

The language of culture and the culture of language

Oromo identity in
Melbourne, Australia



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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for Doctor of Philosophy

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and Community Studies
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1999

*Yaadannoo Oromoota dhabamaniifii kan
maqaan isaani ifaa hin bahiniif warra waregnii
issani Oromoota qoranna kanaa keysatii
mullatan hadochu.*

Dedicated to the memory of the missing and
unknown Oromo whose lives have touched the
Oromo who feature in this thesis.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my original work, except where otherwise cited, and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other academic award.

Greg Gow
January 1999

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although this thesis is my work, the development of it was in many ways a collaborative effort. There are many people whom I want to thank, who assisted and supported me throughout the process of researching and writing.

Firstly, I wish to thank my supervisor, Ron Adams, for the ongoing enthusiasm he has shown towards the research topic and the writing challenge, for his unswerving support, professional guidance, encouragement and friendship. I am also grateful to fellow PhD student Erik Lloga for his advice and valuable suggestions.

A special thanks is due to Hili Hassan who read over much of the material and offered valuable input, Abdisebur Omar and Ferdusa Taha for first introducing me to the Oromo community, my co-traveller Abba Joobir for helping in so many different ways, Endashaw Teseme for his guidance at the outset, Keltume Hassan for special assistance relating to women's issues, and Sura Eteffa (aka Dawit) and my cousin Kevin McNulty for their artwork and help with the graphic layout.

From its beginnings in February 1996, the research has been supported by probably all the Oromo people whom I know in Melbourne. I am indebted to a large number of them who made important contributions. To protect their privacy, many appear pseudonymously in the following chapters, but those I wish to thank by name are: Abbaa Ahmed, Abdala Adem, Abdala S. Omar, Afandi Siyo, Amina Hassan, Demma Sheko Kedir, Gebi Genemo, Gibril Obsie, Halakhe Ganyu, Irasie Obsie, Ismail Abdullahi Mohammed, Johara Omar, Kadija Youssuf, Kedir Subi, Likkee Waldee, Makida Abubeker, Mariyam Sheko Kedir, Mohammed Aba-Bulgu, Nouria Rashid, Seada Ahmed Adem, Sayed Osman Aliye, Shantam Shubissa, Tajudin Amme Mume and Ture Lenco. For offering their assistance and hospitality when I travelled overseas I would like to thank Ali Birraa, Bonnie Holcomb, Demmisu Tullu, Gelgelu Felema, Gemetchu Megerssa, Mohammed Hassen, Paul Baxter, Sue Pollock, Trevor Trueman and Zeinab Ahmed Adem.

Finally, I offer a personal thanks to my wife Rose and my son Joseph, for their willingness to journey with me and Melbourne's Oromo over the past three years.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND THE USE OF *AFAAN OROMO*

This thesis contends that language constructs rather than simply reflects reality. Over the past three years as I have attempted to write about the Oromo, I have also attempted to learn the language *afaan Oromoo*. Throughout, translation has been a necessary activity of cultural exchange—what Simon (1996, p. 146) refers to as a movement of ideas and aesthetic forms. The following writings embody the movement from one language to another: from *afaan Oromoo* to English. As a translator of language and culture I have not sought to find or determine a hidden ‘cultural meaning’; instead I have located meaning in ‘lived’ processes of articulation. As I discovered, the means of addressing problems of interpretation was not found in Oromo dictionaries, but in attempting to understand the way language is tied to local realities and to changing identities. As Simon discovered, the process of translation often has less to do with *finding* the cultural inscription of a term than in *reconstructing* its value. My attempts at translation (or linguistic and cultural mediation) were always incomplete and experienced as a form of negotiation between myself and those I was studying—not an attempt to reshape Oromo culture into a ‘Western’ frame.

It was not until after 1991 that it was lawful in Ethiopia to teach or publish in the Oromo language using the Latin alphabet—which largely explains why the written standardisation of *afaan Oromoo*, referred to as *qubee*, remains underdeveloped. In addition, the diversity of dialects among the Oromo population and lack of resources make standardisation a very difficult and potentially divisive task. Given that there are few people among Melbourne’s Oromo who competently write *qubee*, and given an apparent lack of consensus on ‘correct’ spelling, the orthography of some words in this thesis may not accord with their spelling elsewhere.

GLOSSARY

Words and acronyms with single references and whose meanings are described clearly in the text are not listed here, while those which frequently occur are listed.

<i>abbaa</i>	father, title of respect
<i>a'anan</i>	cow's milk, an important ritual item
AOCA	Australian Oromo Community Association
<i>ayyaana</i>	the means by which God creates and sustains everything
<i>bilisummaa</i>	liberation, freedom, self-determination
<i>biyya</i>	land, country, countryside
<i>bokkuu</i>	club or sceptre considered central to the gadaa system
<i>buna</i>	coffee, an important ritual item
<i>buna qala</i> (or <i>killa qala</i>)	sacred coffee and butter ritual
<i>dareemoo</i>	porridge that features in women's birth rituals
Derg	Provisional Military Council, common name for military regime which controlled the Ethiopian state from 1974 till 1991
<i>elilebaa</i>	high pitched trill that women issue forth as an applause
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<i>faranjii</i>	a white European person
<i>gadaa</i>	self-governing ceremonial age-set system
<i>gaddaa</i> (or <i>taazi'a</i>)	condolence ceremony
<i>geerasa</i>	call-and-response song about one's heroic exploits
<i>gobana</i>	colloquial term for an Oromo who betrays his/her people to the Abyssinians, derives from Gobana Dacchie who assisted Menelik
<i>gudisaa</i>	naming ritual for a child aged under eight years
<i>guduunfa</i>	tying together, engagement negotiations
<i>hayyu</i>	a senior councillor or elder
IFLO	The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiya

<i>kismedal</i>	ritual slicing of bread prepared by the mother of the house to keep evil away, the first slice being eaten by the youngest girl present
<i>mana</i>	house, home
<i>manguddo</i>	an elder and mediator
<i>moggaasa</i>	adoption of an individual or a group, name giving
<i>nagaa</i>	peace with God, people and the land, key Oromo motif
<i>nikah</i>	Islamic engagement/marriage negotiations
OCAV	Oromo Community Association in Victoria
<i>odaa</i>	large sycamore tree, primary national symbol, meeting place for the gadaa council
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front (or <i>ABO, Adda Bilisummaa Oromooti</i>)
<i>ollaa</i>	neighbourhood, neighbours
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
OPLF	Oromo People's Liberation Front
<i>Oromumma</i>	Oromoness, being Oromo
<i>qaallu</i>	high priest, ritual expert
<i>saddeeta</i>	representative and spokesperson during engagement negotiations
<i>siiqqee</i>	stick symbolising women's socially sanctioned set of rights
<i>soda</i>	affine
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
<i>ulmaa baha</i>	women's post-birth ritual
<i>waaqa</i>	Oromo divinity, God

ABSTRACT: BY WAY OF NOTES TO THE READER

Until recently, the Oromo were largely unknown among scholars of Africa. Since the Abyssinian conquest of the vast Oromo land—known today as Oromiya—in the late-nineteenth century, Oromo within the Ethiopian empire state (where they number more than half the population) have remained politically, linguistically, economically and historically marginalised. Since the late 1970s, almost a century after their conquest, when the Derg military junta's campaign of terror was at its peak, and continuing with the present regime, large numbers of Oromo have fled Ethiopia to neighbouring countries. By 1997 a small number (approximately 500) had resettled in Melbourne, Australia. Over these past two decades Oromo nationalism has grown into a mass movement in east Africa and among the worldwide exilic communities. Central to the growth of nationalism has been the assertion of a pan-Oromo national identity (*Oromumma*, 'Oromoness'). Like all identity politics, Oromo nationalism remains academically deadlocked between essentialism and social constructionism: Oromo anti-colonial nationalists posit an atavistic account of Oromo identity, while 'Western' scholars generally conceive of it in politically disabling constructionist terms.

Engaging with current debates in postcolonial, cultural and women's studies, this study suggests an alternative approach towards the subjectivity of the Oromo nation, which—under the umbrella of 'articulation'—draws heavily from the eclectic but overlapping works of Deleuze and Guattari and Stuart Hall. Such an approach affirms Oromo identity—Oromo cultural formation—without retreating to anti-colonial Manichean binary oppositions. Through an ethnography of musical, ritual and nationalist performances, and analysis of community and gender politics among Melbourne's exilic community, Oromo identity is represented as a unified but diverse materially real cultural formation practised in everyday life.

The study is divided into four distinct parts. Each part stands by itself in some way, but (borrowing from Greg Dening) like movements in a musical sonata, they also stand together. Encouraged by my supervisor, I have chosen to use this unconventional format, which is largely adapted from Dening's (1996) book *Performances*, for an academic dissertation, because it accords with the understanding of identity formation that features throughout this study. Writing

ethnography in this way implies a critique of linear structured ethnographic methods of presentation, which flatten cultures and homogenise individuals (cf. Josephides 1998, p. 145). By emphasising storytelling and intrigue over explanation, my hope is that the following ethnography of Melbourne's Oromo will communicate some of the community's vibrancy and complexity and thus encourage the reader to journey with the Oromo who feature in the study.

The two primary metaphors of 'home' and 'language' articulate the disparate parts into a unity. Each part specifically approaches both 'home' and 'language' by investigating a range of 'performances' which, together, might be said to weave a tapestry of Oromo identity (what I call Oromo cultural formation). Within the chapters of each part, *afaan Oromoo*—whether written, spoken or sung—features.

Part I, Representing Home: A Language of Subjectivity, deals with themes of representation and subjectivity: academic, anthropological and nationalist.

'Oromo Identity: Theorising subjectivity and the politics of representation' begins with the dilemmas of setting the parameters of Oromo identity amongst a global community via the internet. The episode demonstrates the many tensions facing the worldwide Oromo 'nation' as Oromo seek to map out globally who they are. By sketching the landscape of contemporary academic theorising of Oromo subjectivity and the pan-Oromo national movement, the chapter situates the significance of the current study and presents the theoretical framework (called 'articulation') which informs it.

The methodological dimensions of the study are described in 'What has home got to do with it? Being ethnographer and becoming-person'. With particular focus upon my role as ethnographer and the problematics of representation, the dimension of spoken language is shown to be vital to the ethnographic process: a means of stepping both inside and outside the circle of hostilities.

The theme of hostilities features throughout the thesis. 'Oromo nationalist sensibilities: Silent enouncements and becoming-other' examines anti-colonial nationalist sensibilities manifest in a range of linguistic practices among Melbourne's Oromo. Attention is paid to the historical experience of linguistic marginalisation. Two encounters demonstrate the problematical Manichean use of

spoken *afaan Oromoo* as a means of resisting assimilation and claiming an essentialised Oromo identity. Other episodes suggest that language use and attitudes towards Amharic vary within the community.

Part II, *Performing Home: A Language of Music*, is a series of cultural studies which discuss the role of music and public performance in the formation of Oromo identity in Melbourne.

‘Mana itti gaddinu hinqabnu. The mourning of a “nation” without a “state” describes the ongoing legacy of colonialism among the Oromo. Episodes are introduced which point to the transformative role of performance. The chapter concludes with a description of a group of Oromo women singing in a park in inner-city Melbourne, illustrating the transformative role of music and dance combined with a use of public space unthinkable back ‘home’.

The transformative role of music is taken up in *‘Baddaan biyya tiyya*: Musical aesthetics and the production of place’. The Melbourne community is fortunate to have a number of musicians, the most prominent of whom are Shantam Shubissa, Ture Lenco and Afandi Siyo. The role of music in their lives and in the lives of the broader community is discussed in the context of providing points of connection with a rural world and the struggle of the past.

‘Ali Birraa keenya. The Legend continues’ ponders how, despite the importance of the Melbourne-based musicians, it is Toronto-based Ali Birraa who is the leading Oromo singer and artist. Focusing on his 1997 visit to Melbourne, it suggests how the ascribing of legendary status to Ali Birraa can be interpreted as an attempt by Melbourne’s Oromo to create for themselves an embodiment of Oromo identity in the present. Both his concerts, it is argued, functioned as national rituals whereby Ali Birraa’s authorial presence served to fill a vacuum of identity.

Part III, *Managing Home: A Language of Dissonance*, marks an important detour from the path traversed in preceding chapters. Returning to the earlier theme of hostilities, it examines the interaction of Oromo nationalism with strategies of community and gender management.

‘Manguddo sabloα. Stories of conflict, sabotage and exclusion’ investigates, through a series of stories, the politics of management and tactics of silencing that have dominated the mosaic of Oromo cultural formation in Melbourne.

‘Yaadannoo Aannolee. Commemorating calamity and the erotics of nationalism’ continues the theme of management by using the popular 1991 video recording of the Oromo gathering at *Aannolee* in Arsi (which featured the work of Melbourne artist Dawit Eteffa) to explore the ambiguous representation of Oromo women within nationalist discourse.

Part IV, *Invoking Home: A Language of Sacrality*, continues the theme of performance, with emphasis upon ‘rites of passage’ as transformative space for the renegotiation of Oromo identity and collective ties.

‘Ulmaa Baha. Free women’s day’ documents the performance in Melbourne of *ulmaa baha*, a post-birth ‘rite of passage’ that offers an ‘inside’ space for women—via spoken and sung ritual and ceremony—to affirm and collectively celebrate motherhood, sexuality and fertility. The episode provides a context for the discussion of Oromo women’s strategies of resistance and the demarcation between women’s ‘inside’ and men’s ‘outside’ space.

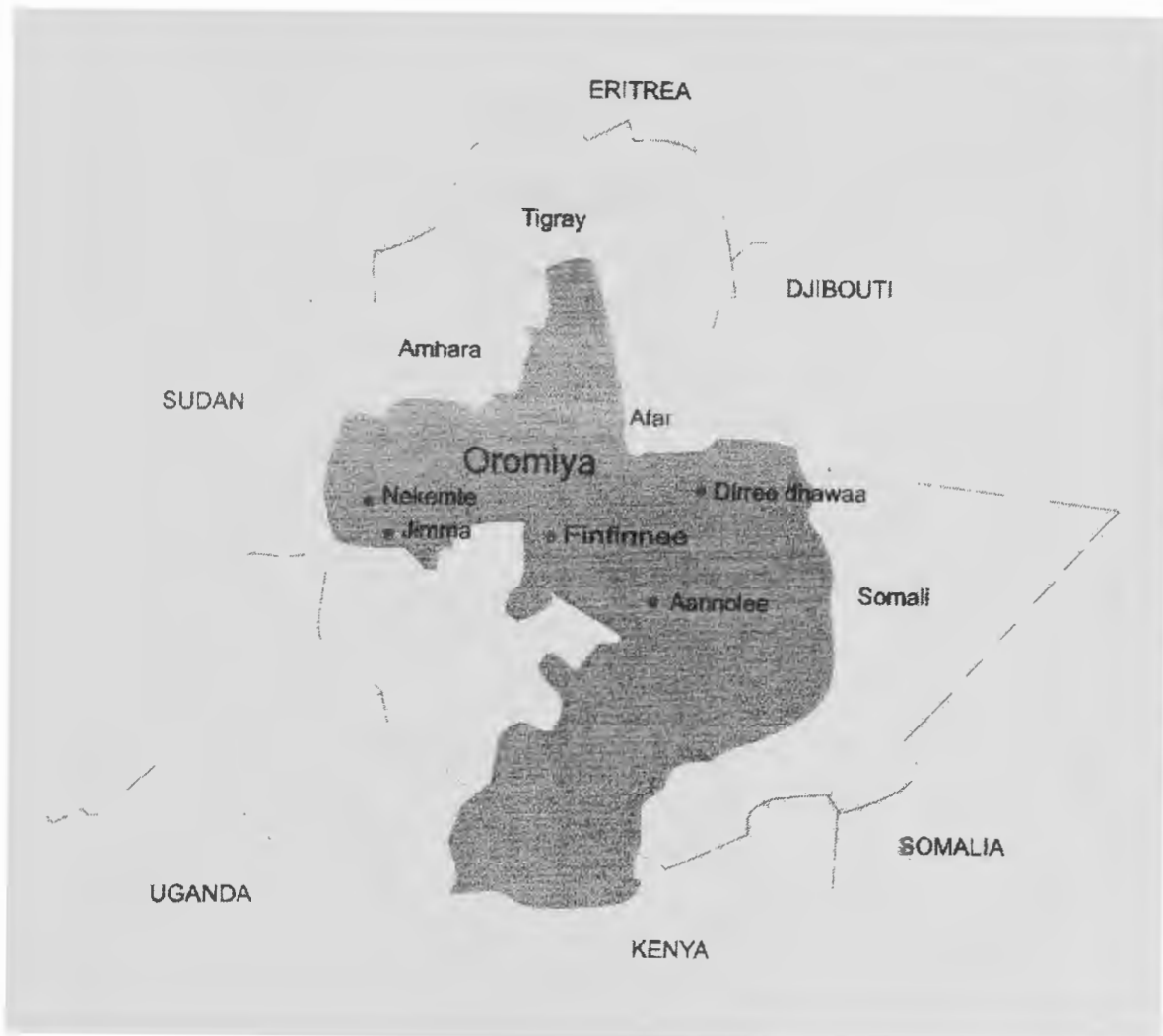
‘Moggaasa. Renegotiating and incorporating affines’ provides ethnographic details of other ‘ritual’ occasions including new immigration arrivals, *guduunfa* and *gudisaa*. These ritual episodes are linked with discussion of the role of ‘households’ within Melbourne’s Oromo community and the importance of renegotiating affinal relations.

Like a musical piece, the thesis has a Prelude—‘A sort of homecoming’—and Postlude—‘Another sort of homecoming’—which respectively form the first and last movements of the sonata. Both tie together the discrete parts via stories which touch explicitly upon the themes ‘language’ and ‘home’. The thesis also has an Interlude, ‘Imag(in)ing home’: a series of visual images which provide a brief pause from the written text. The images should be treated as a visual text complementing the themes running throughout the written text. Again, this format is adapted from Denning’s *Performances*.

Throughout the study, ‘home’ and ‘language’ feature as the two primary metaphors mapping cultural formation. Extending the musical simile, they act as counterpoints, bringing together the disparate elements of Oromo performance. Specifically, the many varied performances of the Oromo language, *afaan Oromoo*—spoken, written and sung—are considered vital to the narration of the nation, and, assembled together, constitute Oromo cultural formation.

MAPPING OF OROMIYA

A map with its exclusive boundaries conveys a particular image of the world. The various mappings of the territory called Oromiya delineate boundaries which are contested and incapable of representing the heterogeneity of the people living within them. In many respects, it is colour and image, rather than territorial representation which more accurately 'maps' what Oromiya signifies to Melbourne's Oromo (cf. 'Imag(in)ing home', Plates 1-7, between pp. 162 & 163). The shaded representation of Oromiya provided here is to enable the reader to locate the places frequently referred to in this thesis.



Prelude

A SORT OF HOMECOMING

Each of us carries around those growing up places, the institutions, a sort of backdrop, a stage set. So often we act out the present against the backdrop of the past, within a frame of perception that is so familiar, so safe that it is terrifying to risk changing it even when we know our perceptions are distorted, limited, constricted by that old view.

Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984, p. 17)

Duretii left Oromiya when she was thirteen years old. Now twenty-five and presently dwelling in North America, her past lies back in homeland Arsi. She is proud to be Oromo and takes an active and public role among her community. In 1995, eager to visit her place of origin and following much deliberation, she embarked upon a return journey back 'home'. While aware of the risks, Duretii anticipated a time of reunion and cultural renewal, of 'being home'—a rediscovery of her Oromo identity.¹

She flew to Addis Ababa (Finfinnee),² the capital of Ethiopia, via Asmara, Eritrea. As the aeroplane approached Asmara the many Eritreans on board stood, applauded and began singing together; these Eritreans were arriving 'home' to enjoy a liberated homeland.³ While they celebrated, Duretii was overcome by sadness and secretly wept with her head between her knees. Unlike them, she was not going 'home'; rather, she was going to a place where her people continued to suffer, where she would have to hide her identity to avoid trouble. Unlike her ecstatic Eritrean co-travellers, Duretii was now fearfully going to a place where she could not speak her language without being regarded with suspicion. On board the aeroplane she was compelled to hide her feelings. Nothing had changed: the past and the present merged, as she once again felt 'homeless', in her own land.

¹ The story is taken from an interview with Duretii, August 1997.

² Throughout this study the pre-colonial Oromo names of places in Oromiya will be used (e.g. Finfinnee as opposed to Addis Ababa). Colonial names will only be used (as above) when referring specifically to Ethiopia (e.g. Addis Ababa). This accords with the anti-colonial naming practices among Melbourne's Oromo.

³ Sorenson (1992) describes how for Eritreans the myth of return among the Eritrean exiles was conceptualised in terms of independence. He notes how around the world Eritreans celebrated their liberation, and that shortly after the war ended 'flights to Asmara began and were fully booked for months in advance' (p. 215).

The connection of past and present is inextricable. This study explores the ways in which cultural identities of the past are articulated not only *within* but also *with* the present. The Oromo community in Melbourne,⁴ the subjects of the study, are a people who, like Duretii, have experienced displacement from 'home' and are now busy forming their cultural identities in the present 'exile'. The fragmentation and disruption of 'home' they face is neither new nor, in terms of scale, unprecedented: the condition of displacement has remained an ongoing experience for the colonised Oromo since the days in the late-nineteenth century when the Emperor Menelik II and his forces ruthlessly stamped their rule over them. They found themselves displaced—linguistically, culturally, economically and politically—within or on their own land.

The word 'home' is highly evocative, carrying with it a strong sense of familiarity, safety, rest and acceptance, the primary site of the experience of belonging, if not the primary experience itself (Smith, R. L. 1997, p. 177). For Duretii, 'home' may be said to exist in a virtual space between loss and recuperation, and constructed on the tension between two specific modalities: being home and not being home (Martin & Mohanty 1986, p. 195). As Massey (1992, p. ix) suggests, it is the imaginary point where here and there—where she now is and where she came from—are momentarily grounded. According to this quintessentially postmodernist cartography, 'home', in every sense of the phrase, is neither here nor there: it is both here and there—an amalgam, a performance.

My exploration of the problematic of 'home' for Melbourne's Oromo is ethnographic, which has entailed participating in the very processes of performing 'home' that form the complex matrix of negotiation between the past and the present with which the study is concerned. My thesis is that the practice of language—*afaan Oromoo*—is the primary means through which the present structures a particular past. Moreover, language is vital to the transformation of Oromo identity in Melbourne—the rebuilding of 'home'.

Issues of marginality and power feature throughout this study. Perhaps predictably, then, the spatial metaphor of centre and margin also features—but not

⁴ Throughout this thesis, in relation to Melbourne's Oromo population, the term 'community' is intentionally used to suggest communal ties among the broader population constituted by a densely complex network of social relationships that overlap and reinforce each other. Such a concept implies, though not rigidly, face-to-face contact, commonality of purpose (Oromo anti-colonial struggle), familiarity and dependability (Calhoun 1980, p. 111).

as a straightforward oppositional relation of power between two distinct entities capable of being subverted by inversion. Rather, in a Foucauldian/Deleuze-Guattarian poststructuralist⁵ sense, the marginal and the central are considered part of the very same body—centre AND margin, a ‘double-capture’. The centre is the multi-layered past experienced as marginalisation within what is now problematically referred to as Ethiopia. This centre is the point from which the present cultural formation refers. Ironically, the formation from the margins is transforming the cultural map, whereby the marginal is now ‘becoming-central’. As Duretii’s journey exemplifies, that which remains marginal and hidden at ‘home’ in Ethiopia is able to emerge as central in ‘exile’.

Ostensibly a means of communication, for Melbourne’s Oromo language is, above all, a means of cultural articulation in which their very identity as Oromo is practised and thereby constituted as real. The following chapters explore the dynamic role of language in the processes of cultural formation. Specifically, they deal with the various forms of language—written, spoken and sung—and their ideological, linguistic, musical, literary and religious expressions.

Contrary to popular perception, it is claimed that cultural identity is not complementary with ‘essence’ (in the Platonic sense), but rather, that ‘essence’ (being Oromo) is always of an encounter or event. The *metaphor* of language features throughout this thesis, as the various effective structures of cultural identity are thought of as operating *like* a language. In an attempt to move beyond a semiotic Lacanian view, identity is articulated in and through language but is not equivalent to it—hence the ambiguous title *The Language of Culture and the Culture of Language*. The essentialism of various poststructuralist writings that privileges the discursive at the expense of lived reality is thus rejected.

Agreeing with Baxter (1990) and Aguilar (1996), my contention is that Oromo identity is constituted as ‘real’ in the performance of both domestic and national rituals, in which language is active, transformational and functioning in many different ways. Drawing from the recently emerged interdisciplinary field of

⁵ Throughout this thesis the term ‘poststructuralism’ refers to the gamut of themes evident among the works of French intellectuals such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Common to their work is the privilege given to language over consciousness as the point of intelligibility, a critique of the authorial subject, a refusal of totalising categories, and the sense that modernity is coming to an end.

performance studies, the expression ‘performance’ features throughout the thesis. The term is inclusively used to convey that performativity is everywhere in life: from ordinary gestures, sports, politics, observances, celebrations, to ‘rites of passage’, and that for marginalised people such as Melbourne’s Oromo, performances are clandestinely tactical and highly skilled (Schechner 1988, p. 283). Adopting Schechner’s (1985, pp. 35-116) definition, performances are ‘restored behaviour’: re-presentations that can be rehearsed, repeated and, above all, recreated.

The concept of restored behaviour implies that performances are not simply reflections or expressions of culture but are themselves tactical agencies of change. In this way, performance takes on a reflexive character whereby the subject and direct object refer to the same thing. Performance represents ‘the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living”’ (Turner 1987, p. 24). Like Erving Goffman’s (1959) ‘presentation of self in everyday life’, here it is argued that everyday life⁶ is framed and performed—but frequently the performer is likely to be unaware of her own performance.

Unlike Baxter and Aguilar, the ‘web’ of performances I examine occur on another continent in a setting far removed from the homeland where the renegotiation of ties and affinities is central to the collective reality of being Oromo. In Oromiya, being Oromo was marked by extensive patterns of affinity which, like a ‘house’, provided a space in which to safely negotiate identities. In the context of exile—where previous affinities are severely fragmented—the house has been demolished. Throughout this thesis the metaphor of a home, which in *afaan Oromoo* equates with the term *mana*, refers to a safe place from which Melbourne’s Oromo are able to engage the world around them. Like de Certeau’s (1984) enunciative ‘practices of everyday life’, an ‘invisible theatre’ (McNamara 1978) of performances

⁶ The expressions ‘everyday’ and ‘everyday life’ are used to refer to a specific, historically produced form of quotidian daily life. Following Lefebvre (1971), ‘everyday life’ is characterised and built upon the principles of repetition, mundanity, triviality and redundancy. Lefebvre describes ‘everyday life’ as a compound of united insignificances, a ‘compound of signs by which our society expresses and justifies itself and which forms part of its ideology’ (p. 24). Accordingly, ‘Everyday life is made of recurrences: gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements both human and properly mechanical, hours, days, weeks, months, years, linear and cyclical repetitions ...’ (p. 18). But, importantly, as Grossberg (1997, p. 99) notes, ‘everyday life’ is unequally distributed and a privilege largely determined in economic terms: for socioeconomic marginals such as Melbourne’s Oromo, ‘everyday life’ as modelled in the dominant Australian dreams of home ownership, regular employment and popular leisure activities are striven for but seldom obtained (cf. Buchanan 1998).

provides a tactical context (place) for the transformative renegotiation of affines: the building of a new *mana*.

The performance of ritual, while mirroring aspects of the past, involves innovation and transformation: the new context of performance, as Adams (1998, pp. 242-6) would suggest, points not so much to cultural *translation* as to cultural *formation*. Approaching Oromo identity in Melbourne as cultural formation rather than translation suggests a series of alignments and lived conjunctions that do not represent a hidden real but *are* the real. They constitute the individual and collective reality of *being* Oromo in Melbourne.

While rejecting the extremities of various poststructuralist discursive positions, this project also eschews the attempt to grasp what it ‘means’ to be Oromo in Melbourne via modes of explanation, interpretation and analysis that seek some kind of subterranean essence hidden deep beneath a manifest surface. As an ethnographic study, this thesis rejects the attempt to define the true but hidden essence of the Oromo in favour of an attempt to describe precisely those connections and interrelations that are never hidden.

Throughout, reference is made to a singular Oromo identity in Melbourne called *Oromo cultural formation*. The deliberate use of the singular is designed to denote a unity of identity common to all Oromo in Melbourne. This should not be confused with an essentialised notion of unity premised upon the binary logic of the oppositional unity/difference. Rather, difference must be thought alongside of unity, or not at all. Following the lines of Deleuze-Guattarian rhizomatics, just as some plants do not singularly propagate from one root system, but multiply and propagate from a hidden rhizome network, so too cultural practices, while appearing disparate, have multiple differences that co-exist with a unity. The rhizome describes a chiasmic relationship between unity and difference, the intertwining of the two. Within this logic of enquiry, cultural identity is an open and connectable map that has multiple entry-ways and can be constantly modified.

In this respect, it is close to Stuart Hall’s concept of *articulation* (cf. Morley & Kuan-Hsing 1996), which refers to a subjectivity of practice whereby identity is defined by its ‘lived’ and ‘real’ effects. The dynamic process of living Oromo identity in Melbourne involves the linking of the many practices/rituals (ideological,

cultural and discursive) that evoke and confirm who they are, to themselves and to outsiders. Via articulation, real effective structures of difference—which I call the structures of *linking, voicing and living*⁷—are created and converge to constitute *Oromo cultural formation* in Melbourne.

Hall understands articulation as the production of real identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments. Oromo cultural formation refers to the unity of identity that constitutes the ‘reality’ of being Oromo in Melbourne. It is this formation which constitutes the ‘real’. However, the ‘reality’ of identity is not intrinsic essence but, rather, the external structures of effects. While the radical poststructuralist position asserts a kind of discursive reductionism (‘reality is linguistic’), articulation asserts that reality is constituted by the historical linkage of lived practices (differences) to form structures of effect. These discrete and localised structures of effect are then articulated to form a larger structure or cultural formation that constitutes a unity of Oromo identity. Within such a unity there exists a multiplicity of difference. This multiplicity is ever-changing, and defined, not by its abiding principle of sameness over time, but through its capacity to undergo transformations via everyday practices.

