households in Wachi belonged to this clan. The smiths fashion iron tools, make agricultural implements such as ploughshares, sickles, *walla* (cutlass), hoes, axes, and home utensils such as knives and spears. Among the artisans in Dawro, smiths are ranked highest. Generally, they hold relatively better social positions than the rest of the occupational specialists, probably because they deal with iron
and they produce tools that were essential for production or war in the past. One indicator of the relatively better standing of smiths is that their settlement is not secluded, unlike the Manja and the potters. Smiths also share work groups, burial associations, and religious congregations with the Malla.

The position of smiths in Dawro tallies with other observations elsewhere. Haberland (1978) noted that in Africa, the smiths hold a special, prestigious position relative to other despised occupational “castes.” As he explains, the unique kind of work they do, which is closely related to the elementary powers and the special skills required by their work (in contrast to pottery and tannery) give smiths a certain kind of prestige that distinguishes them from the other artisans. Haberland also noted that in some regions such as western Sudan, the smiths do not at all have a socially inferior position, but are highly esteemed. “Where the smiths are regarded as pariah it is therefore obvious that ironwork is of rather recent origin. As strangers and immigrants the smiths had to find a place in society and were attached to the already existing castes” (Haberland 1978, 30).

**Hillancha II: tanners**

Locally known as the *degella*, the tanners were men and their sons who engage in leather work; women did assist their husbands particularly in softening the hides. Among their products is a highly valued painted sleeping mat called a *manchala* and saddles which were used by richer people who can afford to own a horse or mule (Figure 3.1). Contrary to the esteem of their products, the tanners

*Figure 3.1* Manchalla: decorative and sleeping leather made by the Mana.
were ranked among the despised craftsmen in Wachi and Dawro at large. In Dawro there are myths that tanners came from northern Ethiopia, particularly from Gondar. Their craftsmanship and light skin, which the Malla claim to be somehow different from the rest of the Dawro people, are used by the Malla to relate them to the Falasha – Ethiopian Jews of Gondar. However, the stories around place of origin and local variation in ranking pose interesting questions as to the whole process and practice of ranking. Perhaps this has more to do with general patterns of movement of craft specialists between different places and times across political boundaries as discussed in Chapter 2.

**Hilancha III: potters**

The potters are also known as Mana in Dawro language. The potters react negatively to the term *mana* and prefer to be called *hilancha*. Indeed, many Malla already address them as *hila* or *hillancha*, particularly in lowland Dawro. Therefore, they are referred to as *Hilancha III* to distinguish them from the other two groups of occupational specialists.

Commonly, it is the women who are potters; men help by providing wood to fire the earthenware (Figure 3.2). In the traditional hierarchy, the potters hold the lowest status, even among the artisans, and are only higher than the Manja. Though generally ranked higher than the Manja and considered not as polluting, in many ways the material conditions of potters are worse than that of the Manja.

Potters in Dawro were accused of being *goromote* (‘evil eyes’) and because of this, there were reports that potters in some parts of highland Dawro were not

*Figure 3.2* Mana family at pottery work.
allowed to sell their earthenware in the market. If they disregarded these restrictions, they could be beaten up and their pots smashed. Hence the potters forged a special exchange relationship with the Manja so the Manja acted as middlemen, purchasing, then selling the products to the market at a profit. While the blatant stigmatization and abuse against the potters was declining due to a sustained campaign by the government and a local NGO who deserve due credit for it, subtle aspects of discrimination and exclusion remain thinly disguised. A strong case could be made here for the need to more effectively protect the basic rights of this sub-cultural category of persons.

The Manja

At the bottom of the yara hierarchy are the Manja. Some Manja prefer to be addressed as the Gomaro but this term is not in wide use here yet. (Note that in the neighboring Kaffa from where the Manja migrated to Dawro, Gomaro is the term for the Kaffa equivalent of the Dawro Malla.) Though in the past the Manja might have depended more on forest resources, for example by engaging in hunting, gathering, and woodcarving, at the time of my research, every Manja household owned a plot of land, courtesy of the 1979 land redistribution, and engaged in agricultural production, alongside collecting firewood and burning charcoal for sale. The Manja in Dawro are bilingual. They speak Dawrotsua (Dawro language) and Kaffinoono, a branch of the Omotic language spoken by the neighboring Kafecho people. They use the Kafa language to communicate among themselves and Dawrotsua to communicate with non-Manja. Speaking a separate language supplements the myth that the Manja came to Dawro from Kaffa, where there is still a sizeable Manja population (see Petros 2001, 2003 on the Manja in Kaffa). At the time of my field research, there were active restrictions on commensality between the Manja and non-Manja. For example, many Malla would not shake hands with Manja, they would not admit Manja into their houses, they would not use utensils used by Manja, and Manja-Malla intermarriage was still unheard of. This is not to say however that every Malla observes these restrictions.12

As in much of southern Ethiopia and beyond, yara identity remains an important influence on a Dawro person’s life. But yara relevance has become more situational than overarching. In some situations of social interaction yara could be kept in the background, and in others it was pushed to the forefront. This could be the case even in different interactional events involving the same person. This was the case, for example, between Gezahegn, who was the son of a notable Malla and around age 40, and Hemado, a Manja man around age 50. The two men were sharecropping partners, which is a widespread socio-cultural practice here. In all the contexts I observed, Gezahegn and Hemado operated as ‘business partners’ who were also very close friends. They presented an image of status equals such that their yara difference was often concealed from view. In a cultural setting where most Malla did not let Manja into their houses, Gezahegn entered Hemado’s house and ate there, and vice versa.
The share cropping partnership between Gezahegn and Hemado was, for all intents and purposes, a contract freely entered between two adults who made choices pursuing their respective interests. But there were subtle elements of structural *yara* asymmetry. It was Gezahegn (Malla) who initiated this partnership. He owns a plot of land next to the community forest near Hemado’s house. Gezahegn was given this land by the *kebele* after he had returned from the former national army when it was dismantled in 1991, and he needed labor to work on this land, which was also located far from his house. So Gezahegn asked Hemado to be his sharecropping partner, and the latter gladly agreed. This was not primarily because Hemado needed extra land, but because it was an excellent opportunity for a Manja to network with the powerful Malla family of Gezahegn. In this partnership, locally known as *kotha* (literally means “to share”), Gezahegn provides oxen, seed, and occasionally food for work parties. Hemado provides predominantly labor. They share the produce equally. *Yara* identity constituted an important background in this partnership.

