

Dynamics of constructing belongingness. An interplay between genealogy and tradition in constructing identities: a Sidama example^a

Dinâmicas de construção do sentimento de pertença.
Interação entre genealogia e tradição
na construção de identidades: um exemplo Sidama



117

Ambaye Ogato Anata^{1,2*}

Abstract The article explores the various ways of identification among the Sidama people of Ethiopia. It shows how various narratives about common origin are constructed and feed into the process of identification. It also presents how an identity could be changed with a framework of tradition giving a completely different affiliation with other clan groups. The research employed an extended ethnographic fieldwork in order to understand the processes of ethnic identification among the Sidama.

Keywords: Sidama; identification; genealogy; clan.

Resumo O artigo explora as diversas formas de identificação entre os Sidama na Etiópia. Mostra como as narrativas sobre origem comum são construídas e contribuem para o processo de identificação. Demonstra também como uma identidade pode ser alterada dentro de um quadro de tradição, proporcionando uma filiação completamente diferente à de outros grupos de clãs. A investigação baseia-se num trabalho de campo etnográfico prolongado que permite compreender os processos de identificação étnica entre os Sidama.

Palavras-chave: Sidama; identificação; genealogia; clã.

^a This article is fully grounded in my anthropological fieldwork that I carried out for a year in 2009 while doing my PhD at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany. Over the course of that period, I conducted in-depth interviews, undertook sustained participant observation, and participated in rituals and public gatherings, generating a rich ethnographic record of social practices and dynamic everyday life. The analysis is further informed by my sustained and ongoing engagements in the region.

¹ Commissioner at the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission, Ethiopia

² Former Post Doctoral Researcher at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany.

* Autor correspondente/Corresponding author: ambaog@yahoo.com

Antrop Port 2025, vol. 42: 117–137 • http://doi.org/10.14195/2182-7982_42_6

Artigo recebido: 12 de junho de 2024 – Aceite: 26 de novembro de 2025 / Received: June 12th 2024 – Accepted: November 26th 2025

Background of the people

Today, the Sidama are found in the northeast of the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS) and the current Sidama regional State (Figure 1). The boundaries of the Sidama are the Oromia region in the north, east and southeast, the Gedeo zone in the south, and the North Omo zone in the west. The Sidama regional State lies between latitude 5° 45' north and longitude 38° and 39° east, constituting a total area of 76,276 square kilometres. The topography ranges from 500 to 3,500 meters above sea level, and the area generally has a mean annual temperature of 18 degrees centigrade and a mean annual rainfall of 1,253 mm.¹

The Sidamaland is the home of the Sidama people. It was structured as an awraja administrative unit within the Sidamo Province from the time of its incorporation (1893–94) until 1991. Since 1991, it has become one of the zones in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS) and later on became the 10th regional state by overwhelmingly voting for autonomy in a November 20, 2019 referendum.

The Sidamaland is located about 270 kilometres south of Addis Ababa. It stretches north–south along the international all-weather road that connects Nairobi (Kenya) to Addis Ababa. The northernmost point of the Sidamaland consists of the city of Hawassa, which,

as mentioned above, is both the administrative capital of the Sidama zone and the SNNPRS capital.²

For a long time the majority of the Sidama practised mixed farming and animal husbandry.³ The practice of mixed farming is still evident today. In the zone's lowlands, pastoralism has been very important to the livelihood of the Sidama.⁴ Hamer (1987) also points out that the Sidama practise subsistence agriculture and simultaneously keep cattle. As Girma (2001: 4) states, 'Sidama lowlanders of the western and northwestern borderlands, like their Arssi neighbors to the northwest, are largely pastoralists'. The production of *Ensete ventricosum* is a very important element of the Sidama economy. Before the incorporation of the Sidama into the 'modern Ethiopian empire', the Sidama had a tradition of keeping large herds of cattle, and coffee was grown mainly for local consumption and exchange with neighboring ethnic groups on a small scale (Ababu, 1995).

Introduction

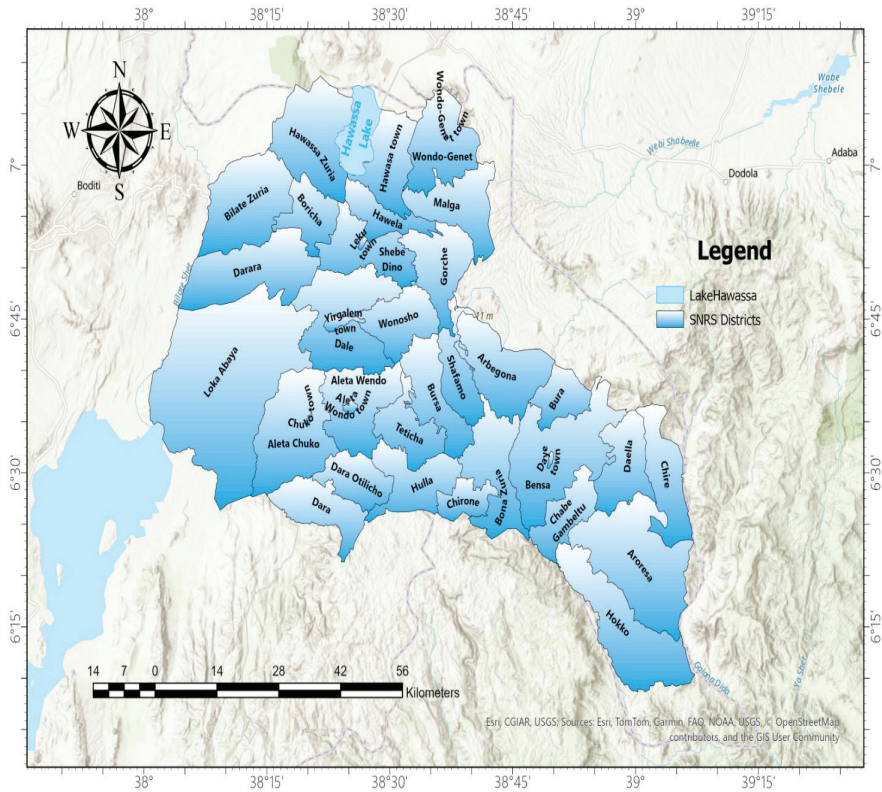
Hypotheses about the early history and movement of the Sidama people are marred by controversy. Most assertions are based on conjecture, and secondary sources such as the oral stories of elders cannot be corroborated by archaeologi-

¹ Sidama Administrative Zone, 1–8.