One such transformation is evident in the story told to me by an Oromo regarding the visit to Australia in 1988 of the Ethiopian Foreign Minister to secure aid from the Australian government. An evening function, attended by a number of dignitaries, was held at Melbourne’s Hyatt Hotel. My informant, who attended the function in order to protest against the Minister, recounted the events of the evening: ‘I went up to the Minister and I spoke to him in English. I said, “you are abusing the Oromo and the humanitarian aid you are receiving is being used for the military”. He replied, “speak to me in Amharic”, to which I responded, “I will not speak to you in Amharic, but in English”. He then told me that he would not continue to discuss this with me if it was not in the Amharic language Amharic’.⁸

The story, like Duretii’s journey, is archetypal of an encounter where past and present intersect with one another. The location, a five star hotel in Melbourne, mitigated the dynamics of an encounter reflecting the historically violent struggle

⁷ For their initial guidance and suggestions regarding the use of the term ‘articulation’ I am grateful to Ron Adams and Eric Lloga, who suggested using the three dimensions of articulation: linking, voicing and living.

⁸ Interview, September 1996.

within Ethiopia between the Amhara centre and the Oromo margins. But the confrontation—in a scene unimaginable in Ethiopia—was not violent. The dignitary and the refugee did not even discuss politics. Rather, the Minister was linguistically challenged from the margins, and his attempt to reassert his dominance as the linguistic centre failed when the Oromo resisted and the meeting finished.

The encounter was etched on the mind of my Oromo friend. Through this performance he confronted the linguistic centre in a manner that struck the core of Ethiopian colonialism: he rejected linguistic assimilation and challenged the conditions of linguistic hegemony. The socially constructed matrix was transformed as he boldly asserted the terms of discourse—while in 'exile' and away from 'home'.

Upon this note, I return the reader back to the story of Duretii's homecoming with which this prelude began. She abruptly ended her visit back 'home' and retreated back to 'exile'. Feeling terribly sad, defeated and insecure, she stayed only two weeks in Arsi. Her illusions of 'home' as an unproblematic geographic location—her growing-up place of coherence and familiarity—were undercut by the reality of oppression and struggle. She had planned a holiday in Italy on her return to North America, but cancelled the trip because she was too upset. Her journey meant confronting the unreality of her mythical constructions of 'homeland and return' (Safran 1991)—the anticipation, promise and shattering of illusion. Similarly, throughout the journey of exploring the transformative role of language amongst Melbourne's Oromo I have discovered that 'home' does not necessarily exist physically, but the overriding desire to construct 'home' even away from 'home' is pervasive. As the following chapters demonstrate, the commitment of all Oromo people via the transformative role of language to creatively construct 'home' while away from 'home' is a process which this study both reflects and contributes to.

Part I Representing home:
A LANGUAGE OF SUBJECTIVITY

CHAPTER ONE

OROMO IDENTITY:

THEORISING SUBJECTIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Theory is always a [necessary] detour on the way to something more important.

Stuart Hall (in Grossberg 1993, p. 91)

An internet discussion forum called ‘Oromia-Net’ features regular postings regarding the Oromo people. Characterised by a climate of mistrust, the majority of the postings concern ‘in-house’ disagreements and hearsay gossip amongst various Oromo élite from North America, Europe and Australia. Until recently there have been two regular contributors from Melbourne. Notably, contributors—often via feints and counterfeints—use the forum to vent their suspicions concerning the identities and allegiances of those who post messages. In September 1997 there were accusations concerning the genuineness of one applicant’s claim to be Oromo, but eventually he was certified by various members to be ‘100% Oromo’. Moreover, some suggested the application for access to ‘Oromia-net’ should feature the question:

Are you an Oromo? ____ Yes 100%____ (tick the box)

The framing of this question launched a controversial debate about the use of the criterion ‘100% Oromo’. The range of responses centred around the basis for legitimate claims to Oromo identity. The divergent responses reflected the degree of heat in the debate. One participant, ‘G.B. Tuke’, stressed the applicant’s pedigree as the decisive factor:

If you are an Oromo by blood, you will remain an Oromo REGARDLESS OF WHETHER YOU SUPPORT THE OROMO CAUSE OR NOT; BECAUSE IT IS A NATURAL GIFT THAT NO ONE COULD TAKE AWAY FROM YOU. If you are an Oromo and an active supporter of the Oromo cause, you are ‘Oromo dammaqa qabu/du’ [an Oromo who is awake]. However, your

being an active supporter of the Oromo cause should not be used to exclude or deny the rest from being Oromo.¹

Another contributor, 'Ahmed Sedik', agreed with the pedigree approach, but added an additional criterion of actively living their *Oromumma* (Oromo personality):

I think '100% Oromo' is the maximum possible amount that can be attained. Please don't attempt to request any information about how we can figure out this value. We all know it is not easy. Nevertheless, I can say that '100% Oromo' can be attained if and only if a person is fully born from Oromo parents and fully supports actively doing something possible for the cause of his *Oromumma*. I think that is what it should be.²

In response, 'Martha Kumsa' (aka Kuwee Kumsa) emphasised the difficulty in trying to define what constitutes '100% Oromo':

It is very interesting to see that you are asking applicants whether they are 100% Oromo. How is one to be certain of that? Is there some form of physical and chemical test that some eminent university can conduct in order to determine the percentage of Oromo blood coursing in the veins of an individual? Once again you are touching on a sensitive point: who is an Oromo? Do all pure Oromo (if there is such a being) support the cause and are all non-pure ones suspect?³

Finally, 'Jarro' responded by calling for a more diverse and inclusive approach by presenting the complexity of the issue for those living outside Oromiya:

Your attempt to explain what it is to be '100% Oromo' was totally absurd. You know what? On my father's side, my grandmother was not an Oromo, but my father considered himself as 100% Oromo. I myself have a mother who is not Oromo, however I consider myself as 100% Oromo. My wife is not an Oromo, but I am teaching my children *afaan Oromoo*, Oromo culture, and I want them to consider themselves as Oromo-Americans, not just Americans. I consider my kids as Oromo-Americans, because

¹ 'G.B. Tuke', posted on Oromia-Net 21st September 1997.

² 'Ahmed Sedik', posted on Oromia-Net 21st September 1997.

³ 'Martha Kumsa', posted on Oromia-Net 21st September 1997.

they were born in the USA, otherwise they would have been just Oromo if they were born in Oromiya. Are you going to tell us that we are not 100% Oromo? ... In my view, if anyone has a drop of Oromo blood in him/her and would like to consider himself/herself an Oromo, such persons should be welcomed by all of us. In the future, when we regain our homeland, Oromiya, there will be procedures by which we can even admit foreign nationals who wish to become Oromo citizens.⁴

The range of responses point to the level of uncertainty regarding the constitution of Oromo identity. The common perception is that *Oromumma* or 'Oromoness' is constituted by birth: it is blood that atavistically transfers the 'essence' which is Oromo identity. Additionally, it is the individual's political disposition towards the Oromo national movement that activates this dormant genealogical identity. In this way identity and politics are complementary.

This controversy from 'Oromia-Net' touches upon the central problem addressed in this study: namely, what are the traits of pan-Oromo identity? This is a fertile area, pregnant with possibilities for academic enquiry, at a time when interest has only recently turned to the Oromo, who, prior to the 1990s, remained largely unknown among the worldwide fraternity of anthropologists and 'Africanists'.

Nevertheless, despite the veiled knowledge of the Oromo, a rich and diverse range of scholarly work has recently emerged, which provides one of the contexts for this study. Mario Aguilar (1997a) recently offered a broad sketch of the current Oromo studies landscape, observing that 'by the 1990s, publications on Oromo by non-Oromo (mostly 'Western')⁵ scholars and by Oromo themselves have increased in number, so that one needs to focus on books rather than articles or papers ...' (p. 277). The recent expansion from articles and papers to books is startling given the dearth of published literature prior to the 1990s (cf. volumes by Asafa Jalata 1998a, 1993; Aguilar 1997b; Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi 1996; Brokensha 1994; Van de Loo 1991; Mohammed Hassen 1990; Holcomb & Ibssa 1990; and Hultin 1987).⁶

⁴ 'Jarro', posted on Oromia-Net 21st September 1997.

⁵ Throughout this thesis, for lack of a better term, the problematic word 'Western' is cautiously used to relate to those parts of the world—North America, Australia and parts of Europe—which in modern history have been on the dominating side of the colonial equation. However, the 'West' is not considered as constituting any automatic unitary group.

⁶ Often 'Western' scholarship cannot accommodate names that come from 'other' cultures. Throughout this thesis, when citing Oromo and various other writers the full name of the author is used because the 'Western' system of citing the surname followed by initials may be construed as inappropriate when applied to their names.

Perhaps the earliest writer was the Abyssinian monk Bahrey, who wrote *The History of the Galla* in 1593. Since then, historians and anthropologists have commonly used the derogatory term 'galla' when referring to the Oromo, who, despite their great numbers and sophisticated socio-political organisations, were written-out of Ethiopian history via their classification as the savage 'galla' (cf. Bahrey 1954; Pankhurst S. 1955; Levine 1965; Ullendorff 1965; and Bairu Tafla 1987 for examples of such historical representation).

Confirming the transcultural relevance of Said's Orientalism, Hultin (1996) offers a rigorous analysis of the historical use of 'galla' as a means of culturally constructing the Oromo as 'Other'. He emphasises the role of the term in validating the Abyssinian myth of 'Greater Ethiopia'. Even up to the early 1970s those politically sympathetic 'Western' scholars who were aware of the brutal colonial administration oppressing the Oromo remained poetically constrained by the prevailing politics of representation at their time of writing. They continued to refer to the Oromo as galla in their writings: a source of consternation for many of these writers who knew that the Oromo hated and never used the term when referring to themselves (cf. Baxter 1954; Huntingford 1955; Haberland 1963, Lewis 1965, 1970; Knutsson 1963, 1969; and Bartels 1975).⁷

Nonetheless, by the late-1970s there had emerged a number of non-Oromo scholars who began challenging the dominance of the galla myth and Ethiopianist representations of the Oromo as cultureless and backwards. Among others, were Asmaron Legesse, Baxter, Blackhurst, Bartels, Hultin, and Triulzi—the most prominent being Paul Baxter who comprehensively wrote on the Oromo society, institutions and culture.⁸ While these non-Oromo scholars began widely publishing in the 1970s, it was not until the late-1980s that the writings of Oromo scholars became readily identifiable beyond their own community.

⁷ Bonnie K. Holcomb described how she wished to use the term Oromo when writing her MA thesis in the early 1970s. To her consternation and regret, her supervisor strongly forbade her from doing so because, as he explained, 'Nobody would know who you are writing about'. Instead the term galla was used. Likewise, Herbert S. Lewis expressed his regrets at being unable to republish his book *A Galla Monarchy* (1965) as *An Oromo Monarchy* (interviews, August 1997).

⁸ Most outstanding was Baxter's (1978a) essay, 'Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: the Oromo', published in the journal *African Affairs*. Exposing the political and cultural subjugation of the Oromo, the article was a landmark in the sense that it raised the Oromo issue and challenged the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state at a time when it was academically dangerous to do so.

Various Oromo scholars—the foremost arguably being Hamdesa Tusso, Abbas Haji, Sisai Ibsaa, Mohammed Hassen, Asafa Jalata and Mekuria Bulcha—gained postgraduate qualifications in metropolitan ‘Western’ universities. Commonly, their graduate work attempted to re-examine and rewrite Oromo history, identity and national aspirations from fiercely combative anti-colonial locations (cf. Ficquet 1997, pp. 43ff).⁹ By the early 1990s the Oromo Studies Association—a de facto academic arm of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)—was firmly established and the two associated journals *The Oromo Commentary* and *The Journal of Oromo Studies* (vol. 1 in 1994) provided anti-colonial forums where Oromo academics could regularly publish their writings.

Recently, Kuwee Kumsa (1997, 1998) has emerged as an important contributor in the field of Oromo studies. Her works on Oromo women’s subjectivity, the first rigorous attempt by an Oromo scholar to expose the dilemmas and problems of Oromo women in the national struggle, feature in chapters eight and nine of the current project. As she elaborates, triumphant Oromo nationalism invariably makes gains and wins accomplishments at the expense of a subordinated feminism.

Kuwee Kumsa’s work is part of the growing, but still limited, range of literature that reflects a diversification of perspectives and approaches. Such diversity is vividly manifest in the volume *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, edited by Baxter, Hultin and Triulzi (1996), and to a lesser extent in the recently published *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy*, edited by Asafa Jalata (1998a). Both volumes, which include contributions from Oromo and non-Oromo scholars, signal the arrival of Oromo studies as an area of significant academic enquiry in its own right. Ambitiously, the former volume attempts to identify the common strands that link the diverse groups of Oromo into some cultural whole, and the historical and contemporary significance of that unity. As suggested in the title *Being and Becoming Oromo*,¹⁰ the principal topic of the book is the recent growth of pan-Oromo consciousness—which is understood differently by the diverse range of Oromo and non-Oromo contributors.

⁹ The term ‘anti-colonial’ refers to people like the Oromo who are engaged in liberation struggles against contemporary forms of imperialism.

¹⁰ The editors attribute the inspiration for the title ‘Being and Becoming Oromo’ to Spear’s and Waller’s (1993) volume *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi 1996, p. 7).

With such a title, it would appear that the publication, by interrogating the ‘identity politics’ of the Oromo national movement, was potentially disabling and/or augmenting for the liberation struggle. The two terms ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ emphasise the diversity of approaches contained within the volume. The editors introduce the book by describing the heated debate concerning the constitution of Oromo identity that occurred among the Oromo and non-Oromo contributors (p. 9).¹¹ The term ‘being’ describes the presumed essential identity common to all Oromo that is taken for granted by the anti-colonial Oromo contributors; while the term ‘becoming’ signals the construction of Oromo identity, that begins with the diverse, local and particular as emphasised by the apparently politically neutral non-Oromo contributors. The use of ‘becoming’ was a sore point for various Oromo nationalists and scholars—including Asafa Jalata and Gemetchu Megerssa¹²—who dismiss the question of Oromo identity formation. Predictably, appealing to politics, they undercut the value of the book, labelling it ‘weak’ because of its inability to occupy politically combative subject-positions (via-à-vis ‘Oromocentric’ images of identity over and against Ethiopianist discourse).

Significantly, these polemical debates are part of the much broader contemporary interest with issues of identity, culture, place, space, colonialism, nationalism and resistance that is inextricably tied with the impact of poststructuralist ideas upon the certainties of subjectivity, tradition, cultural continuity and location that previously informed enquiry. In relation to cultural identity, whereas earlier theoretical models focused specifically upon linear continuity, community and cultural objectification, present approaches stress the qualities of discontinuity, hybridity, fragmentation, flux and change. Harris (1996) describes this moment as ‘typically evoked through terms such as emergence, creation, contestation, empowerment, negotiation, indeterminacy, reinvention and transformation ...’ (p. 7). Indicative of the prevalent poststructuralist sensibilities is what Linnekin (1992) has termed the recent ‘poetic fetishism’ with words like ‘imagined’, ‘invention’ and ‘construction’—terms often interchangeably used to denote the process whereby national culture and identity are produced.

¹¹ The contents of the book derive from a workshop held in Gothenburg, Sweden in October 1994.

¹² During interviews with Oromo scholars Asafa Jalata and Gemetchu Megerssa both expressed their belief that the book was weak and unfavourable to the Oromo nationalist movement.

The question of identity, as Pratibha Parmar (1990) notes, has taken on colossal weight, particularly for those who are postcolonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora (p. 106). While historically cast into the role of the Other, these postcolonial¹³ subjects are now ‘developing a narrative that is wholly encased within [their] own terms of reference’, a narrative that ‘thwarts the binary hierarchy of centre and margin’ (p. 101). Parmar uses the example of the complexity of the black cultural ‘explosion’ to challenge any simple notion of identity. Black British women have ‘sought to rework and reinscribe the language and conventions of representation’, which means, ‘creating identities as black British women not “in relation to”, “in opposition to”, “as a reversal of”, or “as a corrective to” ... but *in and for ourselves*’ (ibid.). While this description is perhaps pertinent to elements of the contemporary development of pan-Oromo discourse, the comparisons are limited: unlike the subject-positions of black British women, the anomalous Oromo in Ethiopia are yet to enter significantly the space of decolonisation, and, consequently, those in exile still occupy fiercely anti-colonial positions.

The current study attempts to engage with these issues of identity which now frequently revolve around the slippery and by no means widely agreed upon umbrella of postcolonialism. It seeks to ask how Oromo studies can benefit from postcolonial studies. Without pre-empting what lies ahead, one of the main contentions of this thesis is that postcolonial theory, while certainly no panacea, is relevant to the Oromo political struggle because it approaches decolonisation as a critical practice which potentially offers new strategies of resistance.

Postcolonial studies confound any uniformity of approach—except perhaps an odd collusion of Marxist and poststructuralist sensibilities—and piggybacks upon the intellectual efforts of ‘Third world’¹⁴ anti-colonial historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon (Prakash 1995, p. 5ff). The recently emerged critical discourse (in which Said, Spivak and Bhabha are the central figures) is a progressive interdisciplinary attempt within the humanities to engage with the problematic of difference. Firstly, by rectifying the dominant hegemonies of race and nation (the *mea culpa* of Eurocentrism)—to go beyond this, and deal with

¹³ Whereas some scholars, like Parmar, invoke the hyphenated term ‘post-colonial’ as a decisive marker of the decolonising process, throughout this thesis the unbroken ‘postcolonial’ is used on the grounds that the postcolonial condition is inaugurated with the onset rather than the end of colonial occupation (cf. Gandhi 1998, p. 3).

¹⁴ Again, like the term ‘Western’, for lack of a better term, ‘Third world’ is cautiously used in reference to the groups who were colonised or ‘Orientalised’ by the dominant ‘Western’ superpowers.

diverse places and different flows (of people, ideas, finance) on their own terms, and not in relation to the by now well-critiqued position of the 'Centre'. Then, secondly, by using the postcolonial as a possible tool to move beyond the popularised but challenged categories of diversity, identity and ethnicity towards new conceptions expressed in notions of 'in-betweenness' and 'ambivalence' and terms such as diaspora and hybridity (Chambers & Curtis 1996).

In relation to diasporic populations, notions of ambiguity and 'in-betweenness' are manifested in the chic term 'hybridity'. Both 'diaspora' and 'hybridity' appear almost co-dependently synonymous and interchangeable in the writings of popular postcolonial theorists, the hybrid (as popularised through the persuasive writings of Homi Bhabha) standing as the 'perfect conduit for poststructuralist understandings of pluralism, ambivalence, and nonfixity' (Mitchell 1997, p. 535). Agreeing with critics such as Rey Chow (1993), Katharyne Mitchell (1997) and Robert Young (1995), the word 'hybridity' is avoided throughout the current project because—despite a mask of deconstruction and anti-imperialism—the term contains within it historically-loaded colonialist images of racial grafting and assimilation. It can easily be objected, as Young (1995) convincingly argues, that the concept of cultural hybridity (or creolisation) assumes the prior existence of pure, fixed and separate antecedents—vis-à-vis nineteenth century racial theories. In addition to the omission of 'hybridity', when referring to Oromo living outside Oromiya, the term 'exile' is used in place of the obscure 'diaspora' because it more appropriately relates the threat of sociopolitical expulsion that is a daily reality in Oromiya.

The spatial vocabulary of the term diaspora has proliferated beyond the movement of people to a conceptual model for the discussion of time, place, space, cultural identity and postcoloniality (cf. Brah 1996; Clifford 1992, 1994). The discourse of diaspora relates to the emerging 'global cultural economy' often referred to as 'globalisation': the new global cultural processes whereby 'cultural material may be seen to be [disjunctively] moving across national boundaries' (Appadurai 1994, p. 336). The discourse of global cultural formations, as Appadurai accentuates, implies the rejection of 'highly localised, boundary-oriented, holistic, primordialist images of cultural form and substance' (ibid.).

The postcolonial rejection of boundary-oriented essentialist identifications is usually equated with a politically progressive agenda by anti-essentialists. However, the effective dismantling of 'essentialist' subjectivity, while debunking Eurocentric Otherness, obscures the processes of collective representation and self-representation which are *not* essentialist and the dynamics of power in which these processes occur. Especially among exile groups, the sites of essentialism need to be explored in terms of the question, 'who essentialises whom, when, [how] and for what purposes?' (Werbner 1997, p. 226). Based upon the case of Melbourne's Oromo, this study goes some way towards answering these questions by examining the role of essentialised notions of identity in the context of the broader social and political marginalisation that impacts upon the Oromo.

Diana Fuss (1989), in *Essentially Speaking*, similarly engages with the 'dangerously sedimented' binary opposition of essentialism/constructionism. By claiming that essentialism and constructionism are deeply and inextricably co-implicated with each other, she bilaterally works to subvert the deadlock over the issue of human 'essence' embodied in the opposition. Simply put, she asserts that there is no essence to essentialism and that social constructionism really operates as a sophisticated form of essentialism. Viewed this way, constructionism counters essentialism but does not displace it.

The deadlock between the essentialist and the constructionist positions features prominently throughout this study. Using a bilateral approach like Fuss, my position throughout this thesis may be viewed as that of a poststructuralist, who ambiguously wants to preserve the category of 'nominal essence' by asserting a productive role for specific kinds of essentialism. I attempt to balance precariously between the pervasive dualism. But, and again like Fuss (1989), I do not presume that it is possible to speak from 'a location above or beyond this powerful structuring opposition' (p. xiv).

Because the personal and political stakes are high, there is a 'strategic' dimension to the Oromo self-essentialisation: they must essentialise their identity because it is *essential* for their very survival to do so. As demonstrated in the following chapters, the historical moment which Melbourne's Oromo inhabit urgently requires strategies for their own cultural survival. Relations of domination and subordination characterise their place in an indifferent world. To shift the

balance of power, the repertoires of pan-Oromo ‘popular culture’ and the accompanying invocation of an essential Oromo subject are the only performative spaces open to them. This self-essentialisation—which Denning (1998, p. 15) might speak of as ‘creative aboriginality’—occurs within the context of daily life where the many dimensions of power impact upon the lives of Melbourne’s Oromo.

The oxymoron ‘constructive strategic essentialism’ perhaps suggests a ‘third way’ that overtakes the essentialist/constructionist opposition (de Lauretis 1993). The term saliently expresses the subject-positions from which people such as the Oromo speak, while recognising that such positions have their own historical specificity. The strategic dimension of the conjunction is described by Hall:

Political identity often requires the need to make conscious commitments. Thus it may be necessary to momentarily abandon the multiplicity of cultural identities for more simple ones around which political lines have been drawn. You need all the folks together, under one hat, carrying one banner [*Oromumma*], saying we are for this, for the purpose of this fight, we are all the same, just black [Oromo] and just here.

(Hall in Azoulay 1997, p. 102)

Following the events of 1991 in Ethiopia,¹⁵ despite their many differences, Oromo people around the world have increasingly rallied around simple identifications. Even the intellectuals are generally unable to view their beliefs, identities and practices in relativist terms—to do so would be counterproductive to the social and political work they are attempting to accomplish (cf. Sorenson’s 1996 critique of Oromo Studies Association meetings).

In relation to the developments described in the preceding paragraphs, postcolonialism and cultural studies intersect on a number of different planes and face mutual challenges. First, as Grossberg (1996) describes, both must confront the globalisation and deterritorialisation of culture—and its subsequent reterritorialisation—as a movement outside the spaces of any (specific) language. Second, both cultural and postcolonial studies (largely due to poststructuralism’s apparent debunking of essentialism) seem to have reached the limit of theorising political struggles organised around notions of identity and difference (p. 169).

¹⁵ In 1991 when the Derg regime collapsed in Ethiopia, for the first time since the formation of the modern Ethiopian empire, masses of Oromo went public in their support for the Oromo Liberation Front’s nationalist program. These events will be discussed in detail in Chapter Eight.

While no singular theoretical approach has yet emerged that transcends the limitations, a number of scholars in recent years have begun to develop new terms of reference. The following chapters attempt to sketch a ‘third way’, primarily extrapolated from an amalgam of key ideas from Stuart Hall, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which offers a conjunctive framework for theorising that I loosely term *articulation*. Remaining undertheorised and largely unexamined as both a descriptive and political practice, articulation is pregnant with possibilities for rethinking the theoretical foundations of postcolonial and cultural studies (Grossberg 1996, p. 171).

The problems presented by diverse and localised dimensions of power in the daily lives of people have enabled the concept of articulation to arise within the mainstream of cultural studies where, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the dimensions of power were understood via a Marxist—particularly the Althusserian structuralist—frame of reference. It was not until Laclau’s (1977) *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* appeared that the movement away from determinist approaches began. In contest with class reductionism, Laclau sought to theorise the concrete (feudalism and capitalism in Latin America) in terms of articulation (Slack 1996, p. 118). His was the first attempt to map-out an explicit theory of articulation that sought to examine ideology in a non-reductionist way.

While Laclau was the earliest architect of articulation, the writings of Stuart Hall (cf. 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996; Morley & Kuan-Hsing 1996) have exerted considerable influence and enabled articulation to become a generative concept in contemporary cultural studies. Via articulation, Hall theorises a middle ground between the reductionist ‘culturalism’¹⁶ which emphasises singular cultural unity, and the absolute complexity of poststructuralism wherein unity and identity are always deconstructed.

Although not a neatly packaged theory or clearly delineated method, Hall understands articulation to be the production of ‘real’ identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments. However, the ‘reality’ of identity is not intrinsic essence

¹⁶ The term ‘culturalism’ refers to what had been the dominant and early paradigm in cultural studies that emphasised the single unity of specific practices. In the culturalist position, a particular social identity corresponds to particular experiences and has its own ‘authentic’ cultural practices. The coherence and totality of a particular social structure are already given and every practice refers back to a common origin (see Grossberg 1996, p. 155).

but, rather, the external structures of effects. As described in the Prelude, throughout this study the unity of identity, which constitutes the ‘reality’ of being Oromo in Melbourne, will be referred to as Oromo cultural formation. This formation is constituted as real via a materialist theory of effectivity (Grossberg 1992, p. 46). Articulation asserts that reality is constituted by the historical linkage of lived practices (differences) to form structures of effect. These discrete and localised structures of effect are then articulated to form a larger structure or cultural formation that constitutes a unity of identity (in this case Oromo cultural formation).

While articulation is strategically anti-essentialist, it concurrently allows for real structures of cultural identity to exist outside the sphere of the discursive, thereby rejecting the epistemological anti-essentialism of radical poststructuralist positions. Given that any anti-essentialist position is likely to embrace social constructionism, the task to be taken up in this study is to ethnographically map-out the conjunctive lines of articulation among Melbourne’s Oromo without retreating to the radical poststructuralism that reduces ‘reality’ to the discursive. Since these conjunctions are not inevitable or necessary, articulation assumes that relations (e.g. identities and effects) are real but not necessary. In this regard they potentially can be transformed, so that being Oromo in Melbourne can be articulated in a multiplicity of ways.

Linking with the selective use of Hall’s conceptual framework, I have adapted to this project key theories from the collaborative work of Deleuze and Guattari—extensively described in their brilliant but cumbrous two-part *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* series (*Anti-Oedipus* 1983 and *A Thousand Plateaus* 1987).¹⁷ The relational conjunctive dynamic of their cartographic and nomadic philosophy of becoming (or theory of multiplicities, commonly referred to as Deleuzian thought)¹⁸ provides a much needed philosophical anchoring point for a theory of articulation. Furthermore, in relation to the present study and in addition to Hall, their somewhat sketchy conceptual framework justifies the juxtaposition of

¹⁷ Less cumbrous presentations of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s key ideas are contained within Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s book *Philosophy Through the Looking-Glass* (1985) and Phillip Goodchild’s *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (1996).

¹⁸ Guattari is often left out when reference is made to the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* series, which is inaccurate given that the work was a collaborative effort. For this reason the category ‘Deleuze-Guattarian’ is used rather than ‘Deleuzian’ when referring to concepts that largely derive from that series.

multiplicity with a common identity based upon shared culture(s) among Melbourne's Oromo.

The relevance of Deleuze's and Guattari's nomadic philosophy of becoming to cultural and postcolonial studies has only recently begun to emerge, and both are yet to be widely recognised among English-speaking scholars, while Hall's contribution has become widely known and his works frequently quoted. Key areas of their thought remain yet to be taken up in a major way in cultural studies and are virtually absent from discussions of postcolonial theory. One finds a scattering of references among the literature, the most notable being the recent symposium edition of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* (1997, vol. 14, no. 2), exploring the significance of Deleuze's life and thought. Additionally, a special edition of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (1997, vol. 96, no. 3), titled 'A Deleuzian Century', is dedicated to their work. The publication is edited by Ian Buchanan who, in his essay 'Deleuze and Cultural Studies', argues that the formation of the subject should be at the centre of any attempt to produce a Deleuze-Guattarian cultural studies (Buchanan 1997a, p. 484). Such an approach to cultural studies would begin with the question, 'How does one become a subject?' rather than the objectifying 'What is a subject?' (ibid., p. 494).

Other useful selective applications of Deleuze's and Guattari's work are found in Robert Young's (1995, pp. 166-74) attempt to map out the relevance of *Anti-Oedipus* to postcolonial studies, Grossberg's (1996) effort at theorising a spatial materialist Deleuze-Guattarian philosophy, and Malkki's (1989, 1992) innovative application of Deleuze-Guattarian rhizomatics to the study of identity formation amongst Hutu refugees in Tanzania.

Rosi Braidotti (1997), in the special Deleuze-Guattarian edition of *Theory, Culture & Society* mentioned above, stresses the relevance of their philosophy of becoming for cultural studies. By highlighting the critique of representation as the overarching concern that unifies their heterogeneous work, she argues the impossibility of separating the 'cultural' from the 'conceptual' aspects (p. 68). For example, as Massumi (1992) notes, the bulk of *Anti-Oedipus* is given over to detailed analysis of the collective synthesis constituting a society and to the invention of a new typology of cultural formations (p. 3). Picking up Braidotti's and Massumi's

emphasis, in the following pages I have sought to illuminate the relevance of Deleuze's and Guattari's work to cultural studies.

As flagged in the Prelude, Deleuze's and Guattari's metaphorical use of the rhizome is an excellent tool for conceptualising the cartography of cultural identity among an exiled people group. The rhizome potentially provides a means of transcending the problematic of difference (or 'Otherness')—the polar, non-pluralist model of domination that has so far prevailed in cultural, postcolonial, anthropological and women's studies—as recent critical work by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, bell hooks, Luce Irigaray, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha and George Marcus attests.