However, neither Gezahegn nor Hemado is under the illusion that they are status equals. And Tibebe (2018) asserts that in share-cropping (and share animal rearing) partnership, not only are the Manja and the Malla are status unequals but such partnerships generally work to the advantage of the Malla. Under a typical sharecropping relationship between two status equals, often the younger person provides the labor and the older provides land, seeds, etc. This was reversed in this relationship because of the *yara* background. Hemado (the older) accepted the partnership partly because it was not polite for a Manja to turn down an offer, particularly when it came from a powerful Malla. (Among other things, Gezahegn was also well-connected to current *kebele* administration.) I saw Gezahagn often buying *tej* (local honey wine) for Hemado in Waka town. Customarily, such hospitalities are reciprocated. But in this case, I did not see that happen. When I mentioned it to Gezahegn he replied, “I do not mind if Hemado buys me a drink; he is richer than myself. But if people see me letting a Manja pay for my drinks, where can I go? So I never let it happen.” If a Malla accepts a drink invitation from a Manja, this could be used to shame the entire clan. So Gezahegn paid for Hemado’s drinks but never let Hemado reciprocate. This is where *yara* as a status hierarchy was blatantly displayed. Gezahegn and Hemado comfortably joked about each other’s *yara*. If Hemado did not comply with any of Gezehegn requests, Gezahegn would say, “Do not be like the other Manja” or if the reverse happened, Hemado would say, “You Malla, you people are always like that.”

*Yara* was made relevant differently in a contractual relationship between the Arusi Gozo *kebele* administration and a Manja man named Kebede Kassaye. Kebede was about the same age as Gezahegn and he lived in the Gulali village of this *kebele*. Kebede was the first Manja in this area to complete an eighth grade education. Considering his educational achievement, (AAE) employed Kebede as health officer in charge of a village health post, set up by the NGO to serve the people of Gulali village. This was a prestigious job for any villager but most especially for a Manja. Putting Kebede in charge of this health post was
meant to facilitate Manja-Malla interaction in a way that did not mirror the traditional Manja-Malla interaction as status non-equals.

On the national anti-polio day, I saw Kebede blowing his traditional Manja musical instrument to announce a message from the kebele leadership to the community urging them to bring their children for vaccination. This rather lowly role was in dissonance with Kebede’s position as the head of the village health post. Though the AAE was a partner in the polio campaign, it was the kebele leadership’s responsibility to publicise the event. Thus, Kebede made the announcement not as an AAE employee, but because he was separately contracted, following historically and culturally established Manja roles in this society, by the kebele leadership to carry out any and all announcements on behalf of the kebele administration. In return for doing this undesirable job, the kebele administration exempted Kebede from all other public work required by the kebele. While this arrangement was materially not bad for Kebede, he was aware of its symbolic costs as it signified continuity of the caste-like division of labor and his Manja status. When I mentioned it to him, Kebede replied: “Gashe [sir], regardless of what I do now, we are still a Manja.” Although the Manja indeed remained the most marginalized and excluded social group in the region, in one way or another they were taking part in the cultural change underway. In fact because of such changes, the yara’s pervasiveness as a defining local identity was being challenged, as will be shown later in the chapter.

The Qomo (clan) as heritage

The local term qomo comes close to the institution or cultural identity category known in anthropological literature as clans. In my research areas, qomo identification is made on the basis of actual or putative blood ties. In Dawro, example, there are over 170 qomo (clans). This number of clans is broadly comparable to those in the neighboring groups such as the Wolaita (Chiatti 1989) and Kaffa (Lange 1982). Being one of the strongest bases of personal identity, clan belonging shapes a person’s life in important ways. It could be generalized that descent nearly defines one’s destiny here. Since there has not been any active process of enslavement or new assignment or reassignment of occupational or yara status to a person over the last many generations, it has been clan belonging inherited through parental lineage that has determined one’s ascribed status at birth, which in turn positions a person favorably or otherwise in terms of cultural capital, kinship networks, or even inheritance of material resources such as land (Chapter 5) or to a important extent, access to political appointment (Chapter 2). In Dawro the clans are patrilineal – that is, one’s primary clan identity is reckoned through the father’s line (Figure 3.3) and post-marital residence is patrilocal. Traditionally, patrilineality informs rules of land inheritance, where only sons inherit land from their parents, assuming daughters will marry out.

In Dawro, as in many neighboring societies, qomo-based relations are talked about as ta asho ta sutha – my flesh, my blood. Also encapsulated within the concept of qomo (hereafter “clans”) is the feeling that clan members share the
same ayana (literally, “spirit”), an important component of personhood throughout southern Ethiopian societies and elsewhere in Africa (see Kopytoff 1971). Ayana (spirit or life energy), meqetha (bone), and sutha (blood) are central elements of clan identity.\(^{15}\) Partly owing to its constitution from deeply engrained constructs such as spirit, blood, bone, and flesh, and partly because of its social history, clan belonging creates a profound feeling of relatedness. Clan identification in my research sites is not as neatly structured as the principle of social organization attributed to the segmentary lineage among the Nuer.
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(Evans-Pritchard 1990 [1951]), nor is its use as flexible as Feyissa (2011) reports in his analysis of descent as part of Nuer identity construction. But it does manifest, à la Schlee (1985, 2002), strong social and political relevance, as I will demonstrate later.