² See also Vecchiato (1985), *Culture, health and socialism*.

³ Ibid., 63.

⁴ Almaw (1999), *A historical survey of the Arsi-Sidama conflicts (1935–1974)*.



cal evidence and/or recorded sources from the Sidama. Therefore, the early history of the people, which essentially has been synthesized through oral stories, has been at the center of academic polemics. Based on speculative arguments, the early history of the Sidama can be placed on different historical grids — i.e., viewed from different vantage points. One line of argument is drawn from the ‘Hamitic hypothesis’, which asserts that most of the peoples of northeast Africa, including the Sidama, arrived either

from Arabia or Asia by crossing the Red Sea (see Ullendorff, 1960; C. G. Seligman, 1966; Stanley, 1970; Braukämper, 1978; Hammer, 1987). Other writers dismiss the Hamitic hypothesis, arguing that the presumption of an 'outside Africa origin' of the Cushitic peoples of northeast Africa is an attempt to externalize African achievements. These opponents of the Hamitic hypothesis contend that the Cushites are indigenous peoples, particularly in northeast Africa (Tadesse, 1972; see also Almaw, 2005). As indicat-

ed in Almagw (2005: 1–3), scholars such as Taddesse (1972) and Sergew (1972) placed the Sidama in northeast Africa during the Axumite period around the third century AD, relying on the mention of names similar to Sidama in the inscriptions and evidence of interactions of the Sidama with the Axumite kingdom in the second half of the third century AD.

Weighing the relative merits of the above arguments is not an objective of this article. Nevertheless, because the article investigates the elements of identification among the Sidama ethnic group, it is pertinent to discuss the narratives about Sidama common origins. The first section of this chapter explores how the common awareness of shared origin and history, as narrated by elders, serves as a source of Sidama ethnic identification. In doing so, it is possible to identify the historical process through which the Sidama came to develop a unified ethnic identity based on a shared history of common ancestors.

Narratives of common origins and Sidama identification

One expression of Sidama ethnic identification and group formation is through common descent, i.e., common genealogies. By tracing their line back to a common ancestry, the Sidama construct relationships among different clan groups who consider themselves Sidama. Yet the common origin discourse of the Sidama ethnic group is far from simple, since no concrete or definitive

evidence exists to verify it. Some of the existing meager literature on the Sidama only adds to the perplexity regarding the origin, early history and movement of the people. The casual mention of the people in early studies fails to provide even a common name for the people. For example, Hamer (1987) in his early work referred to the Sidama as Sadama, and Braukämper (1978), unclear as to who the Sidama were, sometimes referred to the ‘Sidama-Hadiya’. Despite such shortcomings, I have used these texts at length because most of their assertions about the origin history of the Sidama are quite similar to the oral stories that I was told during my fieldwork⁵.

In these oral stories, most elders regard all Sidama as the descendants of two putative ancestors, Bushe and Maldea, who served as nodes for all of the major Sidama clans. Most elders can recite their genealogies back to Bushe and Maldea. Elders have mentioned that Sidama genealogies go back even further than Bushe and Maldea, but they were unable to recount them. Some sources add the Hoffa as an additional progenitor of Sidama ethnic groups, but this is not the view of most Sidama, who consider the Hoffa as a different clan and Bushe and Maldea as the sole progenitors.

Viewing Bushe and Maldea as the

⁵ By the time of my fieldwork and writing, I have not used a publication by Jensen, Pauli and Straube on Sidama which is published in 2022. However, works of the aforementioned scholars has an in-depth insight on Sidama.

mythic founders of the Sidama reflects a deeply rooted narrative that projects a sense of shared ethnic identity. Because the Sidama have a patrilineal descent system, all individuals belong to their father's clan, meaning that theoretically both men and women should be able to trace their ancestry back to a common male ancestor who was linked to either Bushe or Maldea. From many discussions during my fieldwork, I discovered that knowing one's own genealogical lines is very important. Knowledge about one's 'root' (*sircho*), and in effect one's relatives, is a source of pride and security for many people. This is evidenced, in addition to the narratives, by the sayings that people frequently use. For example, in the Garaha Gando area, one of my interlocutors said: '*Fixa hoggino manchi illamassi xerito gobara ku'lano*' – 'One who does not have a relative, traces his genealogies from a distant country'. Emphasizing the importance of knowing one's genealogy and relating to one's ancestors as relatives, another interlocutor said: '*Fixa missino ger-echo farosse gobbanni worte galitano*' — 'A sheep that has a lot of relatives sleeps by putting its tail outside its coat' — i.e., one gains a sense of security when one knows one's relatives and, by extension, one's genealogy. While the latter interlocutor spoke the above saying in a joking manner, he added that, as he was originally from the Kewena clan, he knows his genealogy properly and has passed this knowledge to his children. When I asked this interlocutor why he maintains

his strong links with the Kewena clan by going to their clan associations (*idir*), while at the same time living among and identifying himself with the Hawella clan, he replied, '*fixa hoginohu wi'lanni herre ol-lamano*' — 'A person who does not have relatives cries while fighting' (discussion with Lalade A. Gambura, 2010).

An elder in Garaha Gando said: '*hi'ra habe diko xonitanno ku'la habinoti cimesa xonitanno*' — 'A lady who failed to sell out her items curses the market; when she fails to explain her problems, she curses an elder'. The elder clarified this saying by relating it to a person's desire to receive a fair verdict in a Sidama elders' (*Songo*) meeting. He said that some people fail to express their problems properly — that is, they fail to argue their case in a convincing way — and the elders deliver a verdict against them, since they base their decisions on what they have heard and the available evidence. The complainant in turn 'curses' the elders, blaming them for the verdict. The saying is meant to emphasize the knowledge about one's genealogy is as important as being able to tell one's story in front of a jury which could decide the outcome of the verdict (discussion with Wakyo Kawe, Garaha Gando, 2009).

In addition to invoking sayings to emphasize the importance of knowing one's genealogy and relatives, elders also took to reciting their genealogical lines, with the intention of reaching as far back as Bushe and Maldea. On a couple of occasions, I have witnessed elders, in trying

to recount their genealogical lines, failing to repeat what they said earlier and then cringing and being laughed at by friends. On these occasions they blamed old age for their forgetfulness. Such attempts to establish connection with a progenitor, even if they are derailed by failing memory, are nonetheless significant and offer practical advantages to the person who manages to identify himself with a progenitor. This coincides with Geertz's (1973: 259) analysis: 'One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute to the very tie itself'.