Simply stated, the problematic of difference/'Otherness' refers to the binary condition whereby the Other is problematically negated by the non-Other (the Self) in the process of its self-affirmation. According to this binary logic, 'Otherness' (in the ontological sense) refers to a state of being, rather than a way of being, which precludes speech or presence. The condition of Otherness refers to a condition of imposed silence, because speech would make present what is fundamentally absent and hence negate the non-Other's condition. Such Hegelian dialectics ensures that a logic of dualism prevails between the dominator and the dominated, the powerful and the powerless (Buchanan 1997b, p. 176).

Deleuze and Guattari attack such binary logic by attempting to 'think' an active pluralism based upon co-existent multiplicities. Their notion of 'transcendental empiricism' equates subjectivity with pluralism, because 'the essential thing, from the point of view of empiricism, is the noun *multiplicity*, which designates a set of lines or dimensions which are irreducible to one another' (Deleuze & Parnet 1987, p. vii). In this way, empiricism transcends the core problem of 'Otherness' by positing that the tension between 'Self' and 'Other' is grounded in the relation between terms and not the terms themselves. The conjunctive is given primacy, whereby 'Self AND Other' means a double capture (ibid., pp. 2, 7). The conjunctive relation is primary, and relations are external to their terms: it is not 'the elements or the set which define the multiplicity. What defines it is the AND, as something which has its place between the elements ...' (ibid., p. 34).

From the perspective of ‘double capture’, the metaphorical centre and margin are understood quite differently. As bell hooks puts it, ‘To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body ... a main body made up of both margin and centre’ (1984, Preface). Here marginalisation (living in the margin)—as used throughout this thesis—is neither an identity nor a spatial position but a vector or distribution defining access, mobility and the possibilities of agency. In this schema, agency refers to a particular spatial formation which enables empowerment at particular sites (Grossberg 1993, p.100). But agency is not a given; rather it is constructed and its possibilities distributed via an abstract machine that Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 260) call the ‘body without organs’ defined by a cartography of latitudinal and longitudinal lines.

Within this Deleuze-Guattarian line of enquiry, cultural identity, like Hall’s articulation, can be approached as an open and connectable map that has multiple entry-ways and can be constantly modified. Just as the rhizome connects any point to any other point, the cultural map is composed not of units but of ‘real’ lines that performatively intersect (Boundas 1993, p. 35). This mode of individuation—where the complex individual (a thing, a person, an identity) is only definable by movements and rests, speeds and slownesses (longitudinal lines) and by effects and intensities (latitudinal lines)—Deleuze and Guattari refer to as *hecceity*.

Such a cartographic understanding of subjectivity assumes the spatialisation of transformation, or, as Grossberg succinctly puts it, the notion of space as a transformative milieu of becoming (1996, pp. 179-80). Transformation is equated with becoming and understood as a scalar event that has magnitude but not direction—herein lies the strategic possibilities of articulation for both descriptive and political practice which are most pertinent to the current study of the Oromo. As a philosophy of the real, Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work takes reality to be both real (productive) and contingent (produced)—reality producing reality. In this way, the production of reality is the practice of power. From this perspective, the reality of the subject is embodied in a process of perpetual becomings (assemblages of multiplicities) which continually transform within and across the space of existence (Braidotti 1997; Grossberg 1996). Such an approach juxtaposes singularity with multiplicity and creativity; with singularity referring not to a universal subject but to an articulation or index of coexistent multiplicities (a *hecceity*, or what in this study is called Oromo cultural formation).

In his previously cited (1993) essay ‘Cultural studies and/in New Worlds’, Lawrence Grossberg issued a challenge for cultural critics that is yet to be adequately pursued. He proposed that cultural studies (using a Deleuze-Guattarian framework as a starting point) need to move beyond models of oppression—both the ‘colonial model’ of the oppressor and oppressed and the ‘transgression model’ of oppression and resistance—and toward a model of articulation or ‘transformative practice’ (p. 94). Agreeing with this summation, because I consider both models of oppression inappropriate to the relations of power in which exiled Oromo dwell, I have responded to Grossberg’s prompt by attempting to theorise and map a spatial economy of power and resistance via the relations of places and spaces and the distribution of people and practices within them. Importantly, I intimate throughout this thesis that such a response may offer a way of conceiving the Oromo political struggle in something other than the simple, debilitating, guilt-ridden dichotomies which currently dominate the aesthetics of Oromo nationalist resistance (e.g. Ethiopia/Oromiya, oppressor/oppressed, centre/margin).

In relation to postcolonial critique, it is Deleuze’s and Guattari’s difficult *anti-Oedipus* which—as Young (1995, p. 167) suggests—potentially offers a related though different way of thinking about the operations of colonialism to the dominant paradigm elaborated in Said’s (1979) *Orientalism*. In the context of the current study of the exiled Oromo, attempts are made to delineate the usefulness of anti-Oedipus as a cartography of desire that breaks down the distinction between materiality and consciousness (social production and desiring production). In a Deleuze-Guattarian interactive fashion, such an approach offers a way of articulating capitalism, colonialism and spatiality.

Central to the current venture of amalgamating (under the umbrella of articulation) the preceding key ideas from Hall, Deleuze and Guattari is analysis of the ‘transformative practice’ of articulation in relation to everyday life. Particular interest in ‘daily life’ or ‘the everyday’ (*le quotidien*) has become commonplace within cultural studies, which frequently scrutinise the ‘banal’ details of daily living as important sites of resistive practice. To address the ‘everyday’, I have supplemented a reading of Hall, Deleuze and Guattari with the theoretical kernel of Michel de Certeau’s theory of practice elaborated in his major work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). De Certeau’s theory of practice is read against the background

of Hall's theory of articulation and Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy of becoming. The idea for such a reading is partially taken from Buchanan (1997b) who—responding to the criticism of Meaghan Morris (1990), John Frow (1991) and Joke Hermes (1993) that de Certeau romanticises everyday life by advocating a binary model of domination—argues that Deleuze-Guattarian thought and the work of de Certeau offer similar solutions to the problem of difference/'Otherness'.

The similarities between de Certeau and Deleuze and Guattari—insofar as they expound a non-binary, pluralist theory of relations—are important and extensive, and, as Buchanan (1997b) suggests, 'form the basis of a possible counter tradition in cultural studies' (p. 176). De Certeau's work, like Deleuze's and Guattari's, gives primacy to the conjunctive relational aspects of the subject by philosophically conceiving subjectivity as grounded in ways of being, not states of being. Additionally, the subjectivities proposed by de Certeau and Deleuze and Guattari are eminently political: a kind of poststructuralist thought that aims at reconnecting theory with daily practices of resistance (Braidotti 1994a, p. 165). While reflecting poststructuralist thematics, de Certeau's work has a unique direction that also brings him close to cultural studies: whereas other poststructuralists—reluctant to define the subject theoretically—shield away from the problem of resistance, de Certeau shows no such inhibition (Poster 1992, p. 95). Rather, the question of the resisting subject as a theoretical and political issue runs throughout *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

Given this theoretical richness, I have sought to apply de Certeau's theory of practice to the current analysis of the resisting subject among Melbourne's Oromo. As will become clearer in the following chapters, his approach to everyday practice aims to make explicit the *procedures* of everyday creativity which—by means of a multitude of articulated 'tactics'—subversively enunciate cultural identity (what he calls popular culture, but is here referred to as Oromo cultural formation). According to this schema, everyday practices no longer appear as the obscure background of social activity; rather they become tactical practices of resistance (de Certeau 1984, p. xi).

In addition to de Certeau's theory of practice, I have drawn from a number of theorists whose work is readily applicable to 'the everyday'. Luce Irigaray's (1985, 1993) philosophical constellation is compatible with Deleuze and Guattari,

especially her notion of becoming-woman, and her attempt to redraw the foundations of subjectivity in relation to what makes women distinctly different has proven a valuable resource for theorising difference. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophical approaches are adaptable to a Deleuze-Guattarian framework, and his theories on the carnivalesque elaborated in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) are very useful for the current project—his notion of 'grotesque realism' is poignantly relevant, especially in relation to the discussion of Oromo women's acts of resistance. Additionally, Bakhtin's analytic category of carnival significantly parallels Victor Turner's (1987) work on performative 'liminality' as symbolic inversion. Along similar lines, James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) offers a transformative approach to symbolic resistance pertinent to Melbourne's Oromo. Like the current study, Scott selectively applies elements of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977; 1980; 1991) general 'theory of practice' with an emphasis upon his idea of symbolic power/capital.

With the exception of Luce Irigaray, the authors cited above have been conspicuously silent on gender issues—especially de Certeau. In an attempt to fill this gap, I have drawn from Dorothy E. Smith's book *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (1987), which offers a useful way of conceiving the relations of power in daily life. Her delineation of 'relations of ruling' as multiple, fluid structures of domination which articulate at numerous sites in particular historical conjunctions is readily adaptable to the framework of articulation applied throughout this project.

The choice to write about (represent) Oromo women has been fraught with difficulties, not only because I am male, but, additionally, because I am a 'Western', 'first world' white male writing about 'Third world' women. I cautiously proceeded while simultaneously interrogating my 'authorial presence': the perspective and the institutional locations from which I write. The issues of my location are considered in more detail in the next chapter. In relation to the discussion of Oromo women's subjectivity, valuable conceptual assistance was gained from the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1993), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991a, 1991b, 1992) and bell hooks (1984, 1988, 1990). Their respective theoretical frameworks for theorising gender and 'Third world' women's engagement with feminism inform much of the discussion which follows.

As discussed in the preceding pages, issues of subjectivity invariably involve debate about the politics of representation in relation to the essentialist and constructionist opposition. The vocabulary of constructionism has personal and political implications when applied to dispossessed people such as the Oromo. The central problem is that words such as 'imagined', 'invention' and 'construction' inescapably imply something fictitious, 'made-up', and therefore not real.

Speaking about the Pacific, Linnekin (1992) describes how anthropologists working there 'are frequently confronted with the perceived political implications of their research and cannot simply deny its "real world" relevance' (p. 250). Wendy James' (1973) description of the historical role of anthropologist as 'the reluctant imperialist' retains its relevance today. Anthropologists seeking to apply deconstructionist models to indigenous and dispossessed people frequently find themselves marginalised and excluded by the very people they seek to study. This is markedly so when models of culture, tradition and history are politically instrumental in the construction of anti-colonial and national identities among 'subaltern' peoples.

Throughout the three year process of researching and writing the current project, numerous Oromo intellectuals/political activists have complained to me about the apparent historical failure of non-Oromo (mostly 'Western') academics studying the Oromo to enter into the realm of oppositional politics. It would be fair to say that these sentiments carry some weight. The tag of 'reluctant imperialist' remains relevant when one reflects upon the inability of recent 'Western' scholars of the Oromo to take-up positions of political solidarity.

The problem is that most recent non-Oromo scholars have treated pan-Oromo identity as fundamentally or solely a political construct. A pertinent example is Keller's 1995 essay 'The Ethnogenesis of the Oromo Nation and Its Implications for Politics in Ethiopia', where he ostensibly argues that Oromo national identity is socially constructed in reaction to the ongoing experience of discrimination under Abyssinian hegemony. He postulates that the Oromo national movement is historically baseless and the reason 'the notion of an independent Oromiya seems to have become so salient for some Oromo is because they fear continued repression and exploitation at the hands of yet another Ethiopian regime' (1995, p. 632). While Keller rightly assesses the impact of colonialism as a catalyst, he is mistaken in

denying the presence of primary common elements from which pan-Oromo identity could be forged by the colonial experience.

Marta Hannan (1995) offers a similar diagnosis in her examination of the development of a pan-Oromo identity and the Oromo national movement, 'The Oromo: From Ethnicity to Nationalism'. The study awkwardly attempts to apply Giddens' theory of structuration to interpret the emergence of Oromo identity. Like Keller, Hannan contends that Oromo identity is primarily a created response to the ongoing pressures of marginalisation under Abyssinian colonialism. However, importantly, she adds that Oromo identity 'is also one which has a lived reality which anchors it in the everyday'. She attempts to 'draw the line between those creations which enter the realm of lived reality and those which remain abstract at the level of rhetoric' (p. iv). To do this she undertakes both materialist and Foucauldian 'archeologies' of Oromo representation and self-representation.

Hannan remains unclear in her conclusions—which perhaps try to do too much in the one paper. Like Keller, in seeking to apply constructionist models to the Oromo, she overlooks certain primary elements from which nationalism could be forged by the colonial experience. In addition, apart from a few interviews with male Oromo élite in exile (OLF leaders), she fails to provide any ethnographic episodes to map out the 'lived reality' she seeks to identify. Nonetheless, her use of the Foucauldian idea of archeology to explore the discursive construction of Oromo identity is insightful. Probably most useful to the current study is her elaboration of three different levels at which discourses of Oromo identity have emerged: the Oromo, the Ethiopian and the international (p. 22).

John Sorenson (1993) makes good use of Foucault's approach to power and discourse when exploring Ethiopianist and Oromo narratives in *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*. A major part of the book focuses upon deconstructing the dominant narratives of history and identity in Ethiopia. By examining 'the competing constructions of the past, and the conflicting forms of identity that are championed by Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Oromo nationalists' (p. 4), Sorenson demonstrates how mainstream academic discourse concerning Ethiopia is linked to the local invention and construction of certain images, histories and identities. He succeeds Holcomb and Ibssa (1990) who, in their study of dependent colonialism in Ethiopia appropriately titled *The Invention of*

Ethiopia, assert that 'Ethiopia was not a naturally occurring political, cultural or economic entity'. Rather, it was formed as a result of an alliance between imperial powers of Europe and Abyssinia', 'invented to fill a need felt in Europe rather than one in northeast Africa' (p. xvi). Likewise, Triulzi (1994) deconstructs the making of Ethiopia by examining the various historiographies that have enabled the Oromo and other marginalised groups to be written out of Ethiopian history. By deconstructing the commonly accepted Ethiopianist discourse, the three works present subaltern views of Ethiopian history.

In addition to *Imagining Ethiopia* (1993), Sorenson has published two works concerned with Ethiopian diaspora groups, and recently contributed an essay, 'Ethiopian Discourse and Oromo Nationalism' (1998), to Asafa Jalata's collection mentioned earlier. Sorenson warns of the excesses of the ethnic essentialism (identity politics) which characterises Oromo nationalist discourse. In an earlier essay, 'Essence and Contingency in the Construction of Nationhood: Transformations of Identity in Ethiopia and Its Diasporas' (1992), he interrogates the 'renegotiation of identity' (p. 201) among Oromo, Eritrean and Ethiopianist diaspora groups in Toronto, Canada. Finally, Sorenson's 'Learning to be Oromo: Nationalist Discourse in the Diaspora' (1996) provides a thorough deconstructive analysis of the 'creation of social identities through appeals to nationalism' among Oromo in exile (p. 446).

A recurring motif in Sorenson's work on the Oromo is the danger of nationalist ideology read as ethnic essentialism. In his 'Learning to be Oromo' (1996) essay, he describes the essentialism which dominates Oromo nationalist discourse. The study is an analysis of language use during a series of annual conferences held by the Oromo Studies Association between 1989 and 1994. Sorenson attended these conferences and subjected the nationalist narratives of these meetings to textual deconstruction. He deconstructs numerous Oromocentric narratives from the meetings which essentialise Oromo, Tigray, Amhara¹⁹ and Eritrean identities. Describing the enterprise he calls 'learning to be Oromo', Sorenson convincingly argues that Manichean essentialist categories are used by Oromo intellectuals for the social construction of nationalist mythologies which enable Oromo in exile 'to reconstruct and reclaim an essentialised identity' (p. 447). By describing how the (re)discovery of Oromo identity is consistently linked with

¹⁹ Tigray and Amhara are the names of the two historically politically dominant tribal or national groups from the north of Ethiopia.

acceptance of the program of Oromo nationalism, he argues that 'learning to be Oromo' is not only a cultural but also a political project.

With his emphasis upon the discursive constitution of Oromo national identity, Sorenson describes the role of Oromo intellectuals as the authors and propagators of Oromo identity in the diaspora. But, as with deconstructionists in general, he is apparently unwilling to explore the possibility of events, relations and structures having conditions of existence outside the sphere of the discursive. No account of the struggle over the relations of representation played out in the day-to-day lives of the thousands of Oromo in North America is provided. Apart from his description of language use at formal meetings, ethnographic episodes that demonstrate how the social construction of 'learning to be Oromo' occurs in the everyday lives of exiles are neglected. Furthermore, describing the Oromo in North America, he claims that 'among a population that is unlikely to number more than several thousand it is possible to distinguish those who are Oromo in terms of ancestry and those who are Oromo in terms of (fictionalised) political commitment' (1996, p. 443). He does not elaborate how this is done or what he means by 'ancestry' as a criterion for Oromo identity. Moreover, as the present study contends, among Melbourne's Oromo, such a simple differentiation is not possible.

Despite these apparent shortcomings, Sorenson's work provides a valuable deconstruction of Oromo nationalist discourse and is most relevant to the current study. By providing ethnographic episodes that demonstrate how nationalist discourse is articulated in the everyday shaping of personal identity, this study of Melbourne's Oromo, in a complementary way, goes some way towards filling a gap left by Sorenson's work.

The subaltern narrative of Oromo nationalism challenges the Ethiopianist centre, and the previously cited works of Hannan and Sorenson have proven valuable for the study of Melbourne's Oromo. While both lack thorough ethnographic bases, they provide useful models of deconstruction that are applicable to the study of Melbourne's Oromo. However, while both of these writers have drawn from Foucault in their discussion of Oromo identity, I suggest that there are further theoretical lines of analysis to be followed.

As the following chapters demonstrate, amidst the theoretical approaches of Hall, Deleuze and Guattari and de Certeau there are lines of convergence that supplement and enrich the application of ‘articulation’ as an analytical tool for the exploration of Oromo identity in Melbourne. However, while their ideas provide excellent approaches to the analysis of structures, they fail fully to offer adequate descriptions of either the ‘complex multidimensionality of structure, or of the active process by which such structures are constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed’ (Grossberg 1992, p. 54). This study of Melbourne’s Oromo, like Grossberg’s (1992) work *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, seeks to address this gap by closely examining the production of identity on top of difference.

Another scholar who has recently written about the Oromo in exile is Eloi Ficquet (1997). He provides an analysis of the role of exiled Oromo intellectuals in the formation of the Oromo national movement. Exploring themes of continuity and rupture, he describes the contribution of sixteen exiled Oromo intellectuals to the growth of Oromo nationalist consciousness. His work is an attempt to understand the impact of exile upon the growth of the Oromo national movement based upon an extensive review of the available literature. However, like Sorenson, he too lacks ethnographic data that provide a connection with the theory.

A more satisfactory connection is made by Thomas Zitelmann, who combines sociopolitical interpretation and perceptions from Oromo themselves to provide a case study of the ‘mini-diaspora’ in Germany. Published in 1994 as *Nation der Oromo: Kollektive Identitäten Nationale Konflikte Wir-Gruppenbildungen*, his study (and the range of spin-off articles) was the first rigorous attempt to examine the Oromo national movement from the perspective of those outside Oromiya.

Zitelmann attempts to locate the connection between the Oromo nationalist movement and the re-creation of cultural identity among those in exile. Central to his analysis is what he calls the ‘triangularity in the diaspora’, that is, the relationship of hostland-refugees-homeland (Zitelmann 1992, p. 5). He describes a hostile climate in Germany where integration has been most difficult, with, since reunification, the burgeoning theme of ‘German identity’ manifesting itself in aggression against visible minorities such as the black Oromo.

He argues that the ‘question of “*aadaa oromoo*” [Oromo culture] is eventually combined with the issue of the “*saba oromoo*”, the Oromo nation’ (Zitelmann 1990, p. 2), and observes the discourse on Oromo culture to be the most common activity among exile communities. Like this study, language is central to his thesis. But there are vast differences between his informants and those who feature in the current project. The earlier developments in Europe, compared with the Melbourne case, are quite different: unlike Melbourne’s Oromo, the German exile community is highly educated and—although its members number little more than 200—one of the most active immigrant groups in Germany.

According to Zitelmann, the Oromo population in Europe fluctuates because most regard Europe as a transit point on the way to North America. Contrasting with the Melbourne community, where members are permanent residents and mostly uneducated, the European exiles are mostly students on the move with high literacy levels. Unlike the Melbourne setting, where dance, music, video cassettes and the spoken word serve as ‘books’, Zitelmann observed how, in the European case, the ‘presentation of Oromo culture was rather “logo-centric”. “History books” were indeed “books” (in *afaan Oromoo* and English)’ (1998, correspondence, 20 January). Zitelmann notes that the ‘central part of the discourse on culture was the shift from oral to written communication’, whereby, on the level of cultural nationalism, ‘the application of the Latin script marks a symbolic border against the literate legacy of the Ethiopian empire’ (1990, p. 14). Elsewhere he argues that the shift from orality to literacy is clearly part of the political process: ‘Literacy in the Oromo language marks a major break with an oral tradition, it is linked to nationalism, and the grammarians and philologists can be found as activists’ (Zitelmann 1996, p. 289).

There can be no doubt that Oromo nationalism among exiles has strongly influenced and articulated with Oromo nationalism within Ethiopia. The Oromo group in Germany has played a leading role in the growth of national self-consciousness, or what Zitelmann refers to as the ‘romanticisation’ of the Oromo. For example, Zitelmann notes how Oromo intellectuals in Europe played important roles in language development. Until the 1990s the centres for development of Oromo literacy (*qubee*) were largely located in the foreign offices of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and among the international Oromo exile communities

linked to the organisation. Drawing from Zitelmann's findings, the theme of literacy and its connection to the national movement will be explored in this thesis.

Among the Oromo academics, very little work has been done on Oromo communities in exile. Of that completed, Mekuria Bulcha's 'The Predicaments of Forced Migration: an assessment of the Oromo experience' (1997) is outstanding. He examines the collective and individual impact of uprooting and forced migration upon the Oromo, and eloquently explores the experiences of those Oromo now residing in Europe and North America. Mekuria emphasises the prominence of 'homelessness' and 'nostalgia about home', which is linked to the centrality of land to the Oromo identity. Describing how the land 'symbolises both the physical space which he/she [the Oromo individual] inhabits and the social life that is embedded in it ... [and] is a crucial part of his/her identity' (p. 25), he highlights how vital continuity with the land is to Oromo identity. Following a nativist line of argument, he asserts that is inconceivable to speak of Oromoness without making reference to the land because the Oromo identity is centred upon a geographical location (Oromiya). Agreeing with Mekuria (although rejecting a spatial incarcerating nativism), a central contention of this thesis is that the connection with the land is vital to Melbourne's Oromo and that, while identities can be reconstructed in the new place, to a large degree a crisis of discontinuity prevails because of this physical separation.

Mekuria Bulcha's stress upon the nostalgia with which exiled Oromo view their country, their origins, suggests that particular attention should be paid to the notion of 'place'. According to Massey (1994), in much of the recent debate about identity, the theorising of the nature of place has remained essentialist in its characterising of places according to their past histories and local traditions, which are often viewed through nostalgic longings. Drawing from connections between the debate about personal identity and the discussion about the identity of place, Massey argues that the identity of place is unfixed, because 'place is thought of as simply a set of the interactions which constitute space, a local articulation within the wider whole' (p. 115). Thus, the specificity of the local place can only be constructed through its interrelations with the 'outside' global. Indeed, the global has always been part of the construction of the local.

If places are conceptualised in this way, understanding the specificity of place is best approached through an analysis of the particularity of the social interactions which intersect at the location. These social interactions and their interpretations are ever changing to produce new effects and social processes. As discussed in subsequent chapters, Melbourne's Oromo consider themselves to be rural people living in urban 'places', yet via the creative use of their language they maintain a continuity with their rural past by transforming these urban places they currently inhabit.

Oromo academic Addisu Tolesa (1990) offers a significant contribution to the study of Oromo communities in exile 'articulating' their rural identities by transforming the 'places' in which they find themselves via the performance of their language. His study, *The Historical Transformation of a Folklore Genre: the geerasa as a national literature of the Oromo in the context of Amhara colonisation in Ethiopia* (1990), examines *geerasa* (folksong), a medium of artistic expression firmly embedded in Oromo social life, both in Ethiopia and among exile communities. *Geerasa* consists of life experience stories sung and recited in a call-and-response manner. Addisu approaches the study of *geerasa* as performance, 'wherein the Oromo and their lore are integrated' (p. iv). The audience of the traditional *geerasa* performances consist of members of familiar social networks, while the context of contemporary *geerasa* has the additional feature of exile. He argues that the Oromo sense of identity, and their aspiration for freedom from Amhara cultural domination, is clearly stated in these performances. By representing both pre-colonial and anti-colonial phases of Oromo history *geerasa* expresses lines of continuity of Oromo cultural tradition (p. 6).

The performance of *geerasa*—also common in Melbourne—is considered by Addisu in terms of a continuity of Oromo cultural identity. He argues that Oromo national identity is revived and maintained through the adaptation of *geerasa* to change during and after colonisation. Exile is an important feature of the cultural context of contemporary *geerasa*, and of particular relevance to this study of Melbourne's Oromo is Addisu's exploration of the use of *geerasa* by two Oromo communities in North America (Minneapolis and Washington DC). Addisu describes how these communities have been able to creatively reconstruct *geerasa* to suit their new settings while asserting a continuity with its traditional practice, 'which has been a constant companion to the Oromo destiny' (p. 8). As a participant observer,

he provides a richness of ethnographic detail to demonstrate the role of the Oromo language verbally sung in *geerasa*. The account of the role of *afaan Oromoo*—written, spoken and sung—among Melbourne’s Oromo provided in this study is an attempt to follow Addisu Tolesa’s example, by looking for the apparent continuities but also examining the reconstructions.

The preceding studies, with their emphasis upon exiled deterritorialised discourses, represent the emergence of globalised and ‘outside’ perspectives concerning Oromo identities. Building upon the scholarly work already completed, this study of Melbourne’s Oromo also begins ‘outside’ by exploring what it means to be Oromo away from ‘home’. With the exception of Addisu Tolesa and Thomas Zitelmann’s contributions, there has been no substantial work done on the vital role of the Oromo language, *afaan Oromoo*, among those in the exile. While there are a number of studies examining the historical impact of Ethiopian language policy upon the Oromo (cf. Mekuria Bulcha 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Tucho Yigazu 1992; Mulugeta Seyoum 1985; and Seyoum Hameso 1997), there remains a great deal of work to be done on the steadily growing role of *afaan Oromoo* in the constitution and articulation of pan-Oromo identity.

In 1989, Paul Baxter—relating to the ‘Western’ experience, where the evolution of a national identity has been closely associated with some form of literary expansion—suggested that language would be the base upon which a modern Oromo political culture could be built (p. 7). Later he described how, ‘over the years’ as an anthropologist, he reluctantly came to ‘see Oromo identity as a cultural construction built out of words: it is maintained largely by the instrumental force of the poetically charged words which are used at both religious and secular events ...’ (Baxter 1994, p. 248). Moreover, according to him, the ‘essence’ of Oromo identity is ‘active involvement in Oromo cultural values through local ritual and social performances’. Especially, among the Oromo exiles, who ‘feel their sense of ethnic identity very, very strongly indeed’, words have much value for them (p. 256). This insight will be taken up and further developed in subsequent chapters.

Asserting that Oromo identity is anchored in the Oromo language (*afaan Oromoo*) and pursuing a nativist—even atavistic—line of enquiry, Gemetchu Megerssa’s (1994, 1996) work takes issue with constructionist interpretations of Oromo national identity. He endeavours systematically to reconstruct a precolonial

definition of what it means to be Oromo by juxtaposing two aspects of *Oromumma*: ‘personality’ and ‘reality’. According to his schema, ‘personality’ is the essence of being Oromo, the substance of Oromo identity that an individual is born with, while ‘reality’ is the social experience of being Oromo, the situation Oromo find themselves in. Apparently unable to move beyond nativist conceptions, Gemetchu (1996) emphasises that the social experience of the Oromo must ‘never reduce Oromo culture and consciousness to a mere product of that experience’, because such an approach ‘would destroy *Oromumma* and would not be able to account for the historical continuity and essential identity and unity of the Oromo’ (p. 102).

Gemetchu Megerssa’s (1994) major work involves an exposition of the Oromo system of knowledge in an attempt to show that ‘knowledge is identity and that identity is knowledge’, because ‘to understand the Oromo identity it is first necessary to understand the system of knowledge upon which that identity is founded and which provides it with a worldview’ (1994, p. 253). In a later work, he raises the difficulty of describing what *Oromumma* represents to Oromo in exile, but responds with the suggestion that, when probed deeply, they would be able to articulate an ‘adequate framework of meaning composed of his/her beliefs, values and practices ...’ (1996, p. 99). While rejecting the universalising tendencies of Gemetchu’s project, the current study will follow this line of enquiry by exploring how such a framework might be articulated among the exiles in Melbourne.

Underlining the role of *ayyaana* as the primary spiritual principle upon which the Oromo knowledge system is constructed, Gemetchu Megerssa defines it as: ‘that by which and through which *waaqa* (the Oromo divinity) creates everything. *Ayyaana* is the cause of something while at the same time it becomes that which it has caused’ (1994, p. 15). Bartels (1983) has similarly discussed in detail the role of *ayyaana* for the Matcha Oromo. Part IV of this thesis interprets various ritual practices among Melbourne’s Oromo which enact a fragmented Oromo spirituality (or religious disposition) that stresses the importance of blessing, fertility and peace (*nagaa*). Such enacted dispositions perhaps equate with a contemporary *ayyaana*. However, while *ayyaana* is important, as this study shows, it is *gadaa* that features more prominently on the cultural repertoire of exiled Oromo in Melbourne.

No discussion of the context of Oromo studies would be complete without reference to the dominance of *gadaa* in the shaping of contemporary Oromo national identity. The seminal and most quoted work is Asmaron Legesse's *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society* (1973). Indeed, this text has greatly influenced the current understandings of *gadaa*. Since the early 1970s, *gadaa* and its accompanying *odaa* tree have become national symbols for all Oromo. For those Oromo in exile with no direct connection to the land, both have developed into metonyms of the very term Oromo.

The use of the two words *gadaa* and *odaa* have become instrumental in the voicing and linking of Oromo identity while in exile. However, the representation of both *gadaa* and *odaa* as universal signifiers of Oromo identity has come under scrutiny by various scholars. While a great deal of the work to date has focused upon the political role of *gadaa*, especially among the Booran in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (cf. Asmaron Legesse 1973, 1989; Baxter 1978b; Lewis 1989; Lemmu Baissa 1994; Bassi 1994, 1996; and Dahl 1996), there is scarcely anything about the contemporary ideological roles of *gadaa* and *odaa* as symbols of pan-Oromo identity. Through ethnographic episodes, this study seeks to interpret the complex multi-layered roles of both *gadaa* and *odaa* as symbols of pan-Oromo identity among Melbourne's Oromo.

