Politics and Power in Southern Ethiopia: Imposing, Opposing and Calling for Linguistic Unity

Logan Cochrane & Yeshtila Bekele

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Logan Cochrane
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7321-8295
Carleton University, Canada
Hawassa University Institute for Policy and
Development Research, Ethiopia
logan.cochrane@gmail.com

Yeshtila Bekele
Hawassa University Institute for Policy and
Development Research, Ethiopia

Abstract

In 2018 there were demands for the creation of new regional states in Ethiopia by ethno-linguistic groups seeking greater self-determination. Two examples of this were the Sidama and Wolaita, with some members of the latter advocating for the creation of an "Omotic Peoples" regional state. The idea of Omotic unification is not new to southern Ethiopia. When the amalgamated language of Wogagoda was introduced in the 1990s, the peoples of the region rallied in opposition against government. This article explores the intersection of language, politics and power during that period, which resulted in the withdrawal of a language policy and the creation of new, disintegrated administrative structures. Drawing upon historical experiences, this article reflects on the role of ethno-linguistic identities and their implications for contemporary decision making about languages of instruction and administrative boundaries. The results provide insight into situational contexts that may enable or constrain bottom-up and top-down language policy processes.

Keywords: ethno-linguistic identity; identity; Ethiopia; education; language; politics; Wogagoda

1. Introduction

Since Abiy Ahmed Ali became Ethiopia's prime minister in March of 2018 there has been a series of governmental-led initiatives to resolve conflict: between Ethiopia and Eritrea, between Somalis and Oromos, and between youth protesters and the government. Counter to this trend, however, was a rise of unrest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS). Tensions between the Sidama and Wolaita ethno-linguistic groups arose in June of 2018. Following an annual festival of the Sidama people (*Fichee Chambalaalla*), multiple days of protest and

rioting brought the regional capital, Hawassa, to a standstill. On just one of those days (16 June 2018), 10 people were killed, 89 were injured and 2 500 displaced (Davison 2018). Protesters and rioters called for the expulsion of non-Sidama ethno-linguistic groups from the area, particularly of the Wolaita, and for the creation of a new Sidama Regional State. When the prime minister visited elders in the region, members of the Wolaita ethno-linguistic group called for the creation of another new regional state: the Omotic Peoples Regional State. These tensions are not new, and reflect a period in the 1990s when the government introduced the amalgamated language of Wogagoda in the Omotic-speaking areas, which was met with opposition.

This article analyses the roots of ethno-linguistic divides in southern Ethiopia, cleavages that did not begin with the Wogagoda language policy, but in which the language policy played a central role. The demands for new regional states that occurred in 2018 were driven by ethno-linguistic identities and were bolstered by rights outlined in the Constitution, which asserts the right of self-administration in the so-called ethnic federalism that was established in 1995. The idea of Omotic unification, proposed by Wolaita elders in 2018, is not new. In the early 1990s, ethnicity, language, education and politics intersected as the region navigated similar questions relating to how speakers of Omotic languages would be divided or united. This article explores those historical events in light of the return of the idea of Omotic unification to the political sphere. Specifically, we analyse the events that occurred in the former North Omo Zone, southern Ethiopia, between 1992 and 2000 and seek to assess the drivers of resistance and what implications those drivers have for current questions of division or unification. The mass mobilisation that occurred in the 1990s sought to resist the imposition of newly crafted, top-down languages (see section 3) and in tandem sought to advocate for greater self-administration. After years of struggle, success was achieved on both counts: the Wogagoda language policy was withdrawn and new administrative rights were granted. While this narrative appears straightforward, it is complicated by diverse layers of power and is influenced by the different objectives and motivations of the actors involved. This historical account provides a means through which complexity can be grappled with and, given the revival of ideas of Omotic unity, this research also presents insight into contemporary issues of language, politics and power.

2. The Ethiopian Context

The rise of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 1991– present) and its coalition of regional political parties was the result of a struggle for a governance system suited to the diversity of the Ethiopian nation (Abbay 2004; Clapham 2004; Clapham 2009; Fiseha 2012). This struggle has been ongoing for decades. For example, central to the concerns raised by student activists of the 1960s and 1970s was the modality of governance (at that time a monarchy) and the way in which the

nations, nationalities and peoples of the country should be recognised (Clapham 2009; Bahru 2014). In establishing a new government and drafting a new Constitution, "ethnic federalism" structured the country largely based on ethno-linguistic identities, a concept that was first outlined in the Transitional Charter in 1991 and formalised in the Constitution of 1995 (Fiseha 2012). Despite the stated shift toward democracy, the Marxist-Leninist ideological roots of the government remained a key influence on the decisions made (Clapham 2009). For example, the notion of self-determination for nations, nationalities and peoples within Ethiopia, "up to and including secession" (Constitution, Article 39), was outlined by the Marxist-Leninist student movement in the 1970s (Bahru 2014).