Regardless of their clan affiliations, political and religious beliefs, and ways of life, the Sidama strongly believe themselves to have originated from common ancestors. Such a conception of Sidamaness, according to elders, therefore seems immutable. This sort of essentialist/primordialist conception of Sidamaness that is anchored in the Bushe–Maldea 'hypothesis' is open to question, however, and can be disputed, as we shall see later with regard to the process of fission and fusion that has occurred among the Sidama. Nonetheless, all clans are considered the natural product of those who share the same 'bloodline' from these common origins. As such, Sidamaness is an ascriptive feature of individuals, not a social construction.

In accordance with the Bushe–Maldea common origin narrative, six clan groups trace their ancestry from Bushe and seven clan groups from Maldea. It is unclear, however, what sort of relationship these two common progenitors had. While trying to explain the relationship between them, Maccani (1989: 128) cites the following from one of his interlocutors:

'Maldea' is a spurious son, he is not pure... If a Sidama girl (*semo*), who is given as a bride, leaves her first husband (*muttara*) and lives with another man, she is not this man's '*semo*' but is called '*gursumete*'. When she has her first child with this other man, this child is called *Siwila*, that is from Iron, this child is spurious. If these spurious children begin a new clan they are no longer considered direct descendants of Bushe but spurious children (*siwilu oso* = children from iron).

Some elders, while claiming Bushe and Maldea as their mythical ancestors, consider them as the first beings of the creator, Bushe made from the earth and Maldea made from iron. Other elders argue that Bushe and Maldea were the progenitors, but not the first beings (interview with Wakyo Kawe, Garaha Gando, 2009; see also Markos et al., 2011⁶).

Yohannis (2008: 13) appears to endorse the Bushe–Maldea narrative, noting: 'Genealogically, the Sidama people

⁶ I have consulted the draft version, which was given to me by Ambassador Markos Tekle, the lead researcher for the book. The book was published in 2011, after I had completed most of my analysis.

are descendants of two first forefathers: Bushe and Maldea that comprise thirteen major sub-groups. The descendants of Bushe are: Malga, Yaanase, Shabbadino, Harbee, Harbagoona, Asaraado, Holloo, Garbicho and Haadicho whereas the descendants of Maldea include Alatta, Haweela, Qeweena and Sawoola. These major sub-groups in turn consist of many sub-divisions'. His argument fails to include any mention of the Hoffa. Maccani (1989: 125) concurs with Yohannis, although his categorization is more general, placing some clans as subgroups of his main eight groups: 'Their [Sidama's] mythical ancestors were Bushe and Maldea. From these two ancestors, 8 main groups were born: Faqisa (subgroups: Yanase, Shabadino, Harbe, Harbegona, Asarado), Hollo (and Garbicco), Malga, Hadicco, and Awacco; and from Maldea: Alatta (and Qevena), Savola and Hawela. Each one of these groups honours its family founder with sacrifices and offerings, usually on his tomb'.

Hamer (1987: 22–23) reiterates the epic mythological line that is recounted by elders concerning the origin story:

...The accounts suggest that Maldea and Bushe left the Dawa River together and arrived at approximately the same time in the land between Lakes Awasa and Abaya. On the other hand, several of the accounts indicate that Bushe and his father followed their cattle in search of better grazing land, until the cows discovered land with which they were especially content. This land was so fertile that

they decided to farm, though they had apparently not practiced agriculture during their stay along the Dawa River. In another version, Bushe and Gugi (the son of the brother of Bushe's father) were keeping cattle together at the Dawa River. Both agreed that Bushe should go north to farm while Gugi remained behind to care for the cattle. Later, when Bushe became successful in farming, he sent a request to Gugi for his cattle, which Gugi refused. From that time the descendants of Gugi and Bushe became enemies⁷.

Hamer's explanation should be considered carefully, as he includes the Guji among those who accompanied the early 'progenitors' of the Sidama and alludes to them as having a close blood relationship. The Sidama (specifically the Hawella clan), during the Luwa ceremony, give due respect to the Guji Oromo ethnic groups who are living among them by symbolically placing a separate bowl (Shafeta) alongside other bowls that represent different Hawella sub clans in the ceremony. This process is meant to show unity and solidarity among the subclans and in doing so accommodates the Guji as one of 'them'.

In addition, Hamer (1987: 23–24) states: Sidamoland, according to mythology, was originally inhabited by the Hoaffa, whose origins are uncertain. These people were ruled by the tyrant named Galel-

⁷ Throughout my article I write 'Gugi' as 'Guji', as do most other contemporary authors.

ciord [sic]. The narrative history indicates that he and the Hoaffa forced Bushe's and Maldea's descendants back toward the Dawa River. Nevertheless they returned, perhaps in greater numbers, and eventually an uneasy truce seems to have been established. The relationship was unsatisfactory, as indicated in the account by the demands for tribute and various forms of degradation imposed by the Hoaffa. Examples of the latter included requests to produce a rope of sand, to make a heavy mixing board out of a bush, or to transport fresh cow's milk by hand over a great distance before it could cool. The descendants of Bushe and Maldea always responded with great cleverness to these stratagems and managed to outwit the Hoaffa. The relationship ultimately became untenable. But it is uncertain as to whether the final break came because of increasing numbers of descendants of Maldea and Bushe, the tyranny of the Hoaffa, or a combination of the two. In any event, through use of stealth, the Sadama managed to trick the Hoaffa into a test of arms, in which the Hoaffa were defeated.⁸

Hamer appears to contend that the descendants of Bushe and Maldea tried to come to this area but faced resistance from the Hoffa. In their second attempt they came and lived with the Hoffa, but they ultimately found the situation un-

bearable. Accordingly, the Bushe and Maldea ancestors finally revolted against their subjugation by the Hoffa and subsequently 'annihilated' and/or integrated with the original pre-Bushe-Maldea settlers (the Hoffa).

The above assessment by Hamer is consistent with what many elders related concerning the early settlement of the Sidama in the area and the subsequent confrontation with the Hoffa groups. Almost all of the elders whom I interviewed recounted that there were a group of people called the Hoffa occupying what is now known as Sidamaland when the Sidama arrived. These elders concurred that the Sidama lived under the harsh rule of the Hoffa for some time, but eventually the Hoffa rule became so oppressive that it caused the Sidama to revolt and subdue the Hoffa. Some elders even go as far as to argue that the present language of the Sidama derives from the Hoffa language (see also Maccani, 1989: 125–26).