The articulation and constitution of Oromo identity is an ethnographically rich area full of exploratory possibilities. The emergence of new definitions of what it is to be Oromo—definitions which find their origins not in the settings of Oromiya but, rather, in the changing circumstances/contexts in which exiled Oromo people find themselves—entails processes whereby Oromo identities move into the future through a symbolic detour through the past (Hall 1990). Mapping the individual and collective dimensions of these processes has required ethnographic dexterity—in representing the Oromo, I have become an agency for cultural translation, a very part of the network of relationships into which and within which Oromo identities are articulated.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT HAS HOME GOT TO DO WITH IT?¹

BEING ETHNOGRAPHER AND BECOMING-PERSON

An ethnography is a report of a unique experience. It is about the dialogue of sensibilities implicated in encountering and depicting a people and a place. The work and the writer are thus specifically accountable not just to the interpretive preoccupations of scholarly readers, but to that people and place, and to the need for incisive honesty in their depiction. That depiction situates ethnography as an account of a specific yet indefinite encounter ... This dynamic creates numerous ironic mysteries for an author, and no less for the people who are trying to figure out what the author is up to.

Steven Feld (1990, p. X)

Becoming-other is directional (away from molarity), but not directed (no one body or will can pilot it). It leaves a specific orbit but has no predesignated end point. For that reason, it cannot be exhaustively described.

Brian Massumi (1992, p. 103)

While undertaking ethnographic studies of the Oromo people in Melbourne, whether I liked it or not, I placed myself—or allowed myself to be placed—in the position of being regarded by both Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopians as an advocate for the Oromo cause. To that extent, I was made into a ‘person’ by both parties (with all the attendant risks implied by that status). Becoming a ‘person’ meant being marginalised within the circle of hostilities that characterise Oromo and Abyssinian relations. However, as will be described in this chapter, my status as ‘person’ allowed for a richness of detail and mutuality of the ethnographic encounter that would otherwise be antagonised. Over time and the course of relationships that grew deeper or fragmented, mutual perceptions of my task, my writing and the meanings of my work changed. To the extent that I discovered *language* to be a means of stepping both inside and outside the circle of hostilities, the dimension of spoken language was vital to the ethnographic process. Inextricably tied with my use of language were both my *family* and *location* which

¹ The question, ‘What’s Home Got to Do with It?’ is adapted from Biddy Martin’s and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1986) essay ‘Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?’

provided a constant source of tension as I could never ‘go home’ because—as will become clear—‘home’ became where I did my fieldwork.

I started as a passive, outside observer who was acquainted with a wide range of Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopian people. These acquaintances led to the point where I considered conducting a study of the broader Ethiopian community in Melbourne and the issues they face maintaining and forming their identities. In the early stages, I was ignorant about the complexities of the so-called ‘Ethiopian community’, which (mirroring what many practitioners of community studies have done) I assumed to be a cohesive ‘community’. As I became acquainted with a wider range of people from different ethnic backgrounds within the broader ‘Ethiopian community’, it was not long before this ‘imagining’ soon disappeared. I quickly discovered there was very little cohesiveness amongst people from the area that is today called ‘Ethiopia’; rather, there were clear distinctions and hostilities amongst the various ethnic groups. Initially, I assumed these hostilities were largely based upon personal differences. However, as I learnt more about the history of the Ethiopian state, I began to appreciate how enmeshed and deeply-rooted in ethnic and national conflict many of these differences are.

Because of the huge diversity amongst the 3000-plus people from Ethiopia in Melbourne, it became clear that a study of the broader Ethiopian community was simply unrealistic given the time frame and resources of the study.² Instead, my research interest narrowed and focused upon the Oromo people and their experiences living in Melbourne. I began the project in February 1996 with a few contacts among the Oromo community, but with little knowledge of the actual size of the population.

It was not until July 1997 that the committee of the Australian Oromo Community Association (AOCA) conducted a headcount of the Oromo population in Melbourne. At the time of their count, the total number of Oromo dwelling in the Melbourne metropolitan area was 465 (241 male and 224 female). Unfortunately, there are no additional details of the demographic make-up of the broader community (i.e. age, education levels and birthplace). Suffice it to say that the vast majority of the broader community originate from eastern Oromiya, specifically the

² Official figures of the number of ‘Ethiopians’ in Melbourne have not been obtained, but most community leaders from the various nations estimate that by 1997 there were more than 3000 people who had officially arrived in Melbourne under the political category of ‘Ethiopians’.

Hararghe and Arsi areas, and are of Muslim background. A smaller number derive from Wallaga, Jimma, Shoa, Wollo and Boorana—and are of Protestant, Orthodox Christian and Muslim backgrounds.

It was not because of any premeditative choice on my part that this study primarily depicts the experiences of Oromo from Hararghe and Arsi. Originally I sought equal numbers of informants from each of the various areas of Oromiya, but as the study evolved those from Hararghe and Arsi were the most accessible. Consequently, these were the segments of the broader community with whom I most closely bonded throughout the research process.

With the exception of a small number of professionals, those Oromo from Hararghe and Arsi are vulnerably poor refugees and immigrants. In the majority of cases they are semi-skilled or unskilled workers with little or no formal education. Illiteracy or semi-illiteracy is high, especially among the women. With low levels of proficiency in English, and few marketable skills, unemployment is endemic, and those with jobs commonly work as cheap labour in difficult conditions in badly paid low status sectors (i.e. cleaners, factory hands, process workers and hotel room attendants). While a few have accumulated a small amount of capital and mortgaged houses, the majority live in government subsidised rental properties or privately rented flats. Predictably, they live in the poorer, traditionally working-class areas of Melbourne that are now largely inhabited by immigrants.

The earliest Oromo arrived in Melbourne in 1984, and by mid-1985 there was a steady flow of refugees coming via Egypt. In 1985 the Ethiopian Community Association was formed and the small number of Oromo in Melbourne were invited to join but they did not accept the offer. That same year the Oromo Community Association was formed and temporarily disbanded in 1986 (due to a split). In 1987 there were about sixty Oromo in Melbourne (including the children) but there was no Oromo organisation—only a few active individuals assisting the new arrivals.³

One of the early arrivals was Abdul Yacin, who recalled his experience as an Oromo arriving in Melbourne for the first time and resettling near Footscray:

³ From interviews with early arrivals, 1996-97.

When we arrived in February 1987 there was no active Oromo organisation, but there were some active individuals. It was funny because there were thirty of us on one Qantas flight arriving together. We travelled together from Djibouti, flying by Air Djibouti to Paris and London, then we took a Qantas flight to Melbourne. You can imagine on the plane how excited we were travelling together after spending all that time as refugees in Djibouti.

We were greeted at the airport by the Ethiopian community leaders. We were happy to see them as when we were in Djibouti we all co-operated together—whether Oromo, Ethiopian or Somali we had to co-operate because we faced a common threat from the Djibouti authorities and the Derg in Ethiopia. So when we were greeted by the Ethiopian Community Association we were still happy.

There we were about sixty Oromo (if you include the children) in Melbourne in 1987. After arriving we stayed in the hostel near Footscray and later a small flat on Ballarat Road before getting housing commission [public rental] in Flemington. It was six months until we were approached by any Oromo. During that time we were helped by Ethiopians. But a few people approached me and said they were forming an Oromo Community Association and asked if I would like to participate. I was very keen to help and be involved; especially I was surprised because I had no idea that there was any Oromo community here.

So it was in late-1987 that the Oromo Community Association formed again and everyone was together. We were a big community association with probably one-hundred members. By then people had started sponsoring their relatives to join them in Australia.⁴

Another Oromo, Fozia, recounted the bizarre experience she encountered arriving in 1985:

When we arrived together [herself and a small number of other Oromo] we stayed in the Springvale migrant hostel. We were the first Africans that had been there and everybody stared at us. I remember once we went outside to look around and everybody stared at us. I felt terrible and wanted to tell people

⁴ Interview, May 1997.

to stop staring. It was really hard, people were not used to seeing Africans in Melbourne.⁵

After 1987 the number of Oromo in Melbourne steadily increased and the community further organised; so too did the broader non-Oromo Ethiopian community, which was strong and well organised.

By 1990 the civil war in Ethiopia had reached a climax and the disintegration of the state of Ethiopia became a real possibility. There was an air of expectancy among the many Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopians in Melbourne. Especially among the Oromo hopes for liberation and possible secession were high. Meanwhile, many Amhara feared the disintegration of Ethiopia as the Eritreans were ready to grasp their long-awaited independence.

Despite hoping otherwise, for Melbourne's Oromo 1991-92 were years of bitter disappointment and dejection, with their people back home further marginalised from the centres of power. Mengistu Haile Mariam was ousted in May 1991. Shortly after, the executive leaders of the vanguard OLF attended the London Conference to negotiate the terms of the new transitional government, and then the July 1991 Peace and Democracy Conference in Addis Ababa that adopted the Transitional Charter of Ethiopia. Throughout the negotiating process the OLF was unable to deliver what many Oromo thought the leaders promised. Finally, after many years of fighting, under the negotiated terms of the peace agreement the OLF leadership agreed to encamp their soldiers. Perhaps predictably, the agreement was violated and the OLF duped when the major rebel fighting force, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Liberation (TPLF), quickly moved its forces into previously OLF held areas of Oromiya. The organisation then went underground and the leaders fled the country, undercutting the strength of the movement (cf. Leenco Lata 1998a; Keller 1998).

The significance of these events in 1991-92 will be further discussed in Chapter Eight. At this point, suffice it to say that they were critical for all Oromo around the world and impacted profoundly upon the community in Melbourne. My fieldwork among Melbourne's Oromo was completed in a post-Derg/1991 context—a time full of ambiguity and hostility. Had my research been conducted

⁵ Interview, February 1997.

prior to 1991 the task would perhaps have been made easier: by all accounts the pre-1991 community in Melbourne was smaller and concordant, more active and positive.

Nevertheless, I approached the broader community to conduct research largely unaware of this history and the current dissension. The choice to pursue Oromo studies was difficult to make because in many ways it was fraught with risks, particularly because of the condition of relations within the broader Oromo community, and also because many of my friends were non-Oromo Ethiopians. However, at least initially, it was pragmatic reasons that guided my decision. Not only did the choice to focus upon the Oromo promise to make the project manageable, but it also offered the greatest scope for effective fieldwork: they were a minority community without power who were very positive about my project. In fact, it was the chairperson of the Oromo Community Association in Victoria (OCAV), Mohammed Aba-Bulgu, who, in a casual conversation at his home, asked me to do a study of the Oromo people in Melbourne. By no means did this represent an invitation from the whole community—after all Mohammed is an élite male—but it did indicate that I would be warmly welcomed.

From the outset, a study of Melbourne's Oromo was full of exciting ethnographic possibilities. As noted in Chapter One, there are scarcely any published writings concerning exiled Oromo.⁶ In addition, the Melbourne Oromo community provided an excellent context to explore a gamut of issues related to identity formation and postcolonialism amongst a displaced, black minority immigrant community. Furthermore, gaining easy access to the community enabled me to explore a range of ethnographic approaches.

My concern as an ethnographer was to interpret how Melbourne's Oromo articulate their identity(ies) in everyday practice. Ethnography appealed because of its capacity to draw out wider implications from very particular and focused case studies. Through the application of ethnographic methodologies—specifically, variations of participant observation—theorising from within the particularity of the everyday seemed possible. In this way, my study of Melbourne's Oromo aimed not only to contribute to the further development of Oromo studies, but also to

⁶ Cf. Braukämper (1982-3); Luling (1986); Mekuria Bulcha (1988, 1997); Seada Mohammed (1993); Sorenson (1996); and Zitelmann (1992, 1994).

engage with the current theoretical debates concerning ethnography and identity formation.

In writing ethnography I have sought to provide a plethora of detail. As readily observed in the following chapters, it was often the finer details of a situation that provided the rare angle for discovery and invention. The descriptive approach adopted throughout this study, though not as strictly semiotic, has parallels with the interpretive ethnography of Clifford Geertz. In his volume *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz describes a semiotic approach to culture and an interpretive approach to its study. Within the semiotic approach the basic task of theory building is to generalise within cases. In this way, cultural theory is diagnostic and not predictive. The ethnographer seeks to interpret social discourse with the aim of gaining access to the conceptual world of the subjects. Geertz describes this as 'thick description'. The aim of 'thick description' is to draw large conclusions from small and densely textured facts, to search for meanings within the particular.

According to Geertz (1973), the ethnographer's practice is simple: 'he observes, he records, he analyses' (p. 20). Central to this practice is guess work: in cultural analysis the ethnographer is 'guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses' (p. 21). In this way, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations because they are always fictions that 'begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematise those' (p. 15).

Although rejecting this weightedly semiotic approach to interpretation, throughout the research process of the current project 'guessing' was a daily practice, as I regularly encountered 'ethnographic moments' that confronted me with some 'otherness' outside my own cultural system. Like the 'structural anthropologist', I recorded these interpretations in 'fieldnotes' and attempted to systematise them. But inevitably such attempts confounded me. My enquiry and findings resulted in the following ethnographic writings which are the product of the strange dialectic between discovery and invention (Denning 1996, p. 43). As described in this thesis, I both *discovered* and *invented* histories of Melbourne's Oromo in the interpretive act that Geertz has called 'thick description'.

The notion of guessing aptly describes the manner in which I approached my task of mapping Oromo identity in Melbourne. With the exception of a limited six week trip in March/April 1998 to visit various areas of Oromiya, I had very little to go on in terms of a 'blueprint' of Oromo identity (like Gemetchu Megerssa's *Oromumma* 1994, 1996). There was no Archimedean point from which I could gauge my findings; I literally began with no 'bigger picture' to guide my mapping. The temptation was to look phenomenologically for some experience that encompassed the reality of being Oromo: to resort to nativist interpretations. I resisted, instead choosing to focus upon how people live and act their cultural identity: an identity of practice. So I began a cartography of daily life, by spending hours with Oromo people in many different settings, listening and later writing notes. Grossberg's (1992) analogy of the jigsaw puzzle neatly illustrates the mystery of ethnographic enquiry. He describes how the cultural analyst, or the ethnographer:

always starts by taking evidence literally—at its face value—and then attempts to reconstruct the threads that connect the pieces, the forces that hold them together and the structures that organise them. In this, the practice of reassembling and mapping historical contexts is somewhat analogous to constructing a jigsaw puzzle without knowing how many pieces are needed, if they are all present (and if the only ones present are necessary), or what the puzzle is a picture of. What one finds on the surface of any piece is all there is to go on, yet there is no guarantee that the lines inscribed on the surface correspond to the lines of the puzzle. The identity of any piece remains a mystery until the puzzle begins to give up its image.

(Grossberg 1992, p. 64)

It was not until after two years of fieldwork in Melbourne, that the various effective structures of linking, living and voicing Oromo identity began to emerge into an image of cultural formation that I could specify as Oromo. My visit to Oromiya was a defining point in the research process. Although severely limited in my research capacity by the adverse relations between the Oromo people and the EPRDF government, I managed to visit Oromo people in Jimma, Arsi, Wollo, Finfinnee and Hadama. In addition, in July/August 1997 I visited Oromo exile communities in Toronto, Washington DC, Minneapolis, Atlanta and London. I also attended the 1997 Oromo Studies Association international conference and the OLF

Congress. These brief visits complemented my findings in Melbourne by providing me the opportunity to meet with a wide range of Oromo scholars, conduct interviews and stay with Oromo people in different locations, including their homelands. Importantly, these exposures enabled me to gain a picture of the broader development of pan-Oromo identity on a worldwide scale.

On returning to Melbourne, I could more readily identify a conglomerate of articulations that constitute what I refer to as Oromo cultural formation. Nonetheless, I was still unsure of the legitimacy of the picture I was mapping. To claim a representation of the Oromo was a complex and problematic endeavour, with ‘consequences for certainty and decidability as fraught with difficulties as can be imagined’ (Said 1989, p. 206). Throughout the process of analysis I faced a problematic of representation (the aporia of anthropology)—how do I represent the Oromo? Who speaks? For what and to whom? How does my work relate—and surely it must—to the contemporary political struggle of the Oromo? It was a problematic I never satisfactorily resolved (cf. Clifford 1986). In my institutional ‘home’, where (as my supervisor Ron Adams had suggested)⁷ I operated in a ‘native’ academic way of looking at things, my own epistemological frameworks and points of institutional reference tended clumsily to reify processes of cultural identification that are constantly shifting.

In summary, my own ‘thick description’, while useful, also acted to shut out the voices of those I studied, and their claims of empire and domination (Said 1989, p. 219)—a point Geertz’s interpretive anthropological milieu overlooks. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) states, interpretive anthropology with its self-congratulating claims of listening and conversing with the native, remains firmly bound to a language of nativism expressed in Malinowski’s creed of anthropology: ‘to grasp the native’s point of view ... to realise his vision and his world’ (p. 73).

Another dimension of this difficulty is explored by Scott (1985), who describes the problematic of ‘conformity and the partial transcript’, whereby ethnographic accounts do not, indeed cannot, present a ‘full transcript’ of cultural discourses. The ‘full transcript’ is simply not ascertainable, because in the presence of the powerful and literate ethnographer, dissimulation invariably prevails (p. 278). He calls this the subordinated classes’ necessary ‘art of dissimulation’ which

⁷ In an unpublished paper titled ‘The Anthropological Translation of the Deconstructed Native: Jean Guiart and Tanna’, Social and Cultural Studies Seminar, Victoria University, 1996.

ensures that, nearly always, portions of the ‘full transcript’ are driven underground, as ethnographers

are likely, quite apart from ideological intent, to see only that cautious and deferential aspect the peasantry adopts in the presence of power. What they may describe on this basis is not false, but it is at best a partial and misleading truth that takes a necessary pose for the whole reality.

(Scott 1985, p. 285)

Similarly, the ‘art of dissimulation’ has been palpably practised in my presence throughout the research process—implying that the range of activities described in this study are indeed ‘performances’, and my analysis, at best, partial but plausible accounts, which ultimately relied upon the experience and descriptions the informants brought to me. I do not claim to represent a whole reality of being Oromo, rather provisional generalisations. Nonetheless, as Scott describes it, I have sought to move ‘backstage’ where the mask can be lifted, at least partly, in order to recover more than just the ‘performance’ (1985, p. 287).

Moving ‘backstage’, I have sought ‘non-mask’ situations—such as extended time with close and trusted Oromo companions, and spontaneous private occasions inside people’s houses—‘where some of what is habitually censored finally leaps to view’ (Scott 1985, p. 287). But it took eighteen months before such opportunities became common and when they arose much of the material I gained either contradicted or starkly contrasted with the public accounts offered to me in more formal situations.

Such a methodology mirrors a number of ethnographic studies which have experimented with new critical approaches to anthropological writing and the analysis of identity formation. Besides Scott’s study, Herzfeld’s *Anthropology Through the Looking-glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (1987), and Fischer and Abedi’s collaborative dialogue *Debating Muslims: Critical Dialogue in Postmodernity and Tradition* (1990) have been influential in shaping the methodology employed in this study. Both studies apply a playful, serious and critical ‘bifocal’ approach to the research and writing of culture. Herzfeld takes anthropology itself to be an ethnographic object, ‘as much a symbolic system, and concerned with the differentiation of identities, as any of the social groups that it reifies and studies’ (p. ix). Similarly, the term ‘bifocal’ is used to describe how the

identity of the ethnographer is related to that of any world he or she is studying because, as George Marcus (1992, p. 321) suggests, ‘the multilocality of identity ... creates a mutuality of implication for identity processes occurring in any ethnographic site’.

Pursuing the notion of the ‘bifocal’, I chose to adopt a dialogical approach to participant observation, in which the emphasis was upon dialogue and discourse between myself and the subjects under study. I could see no other way, simply because, above my research role, the Oromo apparently regarded me as a ‘person’. Not only did they see me as a ‘person’—but as one of them or, at least, one with them. Against the background of colonial conflict I became increasingly perceived as an important ‘Western’ interlocutor, not because of any brilliance on my part, but simply because no-one else in Australia was listening to the ‘Oromo. My approach took the research beyond a simple concern with techniques and data gathering; rather, it became a dynamic process whereby significant data were collected through the status of the research method as a social relationship. However, to conduct research via a close, intimate interlocutory social relationship entailed my entering into unknown and often hostile terrain.

Hostilities are usually difficult to perceive, as a veneer of mutual amicability may act as a smoke screen for prejudice and hatred. It takes time and patience to lift the layers of veneer and uncover the dynamics of hostility between people. As an ethnographer locating myself within a zone of ethnically-based hostility, I initially sought to maintain a profile of ‘neutrality’ while concurrently engaging with a divided Oromo linguistic minority within the context of a hostile non-Oromo Ethiopian Amharic speaking majority. From the outset, the dimension of language was vital to the ethnographic process: I soon discovered language to be the most effective means of either stepping outside the circle of hostilities or finding myself in the centre of it.

As contended throughout this thesis, language is central to the processes of identity formation amongst Melbourne’s Oromo. The current study involved me negotiating my way through a maze of politically charged language that was often filled with conflict and misunderstanding. Within the broader non-Oromo Ethiopian and Oromo communities in Melbourne, language is a highly politicised issue: neither Amharic nor *afaan Oromoo* can be considered as ‘neutral’ mediums of

communication. Amharic, until 1992 the official Ethiopian state language, is associated by Oromo with their past suffering and domination by successive Ethiopian regimes. For the greater number of Melbourne's Oromo, being 'Ethiopian' is synonymous with being an 'Amhara' or 'Abyssinian', the words being interchangeable due to the Amhara cultural, linguistic and political dominance throughout most of Ethiopian state history.

In the context of this study, the descriptive title 'Ethiopian'—and the oppressive discourse in which the term is used—is full of difficulties. The majority of Oromo people in Melbourne prefer not to describe themselves as Ethiopians and consider the title offensive. This means that those in Melbourne usually describe themselves as being Oromo, but having come from what is now regarded as the state called Ethiopia. Underlying the rejection of 'Ethiopian' as a term of identification is a widespread desire among the Oromo people of Melbourne to be associated with an Oromo national identity, as represented through the use of the term 'Oromiya'.

Regarding national titles, my findings concur with Batrouney (1991), who, after conducting a general study of the broader African communities in Melbourne, distinguished the Oromo from the Ethiopian community. He correctly noted that, 'although Eritreans and Oromo would have come to Australia under Ethiopian travel documents, upon arrival the majority identified themselves as members of their own communities. Therefore they are not included under the Ethiopian community grouping' (p. 45).

The titles 'Ethiopian' and 'Oromo' are both highly politicised and my decision to use either when making identifications of the people around me was fraught with danger. What needs stressing is that, because of the multi-ethnic demographics in many parts of the state of Ethiopia (for example in the town Dirree dhawaa, where many of my informants grew-up) and Africa in general, one cannot easily reduce people into simplistic categories. Added to the multi-ethnic experiences of life in African refugee camps, generations of intermarriage and interrelations have made boundaries much less clear than nationalist ideologues would like to admit. Nonetheless, my study is concerned with those dwelling in Melbourne, where the population is not so multi-ethnic (the majority of non-Oromo Ethiopians are Tigray and Amhara) and the categories less obstructive. So, throughout my writing, in

addition to using pseudonyms to protect the identities of my subjects when necessary, I have chosen to use the terms *Oromo* and *non-Oromo Ethiopians* when identifying their backgrounds.

The former refers to the majority of Oromo in Melbourne who do not consider themselves part of the broader Ethiopian community; the latter to the broader Ethiopian community from non-Oromo backgrounds who consider themselves primarily as Ethiopians. A third term that will be used less frequently, *Oromo Ethiopians*, refers to a small number of Oromo in Melbourne who regard themselves primarily as Ethiopians but of Oromo ethnicity.⁸ Furthermore, the historically similar identifying terms Ethiopian and Abyssinian are often interchanged and used when referring to those who support the integrity of the Ethiopian state.⁹

Because non-Oromo Ethiopians have generally regarded the Oromo language as deficient, their expectation has been that Oromo will readily speak the 'advanced' Amharic language. In the Melbourne setting this still applies, though not to the same degree as Oromo people experienced it in Ethiopia. My observation is that most non-Oromo Ethiopians in Melbourne fail to understand why Oromo refuse or dislike speaking in Amharic. The expectation is that when non-Oromo Ethiopians and Oromo meet they will always speak in Amharic.

Initially, because I had contact with a wide circle of both non-Oromo Ethiopians and Oromo people, I attempted to convey an impression of neutrality among both parties, which I thought was not only possible but central to the success of the project. To do this I undertook to learn both Amharic and *afaan Oromoo*, languages which provided me with a degree of acceptance when I mixed with both groups. Prior to beginning my research I had already begun to study and speak Amharic and I commenced learning *afaan Oromoo* shortly after, but quickly discovered that the Amharic language was useless when mixing with Oromo people, so I stopped learning it.

⁸ I know of five people who primarily regard themselves as Ethiopians but still recognise their Oromo background. Usually anyone with an Oromo background is known by the wider Oromo community; however there may be others who hide their background and are unknown.

⁹ As Holcomb and Ibssa (1990) explain, "Ethiopia" is the name that was eventually given to the geographic unit created when Abyssinia, a cluster of small kingdoms in northeast Africa, expanded in the mid-1800s by conquering independent nations in the region ...' (p. 1). Throughout this thesis 'Ethiopia' refers to that empire, and 'Abyssinia' to the historic homeland from which the contemporary Ethiopian empire originates.

Fortunately, amidst the conflicts, one of the best tools I had was my own first language: English. Because English is spoken as a second language by almost all Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopians in Melbourne I was able to communicate in different contexts with a wide range of people. Significantly, English is regarded as a neutral language by both groups: for non-Oromo Ethiopians it does not contest Abyssinian dominance and for Oromo it is a non-Ethiopian language.

The different groups from what is now referred to as Ethiopia have never experienced direct colonisation by an English-speaking superpower. Unlike other African countries, the English language was never regarded as a colonial language in Ethiopia. And while English was taught in schools by the Ethiopian state for the benefit and advancement of the country, it would be fair to say that this choice was not seen by either Oromo or non-Oromo Ethiopians as something imposed on them. One Oromo in Melbourne commented how ‘learning English in school (at Addis Ababa) was good because it meant not having to speak Amharic all the time, having exams in English was even better’.¹⁰

At one level, despite my efforts, I was never neutral because by even writing about their lives I was considered by the Oromo to have chosen to act as their interlocutory advocate. By merely acknowledging the Oromo apart from Ethiopia, which implies rejecting the dominant myths of Ethiopian history, I had effectively taken sides in the conflict. At another, more pragmatic interpersonal, level, I actively sought to be regarded as what I would term a ‘non-person’—in the sense of remaining a disinterested party—outside the broader sociopolitical conflict and struggle. The ongoing temptation at this level was to seek acceptance by aligning with one language group vis-à-vis the other. By over-identifying with the Oromo I risked losing the appearance of neutrality and becoming a ‘person’ in the struggle who might, as such, be marginalised by either group. To my mind, being a ‘non-person’ meant that I could not be marginalised because I was outside the conflict, beyond the margins which (as it were) defined personhood. By primarily speaking English during my fieldwork, in theory it should have been possible to relate to people as a non-person, because of being perceived as outside the language conflict.

¹⁰ Interview, June 1997.

Despite my best (and perhaps misguided) intentions, I was unable to remain outside the circle of hostilities. Predictably, people talked and word spread that I was involved with the Oromo. I became widely known as ‘the *faranjii* [white man] who speaks Oromo’. I was quickly made into a ‘person’, subject to the same sanctions which apply to other ‘persons’. Inevitably, through various channels people heard about my activities and questioned me about them. They asked me, ‘Why are you learning to speak Oromo?’, ‘Why are you going to Ethiopia?’, to which I usually replied in the most non-partisan way: ‘I am interested in learning about Oromo culture’. Nonetheless, by already admitting to learning the Oromo language I had made a political statement from which I could not hide.

The issues related to my political status were more actively brought into focus by the fact that throughout the research process I lived within very close physical proximity to the people whom I was seeking to study. Not only was I living very near to Oromo people, but also to many non-Oromo Ethiopians. This presented a myriad of positive possibilities for conducting ethnographic fieldwork, but also a number of headaches. Before exploring my ‘positionality’¹¹ and the issues related to it, it might be useful to describe my fieldwork context in more detail.

Throughout the time of fieldwork (commencing in February 1996) my family dwelt in a small two bedroom flat located within a high-density private rental housing area in the Melbourne’s inner-urban Footscray. The particular neighbourhood that we lived in for two-and-a half years consists of two small streets running parallel to each other, with a park in the middle and a corner milk bar (a small grocery shop). Nearly all the housing in these two streets is degraded and cheap. The neighbourhood is remarkably multicultural and on numerous occasions outsiders who know the area well have referred to it as ‘the United Nations of Footscray’.¹² In particular, the neighbourhood has a relatively high population from the Horn of Africa (approximately 200), with the majority being from the region which goes by what I have suggested is the highly problematic name of ‘Ethiopia’. Prior to commencing this study I deliberately chose to live in this

¹¹ Here, and elsewhere throughout this thesis, the term ‘positionality’ refers to the particular position in history and culture from which one speaks or writes. Central to positionality is the understanding that what we say and write is always ‘in context’, from a particular position (cf. Hall 1990, p. 222).

¹² One community worker who had lived in the area for twenty years remarked how the neighbourhood was commonly called ‘the United Nations of Footscray’ by local social workers and police.

neighbourhood because of my interest in meeting and mixing with people from Ethiopia.

The particular neighbourhood had a long history in the life of Melbourne's Oromo. For a number of reasons, Footscray has been a centre for the broader non-Oromo Ethiopian and Oromo population in Melbourne since the mid-1980s. In fact, by the time I commenced this study, there was already an eleven year history of Oromo presence in Australia and throughout this time Footscray had been the centre of activities. The area had often been the first place where people stayed upon their arrival in Melbourne. Many of them had either lived there beforehand or had friends and/or relatives living there. My fieldwork was conducted at a time when many of the older Oromo who had arrived in the 1980s were moving out to the affordable new suburbs. Meanwhile, the more recent arrivals settled for cheap private rental as they waited for the availability of government subsidised rental housing. Nonetheless, throughout the research process there remained a regular flow of new arrivals whom I would meet on the street, visit and welcome as they moved into the area. Meeting people in the neighbourhood led to further introductions and the formation of a broad network of Oromo contacts, not only in Footscray but throughout Melbourne.