The ability of lower-level administrative bodies to determine the language of instruction and administration, which is embedded within the broader powers of self-administration of federalism, is a decision-making process that highlights the difficulties of ethnic federalism and implementing the rights outlined in the 1995 Constitution (Abbink 1997). The imperial government (–1974), the Derg junta (1974–1991) and the EPRDF (1991–present) adopted Amharic as the national language (or federal language in the case of EPRDF), which was used as the language of instruction in the public school system (Getachew and Derib 2006; Wagaw 1999). Throughout the country, however, there are some 80 languages spoken by a similar number of ethno-linguistic groups, which are recognised in the 1995 Constitution as being equal. That recognition and status allows for the adoption of local languages for administration (Article 5). In the post-1995 years, local languages (other than Amharic) have been adopted at the regional level in the Afar, Harari, Oromia, Somali and Tigray regional states. Many ethno-linguistic groups have adopted local languages as the language of instruction in primary education in addition to the language of administration (Savà and Tosco 2008). However, this occurred in the case of 15 languages during the Derg period, while little to no progress was made for the majority of languages as the adoption of local languages for instruction often required the development of writing systems as well as curricula, which is time and resource intensive.

The Constitution addressed some of the questions about diverse nations, nationalities and peoples, and created new opportunities. It was empowering for the diverse ethnic identities of the country to be able to determine the most suitable and appropriate medium for administration and education. According to the 1994 Education and Training Policy, local languages were encouraged for use as a means to enhance learning in, and accessibility to, education, as well as a right of the speakers (Hirut 2014). However, there were no definitions in the Constitution about what constitutes "nations, nationalities and peoples" and thus it was unclear who would be granted such rights, particularly for the many minority ethno-linguistic groups in southern Ethiopia (Abbink 1998; 2011). The case of the former North Omo Zone is one example of how the ideals of the new Constitution were navigated and negotiated between the citizens who fought for such

rights and the government, which was constrained by resources and capacity. These are the same constitutional ideals that continue to provide the basis for calls for the establishment of new regional states in contemporary Ethiopia.

This study was conducted in the SNNPRS (see Figure 1) because it is home to the greatest ethno-linguistic diversity and because it experienced some of the most contested decisions about language. Specifically, we focus upon what was the North Omo Zone, where the government experienced the first (of several) challenges concerning language and self-administration. There are an estimated 54 languages spoken in SNNPRS, each of which could serve as administrative and educational mediums (Savà and Tosco 2008). Not all of these languages are completely distinct. Several languages have shared cognates approaching 80% and have high degrees of mutual intelligibility (Hirut 2005; 2014; Savà and Tosco 2008). While there are similarities, the divergences align with ethno-linguistic identities, and thus the unique traits comprise key markers of difference. In what was North Omo Zone, several related languages were spoken, four of which share a high degree of commonality, namely the Dawuro, Gamo, Gofa and Wolaita languages.
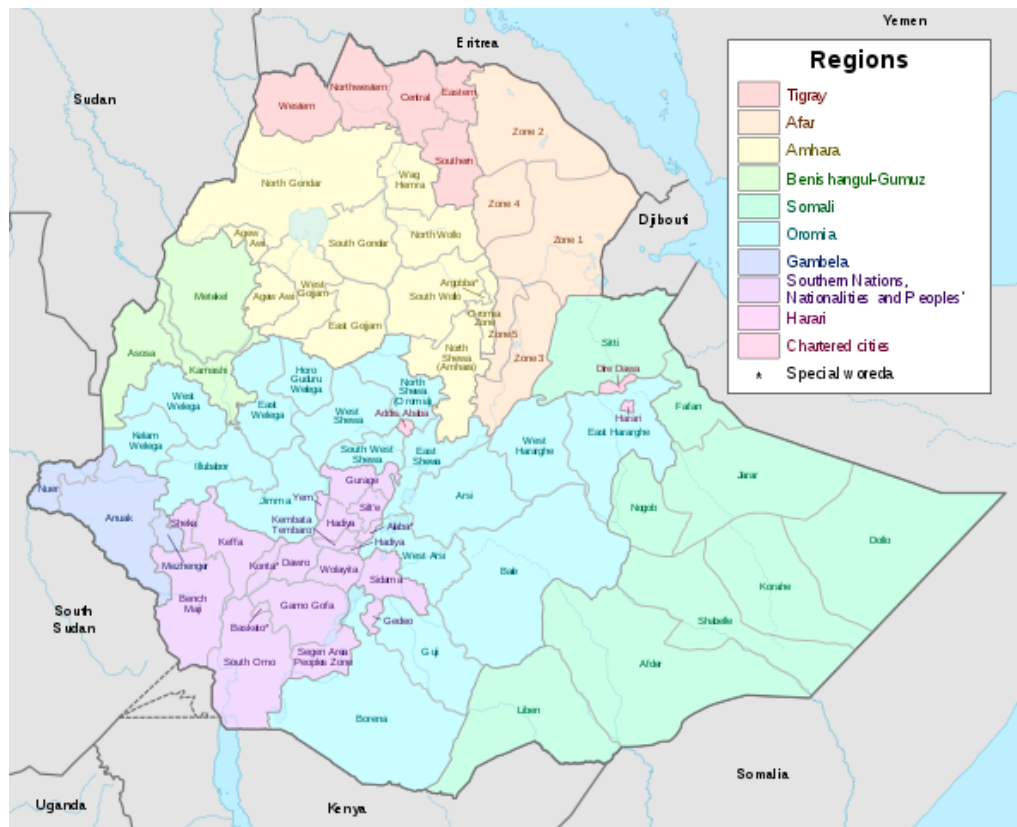
Figure 1: Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State in the southwest of Ethiopia (following the changes to administrative borders within SNNPRS)

Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_zones_of_Ethiopia.svg)

Due to its central role in the linguistic and administrative challenges that were experienced, we focus on one of these specific ethno-linguistic identities: Wolaita. This is an ethno-linguistic group located in southern Ethiopia, and is mentioned in the earliest records of the region (Pankhurst 1997). Long before the Ethiopian state took control of the area, in 1894, the territory was inhabited by the Wolaita ethno-linguistic group and existed as its own, independent kingdom that was the regional power of what is today southern Ethiopia (Aalen 2011; Chinigo 2015). Since incorporation, the administrative boundaries of the area have been subject to significant change. During the imperial period, the area was referred to as "Wollamo" and was administratively situated in the Sidamo Province but existed as its own district (then called *Awaraja*). Due to this status, Wolaita retained a degree of autonomy within the imperial state. During the brief Italian occupation (1936–1941), the administrative boundaries changed, with Wolaita existing in the "Galla-Sidamo" Governorate while still retaining a degree of

autonomy (largely due to a lack of governmental presence rather than administratively granted autonomy). During the Derg period (1974–1991), Wolaita continued as part of the Sidamo Province; however in the late-1980s, districts were merged and Wolaita was embedded in a broader "North Omo" region. This change reduced the administrative power of Wolaita. With the coming of the EPRDF in 1991, Wolaita continued as part of the "North Omo" structure within the SNNPRS (although there were, at one point, plans for it to be a region). Existing within a zone in the EPRDF administrative constellation meant that Wolaita had fewer rights of self-administration (retaining the lower level of administrative power granted during the Derg period).

3. Methods

We collected empirical data from government personnel, community members, former student protesters, former teachers, parents, and elders from the Wolaita, Gamo and Dawuro ethno-linguistic communities through key informant interviews. To do this, we used a semi-structured interview format to collect information, identifying participants both through purposive sampling and by means of a snowball method. Data was collected in September and October of 2017. The focus of the interview process was to identify key stakeholders and those who were engaged first-hand in the events described. We also sought to obtain diverse perspectives: former and current government personnel, former teachers, historians, former student protesters, parents and community leaders/ elders. In total, 26 individual interviews were conducted. Interviews were largely conducted in Amharic, with a few being conducted in English, as per the preference of the interviewee. For all interviews, the researchers were present and took handwritten notes. Audio recording was not done as the issues discussed continue to be sensitive and the idea of audio recording made some respondents uncomfortable—this was particularly the case during the time of data collection as one of the key actors during the 1990s on the government's side had become the prime minister (Hailemariam Desalegn, prime minister 2012–2018). Some individuals we approached to interview refused to participate because past research and journalism had identified them, resulting in severe repercussions. The gravity of this ought not to be underestimated; one of the interviewees had recently been released after being held for two years in jail for engaging in political activities.

This study is also informed by primary and secondary data collected in relation to the Wogagoda language policy, for which we reviewed all results on the Web of Science and Google Scholar platforms. The Web of Science, which is the most comprehensive academic search platform and claims to index the most reliable multidisciplinary research, presented limited results. We also used Google Scholar, which indexes a much broader set of literature and conducts textual analysis (as opposed to topical searches of Web

of Science).[1] Google Scholar identified 63 publications that referenced "Wogagoda"; however, these largely focused on linguistics rather than the mass mobilisation and political components. Approximately half of the results offered relevant research, and were used as contextual references to enhance this study. As an additional source of information, we collected documents from government offices and interviewees, such as copies of the letters described below, to supplement the literature reviewed.