Some interlocutors argued that because the *Gerarsha*, a war song sung by the Sidama to recount heroic deeds, is in the Oromo language, this indicates that the original language of the Sidama, before they adopted their current language, was Oromo. Other elders rejected such an argument as a political attempt by certain people to establish the dominance of the Oromo over the Sidama. These elders assert that the Arssi Oromo have been traditionally hostile to the Sidama people (discussions with Kamisso Yotora and Harisso Hagirssso, Hawassa, 2009). Histori-

⁸ Unlike Hamer I spell 'Hoaffa' as 'Hoffa' and 'Galelciord' as 'Gelloicha Orde', in line with narratives from my interlocutors in the field.

cally there have been numerous raids and counter-raids, resulting in many deaths, that are viewed as an imperative to display 'pride and gratification' (Girma, 2001: 66) and to fulfill the 'rite of passage' in the *Luwa* ceremony. In light of such conflicts, when the Sidama sung the *Gerarsha*, the lyrics were intended to defame, insult and diminish their Arssi Oromo counterparts, and for this reason they are sung in the Oromo language so that the Arssi, who are considered 'hostile neighbors', understand what the Sidama are singing about them.⁹ Girma (ibid.) supports this argument, claiming 'the reason for [composing the *Gerarsha* in the Oromo language] to be a deliberate attempt to terrify the Arsi and to convey the message to them in their own language'.

Accordingly, in the Sidama tradition a Sidama will not kill a fellow Sidama and make a *Gerarsha*, as *Gerarshas* are meant for 'hostiles' or 'enemies'. In this case, because the Sidama have been long time 'enemies' of the Arssi Oromo, the making of the *Gerarsha* can be interpreted as establishing a boundary. This is, if a person is killed and someone makes a *Gerarsha* against him, the killer is displaying 'otherness' to separate himself from the deceased. In other words, the analytical framework of boundary formation and establishing differentiations, put forward

by Barth (1969a; 1969b), may be relevant here. Also, this war song seems to clearly reinforce 'emic categories' and categorization (Schlee, 2004).

The view of some 'politically conscious' interlocutors is that the progenitors of the Sidama were originally Oromo language speakers who adopted the Hoffa language. However, while the strong Cushitic relationship of the two languages should be acknowledged, the assertion that a conquering Sidama group adopted the language of the conquered (the Hoffa) while the surrounding group continued to speak the Oromo language is, at the least, puzzling, if not outright misleading. Therefore, the oral stories suggesting that the Sidama annexed the Hoffa and then annihilated them should be closely studied. Let us consider that the current Sidamaland is surrounded by Oromo-speaking people. The Oromo are one of the largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia, and if in fact the Sidama spoke Oromo before their defeat of the Hoffa, difficult questions are raised: If the Sidama were Oromo speakers originally, why should they abandon Oromo for the language of the Hoffa, whom they had defeated? What could explain that only the Sidama switched to the Hoffa language, when almost all of their neighbours are Oromo-speaking Oromo?

While the door remains open for further study, both of the claims above with regard to the origins of the Sidama language — that the Oromo-language war songs of the Sidama indicate that the

⁹ According to my interlocutors the Sidama and the Arssi who live along the borders have a good knowledge of both Sidama and Oromo languages. Moreover, despite the conflicts, there are trade activities and intermarriage between the two ethnic groups.

Sidama originally spoke Oromo, or that the Sidama spoke in the language of the Hoffa after defeating them — do not appear to hold up to investigative scrutiny, based on my fieldwork and data. Moreover, many interlocutors directly refuted such ideas. Yet I leave this relevant question open to further research.

Returning now to the earlier discussion concerning common origin narratives, a recent study cautions that the hypothesis that regards Bushe and Maldea as the keystone of Sidama origin should not be taken at face value — rather, it is a myth constructed loosely on historical precedents (Markos et al. [draft] 2011). For example, the name Bushe (which comes from Busha in the Sidama language, meaning ‘earth’ or ‘dirt’) is used simply because the earlier Sidama ancestors, during their search for fertile land, dug out a hole and they returned the dug out soil to the same hole and found that soil did not fit. They moved to another area until they came to their current place where the dug out soil (earth) perfectly fitted back in the hole they dug and concluded that this (the current land) is a better land for them to settle. Accordingly, these early ancestors bore the name ‘Bushe’ (ibid.: 17). This same myth is also told by Hawella clan members of the Garaha sub clan to describe how their predecessors settled in the area the Hawella currently occupy (interview with Wakyo Kawe, Garaha Gando, 2009; interview with Egata Anata, Garaha Gando, 2009).

When elders reach the end of what they

can remember concerning their genealogies, they say *‘hakki ka’a ilama borajju bakkotenni’*¹⁰ *meentu meesanetenni gu-dino’* — ‘genealogies that go beyond this have been wiped out [eradicated] by the slave’s rod, and women have eradicated them with an axe’. In other words, the elders avoid recounting more distant genealogies by establishing a myth that threatens people who attempt to discuss a time before Bushe and Maldea. In one example, they say that some people who have dared to do so developed wings and flew away (i.e., disappeared) (Markos et al. [draft] 2011: 18).

In light of the different narratives, it becomes clear that establishing Bushe and Maldea as the first progenitors of the Sidama is debatable, and that a search for the first progenitors of the Sidama may in fact go further back in time than the sixteenth century and Bushe and Maldea. Nonetheless, despite reasons for doubt, the myth of common origin that centers on Bushe and Maldea as the first progenitors of the Sidama, and which espouses them as the seeds from which Sidamanness has grown, remains the dominant narrative, and serves as a framework for ethnic identification among Sidama ethnic groups. In this regard, it is not the historical, verifiable accuracy of the information about the original ancestors, but rather the common conception among

¹⁰ The phrase *‘borajju bakkotenni’* translates literally to ‘by the slave’s jaw’.

the Sidama about such ancestors, that is significant in constructing layers of ethnic identification. It is this disposition to accept a common set of ideas and in turn to perpetuate them through generations by word of mouth that lays the foundation for the process of identification. Although arguments continue to be made asserting the existence of the Sidama before the sixteenth century, the lack of compelling evidence and documentation that can trace the Sidama beyond the time of Bushe and Maldea has convinced many people that there is no reason to doubt Bushe and Maldea as the first progenitors.