The clans here are typically divided into lineages, which in turn are divided into families. While issues such as land inheritance could create tension, or even outright conflict, between families within a lineage as they do between siblings, members of an entire clan would unite to support one another when they are faced against non-members or at a time of hardship or other major life events. Relatedness through clan is conceptualised at two levels: (1) asho-sutha dabo, referring to persons related by flesh and blood or genealogically traceable ties; and (2) gomo dabo, referring to what might be translated as ‘imagined kinship’ ties, or those based on the belief that such ties exist even if it may not be genealogically traceable. It is generally believed here that members of a given clan are spread beyond the territory of any single ethnic group, alluding to interethnic clan ties. Thus, sharing a clan name symbolically unites clan members beyond those persons who are actually known to an individual. If and when such persons happen to meet or reside in close proximity, clan members may form a corporate group, or at least a descent group. In general, as widely observed in the region of northeast Africa, clan identity often links its members across other boundaries such as ethnicity, religion, class, and political affiliation.

Some features of clan identity in Wachi and Gulali villages

As shown in Tables 3.1 and 3.2, the 112 households of Gulali village belong to 34 clans and the 119 households in Wachi village belong to 33 clans. Most clans in these two villages are distinctly associated with a specific yara. For instance, Kawka, Kalisia, and Tsata are Malla clans; Gado, Majarso, Dalo, Bero, and Yoro are Manja clans; Hinibabinia, Hinimaya, Hinachiqana, and Inadinia are clans of smiths; and Disha, Washara, Qiqa, and Tura are clans of tanners. Whereas only two clans (Qiqa and Tura) have members belonging to Malla and non-Malla status groups, there are ten clans in the two villages whose members belong to Tsalta Malla (pure; formerly free citizens) and A’le-Malla (formerly locally enslaved). While shared clanship between Malla and non-Malla is not expected, the fact that ex-slaves and ‘pure Malla’ may be members of the same clan would not surprise any Dawro, because if a person was enslaved for any reason, only his/her economic and political statuses would change, and not clan membership.

More members of a person’s clan live in close proximity among the smiths, tanners, and Manja yara than among Malla in these two villages. As shown in Table 3.2, the 17 households of Ofro clan in Gulali village and the 16 households of Inadina clan in Wachi village have a large enough number of immediate clan members in one neighborhood for associational life such as clan association. Yet, as I observed, even these two clans do not significantly differ in the mode of clan-based social mobilization and they did not operate as territorial units. The most populous Malla clan in Gulali village has eight households.
residing in it (although their houses were intercepted by the houses of other clans). Mostly, one finds a son’s house next to his father’s or siblings’ houses next to each other, but rarely does one find more than three or four households from one Malla clan living adjacent to each other. In this sense, it is often members of what is called so (sub-lineage) who usually reside in close proximity. In Gulali, 17 out 34 clans (50 percent) have only one household member residing in the village. Other members of these clans are distributed across a wider geographical space.

Within a yara, clans seem to differ significantly in prestige and status. Except for the former royal clan Kawka, status difference between clans is more social than cosmological. That is, the clans within yara are not differentiated on the basis of presumed moral qualities; rather, clan prestige within yara is associated with the social, economic, and political achievements (e.g., economic success, political offices held, heroic acts) of clan members at specific places or times. For instance, during my fieldwork, the Datia clan in Wachi village was highly prestigious because it had influential members in the village and state bureaucracy, yet the same clan was barely recognized in the lowland areas I visited.

But neither clan nor yara status constitutes the sole basis of a person’s standing in the society at present. In both Wachi and Gulali villages, there were a few iconic individuals who were well respected by everyone not because of their inherited identities of gomo or yara but because of their personal qualities. One such person was Mr. Anashu, an elder in Wachi village from the Inadinia clan of smith yara. Anashu was the former elected head of the village housing and burial association. This is a highly desirable, status-augmenting role in the village. Anashu was also one of the most sought-after mediators in intra- or inter-village conflicts. When he visited the local drink houses in Waka town, Anashu would be surrounded by a wide range of associates from an array of yara or clans. This further illustrates how personal attributes could on occasion balance out stigmatizing cultural identities. Needless to say, this works both ways. For example, in the same village where Anashu rose to high honor, the only person who enjoyed a position of prestige arguably higher than Anashu was Balata from the Agua clan of Malla yara. Balata was relatively wealthy, powerful, and a well-respected person in this village. But his younger brother was economically poor and remained marginal in the village power gradient. A rising star in Wachi village at the time of my research, and economically successful and politically influential, was Tadesse (pseudonym), a man in his early forties who belonged to the a’lia (ex-slave) yara. The fact that Tadesse’s clan (Angotia) and Anashu’s clan (Inadina) had the highest number of households residing in this village helped the two men’s skillful maneuvers in village politics. These individual stories show that belonging to a certain clan or yara, like ethnicity or racial identity elsewhere, may generally be (dis)advantageous but rarely tells the whole story of a person’s lived reality.

There remain significant contexts in which clan identity eclipses all else. This is especially the case with regard to marriage and funerals, both of which are of paramount sociocultural importance. The following excerpts are from a dialogue
I had with Okanto and his wife, a Malla couple who wholeheartedly proclaim the righteousness of their Evangelical faith as a total way of life. But the couple still hold dear some aspects of clan identity that run counter to the anti-tradition stances of Evangelical Christianity (see also Chapter 4).

**QUESTION:** Could you tell me about your dabo? (Note that unless specified, the term *dabo* could be used to refer to a broader range of relatedness than just clan.)

**OKANTO:** We Christians are all brothers and sisters. All Christians are our *dabo*.

**QUESTION:** Do you know any Malla Christian who is married to a non-Malla or what do you think of such an idea?

**SHASHOTE (OKANTO’S WIFE):** No, no. That cannot work. If all my *dabo* (members of her clan) were *amano* (Evangelical Christians), marriage between Malla and non-Malla may not be a problem. But many of *nu dabatu* (member of her clan) are not *amano*. I cannot think of asking them to stand or sit in *alisua* (at a funeral, the line of close relatives of a deceased person) alongside the Manja or Mana. That has never been our tradition (*nu gade Woga*). Does Christianity say you should destroy your traditions?