One of the ways in which we have framed the processes involved in language policy creation are as "bottom-up" and "top-down" (Johnson 2013). We use these categories flexibly; however, the top-down approach is typically carried out by authorities with minimal involvement of the population, and this may be done with political motivations (Hassa 2012; Shohamy 2006). On the other hand, bottom-up processes refer to locally driven processes that serve to address the interests of the population involved (Johnson 2013). The top-down and bottom-up framing links the study of politics and identity with processes of policy (Wodak 2012). With regard to theoretical framing, we are in agreement with Fukuyama (2011) that theories ought to be inferred from the process and results of research, rather than narrative and research being driven by theory. With regard to conceptualising identity, we have not set out to define what constitutes, or does not constitute, an ethnic identity. As this article demonstrates, the ways in which difference and similarity are spoken about are contested, multiple and dynamic (Vaughan 2003). For example, for some there is sufficient commonality in language and culture to constitute a common identity (Omotic), while others strongly oppose such a suggestion, deeming the linguistic and cultural differences to be unique, and reject any form of unification—linguistic, cultural or political. We adopt the terminology of ethno-linguistic identities in this work as the events we describe focused on the linguistic component of identity. We recognise that these groupings are not static, and thus are a form of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983). Identity affiliations are multiple, and thus identity takes diverse forms—shifting if one speaks about language, politics or religion, for example. This work largely addresses the intersection of language and politics with regard to identity; thus our use of "ethno-linguistic" as a classifying group term.

4. Language or Languages?

Amharic has been the national or federal language of Ethiopia since the formation of the modern nation, which took place during the reign of Menelik II (1889–1913). However, language policies have not been consistent or consistently implemented. For example, the first modern school taught French, English and Arabic (Ambatchew 2010). During the Italian occupation, according to an educational ordinance for the colonies issued in

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1   While this offers a greater number of results, it also presents a far higher rate of false positives; see Cochrane and Zerihun 2018 for one comparison of these platforms related to Ethiopian research.

1936 (Article 32), six languages (Italian, Arabic, Amharic, Oromo, Tigray and Somali) were used for administration and instruction (Pankhurst 1972). After returning to power, the imperial government changed the medium of instruction in education to Amharic in 1958 (Hirut 2016). When the Derg came to power, it used Amharic as a national, unifying language throughout its rule (1974–1987). However, despite the official nature of the language, Amharic was not widely spoken in southern Ethiopia due to the people in that region having had limited interaction with Amharic speakers as well as low levels of access to education. It was not until the current government (1991–present) that the rights of diverse nations, nationalities and peoples were recognised, including that of selecting their own language for education and administration (Constitution of 1995, Articles 5 and 39; Getachew and Derib 2006; Smith 2008). This became an issue for the broader citizenry as access to primary education rapidly expanded.[2]

Before the new Constitution was finalised in 1995, the language policy regarding local language use for instruction and administration was outlined in 1992. It was at this time that ethno-linguistic groups throughout the country began to discuss what was most appropriate for their respective areas. SNNPRS was established by the merger of five regions (regions 7 to 11), amalgamating approximately 54 ethno-linguistic groups, in May 1992. Immediately after its creation, challenges began to emerge around politics, education and language. Within the federal administrative system of Ethiopia (regional state, zone, district/*woreda*, community/*kebele*), there were two administrative levels that were able to make linguistic decisions—the regional state (e.g. SNNPRS) and the zone (e.g. North Omo Zone). Language decisions that diverged from those of the federal government were made by several regional states (e.g. Afar, Oromia, Somali and Tigray) as well as zonal administrations, which existed within the regional state. For example, SNNPRS adopted Amharic as the language of regional administration, but zones within SNNPRS were able to decide to use different languages for instruction and administration, many of which did. The linguistic decisions made in an effort to unify Omotic peoples within the North Omo Zone would be one of the primary reasons for mass citizen mobilisation.

Government authorities asserted that the four languages that were spoken in the North Omo Zone (Dawuro, Gamo, Gofa and Wolaita) descended from the same linguistic family (Omotic) and shared substantial commonalities (Hayward 2012). In order to standardise communication (for use in administration and education), a unifying language was proposed by zonal authorities, in a top-down fashion (cf. Johnson 2013). However, there were debates and discussions within the zonal political circle regarding which language ought to serve as a medium of communication for administration and instruction. First, the Wolaita language was proposed by the zonal government officials due to its history as a written language and the relatively high degree of commonality

2   Wolaita went from having a handful of missionary schools in the 1960s to reaching 90% primary enrolment by 2013; see Cochrane 2017.

it had with other languages spoken in the zone (Almaz 2016). Another reason was that the Bible, which was distributed throughout the zone, had been translated into Wolaita, which thus was assumed to have a degree of acceptability as a common language (Hirut 2016). There is some debate about the extent to which this idea was implemented. Some suggest that textbooks were prepared, printed and distributed throughout the zone in Wolaita (Hirut 2014; 2016) while others suggest the idea was rejected by other ethno-linguistic groups and was not implemented (Almaz 2016; Data 2006). The divergence may be reflective of respective areas of focus of these researchers, with Hirut conducting research in Gamo and Data in Dawuro. Regardless of the extent of implementation, Wolaita was not accepted as a language of instruction outside of the Wolaita ethno-linguistic area itself, with other ethno-linguistic groups viewing it as a threat to their language and identity (Hirut 2016). For example, communities of Gamo demonstrated that "they are not Wolaitta and their language is not Wolaitta" (Hirut 2016, 302) and opposed the first attempt of implementing a unifying language for the North Omo Zone.