My ethnographic context could be regarded as somewhat akin to the researcher who conducts his/her fieldwork by living within the community under study in a remote place where there is very little opportunity for stepping outside the fieldwork role. The existential reality that I could never 'go home', because 'home' became where I did my fieldwork, was a constant source of tension. Moreover, my previous sense of 'being home' quickly eroded as I underwent small-scale migration from the affluent east side of Melbourne—where I possessed a modicum of belonging—to the deprived west (a sort of polarised east-west binary of regional difference).

Though certainly the terms 'exile' and 'migration' are too strong to describe the kind of shift involved, to some degree I faced the uneasiness of renegotiating 'home' in an unfamiliar place. My new 'home' was one in which I did not feel at 'home'. To an outsider like me, Footscray, once an industrial centre, was a place of post-industrial decline, of 'exoticism and ethnic otherness', both alien and familiar (cf. Bourne-Taylor's 1992 description of her micro-migration to England's

Bradford). Media representations usually evoke images of Footscray as another 'nation' within the 'nation' of Australia, an infamous place of urban decay, long-term unemployment, migrant enclaves and drugs—a target of recent popular attack by the extreme right-wing One Nation political party and the subject of *Romper Stomper*, the Australian film depicting the lives of a neo-Nazi skinhead group.

Symbolically located on the edges of 'white' Australia, Footscray is a place where I would be an outsider. Perhaps equating Minnie Bruce Pratt's (1984) invisible location in the white people's mapping of Washington DC, my new location was 'nowhere': the space that does not exist for middle-class white people, except in the street directory for passing commuters. A place that, via a consciousness of difference, made my previously coherent sense of continuity and self an impossibility. These boundary confusions personalised the problematics of 'home' and motivated my efforts to reflectively re-conceptualise and renegotiate both myself and my conceptions of 'home' (Martin & Mohanty 1986, pp. 199-202). In the Deleuze-Guattarian sense, via a multiplicity of articulations I nomadically moved towards becoming-other (or becoming-person)—a transformational concept of identity formation elaborated in Chapter Three.

The relocation meant renegotiating 'home' on many different levels. It was not just a micro-migration in the geographical sense, but also in an epistemological and ontological sense: the move disrupted the secure standpoint of the 'home' base on which my sense of selfhood and knowledge were situated (a centre that constructs other peripheries). Recognising my location, having to name the ground I was coming from and the conditions I had taken for granted compelled me, paraphrasing American feminist Adrienne Rich (1986), to come to terms with the circumscribing nature of my 'whiteness' (p. 219). Importantly, I looked to the very people that I was purportedly studying for basic social/emotional fellowship, which at times created ambiguous tensions: was I there as a friend or a researcher? What happens when the project finishes? Again, like the problematic of representation, these tensions remain unresolved.

Expecting these tensions to arise explains why in the early stages of the project I sought to be regarded as a 'non-person' in my interactions with both the Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopian communities. Despite such intentions, as my research progressed I became more entangled in the complex web of power

dynamics within the various Oromo groups in Melbourne and between the Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopians. Not only was I required to negotiate my way through Oromo/non-Oromo Ethiopian dynamics but also through the hostilities between various Oromo élite and their supporters in Melbourne. I attempted to sit in the middle as a ‘non-person’ between the warring factions. But this became increasingly difficult as, unbeknownst to me at the time, I was perceived by various élite as a de facto member of one faction. Such perceptions were heightened in August 1996 when, to my astonishment, a very high honour was bestowed upon me that was both flattering and worrying.

The occasion was the first anniversary of the Oromo radio program in Melbourne. A celebratory evening was held on a Saturday night in a Footscray auditorium. Approximately 150 people attended, the vast majority of whom were closely tied to the Oromo Community Association in Victoria from which, at the time, the radio program was unofficially auspiced. It was a very successful evening that included an awards ceremony and the two prominent Oromo musicians Afandi Siyo and Shantam Shubissa performing. (They both feature in Chapter Five.)

That evening three large trophies were presented to special members of the community who were deemed to have made significant contributions in 1996. Seated in the audience, I increasingly became uncomfortable when it dawned upon me that I was the unnamed person being honoured in the first speech by two of the young women: Kaninii and Ferdusa. I was called up to receive a large trophy and to be congratulated by the community. Given the situation, and despite feeling a disturbing uneasiness, I could do very little but cooperate and receive the award. My sense of unworthiness was compounded by the fact that the other awards were presented to two members of the community who had been very active over a long time. In this regard, the award was not merited; rather, it was a gift.

Inscribed on the trophy was the generous statement:

To: GREG GOW ‘Our great friend’ for your outstanding effort to the development of Oromo community in Melbourne and your ongoing research on Oromo origin, history and culture. Always appreciated: August 1996.
OROMO COMMUNITY RADIO IN VICTORIA.

Stunned and shocked by the award, I was asked to give a short speech. In a muddled combination of English and *afaan Oromoo* I expressed my feelings of unworthiness for such an honour. A pre-recorded video was shown featuring the wives of the recipients congratulating them. On the video my wife and son held the trophy and congratulated me. Following the events of that evening, what most burdened me was the realisation that I was no longer primarily regarded as a researcher, but was now considered by this section of the community as a ‘great friend’—a position with which I was not comfortable, but could do very little to change. I was becoming-person, and not just a distant person, but evidently a ‘great friend’.

While the gift positively symbolised the ties that had developed over the previous eighteen months between me and the community, it also placed weighty expectations and obligations upon me. Deep down I wanted to refuse the award, but I had no right to do so. Like the recipient of any gift, I was compelled to accept it and voice my appreciation. By accepting it I knew that I was committing myself at a far deeper level than before. In this way, the gift was received ‘with a burden attached’ (Mauss 1990, p. 41). Like Bourdieu’s (1977) ‘symbolic violence’, the gift was a mode of domination, a personalised mechanism through which power was subtly exercised while simultaneously disguised in a gesture of generosity. By giving me a gift—one which clearly I could not reciprocate by means of a counter-gift—the givers created a lasting obligation, binding me to their indebtedness (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 183ff; 1980, pp. 122ff).

From that evening forward this gentle act of symbolic violence meant there was no retreat: the trophy signified the great expectations that were placed upon me to identify with their community’s agendas and to contribute to their struggle. The challenge was publicly put to me: to remain an entirely academic anthropological interlocutor unable to make a long-term commitment to the oppressed, or to step over the line and accept the obligation to sociopolitically reciprocate—to be a ‘great friend’—by being a voice and a source of hope for a desperate group of people forgotten, disempowered and subjugated. My interlocutory research and presence was apparently vital to this community because I was writing for a group who cannot write. In this sense I became important; for this reason I became a person.

Equally worried that non-Oromo Ethiopians would adversely consider me a ‘person’ in their circle of hostilities, the following months I was hesitant to publicly

display the trophy in my home. But it was a brief conversation with one Oromo woman, Dartuu, in September 1996 that finally provided the impetus for me to accept my noticeable status as ‘de facto’ Oromo. One day while visiting Dartuu I commented on the Oromo pictures and artefacts present in her loungeroom. I confessed to her my cowardly fear of putting pictures like that in my loungeroom because of the adverse reaction I would receive from non-Oromo Ethiopian friends. She firmly scolded me:

If you put up Ethiopian pictures they would be happy and like it. But if you put Oromo things in your loungeroom they would accuse you of taking political sides. They would not like it. You should put the Oromo pictures up and don’t worry about what they think.

Dartuu’s assertion helped me to realise that, in the Oromo and Abyssinian circle of hostilities, neutrality is a one-sided affair. From that point onwards my self-perception of my role as ethnographer changed and I embraced the status bestowed upon me. I went ‘public’ by placing the trophy in my loungeroom next to the television for all to see—a significant act given the role of loungerooms as ‘public’ spaces and identity markers.

As a ‘person’, I also assumed the capacity to have some input into the development of the Oromo communities in Melbourne. By my research and inclination, I was engaged in the conjunctive process of articulation—negotiating (often uncomfortably) my way as both ‘ethnographer’ and ‘person’ through the complexities of Oromo identity.

The dynamic interplay between the present and the past is crucial to understanding the symbols and signs that have emerged as key markers of being Oromo in Melbourne. As discussed in following chapters, artefacts such as calendars, dictionaries and music cassettes take on new meanings as they act as media through which the present is connected to the past. Each of the artefacts has been authorised and ultimately each relies upon language to be constituted as Oromo. The authors of these symbols and signs are the new mediators of Oromo identity. Ironically, I was involved in the authorisation, which implied that I was also ‘authorising’ my own cultural transformations through the translation which was occurring—e.g. renegotiating what it means to be father, husband, researcher, advocate and, in the context of bilingualism, speaker of English.

Throughout the three year period of the study, my life, like that of my 'subjects', also became a site of transformative practice, of a multiplicity of 'becomings'. The placing of Oromo artefacts in my lounge room (a great many were given to me by Oromo) and the playing of Oromo cassettes in my home were a reflection of the bifocal nature of the ethnographic encounter. My identity as ethnographer became intimately related to the world that I was studying.

Seeking to be regarded as a 'non-person' was made difficult by the nature of the community in which I was located, in terms of which my own personal context tended to be enmeshed with the context of interaction. For example, when I met with people for the first time there were three questions nearly always asked: where I lived, whether I was married, and whether I had children. This was because the family (which includes husbands, wives, children and extended members) is regarded with the utmost importance by Oromo people. My family status was inseparable from other aspects of my identity and it constituted, as it were, the lens through which my fieldwork was viewed and assessed. It was difficult to know how my 'professional' role as 'researcher' would have been apprehended outside the personal framework of being husband and father.

That my family provided the context within which I related with Oromo people was most evident when my son Joseph was born in July 1996. Because the coming of a child is a community event that everybody knows about, when I related to people within the personal context of my family (my wife and child) I was given a certain trust that would otherwise have been difficult to gain. When my son was born I was accorded a changed title: father of a son (Abbaa Joseph), and in this way contextualised by the community within their own framework.

There are variations across the different regions of Oromiya but, generally, more respect would appear to be given to a man who is the father of a son rather than a daughter, especially among the Muslims. The birth of a son is often followed by a ritual, called *haqiqaa*, to celebrate and obtain a blessing for the boy. The ritual entails slaughtering a goat and offering prayers for the baby boy's wellbeing and protection. In Melbourne the event could be regarded as a 'national' ritual because all members of the community are expected to be there. Especially the ritual is common amongst well-off families who can afford it. One Oromo woman spoke of a

couple from the east of Oromiya who now live in Melbourne. After resettling, they had a baby girl. When the next baby to arrive was a boy they slaughtered and prepared three goats for a celebration. The woman recalled that there was no such activity for the baby girl.¹³ Shortly after my own son was born, I attended a community function during which the chairperson of the community association announced that I had a baby boy, which was followed by the seventy-odd people present giving me a loud and joyful cheer.¹⁴

It was not just through the birth of my son that my family was contextualised by the Oromo community within their own framework. In December 1996, the structure of my family changed from the 'nuclear' to the 'extended'. The unexpected arrival of a desperate Oromo woman presented me with another ethnographic moment. It also offered a chance to solidify my credentials as a trustworthy person among Melbourne's Oromo.

In December 1996 I received an earnest telephone call from Saarah, a newly arrived Oromo woman who was seeking asylum in Australia. She called pleading to stay with my family. She came to stay and remained with us throughout the duration of my project. Saarah is purportedly a Booran Oromo,¹⁵ from southern Oromiya where many of the traditions remain intact and a place perceived as the cradle land of all Oromo. There were two male Booran Oromo in Melbourne so, in a novel way as the first Booran woman, she attracted interest among the community.

By sharing my home and financially supporting a homeless Oromo refugee woman my commitment to the Oromo became widely known. The inclusion of her into my family solidified my partnership with the Oromo community. This was an act that apparently earned me great respect, reflected in the various compliments I received from leaders in the community, such as: 'I have heard about the great thing you are doing for this woman. This is really very good of you', and, 'This is really very good of you to take this woman who has suffered so much. It is so kind of you to care for Oromo people like this'. Without kin in Australia, Saarah quickly became

¹³ The Oromo woman who described this had been to the celebration and was amazed that the boy had received such special treatment. As she described, in Jimma where she grew-up there was not really any special treatment for boys. But she commented that even there 'a father of a son has more respect'.

¹⁴ This is not to say that they would not have cheered had the child been a daughter. But my feeling at the time was that there was a special emphasis upon the birth of a son as a cause for celebration.

¹⁵ The word 'purportedly' is used because there was some doubt among sections of the community about the veracity of her claim to be Booran Oromo.

dependent upon me as her fictive male ‘guardian’, and was recognised within the broader community as part of my household (cf. discussion of *moggaasa* in Chapter Ten).

While various Oromo people were delighted with me, some non-Oromo Ethiopians interrogated me, asking: ‘Where is she from, is she Tigray or Amhara? Why is she staying with you?’ I responded that she was Oromo and from Boorana in the south of Ethiopia.

The unexpected arrival of Saarah became an important juncture in the research process, but the plateau of my nomadic movement towards ‘becoming-person’ was reached when my family and I visited Oromiya in March-April 1998. Although a brief, six week trip, the duration was irrelevant to the fact that I had stepped upon *biyya Oromoo* (Oromo country), the bedrock of *Oromumma*. Visiting ‘home’ meant connecting in a far deeper way with Melbourne’s Oromo. Taking gifts, video cassettes and letters, and staying with relatives in Oromiya, solidified relationships and transformed the standing of my family to ‘fictive kin’. The apparent connection between soil and kinship became evident, as—borrowing Malkii’s (1992, p. 27) arborescent root metaphor—I too planted roots in the nourishing soil of Oromiya. If demonstrations of emotional ties to the soil act as evidence of loyalty to the nation, then my loyalty was perhaps no longer perceived as being in doubt: just as motherland/fatherland suggests that each nation is a grand genealogical tree, in a small way I too was grafted into the tree.

In addition to my credentials as a friend of the Oromo nation, the trip palpably stamped an authority upon my apparent knowledge and experience of Oromo culture. Here, again as Malkii notes (1992, p. 29), culture and nation are kindred concepts: both depending upon cultural essentialism that readily takes on arborescent forms. Terms like ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ and ‘autochthonous’ have all served to root cultures in soils, the term ‘culture’ itself deriving from the Latin word for cultivation (*cultus*). Again, as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) scathingly asks of anthropology: ‘Has anything changed since “indigenous” took over, rendering “native” obsolete?’ (p. 52). Like the nation, culture is conceived as existing in the ‘soil’ where, as I am frequently told, ‘real Oromo culture’ is found. Such concepts ensure that ‘nativism’, as commonly manifest within anthropological and the reactionary political discourses of anti-colonial nationalists, ties people to places

through ascriptions of native status—a spatial incarceration of the native (Appadurai 1988, p. 37).

While I support and in no way would pronounce as illegitimate Oromo claims to nationhood, the following pages demonstrate my antipathy towards the overheated ‘nativism’ that underpins much of what passes as Oromo nationalist sensibilities. Because, as Said knows so well, Orientalism and a particularism like nativism or nationalism are the obverse and reverse of the same coin—criticism of one cannot be made without criticism of the other (Chow 1993, p. 6). Unable to divest itself of the Orientalist divisions which inform the colonial relationship, ‘nativism’ is ultimately self-defeating. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter Four, even if Oromo nationalism, fuelled by an indomitable will to difference, is theoretically ‘outmoded’, it remains—as Franz Fanon (cf. 1963, 1967) militantly argued—the principal means by which the colonised culture overcomes the psychological damage of colonial domination. But, conversely, as Spivak repeatedly argues (cf. 1987, 1990b, 1993), such an alibi continues to ideologically imprison other cultures in an Orientalist mode of discourse. Indeed, when we speak of Orientalism and nativism/nationalism, ‘we understand them as *languages* which can be used by “natives” and “non-natives” alike’ (Chow 1993, p. 7).

Despite resettling in Australia, Melbourne’s Oromo remain encompassed by domination and, though no longer living under direct Ethiopian rule, the colonial presence that was a feature of their lives in Ethiopia remains. The subjugable demands for assimilation from both non-Oromo Ethiopian and the dominant white Australian groups ensure a degree of continuity with the colonial past. The following chapter provides a detour into that past, by highlighting the pervasive colonial experience of exclusion and marginalisation that touches the lives of all Oromo. This painful marginalisation is sharply felt in the debasement of their language *afaan Oromoo*, as explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

OROMO NATIONALIST SENSIBILITIES:

SILENT ENOUNCEMENTS AND BECOMING-OTHER

Every colonised people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country.

Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 18)

Africa is a grand laboratory of language, a microcosm of the language world.

Ali A. Mazrui & Alamin M. Mazrui (1998, p. 69)

The initiation into the Australian public domain for recently arrived Oromo comes with their free but compulsory attendance at the local Adult Migrant English School (AMES), which functions somewhat like a blender used for pureeing diverse ingredients. The classes consist of newly arrived people from different ‘national’ backgrounds, and evidently the role of the teacher is to inculcate them in the ‘Australian way’: to equip them with the survival skills necessary to cope in their new country. Nearly all of Melbourne’s Oromo have attended these classes during the early stages of their resettlement process. For many they proved to be an experience in effacement, where the power dynamics among the small number of east Africans in the class, combined with the homogenised perceptions of Africa and Africans within the AMES, ensure that any Oromo voice is muffled by the din of nation-state rhetoric.

For months one Oromo woman, Ayeesha,¹ had been subjected to derision by various students in her English language class. When her class began and the students introduced themselves, she boldly pronounced that she was not Ethiopian but Oromo and that her country was Oromiya and language called *afaan Oromoo*. Apart from the other east African students, nobody in the class had heard of such a people, place or language. The other African class members (Ethiopians, Eritreans

¹ The following story is taken from an interview with Ayeesha, September 1997.

and Somalis) ridiculed her by insistently telling the teacher that there was no such country as Oromiya—that she was Ethiopian and that her language did not exist.

She was chided with comments such as: ‘if your country is real then show us on the map’ (the world map with political boundaries that featured on the classroom wall), or, ‘show us your flag’, and, ‘if the language is real then show us a dictionary. The others have dictionaries and you do not’. The Ethiopians in her class insisted that she use an Amharic dictionary with chides such as, ‘You are an Ethiopian: use the Amharic dictionary’. The other students were all able to point to their country of origin on the map, show their flag to the class, and produce dictionaries that validated their backgrounds. On one occasion the students placed their dictionaries on a table and examined the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the class members. Because there was no Oromo dictionary that Ayesha could produce, she reluctantly used the Amharic dictionary and remained silent: pushed to the linguistic margins, the Oromo was made invisible.

But things changed. After six months Ayesha obtained a copy of Mahdi Hamid Muudee’s (1995) English-Oromo Dictionary. At last she was ready to prove the reality of her language and country to her teacher and class. Bursting with excitement, she could not sleep the night before her next class. She carried the thick hard-cover dictionary under her arm and produced it to the class. Putting it alongside the other dictionaries, it appeared ‘bigger and better’. Ayesha’s demeanour was transformed from the defensive to the offensive. This simple act of carrying a dictionary in her own language to her class had served, at least marginally, to reinstate her identity by settling the contested nature of her claims.

Shortly after arriving in Australia, Ayesha found herself in this bizarre space—the classroom inhabited by a global array of postcolonial nationals—where her identity was opened up to questioning, re-writing and re-routing. In a literal sense she was re-writing her ‘I’ as the new context demanded her own self-representation in a setting far removed from the established communal authority of the past. She said the once taken-for-granted ‘I am Oromo’, as opposed to ‘We are Oromo’, to a global audience of strangers with little or no knowledge of such a category. By vehemently clinging to a printed dictionary she voiced her identity in a world requiring authoritative ‘Western’ artefacts (maps, flags and dictionaries) to substantiate national claims. Absent here were the communal certainties of identity

and ‘belonging’ that pervaded her past, and which seemed clearer to her on the weekend when people gather together in Melbourne. In a class of Others she remained the invisible and oxymoronic African ‘othered Other’.

This precursive episode demonstrates the crucial role of language as a vehicle for exiled Oromo like Ayesha to present their claims to the world. Her status as an ‘othered Other’ in the global classroom mirrored the ongoing experience of the Oromo as a nation. Nevertheless, as the Oromo language—*afaan Oromoo*—is being publicly spoken, written and sung, a re-presentation and re-creation of *Oromumma* is occurring amongst Melbourne’s Oromo. Given the past experience in Ethiopia, the present Oromo cultural formation involves what was once marginal and hidden within the domains of people’s homes now being made public and central. As this thesis argues, such action constitutes a significant public challenge to the previously dominant Amhara cultural and linguistic centre. This chapter explores the nexus of resistance and oppressive exclusion that characterises language use amongst Melbourne’s Oromo. As will become clear, the linguistic dynamics are enabled and constrained by the starkly ‘authorising’ Oromo nationalist sensibilities—an ambiguous articulation of nationalism with ‘Orientalist’ conceptions.

My first exposure to Oromo nationalist sensibilities occurred during an Oromo wedding held in Melbourne in April 1996. I was introduced to Ali, a young man from Arsi, by Mohamed, and the following conversation occurred in English:

Mohamed: Ali, meet this guy; he speaks Oromo and Amharic. His name is Greg.

Ali: How are you? Are you having a good time? Let me get you some food.

Greg: I’m good, it is a great wedding. I’ve already eaten thanks [in English]. What’s your name? [in Amharic].

Ali: I don’t speak that language.

Greg: I’m sorry.

The conversation ended abruptly when Ali was asked in Amharic what his name was. Before this question, the conversation was friendly and relaxed, but after asking it Ali became very defensive and refused to speak to me in ‘that language’. Because he clearly understood my question, his statement ‘I don’t speak that language’ may be interpreted as a refusal to use this language. What then followed was a cessation of communication—by his pronouncement, the conversation was over.

The crucial element of the conversation was my casual introduction to Ali by another Oromo as someone who could speak both *afaan Oromoo* and Amharic. Given that I was seen as someone who can speak both languages, I chose to speak Amharic, whereas if I could speak only Amharic I would have had no choice. My choice, in effect, constituted a political challenge. I had violated the politico-linguistic ‘rules’ of the social context and suffered the consequences.

Eighteen months later, in October 1997, I was walking with Ali in the neighbourhood and we met Getachew, an Amhara, with whom Ali was close in Cairo before coming to Australia. A relaxed conversation followed in Amharic. I stood by and watched in amazement as Ali, appearing quite comfortable, greeted Getachew in Amharic. In this conversation there were two possible linguistic choices: English or Amharic (Getachew speaks English well, but is not fluent in *afaan Oromoo*).

These encounters illustrate how Oromo people in Melbourne incessantly make choices regarding their language use. These choices constitute not only linguistic, but also political and cultural identifications. The choices occur within contexts that are both similar and dissimilar to the old context of life in Ethiopia. Similar because, like past experiences in Ethiopia, there is an Amharic linguistic majority that subjugates the use of *afaan Oromoo*; dissimilar, because, unlike in Ethiopia, the new context offers a scope for active linguistic choice in both formal and informal settings free from the previously dangerous threats of harassment.

My conversation with Ali demonstrated the stark political nature of language and its use as a means of contesting identities. Not only is language used as a means of imparting referential meaning, but more specifically it serves to identify the speaker and to place him in a particular relationship with the listener (Rubin in

Watson 1992, p. 102). The meetings between Ali and me and, later, Ali and Getachew articulated different points of reference regarding the identity positionings of the speaker and listener.

Language practices, by enunciating identity positionings, are signifying activities. When Ali refused to speak to me in Amharic it would seem that he resisted apparent marginalisation, *qua* Oromo, by rejecting the Amharic narrative. He signified to me another social certainty that both negates and contradicts the past experience of cultural imperialism. In refusing to speak Amharic he refused to place himself (or be placed) in the relationship of subject within the central Amharic narrative (even with a non-Ethiopian such as me). Instead, Ali set the parameters of discourse by defining his own rigid terms of linguistic communication. Inverting the colonial dynamic, he negated the legitimacy of Amharic—such linguistic action perhaps demonstrating his juxtaposition of Oromo nationalism with his view of language-as-political-struggle. Indeed, such action in the context of the past Ethiopian hegemony would have been regarded as seditious and downright dangerous. Conversely, in his spontaneous meeting with Getachew, Ali placed himself within the Ethiopian centre by initiating Amharic speech—where his identity positioning, according to the prevalent nationalist ‘rules’ or sensibilities, was that of an Ethiopian greeting a fellow Ethiopian.

Within political/cultural discourses, ‘rules’ are like Bhabha’s (1994a, pp. 34-9; 174-80) repertoire of enunciated possibilities, which, from the vast array of possibilities—including ambiguous and contradictory elements—one chooses. Choice ultimately is ‘existential’: expressive of the human capacity to do something different (even when it violates certain ‘rules’). As Bhabha (*ibid.*) elaborates, such heterogeneity of enunciative positions highlights how the ‘signs’ that construct histories and identities—ethnicity, gender, refugee status, division of labour, and so on—not only differ in content but often produce incompatible systems of signification and engage distinct forms of social subjectivity (p. 176). Bhabha terms this ambivalence the ‘Third Space of enunciation’ (1990a), the moment of enunciation when ‘the very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth’ is challenged (1994a, pp. 34-5).

Seen in this light, it might seem that Ali’s apparently incompatible politico-linguistic responses towards me and Getachew evidence a ‘Third Space of

enunciation' whereby the binary division of Oromo/Amhara is problematised. Later, when I discussed the dissimilarity with him, Ali brushed aside his use of Amharic with Getachew as nothing extraordinary. Certainly overriding Getachew's Amhara status was the individual affection Ali felt towards him: 'We are good friends', he explained, 'we passed a lot of time together in Cairo'. Would he have chosen to speak Amharic with someone he wasn't so close with? Perhaps not. 'No', Ali responded, 'Getachew is a good Amhara; with anyone else I would speak English'.

Both encounters occurred within social contexts 'governed' by specific 'rules' of discourse: a Foucauldian sense of discourse whereby it is not the language spoken but rather the bounded areas that constitute which specific ways of speaking are acceptable. In this context, what is most significant is not so much *what* is said but rather what *can* be said (McHoul and Grace 1993, p. 33). Truth in this way becomes a function of what can be said, written or thought.

The critical issue regarding Ali's negative statement to me ('I don't speak that language') concerns the governing rules of discourse which make such a statement acceptable. Central to Foucault's (1970) theory of power is the idea that discourses are constructions within certain historically specific discursive regimes. The construction of discourse is governed by historically variable bodies of knowledge and the units of discourse are called *statements (enonces)*. Accordingly, Foucault's enouncements may only be understood via the rules which govern their functioning, the rules governing what it is possible to know in any given historical context. However, following the line of reasoning presented in Bhabha's repertoire of enunciation, Foucault's enouncements may be adaptively applied to Oromo nationalist sensibilities (Oromocentrism). Viewed this way, the 'governing rules' are a metaphor of what *can* be said, written or thought by the Oromo. As Ali's actions demonstrate, what can be said surely is indicative rather than definitive.

This is not to say that the 'governing rules' are ineffective. On the contrary, the ideological representation of Amharic as the language of the enemy to be shunned and rebuked is a central part of the prevailing Oromo nationalist sensibilities. In a Manichean fashion, the Ethiopians and their language are demonically caricatured, while the Oromo and their language are essentialised as peace loving and good. In this way, the practice of publicly speaking *afaan Oromoo* is articulated with a particular social identity and political interest. Accordingly, the

practice of strictly speaking *afaan Oromoo* is claimed to represent the social reality of being Oromo: the ‘authentic’ Oromo does not speak Amharic.

Herein lies the Orientalism so evident in Ayesha’s classroom. The Orientalist/nativist divisions which informed the colonial relationship continue to encompass ‘Third world’ immigrants as they resettle in Australia. But in this case, and in Ayesha’s classroom, it is not merely the ‘non-native’ who views the ethnic through the Orientalist looking-glass, but the ‘natives’ themselves. The demands from Ayesha’s class for a nation-state and a dictionary to validate her Oromo subjectivity concurs with ‘Western’ imperialist constructions of the nation (cf. Anderson’s 1983 ‘imagined community’). As noted in the preceding chapter, when speaking of Said’s Orientalism and nativism/nationalism, we understand them as transcultural *languages* which can be used by ‘natives’ and ‘non-natives’ alike (Chow 1993, p. 7). Ali demonstrated that Melbourne’s Oromo are no exception: they too can employ a language of nationalist exclusion in a manner not dissimilar to their Abyssinian oppressors.

The use of essentialised characterisations provides the legitimating substructure for the maintenance of identities based upon a clear division of the world into ‘good’ and ‘bad’. The attributing of an essentially vile character to Amhara in Melbourne and the refusal to speak in Amharic—but not all the time, in all situations (as the Ali/Getachew episode demonstrates)—could be interpreted as the Oromo’s attempt to vindicate the past, to cleanse themselves of Abyssinian contamination.

The vile portrayal of Amhara is clearly conveyed in the following comments by an Oromo woman called Bedriya. She had been living in Melbourne for more than eight years and has a husband and numerous children who are Oromo. She grew-up in the east of Oromiya, an area where the Oromo suffered greatly at the hands of Amhara. Her first language is *afaan Oromoo* and she refuses to speak Amharic even though she is fluent in the language. She comments:

You can never trust Amhara: they are really selfish and they don’t want to learn any other languages. Oromo and Somali, they are really good, they will be good friends, but Amhara you can’t trust. I don’t mix with Ethiopians and I refuse to speak their language. When I even say ‘Ethiopia’ I feel upset, it is much better to say we are Oromo because we lost all our

life to liberate our country. To lose man and children, I want to tell the world for everybody to know that we are Oromo.

We are telling everybody we are Oromo. We tell all the stories to our kids. We don't forget we are fighting to be liberated one day. We have to speak everywhere. People say we are Ethiopian to the *faranjii* [European] but we say we are not Ethiopian, we are Oromo—my country is Oromiya—we are the people hoping to fight and liberate our country in the future.

But when we are in Ethiopia no one says they are Oromo: we keep it in the heart. If you say, 'I am an Oromo woman', maybe they kill you. They call us by a colonised name—galla. You just say, 'Yes I am a galla', then they let you go.²

Bedriya's comments centre around the past experience of her life under the Amhara or Ethiopians (which she regards as synonymous). She repeatedly refers to the negative impact of the Ethiopians upon her life. Her Manichean characterisations of whole people groups is unconcealed: 'You can never trust Amhara, they are really selfish ... Oromo and Somali, they are really good'. These comments are representative of the parameters of Orientalist discourse amongst Melbourne's Oromo—a discourse of essentialist representations manifest in silent enouncements. But Bedriya has not always behaved this way.