The prominence of this narrative has also been endorsed by the team of scholars who have embarked on writing a history of the Sidama people. Their study was under way during the time of my fieldwork, and we interviewed some of the same interlocutors. According to these interlocutors and to the present findings of the scholars' study (which is ongoing as of this writing cited in the article as Markos et al. [draft] 2011.), the Bushe and Maldea common origin narrative overrides all others. Beyond the assertion that Bushe and Maldea were brothers begotten by Manna, however, the stories fade as one attempts to investigate further into the pre-Bushe-Maldea period. One reason is that, as mentioned earlier, there is a myth warning that he who speaks of a time before Bushe and Maldea will be afflicted by disease. The underlying intention of this myth appears aimed at protecting the claim that all Sidama clans descended

from either Bushe or Maldea and that all other groups have also been constituted under this all-encompassing umbrella.¹¹

Whatever the truth of the Bushe-Maldea narrative, I argue that it serves as an important node of Sidama ethnic boundary formation. If we speak of it in the context of 'boundaries', the Bushe-Maldea narrative constitutes a dominant common origin boundary that is constructed and persistently maintained by the Sidama. Moreover, following Geertz (1973: 261–263) the narrative serves as a 'social marker' of Sidamaness.

Stanley (1970: 216) takes a slightly different view of the common primordial Sidama ancestors. Unlike the authors mentioned above, he maintains that there are three putative ancestors of the Sidama — Bushe, Maldea and Hoffa — from which the thirteen clans or 'sub tribes' (as Stanley refers to them) descended. Harkening back to the Bushe-Maldea common origin myth, the narratives describe how the Sidama fought the Hoffa settlers when they arrived at their present land, but Stanley suggests that the Hoffa therefore formed a third source of Sidamaness in the eyes of certain segments of Sidama society. This further complicates the origin construction, adding to the difficulty of establishing a definite answer to the question of the true origins of the Sidama.

¹¹ Unlike the findings of the group of researchers to whom I refer above, my interlocutors (elders) rarely mentioned Manna while talking about their ancestors.

Stanley (1970: 217) also sets forth another narrative relating to the relationship between Bushe and Maldea:

The grouping of sub-tribes (segments) according to the common forefathers is significant on the one hand because such group may be exogamous with respect to the rest of the tribe There is also another tradition according to which the name Sidama derives from a common ancestor Side. Side's son was Selenia and Selenia's son was Maldea, however the relation between Side and Bushe, Hame, and Dadda is not indicated.

Although Stanley asserts such a relationship, I have not been told similar narratives by my interlocutors, and my fieldwork data reveal no compelling evidence to support the validity of this relationship.

Betana (1983: 56) appears to support Stanley's placement of the Hoffa alongside Bushe and Maldea in the Sidama common origin myth. Further, he considers the Hoffa as a main branch of Sidama, which actually preceded Bushe and Maldea, i.e., earlier than the sixteenth century. Moreover, Betana (*ibid.*: 54–55) argues that the idea that the Sidama came to the present area in the sixteenth century is due to the fact that some elders count back eighteen generations; however, he adds that other elders can trace their genealogies back as many as thirty generations, which thus leads him to doubt the validity of the thesis suggesting the Sidama arrived at their present area no earlier than the sixteenth century. He also ar-

gues that if, as many people assert, it was the Sidama who prevented the massive Oromo movement into the area in the sixteenth century, there is no way they could have checked such a mighty force had they been but newly established in the area. He contends that only a well-organized and well-settled force could have stood up to the swift and powerful Oromo in any kind of military engagement. While Betana was unable to provide a definitive explanation for when and how the Sidama arrived in their present area, he has made compelling arguments that call for a deeper investigation of certain common assumptions.

To sum up this line of inquiry, there are two major theses with regard to the origin of the Sidama. The dominant story contends that all Sidama clans descended from Bushe and Maldea. The less-pervasive variant, espoused by some scholars, suggests that all current Sidama clans descended from Bushe, Maldea and the Hoffa. These two variants taken together constitute the notion of Sidamanness that we can observe today among the Sidama ethnic group. In other words, each person who claims to be a Sidama connects their genealogy to one of these three putative ancestors. Despite the varying narratives, the Sidama maintain a firm attachment to their primordial roots, confirming, as Geertz (1963: 109) asserts, 'the longing not to belong to any other group'.

Processes of identifications

Baumann (1999: 140) contends, 'all

identities are identifications, all identifications are dialogical'. Likewise, the process of ethnic identity formation underscores the identification of people with certain logics that they perceive to be plausible. There has to be this dynamic of plausibility to appeal to a certain category. As we have observed, there is a continuous attempt by the Sidama to make different sorts of connections and identifications to any of the three supposed progenitors. Moreover, from the different narratives we can see that what Roosens (1989: 86) calls the 'genealogical dimension of ethnic belonging' is significant among the Sidama ethnic group. Whether these genealogical ties are real or merely conjectured, the very notion of identifying oneself with one of the three progenitors plays a very significant role in the process of Sidama ethnic identification. Thus, regardless of a common ancestry being proven valid or invalid, 'ethnic actors believe that membership is a matter of shared biological descent' (Gil-White, 1999: 803).

Yet this narrower view of historical origins and the politics of identity based on a sense of common origin overlooks the fact that the Sidama once constituted a much larger group than those who are considered Sidama today. The current impetus toward 'essentializing' Sidamaness tends to deny any possible links to other ethnic groups, some of whom claim to have been Sidama or to have had Sidama connections in the past. More comprehensive views, which describe identity as being in a constant

state of flux, are in line with Schlee's seminal book, *Identities on the move* (1989). For instance, there is evidence to indicate that the notion of Sidama ethnic identity is not fixed, but rather subject to a process of fusion and fission. Zerihun (2010; unpublished) indicates that the Alaba ethnic group claims a connection to the Sidama. Although I have not made an intensive study of the Tambaro, my encounters and brief discussions with people from that ethnic group during the Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and People's Day celebration suggest that the current Tambaro ethnic groups had Sidama origins.¹² For example, from the discussions I had with them they trace their genealogy as follows (Figure 2):

If we accept the proposition of Hamer, which is supported by many elders, that the 'founder' of the Guji Oromo, Guji (elders say Gujo), was 'the son of the brother of Bushe's father', then embracing the idea

¹² While I was doing fieldwork in 2009, I met a group of people from Tambaro who came to Hawassa in order to celebrate Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and People's Day. The celebration took place in Dire Dawa, but all ethnic groups from the SNNPRS were welcome to gather in Hawassa and then depart to the host region. Taking advantage of the opportunity I interviewed a group of people about their origins. I realize this constituted a limited and anecdotal sampling, but it became clear that the now different and distinct Tambaro ethnic group asserts that they were once Sidama. If such assertion is true, it again suggests that the concept of a fixedness of identity is disputable and can be explored further in line with Schlee's (1989) *Identities on the move*. The diagram I have provided in this regard should not be considered authoritative, but it is intended to show how different claims of cross-ethnic connections can be traced.