The second attempt of the zonal administration, in 1994, was to maintain Wolaita within the ethno-linguistic area of Wolaita, and amalgamate the three other related languages, namely Dawuro, Gamo and Gofa, into one. There are conflicting reports about the name/acronym of this language (using the first two letters of each language): DaGoGa (Hirut 2007; 2013), DaGaGo (Almaz 2016; Zahorik and Wondwosen 2009) and GaGoDa (Hirut 2016). It is worth noting that the representation and ordering of the acronyms are not semantic; they are linked to perceptions of power, with the opening name/acronym being viewed as dominant or more powerful/important. The top-down "harmonisation" of the three languages was initiated by a panel of experts, and conducted by a group of educators, who sought to first identify shared word use, and then include variations in parentheses within curriculum materials (Hirut 2016). After a year of work, textbooks were completed and distributed for use in the ethno-linguistic areas of Dawuro, Gamo and Gofa, which were used for at least two years (Hirut 2007). In addition to the limited capacity that existed for teaching this amalgamated language, the communities did not positively receive the harmonised language and challenged it as a medium for instruction in schools. As with the use of Wolaita throughout the zone, identity played a key role: "most people considered the practice as a political motive to destroy group identities," Hirut (2016, 304) suggests. An interviewee of this study suggests that language amalgamation was the ethno-linguistic version of ethno-politics.

Despite opposition to the amalgamation, and before an evaluation of DaGoGa (or its variant names) was conducted, the zonal education authorities decided to add Wolaita to this amalgamation and create yet another language, which was finalised in 1998. The amalgamation of Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa and Dawuro was called WoGaGoDa (hereafter Wogagoda). According to the research of Hirut, a leading scholar of language policy during this period and of these languages, this was a political decision. Hirut argues that this took place following the merging of political parties of the four ethnicities to

form a coalition party (of the same name). It was assumed that since a political merger was possible, a linguistic one would be, too (Hirut 2016). Local officials, however, disagree. The leading political member from Dawuro during this time informed us that while the leaders of the political parties did form a political coalition, they did not know about the Wogagoda language plan. Rather, this former politician argued, the decision was made by the education department, not the political leaders. Regardless of whether the political elite were informed of it, the activities were undertaken with the support of the Regional Education Bureau, which was overseeing similar efforts in the region. For example, the "KAT" harmonisation also took place in SNNPRS, amalgamating the Kambata, Alaba and Tambaro languages in the nearby Hadiya Zone, which similarly followed a political merger. Unlike KAT, however, the Wogagoda initiative was strongly opposed by the population when it was implemented. Hirut (2005) and Abbink (2006) suggest that the amalgamation efforts were linked to financial and capacity constraints, such as the challenge of developing orthographies and textbooks. While the reasons for it are debated, the decision to add Wolaita to the amalgamated language grouping was not informed by appropriateness, educational effectiveness, or the rights to language and culture, nor were communities consulted regarding this decision (Hirut 2016).

All four of the major ethno-linguistic communities in the North Omo Zone (Dawuro, Gamo, Gofa and Wolaita) rejected Wogagoda, viewing the process as a means to "blend and crush distinct identities into one" (Hirut 2016, 304). Resistance was particularly fierce in Wolaita (Data 2006). In context, this is understandable because Wolaita previously used its own language, an expression of its status and power. As it relates to power, it is also worth noting that in the origin folklore of the Wolaita people, a common lineage of the regional ethno-linguistic groups is claimed but the Wolaita are described as superior to the other peoples (Data 2000). The Wolaita also claim regional prestige as they fought a long battle against the expansionist Menelik II (Vaughan 2003). Thus, the imposition of Wogagoda in Wolaita was also a confrontation of its self-proclaimed position in the region and power as an ethno-linguistic group in North Omo Zone.

One of the key informants interviewed in Wolaita Sodo told us the story of the outbreak of the resistance, recalling some unfolding key events in the resistance movement as follows:

> The opposition to Wogagoda emerged after children brought their new textbooks home in the 1998/1999 school year, and within which foreign terms, some of which had objectionable meaning, were identified. At the outset, it was within the homes of educated families where these issues were identified. Thereafter, in traditional community coffee ceremonies, where community members gather, the problematic aspects of the textbooks were raised with the elders of the Wolaita community. Opposition to Wogagoda was then taken up by the elders, who raised the issue as one of critical concern.

There are divergent narratives about who led the resistance. In the above quote, it is suggested that the elders played a pivotal role. However, another key informant explained

that it was the youth who led the activism and protest movement. For example, two former students explained:

> Amid growing frustration the youth took the issue into their own hands: when a visiting official from the regional government came to discuss and settle the issue, a group of youth took the traditional meal that was presented to him and left. This was an event of unprecedented disrespect and insult.