**QUESTION:** How important is *alisua* for a Christian?

**OKANTO:** *Alisua* is important for every Dawro person whether he is rich or poor, Christian or not, Malla or Manja. Here in Dawro, *alisua* is much more important than a wedding. You can make a wedding small or get married even without any big publicized wedding ceremony. But you cannot have a secret funeral. And a funeral should not be *laffa* (too small, pathetic) because you will never see that person [the deceased] again. If a funeral is *laffa*, it will cause a shame that will follow generations. So, everyone puts a lot of effort into organizing funerals and it must be done right. All your close relatives will be in the *alisua* line. By looking at the *alisua*, the attendants to a funeral will know who your relatives are. For me, what will happen to my *alisua* is the only reason for not considering marrying an A’lia or Manja.

As I observed throughout my fieldwork, even the Evangelical Christians, who (at least in principle) proclaim that their Christian identity overrides every other belonging including clan, *yara*, or even ethnic identity, adhere to the cultural practice that the *alisua* line could mainly be constituted of one’s kinship circle (consanguinal and affinal; Figure 3.4). The outcome of this practice and the whole funeral performance displays to the attending public, among other things, the strength of one’s kinship, most especially the current state of the deceased’s clan as signified by how a family organizes the funeral event.

One of the central performative pieces at non-Protestant Christian funerals was a melodious *zillasa* (civic version of a war cry) recounting the achievements of historical figures in the deceased’s family (specifically, himself or herself and notable members of his/her clan, both living and dead). It was customary that the funeral crowd listens attentively to this artful performance usually accompanied...
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by Mana or Manja musicians playing their musical instruments. This performance achieves at once emotional expression, entertainment, and the symbolic reconstruction of a clan’s standing in society.

The history of a specific clan, which is retold on this occasion, may be constructed from the histories of the villages that clan members founded or improved or in which they lived previously, the political achievements of notable clan members within political units such as the kingdom of Dawro. For most Dawro I talked to, the funeral ceremony, which every family will go through at one point in their lifetime, was the most important reason at present preventing marriage across status boundaries. But it was not the only reason for the resilience of these cultural institutions (qomo and yara) and associated hierarchies.

Clans as imagined communities

A young trader I interviewed in Ameya, capital of Konta ethnic community, proudly proclaimed that fellow members of Goshana (the former royal clan of Konta kingdom) are found beyond the Konta territory:

I have dabo (members of Goshana clan in this case) in Dawro, Malo, Kafa, and Gofa. I was also told that I have dabo in Wolaita. However, among my dabo living in distant places so far I have close personal relations with those in Tercha and Chata only. I have never met the others; I was only told I

Figure 3.4 Affinal and consanguineal relatives receiving condolences (Manja family).
have relatives in all these places. If I happen to travel through any of these places I will try to meet my dabo. I am sure they will be very happy to know me as I will be to meet any of them.

(Interview in Ameya, March 2000)

My survey of the actual distribution of clans in selected places in southwest Ethiopia shows how clans criss-cross ethnic boundaries. For instance, out of 45 clans found in Zima, a locality in Lowland Dawro, 34 clans (76 percent) are also found in neighboring Wolaita. Of the 170 total clans identified in highland Dawro, 71 (about 41 percent) are found in Wolaita. Conversely, out of the 182 clans identified in Wolaita, about 39 percent are reported in Dawro. In a locality called Koysha in lowland Konta, informants reported 28 clans in their locality; of these, 14 (50 percent) were among the ones reported in Zima (lowland Dawro), though the two localities are far away from each other.16

Only two out of 170 clans identified in Dawro claim to be native to the ethnic Dawro territory; all other clans claim origin outside Dawro. These places of origin include localities within neighboring Omotic-speaking areas such as Kafa, Wolaita, Gofa, and Maale, to more distant places such as Gondar and Wello in northern Ethiopia. But this is not unique to Dawro; clans in many southern Ethiopian ethnic communities claim outside origin. These real as well as mythologized claims are an important part of broader conversations about identity and cultural connections in the region of northeast Africa.

**Intersecting of mythical origins and political struggles**

Most of the clans dominating local politics in southern Ethiopia recount myths of originating from northern Ethiopia. Some scholars suggested that the ancestors of these dominant clans might have actually come from northern Ethiopia as conquerors, migrants, and traders (Cerulli 1917; Haberland 1962). Other scholars such as Todd (1978) and Amborn (1990) argue that identity formations in southern Ethiopia are better explained by factors internal to these societies than by attributing them to outside influence. Wolde Gossa (1999) adds another dimension to this debate by suggesting that some ethnic groups or clans therein claim outside origin as a mechanism of maintaining crucial inter-ethnic linkages. Claiming or maintaining such links often has important implications for real-life competitions between clans. This in turn is related to an issue of enduring interest among scholars of northeast Africa, the connection between kinship and power (Evans-Pritchard 1929; Donham 1985; Schlee 1989; Ellison 2009).

Interactional events between individuals within a village such as the sharecropping partnership between Gezahegn (Malla) and Hemado (Manja), or even those mediated by state institutions such as between the kebele and the Manja man (Mr. Kebede), might give an impression that the antiquated yara hierarchy remains intact. While this is the case in some spheres of interaction such as marriage, especially since the late imperial era rocked by progressive Ethiopian student movements of the late 1960s–1970s, yara as a hierarchic cultural
institution has been repeatedly challenged by the political discourse on equal rights for all. In Chapter 1, I noted that cultural institutions such as yara need to be examined as structures of inequality underpinned by even larger structures of power. This formulation is informed by insights of practice theory and resistance scholarship (Scott 1990; Foucault 1980; Ortner 2006). These studies suggest that where there is inequality underpinned by power, forms of struggle (hidden or manifest), resistance, and even conflict are inevitable. I gathered some extraordinary stories of such struggles. In Chapter 2, I presented excerpts from my interviews with people like Kebede, the Manja man who pursued formal education against all odds, found a status-building job in a modern sector (village health post), and yet continued to perform, apparently willfully, a stigmatizing traditional role (‘messenger boy’ for the local state agents). It could be further noted that Kebede ran for, and won, a political office (seat in district assembly), yet he was brutally and repeatedly beaten by unruly Malla youth for disrespecting the Dawro culture. To strengthen my argument about what is at stake here, below I briefly summarize the extraordinary persistence of another Manja man, Gelesho, who daringly confronted structurally enabled injustice.