Hirut is an Amhara woman who lives in the same neighbourhood as Bedriya. Despite their previous friendship, for the past two years she and Bedriya have not spoken to each other. Living in the same area they have many opportunities to communicate; they see each other on numerous occasions at the local shops and child-care centre but silence remains. Hirut reflected upon the hurt she feels:

Bedriya and I used to be close friends but now she won't even say hello to me. I don't know what I have done to make her like this. I think that it might be politics. Because I am Amhara she won't talk, but I do not behave in a bad way to Oromo like some Amhara. Anyway, when we were together in Djibouti we were all friends: whether Amhara or Oromo it did

² Interview, April 1996.

not matter. Even now her children are not friendly to my kids, and they used to play together. She has decided to cut me off.³

In Ethiopia Bedriya was acquiescent in the face of violent coercion—‘You just say, “Yes I am a galla”, then they let you go’. According to Hirut’s judgement, as a refugee in Djibouti Bedriya lived harmoniously with Amhara. But now, in Melbourne, she steadfastly resists familiar contact with Amhara and the use of Amharic.

The importance of language in these multi-ethnic encounters cannot be overestimated. Khleif (1986) succinctly sums-up the situation with the comment that the ‘limits of our language establish the limits of our world—the limits of ourselves and the boundaries for others’ (p. 224). Bedriya’s language choices establish impenetrable boundaries for Hirut. Through her silence, Bedriya juxtaposes her contempt of everything Amhara alongside of her psychic identification with everything Oromo (the obverse coin of Orientalism/nationalism). Understood this way, silence is a discursive strategy to put oneself beyond the power of the other’s ‘words’. As such, it emphasises the tremendous power of language—how pregnant words are with political power.

Bedriya’s rejection of everything Ethiopian, including friends, constitutes a significant public challenge to the previously dominant Amhara cultural and linguistic centre. However, such behaviour, while concomitantly using language to rebuke Orientalist perceptions of the subaltern Oromo, does the same thing to itself (the Oromo subject). Fuelled by an indomitable will to difference, the nativism which underpins much of what passes as Oromo nationalist sensibilities in Melbourne is ultimately self-defeating. Because, by ideologically imprisoning Amhara and their language in an Orientalist mode of discourse, Oromo nationalism of this type is unable to divest itself of the Orientalist divisions which informed the colonial relationship. There can be no postcolonial resolution within such a polarity of domination, only ongoing cycles of oppression.⁴

³ Interview, March 1997.

⁴ This observation is pertinent to the Horn of Africa. At the time of writing (June 1998) Eritrea and Ethiopia, once close allies, had commenced fighting. A number of hardline Amhara and Oromo nationalists in Melbourne expressed to me their pleasure in this development, which they hoped would escalate.

Predictively, not all Oromo behave in the same manner as Bedriya and Ali. In January 1997 I quietly listened to the following lively mealtime discussion between four Oromo (three women and one man) from different areas of Oromiya which provides some insight into the divergent language practices among sections of Melbourne's Oromo. The discussion, which occurred in English—presumably so that I could participate—began with a simple question concerning language choices for Protestant Christian prayer:

Demma: Yonas, he says that I should not pray in Amharic; instead, I must pray in Oromo. Do you support this?

Saada: I am not sure. Yonas, he probably feels very uncomfortable speaking Amharic because of his past experience in Ethiopia.

Lula: Yes, I think that he probably said that because of his experience in the old days in Ethiopia when all Oromo were forced to speak Amharic, and take Amharic names if they wanted to have any opportunity to succeed in Ethiopian society. In the old days we had to hide our identity. I grew-up in Addis Ababa and Amharic was my first language; it was not until later when I left Ethiopia that I began to learn *afaan Oromoo*. Even now I have to mix English and Oromo because I can't speak Oromo perfectly. I am sick of Oromo people complaining that I don't speak *afaan Oromoo* properly. Because of this I decided that I would just use English to avoid problems. Now I speak English as my first language because of the politics associated with Amharic and Oromo. But I don't think it matters what language you pray in as God must surely be able to understand you.

Abdullahi: Yes, there are a lot of Oromo in Melbourne who refuse to speak in or listen to Amharic, as if it was an evil language. Usually this is just their protesting against their past enemy. But this sort of consciousness is really very shallow: they make Amharic the enemy when really they know very little about what Amharic stands for. They do

not understand why they refuse to speak it and fail to appreciate the cultural and social role of Amharic as a tool of oppression. But me, I don't hate Amharic: you can pray in this language, it is not an evil language and I am not scared of it. If you are going to criticise it then you must have a level of consciousness about why you are doing this.

Lula: I remember a time when I was sitting in an African café with an Eritrean guy and a Tigrayan. The whole time we were there we spoke in English to each other even though we all understood Amharic. I chose not to speak in Amharic because I knew it would offend them and they did not speak to me in Amharic either. It was very strange.

Abdullahi: Yes, the language use is hard because we are a people in transition. We are trying to work out what it means to be Oromo when we are removed from our homeland.

Abdullahi eloquently described the sum and substance of this thesis: that Melbourne's Oromo are a people in transition, who are (in his words), 'trying to work out what it means to be Oromo when we are removed from our homeland'. Language choices constitute not only linguistic, but also political and cultural identifications. Indeed, while 'trying to work out what it means to be Oromo' in Melbourne, people negotiate their way through a plethora of language choices. The apparent majority like Ali and Bedriya usually respond by refusing to speak in Amharic; their linguistic choice constitutes a rejection of the social certainty of the nation-state called Ethiopia. Others, like Lula, who speak in Amharic or the neutral English because of their inability to speak 'perfect' *afaan Oromoo*, are marginalised, not necessarily by individuals who publicly denounce them, but, rather, by an anonymous signifying system of Oromocentric discourse.

Such an unauthored system of hegemonic sensibilities—like the operations of all colonial powers—is a kind of Deleuze-Guattarian abstract machine, a Body without Organs. Extending Foucault's notion of an apparatus of power, Deleuze and Guattari might be said to conceive of the Body without Organs as a field of immanence assembled by a process of desire, upon which 'everything is drawn and

flees, which is itself an abstract line with neither imaginary figures nor symbolic functions' (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 202-3).

The 'very shallow' that Abdullahi castigates—"it is not an evil language and I am not scared of it"—could be viewed, from a Deleuze-Guattarian anti-Oedipal perspective, as a description of a colonial Body without Organs in which the social field (reality) is invested by Oedipal desire (fantasy). Similarly, viewed along Gramscian lines, the problem is not only, or not so much, the Amharic language as the cultural hegemony that it represents (Appiah 1988, p. 155). From this perspective, the language dynamics among Melbourne's Oromo should be approached in relation to an ever-changing regime of signs, the abstract machine(s) which define it, and the actual articulations into which it enters.

The conversation between Demma, Saada, Abdullahi and Lula was striking because it involved the collective assemblage of differences at a common meal. The conversation concerning language use occurred during a multi-lingual mealtime. Not only was English freely spoken, but so too was Amharic, Arabic and *afaan Oromoo*. Contrary to Ali's and Bedriya's compulsive deviance and conformity—in terms of a Manichean set of 'rules', what is deviance according to one discursive framework (Ethiopian) is conformist according to another (Oromo)—this occasion involved a primary articulation of an Oromo unity that could accommodate difference. The collective meal created an effect of affirmation and a common linking with one another and life back home. Here the cultural formation of 'real' pan-Oromo identity was observable in its effects.

This broad collection of linguistic repertoires is indicative of the linguistic heritage of Melbourne's Oromo which is overwhelmingly multi-lingual. Ali Mazrui and Aliman Mazrui (1992) have described how the postcolonial contradictions of Africa's triple linguistic heritage can be attributed to the complex interplay of three distinct traditions: the indigenous African, the Islamic and the 'Western'. The cultural interplay between these traditions has given rise to four language types: Afro-ethnic, Afro-Islamic, Afro-Western and 'Western'. According to their schema, both *afaan Oromoo* and Amharic are Afro-ethnic languages whose 'native' speakers are predominantly African. My investigation indicates that nearly all of Melbourne's Oromo are either fluent or semi-fluent in both of these languages, which have been minimally shaped by the Arab-Islamic and Euro-Christian traditions.

At the same time, there is a distinct infusion with Islamic ethos and traditions amongst the majority of Melbourne's Oromo. This is commonly reflected through the use of Arab-Islamic personal names, as many Oromo speak fluent Arabic, which is a major Afro-Islamic language. In addition, many—particularly those from eastern Oromiya, the majority of whom fled to Djibouti—can speak the Afro-Islamic Somali language. Apart from a small number of Italian and French speakers, English is the dominant 'Western' language spoken by Melbourne's Oromo.

Within the state of Ethiopia, Amharic is an inter-ethnic *lingua franca* while *afaan Oromoo*, along with numerous other languages, is intra-ethnic, sub-national and geographically limited to specific regions within the Ethiopian state boundaries (with the exception of the Booran Oromo in Northern Kenya). English is an international language largely spoken by the urban élite who conduct higher education, business and foreign diplomacy, while Arabic is spoken as an additional language in urban areas considered as Islamic cultural centres (such as Jimma and Dessié).

There is a degree of linguistic complementarity in Ethiopia between the functional roles of Amharic, Arabic and English. Amharic fulfils a horizontal role of inter-ethnic communication and—although to a lesser extent since the post-Derg ethnic federalism—a vertical role of aiding social mobility. English and Arabic have fulfilled their own distinct educational and religious roles. In contrast, there has been no functional role for *afaan Oromoo* within the Ethiopian state; rather, of all the intra-ethnic languages, *afaan Oromoo* has probably been the most marginalised by colonial language politics in Ethiopia. Since the 1960s, the public re-presentation of *afaan Oromoo* has been regarded by both Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopians as seditiously nationalist. Hence, linguistic conflict has characterised the relationship between the two largest Afro-ethnic languages in the Horn of Africa.

Translated to the Melbourne setting, these two languages—Amharic and *afaan Oromoo*—continue to be represented and exist within a nexus of mutual hostility, in which Amharic predominates now as an inter-ethnic communication language, while English and Arabic are limited to clear functional roles. Many Oromo find themselves a linguistic minority in an Amharic-speaking majority and, according to the social context, will position themselves on a continuum between

linguistic conformity and deviance vis-à-vis the prevailing Oromo nationalist ‘governing rules’—as demonstrated by the preceding example of Ali’s equivocal appropriation of Amharic.

Some of the complexity can be seen in the following conversation with Fozia and Aynee, two Oromo women whom I have met in a social context many times. On one occasion, in April 1996, while meeting to drink *buna* (coffee), I showed them an invitation to an Oromo wedding written in *afaan Oromoo*, and the following exchange occurred:

Greg: Can you please read this invitation to me. It is written in Oromo language and I can’t understand it.

Fozia: Show me. No, I can’t read Oromo, I can speak it but I can’t read it.

Aynee: I don’t understand it.

Greg: What language do you speak to each other in?

Fozia: We speak to each other in a mixture of Oromo and Amharic. It depends. In Dirree dhawaa, where we come from, you have to speak many languages because there are lots of different people there. We are not true Oromo.

Greg: There are some Oromo who won’t speak in Amharic.

Aynee: In Ethiopia they speak in Amharic but when they come to Australia they refuse to and will only speak in Oromo. This is crazy. I like them as people but I think this is crazy—I don’t want to have anything to do with them.

Fozia: Yeah, we speak Amharic. It’s our first language. It is what we learnt back home.

Both of these women are married to non-Oromo Ethiopians and in their homes Amharic is the first-language spoken. Unlike Bedriya, they socialise with non-Oromo Ethiopians (their friends include Amhara and Gurage Ethiopians). Contrary

to Fozia's claim that they are 'not true Oromo' (based on their speaking of Amharic), both have on numerous occasions told me that they are Oromo and that they enjoy conversing with me in *afaan Oromoo*.

Though not belonging to any official Oromo associations, both women attend various Oromo gatherings including concerts and ceremonies. Fozia also attends the annual Ethiopian New Year celebrations which are organised by the Amhara-dominated Ethiopian Community Association in Melbourne. She positions herself in a wide range of sociolinguistic contexts and appears comfortable assimilating to an Amharic linguistic majority—which is perhaps the reason why she describes herself and Aynee as 'not true Oromo'.

My comment that there are 'some Oromo who won't speak in Amharic' was designed to elicit a response indicating where they positioned themselves in regard to linguistic conflict. In striking contrast to Bedriya's response, Aynee commented how in Ethiopia 'they speak in Amharic but when they come to Australia they refuse to and will only speak in Oromo'. She described this as 'crazy', indicating that to cease inter-ethnic communication on the basis of the refusal to speak a language that both understand was ridiculous.

The preceding encounters with Ali, Bedriya, Demma, Saada, Lula and Abdullahi, and Fozia and Aynee, suggest a dynamic situation, full of variance. The active linguistic resistance offered by Ali and Bedriya may be contrasted with the selective use of language employed by Lula, Fozia and Aynee. Fozia's statement, 'We are not true Oromo', reflects the prevailing sensibilities which, ignoring diversity, easily sees Oromo people as falling into overlapping binary oppositions: authentic/unauthentic, nationalist/assimilationist, Oromo-identified (*afaan Oromoo* speakers)/Ethiopian-identified (Amharic speakers), included/excluded. In the midst of a plethora of linguistic and cultural menus, these sensibilities define what it is to be an 'authentic' Oromo via the repressive exclusion of difference: essentially *this* and definitely not *that* (Dollimore 1986, p. 182). Those considered 'unauthentic' Oromo—people who speak Amharic, and worse-still those such as Aynee and Fozia who are married to non-Oromo Ethiopians—are marginalised and withdraw from the community. But often the withdrawal is initiated by the 'unauthentic' Oromo and not palpably obvious, as reflected in Fozia's simple comment that it is 'easier for

me to mix with the Ethiopians than the Oromo people who are always talking about politics and expect you to do the same. I just stopped seeing them'.⁵

To more fully explore the present dynamics it is necessary to briefly examine the historical encounter of the Oromo with Abyssinia in what is today called Ethiopia. As argued throughout this thesis, in differing degrees, the historical experience of empire lives on and continues to exert considerable influence upon the processes of cultural formation among Melbourne's Oromo.

Until now I have spoken of the Oromo as colonised without offering any justification for such a contested classification. Although the Oromo were never completely dominated by a foreign colonial power, I want to insist that the apparent absence of a foreign enemy does not make their case any less 'Third world' in terms of the colonial enterprise so evident in the rest of Africa. If colonialism above all else involves the physical appropriation of land and its capture for the cultivation of another culture, then the Oromo can legitimately be spoken of as a colonised people.

In relation to the Oromo experience in Ethiopia, Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa (1990) analytically utilise the concept of *internal colonialism*, as first introduced by Blauner (1969). The crux of internal colonialism is the active pursuit of cultural hegemony by a colonising power, which is usually ethnically-based. The common strategy of the conquering power is to render the conquered *history-less* by repression of the native language (Khleif 1986, p. 231). The destruction of language and of historical memory is a feature of most colonial situations. In Africa, as Ali Mazrui and Aliman Mazrui (1998) argue in their overview of the interplay between African languages and colonial politics, the creation of massive dependency upon imported imperial languages was central to the European colonial project. While their recent work comprehensively describes the roles of imported imperial European languages in colonial east Africa, Ali Mazrui and Aliman Mazrui are conspicuously silent on the imperial role of Amharic in the Abyssinian conquering of the Oromo—Abyssinian internal colonialism.⁶

⁵ Interview, July 1996.

⁶ In their 1998 volume *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*, Mazrui and Mazrui make one reference to 'Orominya' which they label as 'a cushitic language of southern Ethiopia' (1998, p. 161). The term 'Orominya' is an imperial Amharic expression; since 1992 the Oromo language has been known as *afaan Oromoo*. The language is spoken in southern, eastern, western and sections of northern Ethiopia, and in northern Kenya.

In the case of internal colonialism, language policy is used to promote one linguistic/ethnic group at the expense of others, which so often includes postcolonial independence—where one ‘native’ language occupies the place previously occupied by the coloniser’s language (e.g. English or French). Perhaps internal colonialism is an inevitable aspect of the modern nation-state project, as through the twin mechanisms of exclusion and negation the modern nation-state ideology both debases and nullifies the history of minorities.⁷

In terms of administrative policy, internal linguistic colonialism occurs through the choice of national language and medium of instruction. Past government policy in Ethiopia provides a stark example of internal linguistic colonialism. Despite having over eighty ethnic groups, the Ethiopian ruling élite suppressed other groups by enforcing Amharic as the major language and medium of instruction in schools, with English as a second language (Watson 1992, p. 116). Because of the vast number of first-language speakers, the Oromo language was especially targeted. For the Oromo, this meant the official prohibition of their language.

Much of Ethiopian history can be viewed as a struggle between the Amhara and the Oromo. The Oromo were incorporated into Abyssinia/Ethiopia in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Bairu Tafla (1987)—who translated the writings of the Amhara historian Asma Giyorgis—notes that both Oromo and Amhara had fought in a ‘protracted struggle’ which commenced in the sixteenth century. He suggests that this struggle ‘developed into an incessant confrontation between two forces with different political, religious and social organisations and, hence, it became a war of conquest’ (p. 47). The outcome was the formation of the Ethiopian empire, whose key architects—the Emperors Menelik II (1889-1913) and Haile Selassie (1930-74)—both utilised various methods and strategies to bring about the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the ethnically diverse population (Bairu Tafla 1987).

Emperor Menelik II was born Sahle Mariam in the autonomous central Abyssinian province of Shoa in 1844. The name Menelik recalls the legendary son of

⁷ The word ‘minorities’ refers to those who have limited access to economic, political and social status within the modern nation-state. In the case of Ethiopia the Oromo, while demographically the largest national group, remain a minority.

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba who, according to tradition, was the first ruler of Abyssinia, and the one to whom the family traced its ancestry. His paternal grandfather was the first Shoan leader to become a king of independent Shoa. However, the independence came to an end by 1855 when the Shoan army was defeated by the forces of the Abyssinian Emperor Tewodros II (1855-68). Following various power struggles, in 1865 Menelik proclaimed himself king (*negus*) of Shoa. As a young king he built a power base by increasing the size of his army. He established diplomatic ties with foreign powers and used European weapons and technology to further his aspirations. Contesting with the Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-89) in the north, to whom Menelik was compelled to pay tribute, he increased his revenues by expanding the Shoan kingdom through the plundering of the largely Oromo areas to the north, south, east and west. These expeditions gave Menelik access to important trade routes, natural resources and new sources of slaves. While he actively conspired for the Emperor Yohannes's throne, it was not until 1889, when Yohannes died, that Menelik was crowned. While Emperor Menelik II is commonly remembered by Ethiopians for his victory over the advancing Italians at Adwa in 1896, during his rule, which ended with his illness-related death in 1913, he attempted to build a strong national monarchy and began the task of modernisation via the creation of transportation and communications infrastructure (cf. Greenfield 1965; Marcus, H. 1975).

Between 1913 and 1930 the throne was succeeded first by Menelik's grandson Lij Iyasu (1913-16), and then Zawditu (1916-30), the daughter of Menelik II. But neither were definite in their rule and both failed to effectively consolidate power. When Zawditu died in 1930, the heir to the throne Ras Tafari demanded the title *negasa nagast* (king of kings) and took control of the empire with the throne name Emperor Haile Selassie I. Immediately he recommenced pursuing the goals of modernisation and increasing the power of the central state authority that had earlier begun under Emperor Menelik II (Greenfield 1965).

The conquest of new territories by Emperor Menelik II's forces at the turn of the twentieth century saw the spread of Amharic from its original base in the north of present day Ethiopia to other linguistic communities. The completion of conquest and the incorporation of new land were soon followed by the re-settlement of Amhara, Coptic clergy or 'Amharised' soldiers and populations. These groups became the initial agents for the dissemination of Amharic. Menelik primarily relied

upon military force, the efforts of his appointed officials (many of whom were Oromo in background), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to Christianise and integrate the conquered Oromo regions through active political Amharisation (Asafa Jalata 1993).

Menelik's successor, Emperor Haile Selassie, had the added advantage of modern means to continue the process of national integration, via the Amharisation program, which was then perceived as imperative for the survival of the Ethiopian empire. Aspects of Amharisation included centralisation, Christianisation and the placement of Amhara in positions of influence. In this way, the policy and practice of Amharisation was inherent in and strongly influenced all areas of Ethiopia's social life (Seyoum Hameso 1997). From the 1930s, Haile Selassie built Amharic language schools in major towns and decreed the propagation of Amharic (Tucho Yigazu 1992). After 1942, the government enacted laws which made Amharic the exclusive language of governmental administration, the law and education. All other languages indigenous to Ethiopia were excluded from official domains.

The Ethiopian government's attempt to spread Amharic to all parts of the empire as an instrument of national integration at the expense of all other languages is commonly called *Pax Amharica*. Underlying the enterprise was Haile Selassie's sense of imperial duty: the dissemination of Amharic was vital to the quest for cultural and linguistic uniformity of the people for the building of one 'nation'—Ethiopia—through one language. All government administration, national communication (press, radio and television) and schooling was in Amharic (with English as a second language).⁸ As bitterly described by various Oromo now living in Melbourne, the Ethiopian government made Amharic a prerequisite for access to educational facilities. Indeed, fluency in Amharic was regarded as an essential requirement for all societal advancement. To symbolise the unique status of Amharic, Article 125 of Ethiopia's 1955 Constitution declared it the official language of the empire (Fellman 1992, p. 173).

Until the final days of the empire in 1974, *afaan Oromoo* was denied any official status and it was not permitted to publish, teach or broadcast in any Oromo dialect. The events of 1974 introduced a change of language policy: in addition to

⁸ Mussolini's Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and crushed the resistance led by the Emperor. During the Italian rule (1936-41), Haile Selassie sought exile in Britain, and regained power in 1941 with British backing. Throughout his rule he maintained close ties with the British.

Amharic, literacy programs for other Ethiopian languages began, a government controlled daily radio program in *afaan Oromoo* commenced and newspapers appeared (with the Oromo language strictly written in the Amharic orthography). Nonetheless, even after the demise of the empire and all the changes that were effected, Amharic remained the only indigenous language used for secondary and higher education and all levels of state administration (cf. Fellman 1992, p. 174; Kapeluik 1980). Following the Derg military junta's collapse in 1991—and the subsequent federalising of the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines—Amharic ceased to be recognised as the official national language. But it remains the *lingua franca*.

While Amharisation was a clear strategy, it should not be interpreted as a homogeneous, mono-dimensional phenomenon that impacted upon all Oromo in the same manner. Rather, as argued by Arnesen (1996), Amharisation was far more localised, heterogeneous and multi-layered than commonly perceived. In effect—like Gramsci's conception of hegemony as a process of articulating practices in discourse (Mouffe 1979)—the success of Amharisation depended upon the ability of ruling élite to obtain the 'consent' of the Oromo to their subordinated status. To this extent hegemonic relations were always contested and needed to be continually renegotiated with the oppressed Oromo. A range of strategies were applied to achieve this in different settings and to varying degrees. In some areas of Oromiya despotically ruthless and violent means of coercion were used (such as in rural Arsi which is further discussed in Chapter Eight), while in other areas (such as the towns Finfinnee, Hadama and Jimma) more sophisticated and 'peaceful' methods were applied to 'legitimate' the Abyssinian rule.

This starkly summarised account of the nation-building processes of Ethiopia provides the context for understanding the dynamics of Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopian interaction in Melbourne. All Oromo in Melbourne aged over thirty years attended schools during the Haile Selassie period, and even the younger ones have been indirectly affected by the policies described. Despite the differences of approach in the different regions, the biographies of all Melbourne's Oromo contain chapters of ethnic-based ridicule and debasement at the hands of Ethiopian authorities. Many children were singled-out at school, while adults were regularly harassed, usually accompanied by insults via the derogatory term *galla*.

Oromo academic Gemetchu Megerssa (dangerously writing from within the present day Ethiopia) recently described the ongoing tension of constructing Oromo identities in the present. He emphasised the ongoing burden of past marginalisation and ridicule under the mythical representation of galla:

The intrusive and destructive image of themselves as fabricated by the galla myth forms part of their consciousness and social experience and serves as a constant provocative negative pole according to which all Oromo must now continue to define themselves.

(Gemetchu Megerssa 1996, p. 98)

Such a statement, with a few minor word substitutions, could easily be attributed to Frantz Fanon in relation to the Antillean subject under colonialism. The ‘constant provocative negative pole’ that Gemetchu pronounces as inescapable recalls the ‘manicheism delirium’ discussed earlier, whereby the exiled Oromo—insofar as Gemetchu attributes the pathology to ‘all Oromo’—are ambiguously unable to transcend the colonial condition. Instead, as Gemetchu asserts, the Oromo national is compelled to define herself in reference to the subaltern sensibilities coded within the formation of Abyssinian imperialism. Such compulsion implies a complex and revealing relationship between Melbourne’s Oromo and the Ethiopian Others.

The present place that Melbourne’s Oromo inhabit can be viewed as a microcosm of Ethiopia to the extent that the public housing and cheap private rental estates, shopping centres, community services and cafés are frequented by large numbers of people from Ethiopia (predominantly a cross-section of Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Gurage, Harari/Adaree and Afar). In a hostile white-Australian dominated society, these ‘black Africans’⁹ are socially and economically compelled to live side-by-side, often uncomfortably, as ‘neighbours’.

The drama underlying these everyday colonial scenes is not hard to discern. Bedriya’s silence towards her Amhara neighbour Hirut exhibits the constellation of

⁹ The term ‘black Africans’ is used to denote the mainstream white-Australia derogatory representations of these people as an homogenous group of Others. Such representations ensure that these ‘blacks’ are not found in large numbers in the middle-class suburbs of Melbourne. Contrary to references to Africa, unlike the Tanzanians, Kenyans and Ugandans in Melbourne, the vast majority of Oromo I know do not feel affinity with pan-African identities. Indeed, the Oromo are ignored by the Black/pan-Africanist movement—which often celebrates Ethiopianism—and absent in pan-African literature on the African diaspora (cf. Du Bois 1989; Gilroy 1993; Kanneh 1998; and Lemelle & Kelley 1994).

Fanon's (1967, p. 183) 'manicheism delirium' that mediates everyday social relations between the Oromo national and her Abyssinian neighbours. In this case, Hirut is represented by Bedriya as the embodiment of the colonising enemy, to be avoided at all times. The dynamics between these two women reflect and reinforce the structure of social relations between the Abyssinian and the Oromo. Hirut finds Bedriya's silence incomprehensible, while Bedriya compulsively suspects that Hirut despises her because she is a galla. Bedriya's silence signals her refusal to remain 'invisible' as an assimilated Ethiopian.

The 'manicheism delirium' that Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 183) described as fundamental to the colonialist enterprise is manifest in binary oppositions of good/evil, true/false, beauty/ugliness (in which the primary sign is axiomatically privileged). Fanon recognised the potential of Manicheism as a symbolic launching-pad for nationalist liberation struggles. Similarly, the voicing of Oromocentric discourse could be viewed as immediately necessary for the cultural and linguistic survival of the Oromo, an attempt to re-position the marginal from the edge of obliteration.

In the face of the longstanding poststructuralist dismissal of anything remotely essentialist, 'Western' critics such as Benita Parry (1987, 1994) and John Dollimore (1986) have advocated the strategic role of 'identity politics' in the struggle against oppression. In defence of anti-colonial nationalism and Fanon's nativist theory of resistance, Parry (who is certainly not an anti-essentialist) offers a critique of the postcolonial 'ambivalently positioned colonial subject' (1987, p. 29). She targets the theories of Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohamed (1983, 1990), and to a lesser extent Said, as potently incommensurable with the anti-colonial Fanon and the liberation desires of the 'native'. Perhaps surprisingly, Gayatri Spivak (1987, pp. 197-221), in her reading of *Subaltern Studies*, suggests some usefulness for essentialism as a temporary intervention in certain historical contexts, to the extent that it enables the subaltern to attempt to speak.¹⁰ Parry defends the essentialism of anti-colonial texts written by national liberation movements by asserting the non-negotiability of Fanon's paradigm of the colonial condition: the binary opposition coloniser/colonised. Her sore point with postcolonialism is its apparent inability to mobilise the oppressed masses around a common identity.

¹⁰ Spivak responds to Parry's questions in 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe*, Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*' (1990a).

Along similar though less militant lines to Fanon and Parry, Dollimore (1986) regards the invoking of essential identity as an important initial stage in a process of resistance. Using the gay movement as an example, he defends 'identity politics' by referring to its capacity to initially mobilise people around a common identity. Alluding to a Derridean deconstructionist approach to overturning the hierarchy of binary oppositions (cf. Derrida 1981, p. 41), he advocates a reverse discourse whereby the dominated marginal subjects the dominator to inversion via deviant non-conforming acts of negation.

This approach to resistance appears to fit well with Ayesha's, Ali's and Bedriya's confrontations with Abyssinian people in Melbourne. Unlike back home in Oromiya, there is limited capacity to fight an armed struggle for liberation; instead, as demonstrated in the preceding encounters, the anti-colonial 'struggle' continues, but in less physically violent forms. These forms may reflect a negative desire, on the part of the Oromo agent, to invert the Abyssinian dominator as Dollimore and Parry assert. But inversion, as O'Hanlon (1988, p. 206) notes in relation to the South Asian project of Subaltern Studies, should not be understood simply as a desire to 'turn-the-tables' on the oppressor. Rather, the desire for inversion points to something further: to a sense of the importance of desire in negativity, of the wish to stand in two places, which underlies it and makes it comprehensible.

Diverging from Parry's reading of Fanon,¹¹ Homi Bhabha (1994b), explicitly reflecting upon Fanon's 'manicheism delirium', emphasises the ambivalent fetishism of anti-colonialist nationalism (the 'desire in negativity'). He asserts that Fanon, echoing Freud's Oedipus syndrome, theorises the nationalist subjectivity of the colonised Black man as a compensation for a presumed lack. While Freud asks, 'What does the woman want?', Fanon turns to confront the colonised world and asks, 'What does the Black man want?' (p. 114). Within this approach, the problematic of difference/otherness is evident whereby one side of the self/other equation is seen as lacking.