> On one occasion, two teachers were arrested, which was followed by a large march, led by students, to the prison to free the teachers. The march then continued on to the government office in charge of education, where the Wogagoda textbooks were kept. Students broke into the storeroom and set the books on fire. This led to mass protesting and rioting in the main town of Sodo, which included at least two deaths. The government and citizens each continued to escalate the conflict throughout 1999, and the conflict spread from the town throughout the region.

In this latter narrative, with the youth and students playing a leading role, the above incident was a critical juncture, after which the position of the government changed rapidly. This differs from the narratives elders told us, as well as narratives presented in some of the literature, on the origins of, and key actors in, the movement against Wogagoda. While the roles of the various actors are debated in the different narratives, what is clear is that after the movement became increasingly oppositional and openly confrontational, the government was no longer interested in negotiation, but rather sought to impose its decision. Many members of the community, including the elders involved in speaking out against Wogagoda, were arrested. In response to the mass arrests, citizen mobilisation intensified.

Opposition to Wogagoda included the refusal of teachers to use the textbooks (and their transfer to remote areas as punishment, with at least 136 teachers being transferred), public demonstrations, protests, destruction of infrastructure, violent confrontations (including seven deaths), mass arrests, and the burning of textbooks worth an estimated forty million ETB (approximately US$5 million) (Data 2000; 2006; Getachew and Derib 2006; Jha 2013). Residents explain that the dynamics was more complex than one of the people against the government. Local police (who are hired from the local population, as opposed to federal military who are brought from different areas of the nation) and other legal actors (e.g. civil servants and judges) supported the movement in secret. For example, people would be arrested during the day, following the orders of the federal government, but would be released in the evening to facilitate meetings between the movement leaders and the elders.

In response to rising opposition, a meeting was called by the government—with the support and presence of the well-armed special forces—at which the people of Wolaita defiantly said if Wogagoda is continued, they would continue to fight it. In Wolaita, Wogagoda was never really taught as a language, as teachers in Wolaita refused to teach it. It took a year (1998–1999) of mobilisation, activism and protest for the policy to be

retracted officially. In a rare acknowledgment of error, the prime minister outlined in a televised address that government officials of the North Omo Zone had made mistakes (Data 2006). Thereafter, language decisions in North Omo Zone were allowed to take a more bottom-up approach, being decided by each of the respective ethno-linguistic groups. Hirut (2016, 301) has called the 1992–2000 period one of "trial and error" before arriving at the decision to recognise distinct languages and enable local language instruction. However, not all of the four communities gained the ability to implement their respective languages equally.

5. Language as an End or a Means?

Following the government decision to retract Wogagoda, and arguably as a result of the strong opposition that arose from it, SNNPRS restructured the North Omo Zone in 2000, dividing it into three separate zones. Wolaita and Dawuro were granted status as zones, while Gamo and Gofa were combined into a third zone. At the same time, two new "special" districts, Basketo and Konta, were created (Zahorik and Wondwosen 2009). These are critical differences because the lowest governance level at which administrative language decision making takes place is typically the zonal level, or in unique cases, "special" districts/*woredas* (Getachew and Derib 2006). In Gamo–Gofa Zone, Gamo was adopted as the language of instruction for the early years (up to Grade 4) and Amharic was used as the administrative language. Dawuro Zone opted to use Dawuro for primary education, and is attempting to use it as the administrative language (Dubale 2012). Wolaita Zone returned to using the Wolaita language for primary instruction.

Based on the chronology of events, the narrative about linguistic and administrative change typically builds from one in which the success of citizen mobilisation to change language policy was drawn upon to advocate for greater self-administration. However, this narrative reflects only one perspective on events. Elders of Wolaita suggest that the language issue was only a means, used to support a longer-running battle for greater rights of self-administration. In the course of our interviews, we were able to collect evidence of such activism. A group of elders, representing Wolaita, acted as key advocates for administrative change—submitting at least six letters to the prime minister, as well as to the parliament, the minster of education, regional state representatives, and numerous other authorities, including the U.S. Congress.[3] Key to the argument the elders made was that Wolaita met the requirements of a "major minority" and therefore was constitutionally entitled to self-administration (Data 2012). This process sought change via legal, constitutional and political means, and began following the establishment of the new Constitution in 1995, not after the Wogagoda issue of 1998. According to this

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3   We have copies of these letters.

narrative, the elders' support of Wogagoda activism was with the view that this would support the case for broader governance and administrative change.

At face value, the issue appears to be of minor consequence. However, for people in the areas of the former North Omo Zone, this is an important difference. For students, teachers and parents, Wogagoda was an issue of the government challenging their identity, which they successfully resisted and of which they forced a retraction. From their perspective, the community was thereafter politicised, creating ethnic rifts and tensions that did not exist previously. One of the key informants we spoke to in Sodo recounted:

> Wolaita, Dawuro, Gamo and Gofa all originate from the same family groups. We are brothers from the same father. But due to the ethnic rifts after Wogagoda, we [Wolaita] cannot travel freely through the land of Dawuro, we cannot freely work in Gamo and we cannot freely live in Gofa. The level of animosity among brothers these days is unspeakable. Wogagoda turned out to be a curse for our people.