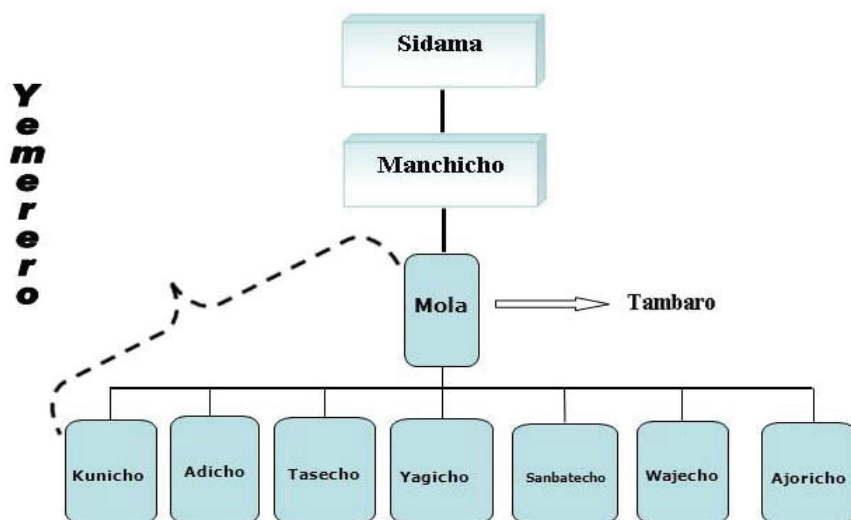


Figure 2. A rough sketch depicting a claim of some Tambaro interlocutors with Sidama.

that Bushe and his descendants were the basis of Sidama ethnic identity and Guji and his descendants the basis of Guji Oromo identity may pose a challenge to the very argument of ‘essence’ and ‘givenness’ with regard to ethnic identity. The dominant narrative among elders that places the Hoffa as the pre-Bushe–Maldea settlers in present-day Sidamaland, and as people who were later subjugated by the Sidama, further calls into question the notion of ‘givenness’ of Sidama ethnic identity. Therefore, if Sidamaness is in fact a fusion of various elements of the storylines of the elders, it suggests that the argument that centers on an ‘essence’ of ethnic identity can be supplanted by this alternate process of Sidamaness as an integration of different groups.

Despite its powerful appeal, the ar-

gument of ‘essence’ potentially becomes even more porous when we consider the different mechanisms of integration of the ‘non-Sidama’ into the Sidama ethnic category, which were narrated to me by elders during my fieldwork. According to my interlocutors, an individual who is not Sidama can be integrated or be taken in as a Sidama. For example, elders mentioned adopting children or even adults as their own by what they called *ununancho* or *ununa kana*, which literally means to ‘suckle at the breast’. The construction of a new Sidama identity in this case can be created through an elaborate ceremony, whereby the would-be father declares the ‘outsider’ to be his son from the time at which he ‘suckles at his breast’. A feast is prepared for the ceremony, including the making

of 'honey wine' (*Malawo*) for the people who will witness the integration process. During the feast, the 'outsider' rises and performs the symbolic 'suckling at the breast' of the would-be father, whereby the would-be father declares the 'outsider' to be his son from that moment, and the 'son' is integrated into the clan of his new father and assumes his new Sidama ethnic identity (discussions with Sirko, Egata, Wakayo et al., 2009; 2010).

Schlee (2008: 151) states: 'One may be compelled to include individuals and groups in the group defined as "us" whom one would really prefer not to include and be forced to do so by the demands of consistency in sticking to the system of social categories or one conventionally accepted mode of identification'. Put simply, despite the claims of those people who wish to project an 'essence' or 'givenness' onto their ethnic identity, the process of fusion and fission plays a crucial role at the center of construction of ethnicity.

The Comaroffs (1992: 60) state: 'while ethnicity is the product of specific historical process, it tends to take on the "natural" appearance of an autonomous force, a "principle" capable of determining the course of social life'. Likewise, what we draw from the Bushe–Maldea narrative or the Bushe–Maldea–Hoffa narrative is that ethnicity is not a definitive, ready-made essence but rather a construction based on the concepts of people. This assertion of a more fluid nature with regard to one's identity can be seen in the following case study, related to me by of

one of my key interlocutors, which illustrates how clan affiliations can change.

CASE STUDY OF SIRKO/WAYESO

After the incorporation of the Sidama into the Ethiopian empire, a small child named Anata who belonged to the Kewena clan but lived among the Hawella clan territory fled Sidamaland with his mother, Dasse Fara, to live among the Arssi Oromo, where they felt relatively safe from the crushing demands of the feudal regime. Anata grew up in the Arssi Oromo territory, and eventually reached the age when his mother began to look for a wife for him. During her search she became acquainted with a family who also had fled Sidamaland. Among this family she met a woman, Lenteta, who had left Sidamaland after being divorced from her first husband, with whom she no longer got along, and returned to live with her parents. Anata's mother found the woman likeable and negotiated for her to marry Anata. Anata and Lenteta were married in Sirka in the Arssi Oromo territory. Unfortunately, although Anata's mother was eager to have a grandchild, the newlyweds did not produce a child for quite a few years. After much fretful waiting by all in the family, Lenteta became pregnant and gave birth to Sirko (my interlocutor). The newborn child was named Sirko in remembrance of the hardship Anata and his mother had experienced fleeing the feudal regime and the generosity of the Arssi Oromo, who had hosted them in Sirka (*shirka*) (see

Figure 3).

After time had passed, they came to believe that the feudal oppression had lessened in the villages in ‘Sidamo province’. Anata, Lentata, and their young son Sirko returned to Sidamaland and settled near the Wosha sub district (kebele) in the Wondo Genet area.

While living in Wosha, Lentata fell out with her husband, Anata, and left him, taking Sirko with her. She returned to her first husband with the child. He welcomed her back, and also welcomed the son whom he did not know and to whom he had no biological connection. Only later did Anata learn that Lenteta had in fact returned to her first husband, along with the child. After many futile efforts to get back his only son, whom he loved dearly because of their shared resemblance, Anata convened a meeting with elders to negotiate the return of Sirko.