Gelesho was a Manja man, about 70 years old at the time of my field work, who had pushed the struggles of the Manja and of rural citizens in Ethiopia’s south. An apparently ordinary man, Gelesho had an extraordinary story to tell:

Before the 1974 revolution, as a young man, I was settled, alongside my father and other Manja, on the land of a powerful Malla landlord. In those days, not even ordinary Malla, let alone the Manja, would openly say anything against the all too powerful landlords. But my landlord was especially notorious. One day, while I was away, he came to my house with his operatives and took away eleven sacks of honey without even asking. Under the circumstances and as a Manja, I was not supposed to show disappointment at his behaviour because the honey was produced from the forest that belonged to him.

But I was very angry. And the best thing I could do was abandon this landlord. So I moved to Gulali village and set up my hut on another landlord’s forest land. This, of course, angered my former landlord. So he sent word, demanding that I come back. But I refused to go back to his land. People warned me that he was very angry and that he may send a few of his men to beat me up and take me back by force which could easily happen back then. I still refused to go back. The revolution broke out before anything worse happened to me.

Immediately after the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 and declaration of revolution, when most people were uncertain about what was going to happen next, I was the first Manja to officially file a case in formal court against my former landlord, spelling out all the injustices he had inflicted on me. While my court case was pending, my former landlord took up arms against the new government and he got killed by the government soldiers.
Gelesho’s story is one of the best illustrations of how ruthless some landlords were for their de facto subjects such as Gelesho as well as how some rural residents were inspired by the socialist rhetoric of equality. Gelesho’s struggle was translated into material outcomes in two key realms, namely, access to land and appointment to political office. During the socialist period, Gelesho became an elected official in the newly established Peasant Association (PA). Perhaps leveraging his political position in the PA, the new government gave Gelesho a disproportionately large plot of land which used to be the property of Gelesho’s former landlord. A hardworking and enterprising farmer, Gelesho converted his political and land resources into huge material success such that by the end of the socialist period, he became one of the wealthiest farmers in the area. But trouble started brewing for Gelesho following the overthrow of the socialist government in 1991.

Immediately after taking office, the new (EPRDF) government declared that it stood against everything the socialist government did or stood for. Some people thought this included reversing the socialist land redistribution that had taken away land from former landlords and allocated it to people like Gelesho. In 1991, while the local structures of the new EPRDF government were still forming, the son of a former landlord came to Gelesho demanding that he (and two other Manja) return their land to its rightful owner—land that had been (illegally, in his view) allocated to people like Gelesho by the socialist state. The two other Manja felt threatened by this well-connected Malla man and gave back their land right away and left the area altogether. Gelesho, however, would not do the same in spite of the fact that the Malla man appeared invincible, with the backing of newly appointed state officials from his clan.

Fully knowing how well positioned his opponent was, Gelesho first filed a charge with the new, reestablished kebele administration, accusing his opponent of violating his property rights. When the kebele failed to stop the Malla man from pursuing his pre-socialist land claim, Gelesho pursued the case at various formal courts. When all of the formal courts failed to deliver him justice, Gelesho took his case to a moderately respected spirit medium in his kebele. This spirit medium summoned Gelseho’s opponent to appear at his court but the accused simply ignored the spirit medium’s summon. Refusing to accept defeat, Gelesho then took his case to the court of a more prominent spirit medium, who was feared and respected across the Dawro society. Even this did not deliver Gelesho justice. Ultimately, despite all efforts, Gelesho lost that plot of land to his opponent, who outmaneuvered Gelesho by forging connections with the reconstituted state. Fortunately, Gelesho still had enough land and rather than being disheartened by this setback, he moved on to other spheres where he confronted structures of normative inequality.

During the time of my fieldwork, Gelesho was still known as one of the wealthiest men in highland Dawro. The new state, via the kebele administration, levied taxes using a local wealth ranking. Accordingly, Gelesho was placed among the highest taxpayers, in the top 5 percent of rural taxpayers. After paying such a high amount of tax, Gelesho thought no Malla should continue treating
him the way they once had. “Now the government knows me,” he exclaimed. He reasoned that he could use his status as a high taxpayer to challenge an aspect of local custom, specifically the ordinary act of riding on horse or mule. For the Malla, riding on a horse was an economic issue requiring one to afford a mule or horse. The majority of Malla still did not own a horse or a mule simply because it was an expensive investment (about as much as an expensive car). For the Manja, however, riding on a horse or a mule was a culturally prohibited act. Challenging this taken-for-granted practice, Gelesho bought a highly decorated mule and started travelling on it. With this he entered a whole new cultural space that had its own rules of deference and demeanour.

As was customary practice, a man travelling on horse- or muleback should dismount the animal when he comes across an acquaintance of equal or higher status. This was based on rules of respect: one gets off to show respect so that others do the same for him. No one dismounted for the Manja because they were at the low end of status hierarchy. Because the Manja never rode a horse or a mule, Gelesho had to make an important decision on how to behave now that he was riding a mule. There was a general expectation that Gelesho would behave like a polite Manja and would follow appropriate Dawro cultural rules and would thus dismount the animal when he came across a person of higher social status, that is essentially all adult Dawro persons given that Gelasho is a Manja. But Gelesho wanted to make a point; accordingly, he refused to dismount his mule when he came across the Malla, who are by cultural definition ranked higher than Gelesho, owing to his yara. Gelesho knew that the Malla might take offense with his act. Whenever he sensed that, he would remark, “Since you [the Malla] never did this for us [the Manja], I have nothing to reciprocate.” Gelesho’s acts were a hot topic of local conversation during the time of my fieldwork. Seemingly banal, these conversations highlight blatant ironies in the struggle for equal rights.