Similarly we could ask the loaded question, 'What does the Oromo want?', as she turns to confront her colonised world. Fanon's response might be that the Oromo, caught in a net of psychopathological identification, wants to introduce a system of differentiation which enables her to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic,

¹¹ For an excellent analysis of the current fascination with Fanon see Henry Lewis Gates Jr. 'Critical Fanonism' (1991).

historical reality. But, adapting Bhabha's elaboration of fetishism as the disavowal of difference, the negation of the Abyssinian, *qua* the primordial Oromo identity, always 'exacerbates the "edge" of identification, reveals that dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned. For denial is always a retroactive process; a *half* acknowledgment of that Otherness which has left its traumatic mark' (Bhabha 1994b, p. 120). Appropriating Bhabha's argument to the historically negating galla myth, one would conclude that it is from this psychic and political tension that the inverting 'manicheism delirium' of Oromo nationalist sensibilities emerges.

In addition to these contesting approaches toward inversion as resistance, I tentatively suggest that there is another way of conceptualising the 'identity politics' of Oromo nationalist sensibilities, as exhibited in everyday practices of resistance among Melbourne's Oromo. Agreeing with Dollimore and Parry, such tactical acts of resistance are indeed about claiming identity and exercising power, but not as simplistic binary inversion, as they assert. Rather, rethought along Deleuze-Guattarian—in contrast to Hegelian—lines and following de Certeau's (1984) concept of tactical consumption, acts of transgression may be conceptualised in the spatial terms of articulation as 'transformative practice'. Such an approach sets up a conjunctive theory and practice of the AND—the 'double capture'—whereby definitions of Self and Other occur within a pluralist theory of power that is not constrained by the imperatives of authenticity.

Such an approach, while complicated, speaks a language of 'essence' without resorting to Hegelian bipolar distinctions or the overwhelmingly negative terms of deconstructionism. In this respect it has much in common with Luce Irigaray's (1985) unique and controversial attempt to positively redefine sexual difference. Irigaray's project, like this study (but far more comprehensively), engages in a dialogue with Deleuze-Guattarian theories. Although writing from a position heavily influenced by Derrida, because of her positive emphasis upon feminine difference, Irigaray has, ironically, been dismissively labelled an essentialist by fellow deconstructionists. While not clearly an essentialist or constructionist, she simultaneously engages in a process of constructing and deconstructing feminine identities (their 'essences') that confounds the deadlock.

Similarly, from the theoretical viewpoint of articulation, transgressive acts can be seen as Deleuze-Guattarian reterritorialisations, events which—by

articulating subject-positions into specific places—enable Oromo people to stop and *place* themselves in temporary points of belonging and identification: to ‘become-Oromo’. Such a response may offer a way of conceiving the Oromo political struggle in something other than the simple debilitating guilt-ridden dichotomies which currently dominate the aesthetics of Oromo resistance (Ethiopia/Oromiya, oppressor/oppressed, centre/margin).

As sketched in Chapter One, the strategic possibilities of such a model of articulation for both descriptive and political practice are found in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s equation of transformation with ‘becoming-other’¹²—or becoming-minoritarian, becoming-nomad (1987, pp. 291-4). They use the word ‘becoming’ in place of ‘being’ to accentuate that reality is dynamic. From this perspective, the reality of a subject is conceptualised as embodied in a process of perpetual ‘becomings’ (assemblages of multiplicities) which continually transform within and across the space of existence (cf. Braidotti 1997; Grossberg 1993).

Fundamental to the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of ‘becoming’ is the privileging of the ‘minority’ as the dynamic principle of change. For this reason, becoming is always marginal and a space of transformational encounter. Like articulation, becoming-other cannot be exhaustively described because it is directional—away from oppressive tendencies—but not directed—no one can pilot it (Massumi 1992, p. 103). In Rosi Braidotti’s (1997) terms, the ‘multiple variables of difference or of devalued otherness are positive sites for [the] redefinition of subjectivity [which is becoming]. Thus an asymmetrical starting position between minority and majority is suggested by Deleuze [and Guattari]’ (p. 69). If this is so, then, unlike the deconstructionists, a Deleuze-Guattarian framework offers a positive description of non-binary subjectivity.

Simply put, becoming-other is a double movement occurring at the point of tension between two modes of desire—being and becoming, assimilation and resistance—and ‘plots a vector of transformation’ between these two coordinates (Massumi 1992, p. 94). Becoming-other is always a process of desire and the only way to undertake this process is actually to be attracted to change. But here desire is

¹² The term ‘becoming-other’ is a variation of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s ‘becoming-minoritarian’, ‘becoming-nomad’, or their complex philosophical term ‘becoming-molecular’, and is taken from Brian Massumi (1992).

positivity (anti-Oedipal) and not lack (Oedipal): for Deleuze-Guattarian ‘becoming’ is the affirmation of the positivity of difference, as a multiple and constant process of transformation. Such a process requires impact with others because becoming-other is a collective and relational process that—like a crowbar inserted into the cracks appearing in the existing ideological order—is thoroughly political (Massumi 1992, p. 106).

Moving freely across space, the Deleuze-Guattarian configuration of becoming is a nomadic process, a constant flow of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, decoding and recoding. Such movements may be viewed as tactical manoeuvres, whereby nomadic practices such as those implemented by Ali and Bedriya, while excluding linguistic ‘others’, also create temporary but ‘real’ addresses or ‘homes’ (Grossberg 1993, p. 100). Such nomadic tactics reterritorialise Melbourne’s Oromo, pointing to the sites of ‘nominal essence’:¹³ the spaces of becoming-Oromo, where a *hecceity* I call Oromo cultural formation is evidently real.

Asserting a positivity of difference means that one can speak as an Oromo, although the subject ‘Oromo’ is not a singular essence defined once and for all, but the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experience (Braidotti 1994b, p. 123). Such an approach suggests the potential for radically new Oromo nationalist sensibilities. The task throughout the rest of this study is to ethnographically map such nomadically transformative practices which together

¹³ The Lockean theory of essence is useful for discriminating between the ontological and linguistic orders of essentialism. ‘Real’ essence refers to the ‘natural’, fixed and unchanging understanding of essence, as exemplified, in relation to the Oromo, in Gemetchu Megerssa’s work on *Oromumma* (1994, 1996) and the overarching Oromo nationalist sensibilities. ‘Nominal’ essence signifies a linguistic order of essentialism (which is central to my thesis). Locke’s approach, despite its shortcomings, enables one to conceive of the Oromo as a group without submitting to the idea (as Gemetchu does) that it is ‘nature’ which marks them as different. This idea is taken from Diana Fuss’s book *Essentially Speaking*, in which she notes that ‘real essence is itself a nominal essence—that is, a linguistic kind, a product of naming. And nominal essence is still an essence, suggesting that despite the circulation of different kinds of essences, they still all share a common classification as essences.’ (1989, p. 5).

constitute Oromo cultural formation: to identify where the 'essence' of becoming-Oromo is currently located; where the re-presentation and re-creation of *Oromumma* is occurring amongst Melbourne's Oromo.

Part II Performing home:

A LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

CHAPTER FOUR

*MANA ITTI GADDINU HINQABNU:*¹

THE MOURNING OF A 'NATION' WITHOUT A 'STATE'

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game ... that is, the space instituted by others, characterise the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations ... In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space ... Like the skill of a driver in the streets of Rome or Naples, there is a skill that has its connoisseurs and its esthetics exercised in any labyrinth of powers, a skill ceaselessly recreating opacities and ambiguities—spaces of darkness and trickery—in the universe of technocratic transparency, a skill that disappears into them and reappears again, taking no responsibility for the administration of a totality. Even the field of misfortune is refashioned by this combination of manipulation and enjoyment.

Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 18)

The psychology of the colonial encounter—the colonisation of the mind—tears at the very core of a people's sense of selfhood and identity: the indifference to the possibility of being known and recognised in other ways apart from the colonial is a painful experience. Lacking institutional authority (such as a recognised flag or an embassy), Melbourne's Oromo face the dilemma of being at once members of a nation while simultaneously not having found their 'nation'. As described in the previous chapter, the ideological force of the nation plays a dominant role among Melbourne's Oromo, and their struggle for nationhood entails the elocutionary presentation of their nation to themselves and to outsiders. As this chapter describes, the sites of presentation are not bounded by territory; rather, via reterritorialisation (in the Deleuze-Guattarian sense), the Oromo make their own locations and spaces wherever they can. It is at these locations that the narrative of the nation is plotted amongst Melbourne's Oromo as the will to nationhood is presented through performances—written, spoken and sung—which both create and presage the nation yet to arrive.

¹ 'Having no house/place in which to sit and weep'.

Television programs that feature Ethiopia are very rare in Melbourne and when one is shown there is much interest among both the Oromo and non-Oromo Ethiopian communities. One such program was shown in October 1996: the documentary 'Ethiopia: A Turbulent History',² an hour-long feature examining the history of Ethiopia since the late-nineteenth century. Numerous people (Oromo and non-Oromo) told me about the program in expectation of something special and many video recorded it. However, despite the anticipation, this particular program was not plausible for the Oromo who viewed it.

Produced in 1996, the narrated program examined the historical development of the Ethiopian empire without making any reference to the Oromo. A map of Ethiopia indicated how the ancient Abyssinian dynasty—a minority Christian community—expanded. As the narration described:

For the 1500 years to the end of the nineteenth century this was Abyssinia, a Christian kingdom protected from Muslim attacks by mountains. At the end of the nineteenth century ... encircled and afraid of invasion [by the surrounding British, Italian and French colonial presence] Emperor Menelik the Second set out to secure his kingdom. He conquered the mainly Muslim kingdoms to the south ... and so modern Ethiopia was born.

'Ethiopia: A Turbulent History' (video recording) 1996

No further details of the conquered 'mainly Muslim kingdoms to the south' were provided, which left the viewer asking who these conquered people were. Such a specious presentation of Ethiopian history was perhaps to be expected. Yet, given that the documentary was recently produced, and the fact that the Oromo make-up more than fifty percent of Ethiopia's population, it was surprising that they were not even referred to throughout the whole hour. As would be expected, Oromo in Melbourne who viewed the program were strongly critical of the documentary because it was, 'just presenting the pro-Tigray/Amhara view'. The documentary affirmed their sense of being 'nationless' and their ongoing experience as the forgotten people of Ethiopian history. The documentary ignored or forgot them.

² The documentary *Ethiopia: A Turbulent History* is a French production devised and directed by Jean-Michel Meurice. The program was screened on 10th October 1996 on 0/28 SBS Television in Melbourne. SBS is not a mainstream commercial channel, but a 'multicultural' Special Broadcasting Service that has a smaller, predominantly 'ethnic', viewing audience. Again, the Oromo were put together with the other 'ethnics', away from the mainstream media in Australia.

In the June 1996 edition of the magazine *New African* the cover story titled 'The Oromo—A Forgotten People' featured Sue Pollock, a Scottish aid worker who, in 1995, had spent four weeks in Ethiopia collecting information for a report concerning the suffering of the Oromo. The report, 'Ethiopia—Human Tragedy in the Making. Democracy or Dictatorship?', was released in March 1996. Both the article and the report featured stories about human rights abuses and extra-judicial executions of Oromo by Ethiopian government authorities. On the cover page of the report under the title was a large prominently displayed picture of two dead bodies lying on the ground next to each other. Underneath the picture was the Manichean question, 'Democracy or Dictatorship?' Inside the report was the statement: 'Cover photograph—Extra-judicial killing of two torture victims, held for a month in a secret detention centre in Wallaga, western Oromiya, in April 1995' (Pollock 1996a, p. 3). The same photograph also featured in the *New African* article with the attached statement: 'Two unnamed Oromo victims of extra judicial killings' (Pollock 1996b, p. 11).

A one-page article written by Kirsty Scott (1996) and printed in the English newspaper *The Herald* featured a story concerning Sue Pollock's observations in Ethiopia. In a bold summary to the article, again titled 'Human Tragedy in the Making', Scott wrote, 'After a month in Ethiopia, a Scots aid worker believes she has uncovered a "secret war" by the country's new democratic government against the Oromo people'.

Both articles and the report have been widely copied and circulated among Melbourne's Oromo: 'evidence' of the 'hidden' Oromo suffering and struggle in Ethiopia—evidence, moreover, presented in writing by a 'Westerner'. Though now working for the Oromia Support Group (OSG) in the United Kingdom, among Melbourne's Oromo Sue Pollock is shrouded in mystery, as nobody appears to know how she came to obtain her information. Her report—clumsy and inelegant and containing hastily-drawn conclusions—is regarded with reverence by the Oromo in Melbourne and amongst the exiled communities around the world. One man in Melbourne commented how:

When Oromiya is free and we have our own nation Sue Pollock will be very famous and a hero. She is an amazing woman because she has written about us and exposed the Tigray government at a time when nobody else is

doing this. She must be a very smart woman to get this information. You should get in contact with her before you go to Ethiopia.³

It would seem that the style, content or credentials of Sue Pollock's writing do not significantly matter to Melbourne's Oromo. On the contrary, what really matters is that someone is taking notice of the Oromo: they have not been forgotten.

Both the documentary and the Sue Pollock report and articles reinforce the common experience of marginalisation amongst Melbourne's Oromo. Phrases such as 'The Forgotten People' emphasise an act of forgetting or indifference. The world has forgotten the Oromo. But even the term 'forgotten' is misleading: the world has no memory of the Oromo to recall. How can you think no more of someone you never knew?

In a more powerful sense, it is Melbourne's Oromo who have forgotten themselves, who have effaced themselves. The effacing began back in Ethiopia and was necessary to achieve social mobility. As flagged in the previous chapter, the colonial experience entailed the adoption of a public non-Oromo identity: for many this meant the acquisition of Amhara language, psychology and behaviour. Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1986) description of 'colonial alienation' and Ali Mazrui's and Aliman Mazrui's (1998) 'power of Babel' under European colonisation in Africa, survival in the coloniser's world in Ethiopia generally entailed a disassociation between the languages of work/school and family/community. As discussed more fully in Chapter Nine, the most affected were Oromo men, who were more exposed to formal education and the 'public' Abyssinian colonial spheres. Paraphrasing Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the language of formal education was foreign, the language of books was foreign, the language of conceptualisation was foreign—indeed, in many cases, for educated colonial subjects, thought took the visible form of a foreign language (1986, p. 17).

The language of written discourse—the source of political and economic power—was, like a 'Tower of Babel', completely separate from everyday vernaculars, and access to it was controlled by the Abyssinian social and political structures whose interests it served. But, not surprisingly, in its operation as a language of power, the sanctioned barriers were necessarily breached—in both

³ Interview, November 1996.

directions—as the dominant, unitary coloniser’s language inevitably interacted with the local vernaculars, with the effect that multilingualism, especially in towns like Dirree dhawaa, was the norm rather than the exception (Ward 1997, p. 117). Nevertheless, survival in colonial Ethiopia generally entailed not publicly identifying as an Oromo. Rather, to be Oromo meant being considered subaltern—an outcome of the ethnocentric formation of the Ethiopian empire.

While particular ethnic groups may have taken a greater role in the struggle against imperialism and consequent formation of the various states throughout Africa, the association between ethnic identity and state formation was typically indirect (Donham 1992). In most cases, the pursuit of decolonisation involved the routing of the common enemy to all the population; as throughout colonial Africa nationalist movements emerged in anti-colonial opposition to a European power.

The creation of the Ethiopian state was an aberration. As previously discussed and as documented elsewhere (cf. Holcomb & Sisai Ibssa 1990; Asafa Jalata 1993; and Baxter 1978a), the formation of what is today called the Ethiopian state occurred through the expansion of the mostly Orthodox Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (the Amhara and Tigray people). The expansion entailed the Abyssinians conquering numerous nations south of Abyssinia—the federation of Oromo being the largest.⁴

Imperialist dynamics characterised the formation of the Ethiopian state, in the sense that through the state apparatus one élitist minority ethnic group—largely Shoan Amhara—systematically sought to impose its language and culture upon the vast majority. But, contrary to the Manichean sensibilities which dominate Oromo nationalist discourse (good Oromo/ bad Amhara), it is important to note that not all Amhara people brutally oppressed the majority. As Arnesen (1996) observes in relation to contact between Amhara settlers and the Oromo in the Tulama-Oromo region of Northern Shoa, to simply speak of a unilinear process of ‘Amharisation’ of Oromo groups is highly misleading (p. 237). Rather, the patterns of interaction were diverse: some Amhara settlers and their descendants married Oromo, converted to Islam and mixed primarily with Oromo people. Like most colonial settings, the responses of the local people to the presence of their invaders ranged

⁴ Other groups dominated included the Afars, Somalis and Sidamas—all of which are now engaged in anti-colonial struggles.

from both passive and active resistance ('resisting as best we can') to assimilation ('surviving as best we know how').

Nonetheless, despite the exceptions, the emergence of Ethiopian nationalist discourse coincided with the attempted 'ethnocide' of the Oromo, who made up more than half of the empire's population. The ethnocentricity of the Ethiopian imperial state placed huge pressures upon the general multiethnic population to become modern by assimilating to the dominant Amhara language and culture. This pressure was further applied through the hierarchical ranking of non-Amhara ethnic groups according to their perceived modern development. The Oromo, considered by the ruling Amhara to be the most primitive of all the ethnic groups, were placed at the bottom of the modern hierarchy (Levine 1965, p. 292).

From the outset, the cultural inscription of modernity was apparent in Ethiopia and was mapped onto ethnic identity in a manner different from much of the rest of Africa. Not only was the Emperor Haile Selassie a Semitic-speaking Amhara—who was raised in the multi-ethnic town of Harar (Adaree Biyyoo) and is widely thought to have a 'partially' Oromo pedigree—but the offices of the imperial state were filled with Amhara. As a consequence, modernist Ethiopians tended 'to define themselves not so much vis-à-vis European colonists as in relation to their more backward countrymen'—not an unusual tendency among new élite in decolonising societies. This gave Ethiopian modernism a 'pronounced edge of superiority, a feeling that educated leaders were entitled to drag, so to speak, their backward countrymen into the twentieth century' (Donham 1992, p. 38).

To this extent, in Ethiopia modernisation corresponded with Amharisation, whereby the population could become modern by changing their ethnic and religious identity—by changing their names to Amharic ones, learning to speak Amharic without an accent and converting to Orthodox Christianity (Clapham 1988, p. 23; cf. the broader African experience, Bates 1983). To become an educated person required the adoption to some considerable degree of Amhara custom, and by the time of the 'revolution' in the early 1970s this pressure had produced a significantly large group of thus-assimilated Amhara, particularly in the capital Addis Ababa (Finfinnee).

As Said (1979) has shown in his analysis of colonial discourse within British and French imperialist writing about the Orient, the imperialist enterprise in Ethiopia attempted to define the marginal Oromo through ideologically disguised textual representations and oral stories. The Oromo were written out of Ethiopian history and classified as Oriental. The least developed and barbaric Oromo were considered to have emerged from elsewhere, probably Asia, but certainly not Ethiopia. Many popular stories were circulated to reinforce the backwardness of the Oromo, such as that jocularly described to me by one Oromo in Melbourne:

There are some crazy stories about the Oromo. Because they [the Amhara Ethiopians] dislike us so much, some say that we came from frogs, that they are our ancestors, that we climbed out of the Indian Ocean as frogs and turned into Oromo. You see the Oromo have always been treated as second-class citizens; this is another story they made to show how we are just like frogs.⁵

The psychological effect of growing-up in an environment where stories like this were commonplace was a tendency to a deep-seated inferiority, made manifest in the hiding of one's ethnic background. Accounts of hiding away their Oromo background in order to avoid discrimination, and in some cases death, are frequently repeated by Oromo in Melbourne. To hide one's identity often entailed adopting a profile of another *ethnie* that was higher up on the Amhara's list of development. One Oromo, Hussein, described how, while studying in Finfinnee, he responded to the pressures:

I denied being Oromo to avoid trouble. Instead I said that I was Adaree [a minority group from the east of Ethiopia] which meant that I would be treated better. Before coming to Melbourne I did not want any trouble so I thought not to tell anyone I was Oromo.⁶

Similarly, the impact of colonial policy upon the psychology of an Oromo boy growing-up in Ethiopia is clearly described in the life-story told by Ali:

I was born and grew-up in Calanqqo, a small town in eastern Oromiya. I was educated there, during both the Haile Selassie and the Mengistu periods. I have also studied for two years in another province called Bale.

⁵ Interview, July 1996.

⁶ Interview, August 1996.

All the studies that I undertook were instructed in the language Amharic. When I started school I was ten years old and my mother tongue—*afaan Oromoo*—was not even developed. Although I could speak Oromo at home with my family I was not instructed or taught it at school. I was not able to write at all in my own language because nobody was able to read and write in *afaan Oromoo*. It was only spoken in the market, in the farm and at home.

I have used both Amharic and Oromo to help me with my studies, but most of the teachers always strictly instructed us not to speak *afaan Oromoo* at school. It was from this time that I developed inferiority for my language and culture. Sometimes the teachers used to insult some students who could not speak Amharic properly. In particular the teachers sometimes insulted Oromo students when they were not doing their work by calling them derogatory names. The insult was different for Oromo; the teachers could not call an Amhara student by the same derogatory term because it would not be appropriate. It would be like insulting a white man by calling him black. Because I had some Amhara friends at school, when we argued on something and when they ran out of arguments to use against me they always came back and used the term *galla* to annoy me. This means a person who belongs in the *galla* tribe. To me, now, when I think of this, it had the same meaning to that of *nigger* for a black American. It was only the Amhara that called us *galla*; it was not the Oromo that called themselves by this name.

During the time that I grew-up and studied in Ethiopian schools I always felt inferior by birth—being born from an Oromo. The pressure was great to become more like Amhara and to adopt an Amhara way of life, because the Amhara way of life was considered something to aspire to achieve. For myself as well as many other Oromo we thought of our inferiority as if it was natural. The pressure was that you had to escape that feeling of inferiority by choosing to become the non-inferior, which was then the Amhara way of life. There was a great advantage for Amhara in that, unlike the Oromo, they learnt to speak Amharic at home naturally as well as at school.

My experience is certainly not the worst, but is common to many Oromo who are now living throughout the world. The Oromo were not

treated the same in the eye of the law by the Ethiopian state. Indeed, the Oromo were considered as second class citizens and in many cases non-citizens in their own country. Ironically, even though the Amhara demanded the assimilation of Oromo, they discouraged this assimilation because of the inferiority of the Oromo. Moreover, they were afraid that Oromo may swallow them if they assimilated in large numbers.⁷

Ali's reflexive observation, 'For myself as well as many other Oromo we thought of our inferiority as if it was natural', poignantly points to the mental presence of colonialism. It can be equated with Fanon's 'colonisation of the mind', Nandy's (1983) 'Intimate Enemy', Bourdieu's (1977) 'symbolic violence', and Gramsci's (1971) 'hegemony'. Such internalised domination is more insidiously pervasive and dangerous than the physical presence of the coloniser—which can be removed. Indeed, the colonialist discourse may 'become incorporated into the consciousness and culture of the dominated to the extent that they identify it as part of their own *Weltenshaung*' (Nurse-Bray and Ahluwalia 1996, p. 1).

The 'colonisation of the mind' began for the Oromo with the ridiculing and debasement of their cultural identity—to the point where they were denied even human identity. They were reduced to 'frogs', incapable of any independent action and dependent upon the colonisers to be civilised and educated. The debasing of their language, culture and history ensured that their consciousness was 'controlled and channelled' (Nurse-Bray and Ahluwalia 1996, p. 2). The loss (and recovery) of self under colonialism remains a defining feature of the lives of the vast majority of Oromo (cf. Ashis Nandy's 1983 incisive psychoanalytic reading of the Indian colonial encounter). The 'colonisation of the mind' persists amongst Melbourne's Oromo, despite their presence in a far-off land many years later. They may be postcolonial in their geographical location, but the adverse symptoms of a colonial past are omnipresent and the cultural mappings of colonialism remain. Unavoidably, Melbourne's Oromo are placed in the position of having to articulate their national identity in their daily resistance to the lingering ideology of colonialism.

The only certainty is the present. For those suffering under the omnipresence of the 'intimate enemy' or 'colonisation of the mind', the claim to a national culture in the past, while being useful and providing some justification for a future national

⁷ Interview, September 1996.

culture, is only of use to the extent that people are engaged in a creative process of performative enunciation in the here and now.

In the case of the Oromo, cultural presentation accompanies the emergence of a nationalist movement because, as Fanon (1963) asserted, ‘a national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion. It very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy’. Therefore, the ‘persistence in following forms of culture which are already condemned to extinction is already a demonstration of nationality’ (p. 191). The asserting of any contested culture implicitly involves the transgressive rejection of the coloniser’s world. Meanwhile, the pursuit of ‘the nation is not only the condition of culture, its foundations, its continuous renewal, and its deepening. It is also a necessity. It is the fight for national existence which sets culture moving and opens to it the doors of creation’ (p. 196).

From this perspective, ‘the doors of creation’ are opened to Melbourne’s Oromo by the performative enunciation of a nation, performances that occur—as discussed below—in a context which contests and ‘condemns to secrecy’ their culture. These performances, I would suggest, are part of a process of postcolonial recovery of self that is, ambiguously, driven by an anti-colonial modernist ideal: the longing for a nation-state called Oromiya (cf. Gellner’s 1983 description of modernist ethnic nationalisms).

It is in the spaces referred to here as the ‘loci of affirmation’⁸ that the Oromo are able to simultaneously live, link and voice their cultural and national identities through the use of their language. They are sites of performance, where the affirmation of community, shared culture, shared memories and national identity are performed to themselves and to outsiders. The sites of performance are not bounded by territory; rather, the Oromo make their own locations and spaces wherever they can. The key to all of these spaces is that they provide opportunities for the marginal to be transgressively performed as central—though not by a simple inversion of the Manichean colonial dynamic discussed in the previous chapter.

The word ‘performance’ is apposite, with its sense of affirmation and risky display that is open to scrutiny (Denning 1996, p. 20). Performances in Melbourne

⁸ This term was suggested to me by Eric Lloga.

entail risk because, as the following episode illustrates, the public performance of Oromo culture and national identity requires confrontation with a non-Oromo Ethiopian majority who expect assimilation.

The 1996 African Communities Cultural Festival was held on a Saturday night in a Melbourne hall. The festival was organised by the African Communities Council of Victoria (ACCOV) and widely advertised as featuring performances from the nation-states Somalia, Eritrea, Ghana, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zaire and Malawi. My estimate is that more than five-hundred people, of whom probably half were of African background, attended the evening.

One of the fascinating aspects of the festival was the manner in which Africa was represented as a unified entity with a diverse array of nation-states. Each community presented some of its dancing, dress and music—hence the title ‘cultural festival’—though in the case of the Ethiopian and Oromo communities what ostensibly appeared to be celebratory acts of cultural expression were pregnant with nationalist sentiments. Of the two, it was the presentation by the Oromo community that was greeted with mixed feelings because of its transgressively ‘political’ appearance.

The Ethiopian Community Association dance group presented ‘the dances of Ethiopia’. First was the Amhara dance, then the Tigray, Oromo and Gurage. These dances presented the diversity of Ethiopia, of which the Oromo were a part. Shortly following this performance the Oromo community presented themselves. Gutama, a spokesperson for the Oromo, introduced the performance with the following words:

The Oromo people are the largest nation in what is today called Ethiopia. The Oromo have a rich cultural heritage and operated under their own integrated political and social system called *gadaa*. For the past century Oromo culture and language have been suppressed, suppressed, suppressed by consecutive Ethiopian governments. Tonight we hope you enjoy our Oromo music and dancing.

Following this speech the music and dancing commenced, with two Oromo musicians—Ture Lenco and Afandi Siyo—and a group of male and female dancers performing. In addition to this performance there was a display of Oromo artefacts and photographs. Along with the display a separate sheet and the previously

described articles by Sue Pollock were distributed, to outline who the Oromo are and their problems in Ethiopia.

Two distinctly different ‘realities’ were presented through the performances by the Ethiopian and the Oromo communities: one challenging the integrity of the Ethiopian ‘nation’, the other reinforcing the incorporation of the Oromo into a polyethnic and harmonious Ethiopian ‘nation’.

Some Oromo later commented that it was a real success that they were able to present their culture separate from Ethiopia. But for many of the non-Oromo Ethiopians who attended it was highly offensive that the Oromo should identify themselves separate from Ethiopia. According to one Ethiopian, Haile:

The night was fine and the music was really great, except the Oromo spoilt it because they tried to talk about their suppression. I was really surprised to see Gutama talking about the Oromo being ‘suppressed’—he kept using this word which was very annoying. I thought it was stupid talking about this ‘suppression’. What ‘suppression’? Because Gutama is first an Ethiopian it is silly for him to talk like this. Anyhow, when Gutama was talking nobody was listening: all the Ethiopians at the front were just laughing. I wanted to talk with him about this later, but I didn’t. They also put an article on each table about the Oromo which was not appropriate for the night because you should not bring politics into the evening. Another thing was that the Oromo performers, they just wore ‘Western’ clothes—they had no traditional costume, they haven’t even got one anyway.⁹

Haile’s complaint that ‘you should not bring politics into the evening’ assumed the non-political nature of the Ethiopian presentation and his ridicule demonstrated the degree to which assimilation persists in Melbourne, where most of the Oromo minority are ‘swallowed-up’ by an Ethiopian majority.

Gutama’s public presentation of the Oromo case and implicit challenge to the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state provoked anger not only among the non-Oromo Ethiopians, but also some of the festival organisers, who confronted him after the event. According to Gutama:

⁹ Interview, August 1998.

I had a lot of criticism of being political, because I talked about the Oromo. A number of people came up to me afterwards and they were not happy. In particular, they were not happy because of the Oromo literature distributed, but the article was written by a non-Oromo [Sue Pollock] so they cannot just say that it was biased.

I think that the committee of the African Communities Council of Victoria will probably try and push me out now: Tesfaye [the non-Oromo Ethiopian ACCOV Secretary and festival organiser] will probably try to anyway, but they have to follow their constitution so I will be able to argue my case.