During the meeting with the elders, Anata pleaded his case, telling them how the child was born during their exile and that the child was only conceived after many difficult miscarriages, and that there was no possible way anyone could

connect the child to Lentata’s former husband to whom she had returned. Despite his compelling factual evidence, which clearly showed that Sirko was indeed his biological son, the elders decided that Anata should drop his complaint, and thus the son was officially handed over to his new father.

A sheep was slaughtered, and the child received a new name, Wayeso. He was officially accepted as a new member of the clan of his foster (*siwila*) father, Weta Chule, by denouncing — ‘washing away’ — his biological clan affiliation through a cleansing ritual (*logo*) (see Figure 4). He became one of the Hawella clan in Wome sub clan of the Hawella and Lemicho lineage, thereby adopting his new father’s clan, sub clan and lineage (see Figure 6). As tradition demanded, Sirko — now Wayeso — was given an inheritance (*eqqa*) in the new settlement area of Murancho.

Wayeso continues to live in the Murancho area and has had seven wives. His wives are Bedaro Ribisso, from Hawella (murancho) clan; Safaye Hankamo, from the Malga clan; Dukaa Hatiya, from the

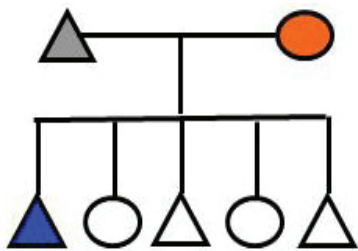


Figure 3. Biological relationship of Sirko.



Figure 4. Constructed relationship of Sirko.

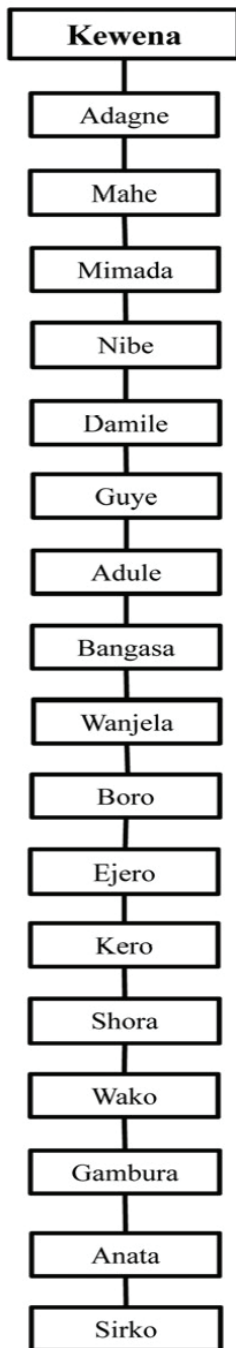


Figure 5. Sirko's biological genealogy.

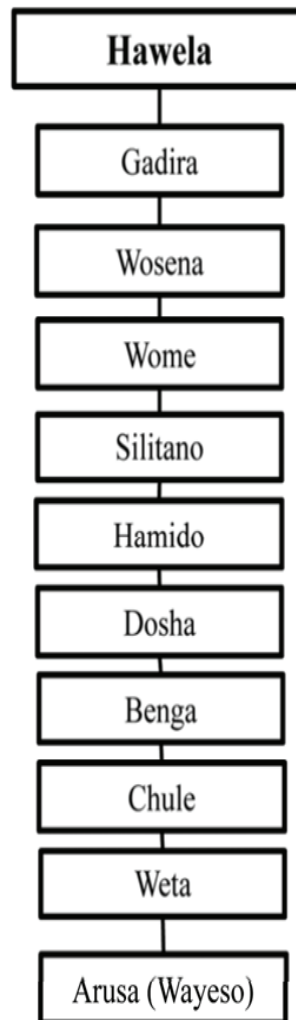


Figure 6. Sirko's new and constructed genealogy.

Yanase clan; Galgale (Wayeso calls her Malga), from the Guji Oromo ethnic group; Harime Wachifo, also from the Guji Oromo; Warite, from the Alata clan; and Bukure Baraso, from the Kewena clan. His

last wife, Bukure, still lives with him.

What is interesting here in terms of Wayeso's ability to marry is that, had he remained with his biological father (Anata), who was from the Kewena clan (see Figure 5), he would not have been allowed to marry his last wife (who is also from the Kewena clan) but he could have married all of the other six wives. I asked Wayeso if he could marry Anata's daughter — in other words, his biological sisters (in this case half-sisters). I asked this because his adopted clan, the Hawella and specifically the Wome sub clan (see Figure 6), is allowed to marry girls from the Kewena clan. To my surprise, he said that he could, although it would be very difficult for him psychologically, because he had very close ties with his biological father, Anata. He said that although tradition would not stop him from marrying Anata's children, as his biological relationship had been made null by the cleansing ritual and his former clan ties had thus been 'deconstructed': 'if I marry Anata's daughters, deep inside me I would feel as if I am eating my own flesh'.

The above case study demonstrates how the tradition allows for the construction of a new clan identity for individuals, which in turn challenges the notion of the immutability of identity. At the same time that same tradition allows for the deconstruction of already existing identities. Although the Sidama attribute 'a certain ineffable significance ... to the tie of blood' (Shils 1957: 142), the case study demonstrates how clan affiliation can be manip-

ulated, reconstructed and deconstructed. It should be noted, however, that despite such room for switching and manipulation of identity, the Sidama continue to project their identity as a 'given' and as something 'natural' that will not change.

Summary and conclusion

This paper has shown the different elements of identification among the Sidama ethnic group. First, it discussed the narratives concerning the Sidama common origin, as told by the elders, in particular the two main variants. One variant claims that Bushe and Maldea are the first progenitors of the Sidama people, and all of the various Sidama clans descend from either Bushe or Maldea. The Hoffa are pre-Bushe-Maldea settlers who later were integrated into the Sidama and thus acquired Sidamaness. According to the other main variant, the Hoffa arrived at the current settlement area first, later to be joined by the descendants of Bushe and Maldea, and therefore all three are the putative ancestors of the Sidama.