In Chapter 2 I noted that during the 2005 parliamentary elections, the incumbent EPRDF won all three Dawro seats in the national parliament and eight out of nine Dawro seats in the SNNPR regional parliament (House of People’s Representatives – HPR). I also pointed out that all 12 ‘winners’ of these parliamentary seats were native Dawro, as were the candidates who did not win. Given that this was an exceptionally competitive election, the next question was, other than belonging to the Dawro ethnic group, who really were the winners and losers and why and how did they win or lose? According to the National Election Board (NEB), a total of 38 candidates (ten for national and 28 for regional parliament) were fielded by three competing political parties. In yara terms, all 38 candidates were Malla. That may not come as a surprise since the Malla constituted the overwhelming majority of Dawro’s population. But still to have no non-Malla candidate revealed a glaring continuity of the traditional status hierarchy. Although the formerly enslaved Malla population is estimated at about a third of the population, only six out of 38 (about 16 percent) of the candidates were slave descendants. In public discourse, references to a person’s yara and qomo background were generally disapproved of. In reality, however, subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle aspects of yara and qomo played a critical
role in the closely contested 2005 parliamentary elections (see Barata 2011 for more details).

It was the incumbent EPRDF that first sought to exploit yara and qomo as cultural capital by seeking to associate itself with influential families and their social networks. In an interview I conducted in Hawassa, the SNNPR state capital, a former high-ranking SEPDM/EPRDF official confirmed that during the 2005 elections the EPRDF was threatened by the strength of the opposition and, unofficially, found candidates whose families had high social standing in their respective areas. As this former EPRDF operative regrets:

This was clearly a move away from the criteria we used to use to fill key posts in the early EPRDF days [early 1990s]. Back then we simply looked at how smart and committed a person was; we did not really care about the person’s family background.

(Interview with Tefera Meskele, former SNNPR state secretary, June 2005, Awassa)

A ruling party official I interviewed in Dawro admitted only partially and indirectly that the SEPDM/EPRDF took the family status of its candidates into consideration during the 2005 elections. According to this official, the criteria the EPRDF used to nominate its candidates included loyalty to the party, educational credentials, competence and skills, and standing in the society.

Be that as it may, several emergent patterns can be drawn from a few instructive cases and the statistics above regarding the candidates’ yara and clan. Here I present a few examples that illustrate how yara and clan were made relevant during the 2005 election and thus in contemporary political contestations. The first case is that of a 55-year-old man from the Malla status group and from Gairero clan, which is prestigious and numerically preponderant in this locality. In the months preceding the campaign season of the 2005 elections, my informant, B.C., was discontented with the ruling party. What specifically angered B.C. was that the kebele, the local embodiment of the ruling party/state, had made him pay high taxes by levying a separate land tax for his two houses (for his two wives) built on one unit of land. B.C. was equally angry that the kebele agricultural officer (known as the development agent) had marked off a portion of B.C.’s land near the public forest as part of yeden meret, or protected forest land. B.C. thought that the kebele agricultural officer’s decision was a violation of his property rights, but he could do nothing until the elections made the kebele officials and the state look vulnerable.

Seizing the rare opportunity of the political space that opened up by the exceptionally competitive parliamentary elections of 2005, B.C. decided to publicly and politically express his discontent with the incumbent party. In fact, B.C. became one of the most outspoken Dawro farmer members of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). Also, using his leverage as the leader of the village housing and burial association, B.C. campaigned vigorously on behalf of the CUD in his village. He fine-tuned his criticism of the incumbent
so that his rhetoric reflected the widely shared discontents of people in his village. According to the villagers I interviewed, the majority of people in this village voted for the opposition CUD. Regardless, the election office declared the EPRDF candidates winners for the regional and national parliaments. This was infuriating to many villagers. Elsewhere in the country, a popular outrage arose over alleged election rigging, a widespread post-election protest that resulted in the loss of over 300 lives and incarceration of thousands of opposition leaders and supporters (Tronvoll and Hagmann 2012). In post-election Dawro, the ruling party officials tried to entice vocal critics like B.C. by reversing earlier unjust decisions such as taking away people’s land (without compensation) in the name of public interest (e.g., forest land) or through promises of government jobs for vocal, unemployed youth activists. In B.C.’s case, his land was returned and the kebele officials promised B.C. he would not be asked to pay land tax for his two wives’ houses.

Clan affiliation was crucially and positively featured in B.C.’s case whereas yara was featured unfavorably in the case of T.A., a mana (potter) man from the neighboring Wachi village in the same kebele. During the 2005 elections T.A. played his traditional role by blowing his lokua to call people to voter education, voter registration, and finally to come out and vote on polling day. T.A. confirmed that, like B.C., he did not like the incumbent EPRDF government. But T.A. voted for the ruling EPRDF because he was worried that, based on the EPRDF’s campaign of (mis)information, if the CUD won, things might revert to the situation of pre-revolution days when occupational minorities like T.A. had no rights whatsoever. Still T.A. was unhappy with the EPRDF:

But this government gave us empty democracy. They gave us nothing, really nothing. I am still blowing my lokua, my wife is still burning her pots. During these elections only the sons of those who ruled in the old days got elected.

(Interview, August 2005)

In the last sentence T.A. referred to the fact that in his constituency, two out of the three elected members of parliament were from the former Dawro royal clan of Kawka and one was the incumbent chief administrator of the Dawro zone at the time of these elections. Though not surprising, it revealed a glaring continuity in the local power structure.20

To fully appreciate the underlying processes and different outcomes of these struggles, it is useful to look, both spatially and temporally, beyond contemporary Dawro. In the broader southern region of Ethiopia, discussions regarding a change from differentiation to marginalization (e.g., Amborn 1990) suggest that in the old days, the low-status groups were at least integrated into the system through the caste-like division of labour that organically connected every status group to the entire society or the social system. Although generally the case, that kind of stratified integration was nothing the low-status groups are nostalgic about. It is not a stretch to believe that even then the lower status
groups resented the state of affairs and resisted it whenever possible. For example, Haberland (1963, 143f.) argued that the Gabra of Northern Kenya created an ethnic identity of their own, breaking out of their lower status under the Boran ethnic group. In the same region, the Waata ‘hunters’ demanded recognition as an independent ethnic group in order to attain political rights (Kassam and Bashuna 2004). And in Somalia, occupational groups have deliberately formed a new identity to increase their chances of being recognized as persecuted refugees (Markus 2015).