Based on this framing of the events, the ethnic conflict that followed the creation of new zones is blamed upon the political elite and their politicisation of issues to advance their own agenda. To support this claim, some interviewees suggest that elites (political and economic) within Wolaita resented having to go to Arba Minch (the main city of the Gamo) to complete administrative tasks and wanted to shift the administrative centre to Sodo (the main city of the Wolaita). One of the elders that we interviewed in Sodo stated:

> Besides the language agenda, one of our major concerns in the Wogagoda movement was the governance status of Wolaita. We were very much concerned about the status of Wolaita under the North Omo Zone. Even during the imperial time we had an Aweraja status [equivalent to the current zone]. The new administration structure degrades the administrative and political status of our people. We were expecting regional status with full autonomy under the new federal structure because historically and geographically Wolaita has a central place in Ethiopian politics. Wolaita is the land of great kings like Motolomi [the powerful Wolaita king who controlled most of the central part of Ethiopia] and Tona [the last king of Wolaita]. However, they [the new government] did not give us adequate attention. Above all, we felt that the new zonal arrangement would severely affect the economic activities of Sodo [the capital of Wolaita]. That was why most known merchants, including us, played an active role in the Wogagoda movement.

In addition to economic gains, it seems plausible that the elders of Wolaita, holding positions of traditional and lineage-based power, wanted to reassert their authority. The Constitution provided a legal means for the elders to gain political power by demanding zonal administration status. It seems that two distinct movements were driving change; the linguistic one with popular support and the administrative one driven by the elite. This is further supported by suggestions that language was not as strongly supported as a critical issue in much of the south by the elite as they often gained power via their

access to education and Amharic, in contrast to the general population who viewed the adoption of local languages as empowering (Vaughan 2003).

From the perspective of the elders in Wolaita, their struggle was a long battle for the rights of the people of the North Omo Zone. Not only they gained new administrative powers, but so too did the Dawuro and the Gamo and Gofa (albeit not equally). The letters that were sent by the elders to the prime minister of Ethiopia and to the U.S. Congress focus on the responsibilities of the federal government, such as supporting their right to language, their right to participate in decisions that affect their community, their right to express their opinions (without arrest), and their right to self-administration (citing the Constitution). The elders point out that Wolaita was not only planned to be a zonal administration, but a regional state ("Region 9"), and thus the federal government has a responsibility for the "development and promotion" of the region. The violence that emerged, the elders argue, was a result of the state attempting "to extinct the identity of the Wollayita tribe" [sic] and "erase the name of 'Wollayita' from the Ethiopian history" [sic]. In agreement with the students, parents and teachers, the issue is highlighted as a political one—but one that faults the federal government for not granting sufficient administrative power to the Wolaita people.

These narratives are valid yet insufficient as complete explanations for why and how the changes occurred. The historical narratives of Wolaita having regional power, and asserting superiority over the other ethno-linguistic groups, contributed to an environment in which activism occurred. However, history does not predetermine future action. Student, parent and teacher activism effectively ended the Wogagoda language issue, many of these stakeholders were not concerned about zonal administrative status. Elders were not leaders of the Wogagoda activism at the outset; however, many were later imprisoned for their activism against the language, suggesting their involvement was far more than self-serving. In the linguistic and administrative struggles, we believe that it was the complex interactions between issues, actors, institutions and evolving preferences that shaped the emergence of transformational changes. Had the community members decided that ending the teaching of Wogagoda in Wolaita was sufficient, the books may not have been burned and teachers not imprisoned. Had the government only insisted on DaGoGa (or its variant names), North Omo Zone might still exist. The elders did not set out to challenge Wogagoda, and the students did not set out to establish a new zonal authority. It was, therefore, the unpredictable interaction of emergent events that unfolded in the way that they did. If Wogagoda teaches us something about social movements, it is that enabling factors may exist for action, but the exact nature of events and potential outcomes are unpredictable.

6. Politics and Identity

Identity is not solely linguistic, nor does language necessitate identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Kroger 2007). For many communities, however, language is a defining feature of their identity and a means through which the socio-cultural and religious aspects of identity are expressed and maintained (Gumperz 1982; Joseph 2004). Identity is relational; language provides a distinctive feature that separates "us" from "them" and thus serves many communities as a central aspect of their identity (Archer 1993; Edwards 2009), a marker of "imagined communities." Language is also an expression of power (Gal 1989); in the activities in the North Omo Zone language was strongly linked to political power. As outlined by Hirut (2014), despite a high degree of commonality amongst the languages, the resistance to a common language is primarily related to identity. The four ethno-linguistic identities viewed their cultures as distinct, and a distinct language maintained the unique relationship between linguistic and cultural identity.