The paper also indicates how the process of identification can be influenced by the context and can vary based on different sets of variables. Thus, the notion of 'essence' with regard to ethnic identity must be viewed cautiously. It is also shown that how an individual based on various circumstances could construct a new clan identity and perpetuate this newly constructed identity. Such arrangements of creation, inclusion and exclusion of identities into and out of a group are

supported by various cultural practises that exist among the people. Based on the different stories from my fieldwork, I argue that ethnic identity and identification is constantly in a state of being constructed and perpetuated by individuals and groups. Thus, multiple layers of identification can exist, and one layer of identification does not void or preclude another, with so many factors pertaining to identity simultaneously in play. Thus, the process of creation, inclusion and exclusion of members always underpins the processes of ethnic identification.

The case from Sidama aligns with broader anthropological insights offered by Guenther Schlee (1989; 2004; 2009), who argues that identities are consciously invoked and strategically mobilized depending on social circumstances. Such phenomena show that identity to be a flexible resource, activated for cohesion, alliance building, and ethnic boundary management.

The paper also posited that there are always accommodative cultural mechanisms that would open up the seemingly 'unmalleable walls' of identification even to the extent of including 'others' into the in-group as evidenced by the process of 'Ununa Kana' or suckling of a breast. Such accounts from Sidama underscore that identity is enacted through everyday practices — through rituals, kinship negotiations, and other mechanisms. These practices continually reaffirm, challenge, or recreate the meaning attached to belonging. Also, the Sidama account reveal

that identity is not merely inherited but also earned through different mechanisms, displayed, and sometimes strategically reinvented. The examples from Sidama profoundly demonstrate how identities remain coherent not only because of fixed genealogical truths, but because they are constantly reproduced through rituals and shared cultural repertoires.

In conclusion, the Sidama ethnographic material makes clear that ethnic identity is not a timeless inheritance but a dynamic social project — crafted, contested, and continually renewed. The Sidama show that belonging is shaped as much by lived practices as by ancestral narratives, and that the boundaries of identity expand or tighten according to some existential needs, contexts, and cultural strategies. Their example powerfully illustrates a central anthropological insight: that ethnic groups are not natural, bounded entities but fluid, relational formations forged through human agency and historical imagination. By revealing the subtle interplay of memory, practice, and power in Sidama identification, this study affirms that identities endure not through rigidity but through their capacity to be reinterpreted, reconfigured, and reanimated across generations.

References

Archival and oral sources

- Anata, E. (2009; 2010). Personal Interview, Garaha Gando, Ethiopia.
- Gambura, A. Lalade (2010). Personal Interview, Garaha Gando, Ethiopia.

Hagirsso, Harisso (2009). Personal Interview, Hawassa, Ethiopia.

Kawe, Wakyo (2009). Personal Interview, Gara Gando, Ethiopia.

Sirko (2009; 2010). Personal Interview, Ramada, Ethiopia.

Yotora, Kamisso (2009). Personal Interview, Hawassa, Ethiopia.

Published sources

Ababu, A. 1995. *A history of Yirgalem town and its environs, 1933 to 1974*. M.A. thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University.

Almaw, K. 2005. *A history of the Sidama people, c.1889–1971*. M.A. thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University.

Almaw, K. 1999. *A historical survey of the Arsi-Sidama conflicts (1935–1974)*. Senior Essay, Department of History, Addis Ababa University.

Barth, F. (ed.). 1969a. *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.

Barth, F. 1969b. Introduction. In: Barth, F. (ed.). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: social organization of cultural difference*. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget: 9–38.

Betana, H. 1983. *Sidama Hezbuna Bahilu* [Amharic language version]. Addis Ababa, Bole Printing Press.

Braukämper, U. 1978. The ethnogenesis of the Sidama. *Abbaya*, 9: 123–30.

Comaroff, J.; Comaroff, J. 1992. *Ethnography and the historical imagination*. Boulder & Oxford, Westview Press.

Geertz, C. 1963. The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states. In: Geertz, C. (ed.). *Old societies and new states*. New York, Free Press:

105–57.

Geertz, C. 1973. After the revolution: the fate of nationalism in the new states. In: Geertz, C. (ed.). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books: 234–254.

Gil-White, F. 1999. How thick is blood? The pot thickens: if ethnic actors are primordialists, what remains of the circumstantialist/primordialist controversy? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(5): 789–820.

Girma, N. 2001. *The Arsi and the Sidama: a history of inter-ethnic relationship along their border lands ca. 1900–1995*. M.A. thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University.

Hamer, J. 1987. *Human development: participation and change among the Sadama of Ethiopia*. Alabama, The University of Alabama Press.

Jensen, A. E.; Pauli, E.; Straube, H. 2022. *The Sidaama*. Berlin, LIT Verlag.

Maccani, B. 1989. *The Sidama: aspects of the Sidama culture*. Awasa, Catholic Mission of Tulo.

Markos, A. et al. 2011. *Ye Sidama biher Tarik ena Bahil* [Amharic version]. Draft. Addis Ababa, Bole Printing Press.

Roosens, E. 1989. *Creating ethnicity: the process of ethnogenesis*. London, Sage Publications.

Seligman, C. G. 1966. *Races of Africa*. London, Oxford University Press.

Sergew Hable Sellassie. 1972. *Ancient and medieval Ethiopian history to 1270*. Addis Ababa, United Printers.

Schlee, G. 2008. *How enemies are made: towards a theory of ethnic and religious conflict*. New York, Berghahn Books.

Schlee, G. (ed.). 2004. *Ethnizität und Markt: zur ethnischen Struktur von Viehmärkten in Westafrika*. Köln, Rudiger Koppe Verlag.

- Schlee, G. 1989. *Identities on the move: clanship and pastoralism in northern Kenya*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Shils, E. 1957. Primordial, personal, sacred and civil ties: some particular observations on the relationships of sociological research and theory. *British Journal of Sociology*, 8(2): 130–45.
- Stanley, S. 1970. The political system of Sidama. In: Pankhurst, R.; Chojnacki, S. (eds.). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol.3. Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies: 215–28.
- Taddesse, T. 1972. *Church and state in Ethiopia 1270–1527*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Ullendorff, E. 1960. *The Ethiopians: an introduction to the country and the people*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Vecchiato, N. L. 1985. *Culture, health and socialism in Ethiopia: the Sidamo case*. PhD dissertation in Social Anthropology, University of California.
- Yohannis, L. 2008. *The quest for self-determination in Ethiopia: the law and the practice on the right to statehood with specific reference to the Sidama*. LLB Degree in Law thesis, Ethiopian Civil Service College Institute of Federalism and Legal Studies.
- Zerihun, D. 2010. *Ethnography and ethno-history of Tambaro*. Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State. Hawassa, Institute of Nationalities Study.