In Chapter 2 I briefly described the violent political process of making and unmaking a new ethnolinguistic construct called WoGaGoDa from the pre-existing ethnic groups of Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa, and Dawro. The WoGaGoDa project was met with the strongest resistance in Wolaita. In this complex process, an unmistakable dividing line (never officially acknowledged yet known to everyone involved) between those who were for and against WoGaGoDa was drawn along yara identity, wherein the slave descendants in Wolaita broadly supported WoGaGoDa while the majority of goqa (formerly land-owning yara) strongly opposed it. But this was entangled with the structures of the ruling party which blurred these local sociocultural boundaries. The slave descendants’ support for WoGaGoDa was interpreted by some segments of the higher yara Wolaita as the ayle being against the Wolaita identity itself. While that is debated, it could be interpreted as an instance of the slave descendant’s struggle for their own rights using every opportunity. The WoGaGoDa project failed and a more vibrant Wolaita ethnic identity (as well as the identities of all other neighboring groups) re-emerged from the ashes of WoGaGoDa. This was read by some as a strong backlash against the ayle. But long after WoGaGoDa was defeated, the ayle continue to struggle for equal citizenship. In Wolaita this struggle remains largely subtle with only occasional outbursts of violent conflicts.

Slave descendants in neighboring Ganta attempted to physically distance themselves from the dominant majority, leading to major conflicts between the ayle and Malla (Bombe 2018). On the Western end of the SNNPR state, in the ethnic Kaffa zone, the Manjo (referred to as Manja in Dawro) demanded proportional political representation as part of the Kaffa ethnic group which consequently triggered violent intra-ethnic conflicts between the Manjo and the majority Gomaro group (Yoshida 2013; Vaughan 2003, 276ff.). And among the Sidama on the eastern end of the SNNPR, with the encouragement and support of the nationally ruling EPRDF, the Hadicho (potters) have successfully pursued an unprecedented political strategy of establishing their own political party – the Hadicho Peoples Democratic party.

**Conclusion**

These intra-ethnic group struggles, against forms of inequality underpinned by clan and status or quasi-caste identities, should not lead to the conclusion that these cultural institutions have survived the carnage against them because these
communities are averse to the idea of equal rights or change in general. Rather, it is because, aspects of these hierarchic local institutions have developed an elective affinity with hierarchic state institutions through the national state’s ethically lopsided and opportunistic cooptation of local agents along with pertinent cultural institutions and practices. This has had serious negative implications for laying solid foundations for democracy in cultural institutions. Put differently, the analysis suggests a need for a new politics of cultural citizenship that enhances the capability of a broader range of the disenfranchised (such as ethnic, clan, status, and other social groups) to resist the exclusionary and discriminatory effects of all hegemonic institutions – local, national or global.

In Chapter 1, I noted that my ethnographic analysis in this book is shaped by two distinct strands of debate: the enduring debates on the connection between culture and inequality on one hand, and the emergent debate about the relationship between identity and human rights discourses on the other. I also noted that attention to power is a common thread that connects these two strands of debate. Keeping those debates in perspective, I analyzed the connection between kinship and practices of power, linking my discussion to enduring interests on this issue among scholars of northeast Africa.

In closing the discussion in this chapter, it is worthwhile to recall some theoretical implications of my analysis vis-à-vis existing assertions. For example, Donham asserted that to understand the nineteenth century Maale notion of hierarchy, it is better to start with kinship than kingship. This is because: “The power that Maale kings were said to have, both to bless and to curse their people, was no different in kind, only in scope, from that of ordinary fathers and eldest brothers” (Donham 1990, 60). This generally relates to the neo-Marxist argument that in pre-capitalist societies, kinship serves as a structure of power that upholds the traditional system of economic exploitation (Peletz 1995, 367). In the broader African context, anthropologists working within the Marxist tradition such as Block (1989) and Meillassoux (1972) have analysed kinship as a system of social inequality; they document cases whereby people who occupy different positions in kinship structures were in a position of material privilege or disadvantage. This in turn relates, as Peletz (1995) points out, to viewing patterns of symbols and meaning as a system of social inequality. The Marxist approach to kinship has been criticized for reductionist interpretation of a complex institution that otherwise serves multiple purposes at once. My argument here, in partial agreement with the Marxist interpretation, is that, unless we reduce complex institutions to a singular attribute, kinship (in my case specifically clan belonging), can serve at once as structures of inequality as well as adaptive responses to organizational needs. It is also a cherished heritage. As much as these institutions such as qomo are viewed as part of a treasured heritage by some local groups well-served by them, these institutions differentially empower rights claims and hence should be treated as part of a contested tradition than above the foray of rights’ struggles.

All of this has implications for the contemporary understanding of culture, cultural identity, and the issue of unequal citizenship. The origin of the two
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institutions that are the bases of historically important yet currently touchy cultural identities (yara and gomo) could be traced to dynastic histories of kingdoms and chiefdom in the region (Haberland 1965). As I noted elsewhere (Barata 2017), in some parallel with Ethiopia’s national history as well as all other dynastic histories, some members of these societies celebrate their cultural heritage in ways that seems oblivious to the fact that some fellow members of their own society remain especially disadvantaged by the legacies and inherited stigmas of these cultural institutions. Such proclivities, observed across human societies, are better explained in structural terms as a problem of power than in essentialized terms as a parochial problem of only these Ethiopian societies and cultures.

Notes

1 It is also important to note that, like many other African societies of the time, virtually all polities including various Oromo groups, southern kingdoms, and Somali and Afar sultanates raided for, owned, and sold slaves (Levine 1974; Clarence-Smith 2013).

2 By subethnic and transethnic identities I am specifically referring to clan and quasicaste identities. It is well documented that because of the historical and/or ongoing movement of people across ethnic boundaries, cultural bases of relatedness such as clanship create identity groups that cut across ethnic boundaries (cf. Schlee 1989).