What does the Wogagoda case tell us about top-down and bottom-up language policy and processes? Misganaw (2014) suggests it was the top-down, external imposition of Wogagoda that resulted in its rejection. If this is the case, the call by the Wolaita elders for Omotic unification in 2018 may bode more positively as a bottom-up approach. However, strife in 2018 highlights that the issue is not merely one of external imposition. Hostility between the regional ethno-linguistic groups is long-standing and unlikely to be resolved even in response to an external threat (e.g. calls by the Sidama for their own regional state). Lubo (2012) argues that resistance to Wogagoda was an opportune moment to express political grievances, thus suggesting the language policy process was a lesser factor. However, multiple governments have imposed administrative boundaries and languages that did not reflect the ethno-linguistic groups in this region. Thus, Wogagoda was about more than politics. Mass mobilisation occurred because people in these regions felt strongly attached to their ethno-linguistic identities and believed that maintaining them was worth the struggle. Since the creation of new zones nearly two decades ago, these ethno-linguistic identities have deepened and strengthened.

7. Beyond Wogagoda

The ability of the people of Dawuro, Gamo, Gofa and Wolaita to engage with the government of Ethiopia to assert their preferences and advocate for their linguistic and administrative rights presents an example of how individuals have sought to change policy. In many respects, it is, as Hirut (2016, 305) describes, a success story. Yet this does not mean the language policy of the post-1991 period has been, or will be, successful. For example, many children are only learning their local language effectively, in addition to a minimal level of Amharic or English, which restricts their work opportunities to their own locality. Mesfin (2014, 19) calls this the "generation of

regional monolinguals." Thus, the political and identity aspects of the linguistic choices of the 1990s may constrain opportunities, and therefore have significant, unintended costs. That language continues to be a part of the on-going conflict in Ethiopia is demonstrative of this point. Furthermore, individuals who only learn local languages (and potentially English, although this remains limited) face significant challenges when they enter the tertiary education system, which in most instances continues to operate in Amharic.[4] Potentially even more problematic is the challenge of national cohesion. Individuals who are not able to engage with people from other ethno-linguistic groups have a limited ability to participate as members of the diverse economic, political and social spheres of the country (Mesfin 2014; Smith 2008).

Although ethnic federalism was designed to resolve conflict (Vaughan 2003), Abbink (2002) argues that ethnic federalism has the potential to increase ethnic conflict, foster division in society, and deepen ethnic identity over a common or national one. Similarly, Ismagilova (2004) argues that the 1995 Constitution did not reduce ethnic tension but rather legitimised ethnic conflict and heightened ethnic division. In the early 1990s, as well as today, the concept of having common regional languages was viewed positively. It has the potential to create more opportunities for work and migration, to improve trade and communication, and to make administration more cohesive (see, e.g., Data 2000). Yet it was the process of implementation, as well as the context of that specific moment in time, that resulted in strong resistance and rejection.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to deliberate on some of the complexity of the largely untold story of Wogagoda. The primary enabling factor for mass mobilisation against the top-down language policy was that the concerns were broadly experienced (i.e. did not affect only a segment of society) and challenged a core aspect of ethno-linguistic identity. Assumptions made by the local government, and a lack of consultation, contributed to narratives that Wogagoda had nefarious intentions. Wogagoda shows that issues are not simple; language and identity intersected with political, business and elite interests, each with their own motivations and agendas. The outcomes of changing political structures resulted in conflict, and according to some, have entrenched ethno-linguistic hostility. While we do believe that granting zonal status to Dawuro, Gamo–Gofa, and Wolaita was constitutionally warranted, our findings suggest that this was not solely an issue of the people. This also appears to be the case in the calls for unification in 2018. The calls for new regional states, and effectively a return to Wogagoda (a unification of the Omotic languages and peoples), come at a time when ethno-linguistic identities are at one of their highest points of importance and they thus have a low probability of popular support.

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4   Even if English is the official language of instruction, in many instances the actual medium is Amharic.

Alongside the mass mobilisation against the Wogagoda language policy, elders and the elite used the opportunity to make demands for greater self-governance. Multiple narratives exist about when, why and how demands for self-governance emerged, and who drove that agenda. The divergent narratives respectively take credit for, or place blame, on different parties. This article does not argue that one narrative is more accurate than another, but rather that these narratives are perceived as accurate by different segments of society, and as a result remain important up to the present.

The mass mobilisation and resistance to Wogagoda was one of the few successful popular movements in Ethiopia during the first decade of rule of the EPRDF. In addition, it was one of the greatest challenges faced by the newly formed government as it attempted to navigate the rights and responsibilities outlined in the 1995 Constitution. Continued activism resulted in the government retracting the top-down, imposed language, and allowing for ethno-linguistic groups to determine their own administrative and educational languages in bottom-up fashion. The language-policy creation process from the Wogagoda case study provides lessons on why top-down approaches may not be successful, particularly when identity is strongly intertwined with language and when the population may feel the imposition is a challenge to that.

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