3 While status hierarchy (or social stratification) has been widely reported in societies across this region, there is no consensus among scholars of the region on whether or not the resultant groups could be referred to as status groups or castes or just social/cultural groups (Pankhurst 1999). I will simply refer to the resultant cultural groups as status groups in the Weberian sense (Weber 1968). Drawing on Weber, Barth (1993, 1981) offered a definition of caste as a sociological principle of a system of division of labor based on strong identification of occupation with total social personhood or social identity. In comparative terms, the social organizational forms we find in southern Ethiopia show a resemblance to the caste structures in the Indian subcontinent as studied by Barth and I will occasionally refer to the yara hierarchy as quasicaste in this chapter. Although engaging this somewhat dissolved debate is not my primary purpose here, it is a topic no researcher of this region can ignore.

4 Although this was a significant amount at the time in rural Dawro, it was a small portion of what it would cost to build a tin-roof house. One could mobilize much of the labor (through a work party) and raw materials such as wood (from one’s own field) without a cash expenditure. In addition to these one needs an estimated cash amount of 2,000 birr (or US$250 at the time) or the equivalent of about four – five fully grown oxen at the time.

5 This conversation touches on a subject of popular, often controversial, discourse about the importance of ‘relatives’ for finding a job in Ethiopia. This importance often appears as a part of the rampant corruption in the country, and the situation is disheartening for young job seekers like Oltaye who do not have well-connected relatives.

6 These households and their adult members belonged to three major religious denominations (discussed in Chapter 4). Every household here also belongs to one of the idirea (housing associations). Other bases of relatedness or distinction that draw boundaries between and/or connect these households include: marriage, Jalla (‘eye father/mother’), father confessor. Miata (best man/bridesmaid, both of which relationships often continue as lifelong friendships), kotha (sharecropping, shared animal ownership, share trading), ukubia (traditional saving and pooling scheme), wudia (village association for tending cattle in turns), Dabo, Zupia (work party or labor
sharing/pooling arrangements), and ‘coffee-drinking partnership’ in the hamlet. Added to these are such institutions as the village water committee, heath committee, saving and credit committee, and others set up by the NGO operating in the area.

7 One could add the local concept of zaria (ethnic referent; related to the Amharic word zer, which is sometimes translated as race, and other times as tribe).

8 Qomo and yara are often subsumed under a broader category of belonging referred to as deria/zaria, which is identification of a person based on the geographical location where he/she lives or comes from, also understood as an ethnic category. The root word dere is also the closest Dawro term to the Amharic term biher or bihereseb (ethnic group). In political terms all the Dawro persons who are variously categorized into higher or lower yara, clans, class, etc. viewed themselves, and are viewed by outsiders, as members of the Dawro ethnic group vis-à-vis the Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa, Konta, Kafa, etc.

9 The EPRDF treated the naftena as its archenemies partly due to their central location in the Ethiopian mainstream that strongly opposed the EPRDF regime and partly because as a category the naftena were implicated in historical injustices. Consequently the EPRDF launched a vicious political and propaganda attack on them. Both the political and cultural fortunes of the naftgena declined since the EPRDF victory of 1990. Consequently, the naftgena have been steadily losing their near-century-long position of privilege in the cultural schema of yara in Dawro.

10 The concept of intersectionality entails critically examining how individuals who occupy intersecting positions in social structures are differently affected by multiple, socially constructed inequalities of everyday life. In these inequality regimes, persons bearing different identities are privileged or oppressed in multiple ways, sometimes simultaneously. Also, to be noted, is how these positions afford their respective occupants agency and options, but also impose barriers (Chow et al. 2011).

11 It is generally believed that individuals and families that were ‘free citizens’ (tsalta Malla) at one point in time became slaves due to one of the following reasons: (1) as a prisoner of war from a neighboring group; (2) for failing to repay a debt when enslavement was the condition of non-payment; and (3) being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Children born to a’lia families were automatically classified as a’lia.

12 More than any other group, it was the Evangelical Christian Malla who stopped observing many of these restrictions except for marriage.

13 As a group, the Manja were the most disadvantaged in regard to access to education and other social services (Dea 2000).

14 This tradition is in direct conflict with a recent Ethiopian law that gives equal land titles to both the husband and the wife, even if the wife comes to live on the land of the husband’s family. This creates new kinds of conflict, especially in the case of divorce.

15 It is generally believed that while the shempua (soul) of all people is equal, different clans and even persons possess distinct ayana (spirit). In sacrificial rituals it is usually the ayana and not shempua that takes a central role. In Dawro cosmology, a person’s shempua dies but the ayana of a person lives on. Thus, the ayana of one’s parents and ancestors are believed to always be around and they need to be attended to in the belief the ancestors affect a living person’s life (see Chapter 4 for more details).

16 As expected, there is variation in clan distribution in different places within one ethnopolitical unit. For instance, a Wolaita himself, Abreham Babanto (1979) reported 133 clans in Wolaita, whereas Chiatti (Chiatti 1989), an Italian anthropologist who did his PhD fieldwork in Northern Wolaita, identified 110 clans of Wolaita. The match between the two lists is 64 clans, i.e., 48 percent of the clans Abreham reported are found on Chiatti’s list. The match between clan names identified in the two neighboring villages in highland Dawro presented in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 was only ten out of 34, i.e., about 30 percent.
The spirit mediums (sharetcho) are commonly used as an indigenous institution of conflict resolution but their effectiveness was contingent on all parties to a dispute abiding by cultural rules of morality (see Chapter 6).

Only one of ten candidates for the three national parliamentary seats and three of 28 candidates for the nine regional parliamentary seats were women.

In the course of this election, it was not only yara and clans that were dragged into party politics, but also other village institutions such as the idir (village housing and funeral associations), the churches, and even influential spirit mediums (sharetcho). In highland Dawro, especially in Essra Tocha constituency where the sharetcho were still powerful, the EPRDF campaigners paid special attention to have the sharetcho on their side. An EPRDF cadre I interviewed acknowledged that persuading the sharetcho was a very important factor in the EPRDF’s victory, especially in Essara Tocha constituency.

But it is also important to note that the two candidates from the former royal Kawka clan presented as the ruling party candidates also had the best qualifications for the job vis-à-vis the candidates fielded by both opposition parties.

Schlee (2008) contests this claim.

References


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