Anyway, I feel really good about the way it went. It was especially good because there was an Oromo presentation that was not representing one group, but the whole Oromo community in Melbourne. It was really hard work to organise, but it paid off. It was really good for the Oromo community. The night showed how the differences between us are really shallow and personal: we have a much deeper unity as Oromo.¹⁰

Gutama's sentiment, 'we have a much deeper unity as Oromo', reflects the nation-building character of public performance where the marginal is performed as central. However, given the exile location, it is not the 1960s geographically based anti-colonial nation-state building of Frantz Fanon. Rather, it is the building of a nation without borders: a national identity characterised by displacement or 'postmodern geography' (Bammer 1994, p. ii). This particular performance demonstrated the strong connections between the expression of culture and the identification with nationality. The 'deeper unity' that Gutama recognised finds its effective reality in such performances by a multiple conjunctive process of 'becoming', linking discrete structures to assemble a cultural formation. The new formation, while having some linkage with the past, radically transforms pre-existing and historically inherited cultural wealth. In the case of the Oromo presentation, the cultural wealth of music and dance were selectively used to promote a national agenda from the Oromo perspective and a secessionist anti-national agenda from the non-Oromo Ethiopian perspective.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The responses indicated the level to which the Oromo remain incarcerated within the hegemony of the nation-state. Contrary to the interpretations of non-Oromo Ethiopians, Gutama mentioned nothing about secession; rather, the autonomy sought by the Oromo that evening was to independently present themselves through the performance of their song and dance. Various Oromo commented that their performance was an attempt to create autonomy, to resist indifference, by performing themselves as being known and recognised in ways other than the colonial.

The poster for the festival, which listed the entertainment for the evening, ambiguously featured the statement ‘Ethiopian band “*Oromo*”’, with ‘Ethiopian band’ in small print and ‘Oromo’ emphasised in bold large print. There was no such band: the performance involved two independent Oromo artists who in no way regard themselves as an Ethiopian band. Gutama, the only Oromo on the ACCOV committee and one of the festival organisers, faced many difficulties having the Oromo included on the program and in the advertising. According to him:

I had to really fight to get the word ‘Oromo’ on the poster. The problem is that nearly all Oromo music is political, which makes it difficult. I also had problems getting a fair share of the funding to cover the cost of getting the Oromo artists and dancers. There is a lot of opposition from the committee, especially from Tesfaye who represents the Ethiopian Community Association.¹¹

That evening Gutama publicly recalled the sufferings of his people over the past century. Ernest Renan (in Bhabha 1990b) has argued that the memory of the past is central to the present commitment to any nation. In relation to national memories, ‘griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require common efforts’ (p. 19). The sense of duty and obligation to pursue the welfare of their people back home is of paramount importance to the exiled Oromo in Melbourne (although this sentiment is not always followed by action). The re-telling of memories of sacrifice and suffering (both long past and recent) serves to encourage large-scale solidarity amongst the international Oromo exile population (cf. *Yaadannoo Aannolee* video production discussed in Chapter Eight). Such re-telling presupposes a common past, which, as Renan notes, ‘is summarised in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue

¹¹ Interview, July 1996.

a common life' (ibid.). For the Oromo—as for any other group—the past is of value to the extent that it is continuously articulated with the present.

Among Melbourne's Oromo, the 'nation' will continue only to the extent that the community perpetuates their legacy of memories and desire to live together. Membership of the Oromo nation is daily constituted by an active and present lived commitment to a past suffering and a future hope—a commitment that is regularly stated through 'national rituals' that reflect upon and structure a particular past while affirming a solidarity with present Oromiya. As argued throughout this thesis, language is vital to the Oromo presentation of memories and formation of national identity. At numerous sites of affirmation, language—written, spoken and sung—provides the medium for the linking of the past to the present.

One such national ritual, in which I participated, occurred when news of the death of a relative back home spread throughout the Melbourne community. The site of the performance was an old three bedroom government-owned house in Sunshine, one of the poorest areas of Melbourne, which was quickly transformed into a site of celebration and affirmation of national solidarity—a place of becoming-nation.

One Sunday afternoon I received a telephone call from Nazzir, an Oromo man and a close friend, who told me that Fatima's sister's husband had been killed in jail by the Ethiopian government. 'They have killed him', he exclaimed. I was not sure of the meaning of this call and what my response should be. Following the call I telephoned Fatima and expressed my sadness. I then decided that I, along with my family, should visit her. Upon arrival at her house there were a least forty cars haphazardly parked, including in the centre of the narrow street.

About fifteen men (most of whom I knew) stood outside the house talking and smoking. They greeted me as we arrived. Upon entering the house I saw a large pile of shoes (probably around eighty pairs of men's and women's shoes) at the doorstep. I took my shoes off and entered the crowded loungeroom where there were about forty-five men sitting on the floor in silence. Hesitantly, I squeezed my way in among the assembly, very self-consciously placing myself in a small space on the floor. The men in the room were not talking to each other, but just sitting together. Every twenty minutes or so they would break into Islamic song and prayer

together and then there would be silence. Some of the men were reading the Koran while most just sat quietly, staring blankly into space.

The loungeroom had no chairs, just carpet and pillows, and on the walls were numerous Oromo and Islamic artefacts. With the curtains drawn, the room, very cramped with no space to move, was dim. The eldest brother of the grieving family sat in the centre with the community elders around him.

The women were in the bedrooms and the kitchen. My wife, who joined them in one bedroom, told me that they too sat together on the floor in silence and occasionally talked while the children played outside. A few of the women read the Koran, while most, unable to read, simply prayed the *fatihaa* (a basic Islamic prayer). Meanwhile, women in the kitchen were busy preparing food and refreshments.

This ritual of condolence—commonly called *gaddaa* or the Arabic *taazi'a*—occurs for three days in the *mana gaddaa* (mourning house/place) following the death of a relative or community member. This day was the third. During the three days the men stay awake and sit together all night. A combination of Islamic and Oromo prayers are offered and the Koran is read throughout. Such occasions can be seen as ‘national rituals’ because the expectation is that the whole community must be present. Although ostensibly voluntary, attendance is strictly compulsory. Everybody must be there, regardless of their timetables, misgivings or differences with the grieving family. Unlike most occasions, when Oromo people are studiously late, here to be late in responding—or worse, failing to respond—is very shameful.

Each adult is substantiated as part of the community by the giving of their time on these occasions, with public esteem bestowed upon the most generous (those who spend the whole three days with the bereaved). In this way, they too are guaranteed the support of the community should they face similar circumstances. The visible ‘gift cycle’ involves the symbolic (food, drinks), the interpersonal (time with the bereaved), and the economic (money to be sent to the bereaving family in Oromiya). Often one person is assigned the task of collecting and recording the amounts of money given by each male member of the community. Each individual is supplied with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchange. As Mauss (1990) would analyse it, individual interests combine to make a social

system, whereby every single relationship has its substantiation in a gift (a theme further developed in Chapter Ten).

I estimate there were 120 people present on the final day. Being the most important of the three days, many Oromo people from all over Melbourne and belonging to different groups participated. I was surprised when two Oromo women—Fozia and Aynee (who featured in Chapter Three)—who are both active in non-Oromo Ethiopian social groups arrived. I had never seen them at an Oromo function before. Their presence signified the importance of the occasion, and the intense obligation felt by each member of the broader Oromo community to be there.

The people present with whom I spoke emphasised that the brother's death had been caused by political opponents—the Ethiopian government—while he was in jail. This provided more impetus for the mourning and identifying as Oromo: with the mourning accompanied by a sense of celebration of community despite the circumstances of the relative's death.

Like back home, *gaddaa* in Melbourne is an important time for the renewal of community, when the social base of one's identity is articulated. Mutual aid and the celebration of family and community characterise the occasion in which collective mourning is transformed into an affirmation and celebration of 'nationhood'. Although wakes such as this are not unique to the Oromo (non-Oromo Ethiopians have similar ceremonies), this particular occasion was special because the young relative who died had suffered under a common enemy. In this way, the ritual tapped into a common experience for all the participants and became the vehicle for creating an effective structure of linking, through which the past (including past injustice) connected with their present historical conditions.

Viewed performatively, the event might be regarded as a large scale social drama (macrodrama), whereby the whole community acts through their collective crisis. Using theatrical metaphors, the house functioned as theatre, the doors as stage curtains, the male-occupied lounge room as centre stage, along with other stages in the female occupied bedrooms. Outside, and in the kitchen, the participants/actors took time-out from the performance (talking about work and other 'mundane' events, laughing and 'acting normal'). Following Schechner's

(1988, p. 168) theatrical frame of performance (gathering, performing and dispersing), the participants gathered to perform—to do something at an agreed location and time—and dispersed once the performance was over.

For the non-Oromo neighbours, oblivious to the significance of the occasion, the performance probably constituted a ‘nuisance’, with the haphazardly parked cars and large numbers of people gathered. For some, there may even have been a sense of indecency in such a public performance around death. For the Oromo themselves, the performance gave expression to a collective and self-conscious articulation of their common identity and destiny. Oromo cultural formation was affirmed.

Late in the afternoon, the responsive prayers, dramatically led by Sheik Hassen, ended, and the mood in the men’s room quickly changed from overtly staged religiosity to an apparent festiveness. Newspapers were laid on the floor and four large trays of food and drinks (coca-cola) were brought in and placed upon them. The men crowded on their knees around each tray and the food—spicy rice with boiled meat—was eaten by hand. Following the lead of the others, I quickly joined in. The food soon disappeared as most of the men started feeding those next to them. More food was promptly brought in and again quickly vanished. Finally, a relaxed contentedness prevailed and all the men reclined on the floor together.

As demonstrated by the laughter and merriment accompanying the exaggerated and hyperbolic sharing of food, one could say that sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible). Like Rabelais’ banquet images, feasting was at the centre of this theatre as the collective feasting celebrated a victory over death: through eating the body is enriched and grows. Here death is followed by the funeral banquet which forms the true epilogue. The end contains the potentialities of the new beginning (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 282-3). The feast is linked to a moment of crisis—death—and change, a breaking point in the cycle of nature. Such moments lead to a festive perception of the world vividly felt by the participants, who for a time entered into a utopian realm of community and abundance which transcends the drabness of everyday existence (cf. the women’s experience of *ulmaa baha* described in Chapter Nine).

Moreover, the rites enacted and the symbols that were engaged on that day provided impetus for Oromo nationalism, by drawing all participants into a politicised vernacular culture in which the past and the present merged. The past intersected with the present in that those participating had also lost friends and relatives. It was something akin to a collective grief, a collective mourning of a people and nation. As shared historical memories were created through this collective mourning, the Oromo nation in Melbourne was narrated and the myth of solidarity and common ancestry affirmed (Smith, A. D. 1991, p. 22).

By means of such collective mourning for the relative killed by the Ethiopian government, a re-dedication of the participants to the nationalist struggle occurred. In the conversations among the men talking outside, extreme statements described the feelings of sadness and solidarity, such as: 'Our people are really suffering; those bastards the Tigrayans shot him', and, 'This is a terrible government in Ethiopia; they are taking and shooting anyone who is Oromo'.

Not only the men outside, but also the women inside the kitchen were keen to talk about the events 'back home', to emphasise and mourn the faraway suffering of women and children there. The presence of the orphaned children now living in Melbourne gave tangible expression to the suffering, and underlined the dystopian perceptions of life 'back home'.

The condolence ritual augmented the experience of exile as the Oromo 'nation' in Melbourne are disconnected from the geography they call 'home'. Usually when a relative dies in the homeland the body is taken to the family's house and remains there for all to see. Death is given a tangible form, when, as part of the ritual, all relatives come to visit and touch the deceased. On this occasion, the exiles in Melbourne, unable to touch their lost one, had to be satisfied with the presence of the children of the deceased. They must grieve in the absence of their father. In this way, news of a death 'back home' highlights their sense of displacement.

Conversely, the collective process of mourning among those gathered in the *mana gaddaa* enabled the lost object ('home') to become imaginatively present in the process of negotiating its loss. However, as Bourne-Taylor (1992) notes, the 'native' place (Oromiya) is 'still seen as representing some sort of bedrock experience; it is home in the double sense of bonding with place and the development of identity in early infancy, which still assumes an absolute dichotomy between Innocence and

Experience; home is always the place you come back to, and always from a place of greater complexity' (p. 92).

The public display of the Oromo nation and longing for the 'native' place in such performances serves to affirm what most Oromo regard as a social certainty: the existence of a nation called Oromiya. A sticker on the back window of one of the cars parked in the street, with 'Oromiya' in national colours and the simple assertion 'Oromiya', telegraphed what was happening in the house—the gathering of a nation. The coloured map on the sticker acted as a visual device to express the territorialisation of the Oromo nation, the land and contested borders synonymous with the nation.

The sticker marked a modernist, territorialised ideal of the nation-state: a panacea for nostalgic longings both imagined and encapsulated in the objectives of the various Oromo political organisations. A range of stickers can be seen around Melbourne on the rear-window of cars owned by east Africans: stickers such as 'I love Ethiopia' in national colours, 'Eritrea is number one', and 'Oromiya', are placed with pride for all to see. The cars which display these stickers are usually owned by a nationalist (invariably a male) who believes in the sovereignty of his particular nation-state. However, in the case of the Oromo drivers there is no nation-state, in the modernist sense, called Oromiya. Nevertheless, in ceremonies such as described above, the shape and form of the 'stickered nation' is made visible and distinct for every member to see.

This process of nationhood is closely connected with the phenomenon of displacement which, being one of the most formative experiences of the twentieth century, constitutes a defining feature of postmodernism. Along with other exile groups, the Oromo have been excluded from the modernist narrative of nation-building as the world has remained indifferent to their claims of sovereignty. Bammer (1994, p. ii) succinctly describes the displacement experience as when 'Our sense of identity is ineluctably, it seems, marked by the peculiarly postmodern geography of identity: both here *and* there and neither here *nor* there at one and the same time'. In this regard, the experiences of Otherness and marginalisation are predominant signifiers of postmodern identity, and 'to "be" in the postmodern sense is somehow to be an Other' (ibid.). This experience of Otherness is characteristic of

‘postmodern geography’ and exhibits strong links with the structures of imperialism and the culture of postmodernism.

This ‘Otherness’ is not to be understood in terms of a polar, non-pluralist model of domination. Rather the conjunctive is given primacy, whereby ‘Self and Other’ means a double capture. Similarly, national identity or ‘becoming-nation’ occurs in any place (both here *and* there and neither here *nor* there at one and the same time) where Melbourne’s Oromo performatively enunciate it. Such ‘being’ necessarily involves the intersection of a range of practices at various sites of affirmation.

The multiplicity of being is part of the ever-growing deterritorialisation of homelands, cultures and origins, whereby the creation of homelands is not ‘*in situ*,’ but through memories of, and claims on, places that they (exiled people groups) can or will no longer corporeally inhabit’ (Malkki 1992, p. 24). Melbourne’s Oromo, in the absence of a territorial national base, are categorised and identified in reference to deterritorialisation. Being uprooted and dwelling on foreign soil, their nation takes on postmodernist meanings via performance.

In anthropological terms the performance of *gaddaa* is a traditional religious rite of passage. In principle, such an activity has a completely fixed format, but no doubt, like nearly all performances, the enactment of *gaddaa* incorporates moments of spontaneous invention. In practice, as Richard Bauman (1984) suggests, nearly all performances lie somewhere between the two extremes of ‘novelty’ (spontaneous invention) and ‘fixedness’ (traditional rites). In this way, while frequently a preformation, performances are concomitantly always an emergent structure that comes into being only as it is performed. For sure, performances such as *gaddaa* are judged according to their conformity to the conventions of their enactment back home in Oromiya, but, additionally, the success of the performance is also measured by the element of spontaneous invention which makes the occasion novel. For the performers, the capacity for innovation and invention means prestige: in the case of *gaddaa*, the sheik performed well if he heightened the intensity of communication between himself and the participants, and for the participating audience too it means a liminally unrepeatable experience.

Another performance which served to give shape and form to the nation occurred one cold and wet Sunday afternoon at the annual Gadaa Soccer Club end of season barbecue at an inner-city Melbourne recreational reserve. My family and I reluctantly attended the day. I was not expecting many people to be there, but we were greeted upon our arrival in heavy rain by more than fifty children and adults. The highlight was the spontaneous and unrehearsed performance by the women as they sang together huddled in the rain around a table. Initially, some of the younger women began singing popular Oromo songs—including Ali Birraa’s *Oromiyaa* and another written by Afandi Siyo called *Baddaan biyya tiyya* (both songs are discussed in detail in the next chapter)—and, as their number grew, the women began a series of improvised call-and-response folk songs (cf. Addisu Tolesa 1990). By that stage it was not just younger women, but also the older ones who sang while the smaller children listened. The folk singing, often called *geerasa*, while original in lyric, drew from a range of popular Oromo women’s folklore (oral literature).¹² The lead singing was shared between two young married women who, in collusion with the participating audience, imposed their originality on the performance through a range of intonations as they humorously composed tales about each other, the rain and country life back home.

In the English language, Oromo women commonly refer to activities which involve singing and dancing together as ‘playing’. This particular performance involved twenty-five women and young girls ‘playing’ together with the musical event. These spontaneous playful acts occur regularly whenever there are a number of the women gathered together at someone’s house. But, by all accounts, this performance was unique, as the usual constraints on expression were suspended. On no other occasion throughout the research process did I observe women spontaneously ‘playing’ in outside ‘public’ places—whereas I witnessed many such activities among the men. As Addisu Tolesa (1990, p. 1) notes, *geerasa* is usually sung and/or recited by males, and it is not common for women to sing in public male-dominated domains.¹³

The activity began with three of the women singing together. Within ten minutes their number had grown to fifteen. Finally, all the women present were

¹² A number of the women who participated, including one of the singers, were interviewed in October 1998.

¹³ Some of the women said that they could not remember another occasion in Melbourne when the women sang in a public place like this.

‘playing’. Meanwhile, the men had left to undertake their own game on the nearby soccer ground which left the women unhampered to create their own space for ‘play’. But as the rain became torrential, and they were soaking wet, the women were forced to seek shelter.

They moved inside the nearby clubhouse and continued ‘playing’ to each other in song and dance. Making creative use of the available shelter, they turned what was a damaged and run-down soccer clubhouse into a site of national performance. A barbecue was brought inside to provide some warmth in the form of hot charcoal. The singing was rhythmic, with wooden salad bowls used for percussion. I stood relatively unnoticed outside the entrance and watched as the women crowded together in a circle facing each other rhythmically clapping.¹⁴ There was also the occasional celebratory *elilebaa*—a loud high-pitched trill the women make with their tongues signifying feelings of happiness and cheer.

One young woman, who had been in Australia for only three weeks, sat listening, enjoying the singing and dancing before joining the younger ones who had been in Australia for many years. The performance continued for two hours.

The sense of exuberance and oneness displayed by the women throughout the activity was striking. Prior to ‘playing’, many of the women had been sitting quietly talking for most of the afternoon: veiled older women and younger ones sitting inside the clubhouse away from the view of the men. In this regard, the barbecue appeared to replicate the custom of people breaking into their gendered divisions and age-sets. But when the ‘play’ began, the women and girls of all ages gathered together in a tight circle. Like the men’s soccer match, the musical performance was an activity around which they could unite. Their exuberance seemed to derive from the sense of unity established by their vibrant physical presence, and was manifested in their rhythmic singing and festive laughter. I was captivated.

The rhythm produced by vigorous clapping and foot-stomping framed the musical experience by drawing the attention of all the women to the music itself. Producing a ‘time’ of its own, the repetitive rhythm defined ‘the present’ in ‘virtual’

¹⁴ My presence did not seem to hinder the women. On the contrary, from the comments various women later made to me, it seemed that they perhaps enjoyed showing their ‘culture’ to a ‘Western’ outsider.

time. The time in the music physically unfolded, not objectively within the music (a drum machine or metronome setting), but as an effect of the women's aural sensibilities (Frith 1996a, p. 152). They heard the rhythm and stressed the tones, in this way entering a world of 'virtual' time experienced as musical action (hence the comments that the two hours of singing went quickly).

Reference to 'virtual' time highlights the evanescent quality of live music which entails a particular kind of temporal-spatial creation. In this respect, as Frith (1996a) highlights, music is like sex, 'and rhythm is crucial to this—rhythm not as "releasing" physical urges but as expanding the time in which we can, as it were, *live in the present tense*' (p. 157). As Miller Chernoff (1979, p. 36) notes about African music, the aesthetic point of this performative exercise was not to reflect a subterranean reality which stood behind it, but to ritualise a reality that was within it: the gathering of women at the park on a rainy day.

The place of this performance, the home ground/clubhouse of the Oromo soccer team, was a male sporting domain. It was not a women's place. Yet the women on this occasion inhabited the place and transformed it into their own space. The singing and dancing could be said to represent a 'transgressive story' which allowed them to contest male/gendered hegemonic meanings and create a space out of place. The soccer clubhouse, beginning as a socially peripheral place, was transformed into a central space for carnivalesque merrymaking. In this way the women tactically manipulated the place so as to make it habitable (Babcock 1978, p. 32; de Certeau 1984, p. xxii). Not merely a space to inhabit, it became, rather, a site for transformative practice which—albeit briefly—disturbed the normal social hierarchies.

The Oromo may be forgotten, unrecognised and 'nationless' in the somewhat old fashioned sense which still informs most of the world's élite and the subjugated Oromo nationalists. Nevertheless, in this small park in inner-city Melbourne a nation—perhaps a postmodern nation—expressed itself in celebration. Like the *gaddaa* condolence ritual and the transgressive speech at the African cultural festival, it is in such collective activity that Melbourne's Oromo transform their standing. Such performances function as a virtual cipher for the carnivalesque: the elements of play, celebration, transgression and subversion enabling Oromo people to turn (momentarily) the 'natural order of things' to their own ends (Buchanan 1997b, pp. 177-8). As argued throughout this thesis, language provides the

common link in all of the performances. But what is striking in the performances, like the women's at the barbeque, is the critical role of music. As the following chapter elaborates, music serves to provide a focal point in the transformation of Oromo individuals into an Oromo nation, as the transgressive carnival moves beyond extraordinary singular occasions to the quotidian 'everyday'.

CHAPTER FIVE

BADDAAN BIYYA TIYYA:¹

MUSICAL AESTHETICS AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLACE

When Centro Social members say that they perform the music to preserve and protect 'Conimeño culture', they do not mean the language, religious beliefs, social style, or agricultural techniques; actually, I think that they are talking about themselves.

Thomas Turino (1993, p. 217)

As a matter of fact it [exile] is really just the continuation of a lot of struggle. If you take it from the beginning, we started getting involved in what we are doing now as musicians, agitators and propagators to the Oromo cause and people. From the very beginning when we started there was no point where we could say: 'Well I want to be a singer'. It was not like that. From the beginning, basically we started as a struggle and we grew up in it from years past—I mean decades.

Ali Birraa (Interview, 20 Feb 1997)

Melbourne's Oromo singers/musicians Shantam Shubissa, Afandi Siyo and Ture Lenco are displaced musicians whose identities have been largely built around their music and the Oromo liberation struggle. For these musicians, identity has been eroded with their displacement from rural Oromiya and the immediate struggle. At the same time, they must keep identifying with the struggle, which gives cohesion, not only to these musicians but more generally to Melbourne's Oromo community, for whom it is a unifying factor. Because so many people have paid such a high price for the struggle, they cannot imagine life without it. Music feeds their imagination by providing points of connection with a rural world and the struggle of the past. Indeed, the re-creation of rural identities in Melbourne largely depends upon these musicians and their music. For many of Melbourne's Oromo, music does not merely evoke nostalgic memories of a place now gone but, rather, serves as the primary means by which they are able to maintain connections with the land (*biyya*). Via a fusion of fantasy and real bodily practices, musical activities affectively define a space without boundaries—enabling Melbourne's Oromo to materially relocate themselves from marginalised city-bound people to city-based Oromo with rural identities.

¹ 'Highland of my country'.

Oromo music is an amorphous category comprising numerous, quite distinct practices; but, as ethnomusicologist Carolyn Muntz has suggested,² it is the language (*afaan Oromoo*) that most distinguishes it. Without the language it is not distinctly Oromo music. For example, if the text of the song is changed to English then it would not be specifically Oromo music. This is because the music styles are not uniquely Oromo but incorporate elements from a variety of sources and in novel ways. However, as Ali Birraa described, though the lyric is primary, the musical style does contribute to the making of a distinctly Oromo flavour:

Oromo music carries the message and the identity of Oromoness in the lyric and concept of the lyrics. At the same time, as well, it has a flavour. Although it is equated to many kinds of music and many people can play it, there is something special which blends the lyric, the message and the music into each other. I consider this blending to be real Oromo. Technically you could say that Oromo music is not really specific to the Oromo, but when you go deeper to look at it there are a lot of words involved and those words emphasise the music. The music is made Oromo because of the meaning of the lyrics.³

The entwining of the lyric and music to produce a distinctly Oromo flavour suggests a complex and dynamic aesthetic relationship. As Ali suggests, the meaning (authenticity) of Oromo music, as an experience, is not to be found in the text alone, but in the performance of the text, in the process in which it is realised—the way the musician and the listener ‘play’ it together (Frith 1996b, p. 109).⁴ Like the model of cultural identity as articulation argued throughout this thesis, musical ‘essence’—in this case, the ‘Oromoness’ of the music—is similarly understood, not as an atavistically transcendent concept, but as a real assemblage of transformative ‘becomings’—a performative event.

Such ‘essence’ is exemplified in Ali Birraa’s song *Oromiyaa*⁵ which is regularly broadcast at the start of the weekly Oromo radio program in Melbourne.

² Interview, July 1996. Additional interviews were conducted with a wide range of popular Oromo musicians.

³ Interview, February 1997.

⁴ Simon Frith is quoted extensively. He is the leading popular music scholar who is not a musicologist. His work on popular music as performative ritual (1987, 1996a, 1996b) is relevant to the current discussion of Oromo popular music.

⁵ The cassette cover spells the song ‘Oromiyaa’ with double ‘a’, whereas throughout this thesis Oromiya is spelt with a single ‘a’.

Oromiyaa is a theme song which has a victorious up-tempo marching melody. The song has been described by Oromo in Melbourne as a revolutionary marching song which is, in effect, an unofficial Oromo anthem. Various Oromo have equated it to the manner in which ‘Waltzing Matilda’ serves as an unofficial Australian anthem.⁶

The words of *Oromiyaa* are clearly rooted in an association with place and, in effect, the song expresses the common experience of disconnectedness felt by Oromo exiles throughout the world. The song reflects a unique global positioning: Ali Birraa is currently exiled in Toronto, but composed the song in Sweden and recorded it in the United States of America. The chorus, in *afaan Oromoo*, is as follows:

Oromiyaa, Oromiyaa
Biyya abbaa kooti
Gammachu koo hirru
Amma sii arguuti
Oromiyaa, Oromiyaa.

While there can be no direct translation from *afaan Oromoo* to English, the song expresses the theme:

Oromiya my fatherland
My happiness is never complete until I see you again.

The chorus resonates with the first verse:

Oromiyaa biyya ki kan kummantami
Oll kaus gaadi cii sunisi abdiin kiyya suuma
Abdiin koo hawiin koo summa galmi kiyya
Sii obbsi salhabbe biyya koo Oromiyaa.

A country of one thousand years
When I get up or lie down you are all my hope
My hope and aspiration is you my destination
My patience is nearly expiring for Oromiya.

⁶ The song was discussed with a number of Oromo in Melbourne and with Ali Birraa.

The song expresses a longing for a place called *Oromiyaa*, but the place is far more than a tract of land. Rather, it is a ‘fatherland’ with all the kin associations that the term implies: the country of a person’s ancestors, ‘a country of one thousand years’. The song taps into the continuing sense of belonging to a rural place that appears to be common to all Oromo, and also *voices* a reality that may be far removed from their present circumstances.

The painful disconnectedness from the place Oromiya that the song expresses reflects and accentuates the reality of involuntary exile. In the song, Ali Birraa describes how even when he lies down to sleep and wakes up he is unable to stop thinking about his ‘destination’. But his patience is expiring: he just cannot take it any more, this worrying for Oromiya. His life—like the lives of the majority of Melbourne’s Oromo—is characterised by ongoing worry and anxiety for his nation and people. The sense of powerlessness and inability to change current circumstances is the context for the anxiety.

The content of the song is that of sadness, yet the style of the music is that of triumph. The music conjures up images of a victorious army marching in to claim what is rightfully theirs. The song emphasises sadness in the current situation, but projects hope for a future destination: *Oromiyaa*. In this way, the struggle for freedom joins with love for ‘fatherland’ as the dominant themes of the song. The struggle for freedom is largely portrayed by the style of music, which is militaristic and victorious, in contrast to the words, which express an underlying sadness.

The song has a cohesive and healing affect as it narrates a story which resonates in the hearts and minds of the majority of Melbourne’s Oromo. In drawing together, through language and music, the themes of homeland and struggle, loss and recovery, the song issues forth a call to unity among Melbourne’s Oromo each time it goes to air on the Oromo radio program.

Ali Birraa is regarded with the utmost affection and respect among Melbourne’s Oromo. One prominent member of the Oromo community commented:

He [Ali] is like our king. He is our voice. His music has kept us alive; this media has been the only way to speak our struggle. That is why it is so important that we be there at Ali’s celebration in America. The

musicians are the fathers of our history. They have kept alive the identity of the Oromo because musicians can communicate with the people. Their music is available for all the people. Our history has been kept through music; even Ali Birraa, his *gadaa* song is the only way we can know about *gadaa*. Their music is like spoken poetry which is in the mind and spoken, but not written.⁷

As the Oromo ‘king’, Ali Birraa is perhaps for the Oromo what Nelson Mandela was for Black South Africans under apartheid, or the Dalai Lama for the Tibetans under Chinese rule. Ali Birraa represents a people, providing Melbourne’s Oromo with a sense of pride, not only because he is an Oromo who has overcome the barriers and succeeded in his own right as a famous artist, but, perhaps more significantly, also because of his symbolic, unifying importance (a theme developed more fully in the next chapter).

The histories and lives of Oromo singers like Ali Birraa have come to be public property. In the case of Ali Birraa, his journey is the journey of all Oromo, who, over the last thirty years listened to his music—one of the few sources of cultural affirmation available to them. Another famous artist, Shantam Shubissa, describes the co-dependent relationship between Oromo artists and their community in symbiotic terms:

I will give you my view of Oromo musicians and artists in exile. You see an artist is like a fish and his people are like the sea. As fish cannot live out of the sea, an artist cannot live out of his people. You cannot say our life is ours, really. Our people share our lives. Even our people can claim us as theirs. Even I can say that most of mine and Ali’s lives are owned by our people. Our life is not our own. We are forced to stay out of our country and away from our people; really what we are doing is from outside. I wish we were inside and doing there what we are now doing from abroad. Our people are *longing* [emphasis his] to see us as we are outside, while our work is inside. Ali Birraa and I and all artists outside wish to be in our country because we cannot live outside of our people’s mind. Because we are so close to our community we depend on them.⁸

⁷ Interview, June 1996. An international celebration was held for Ali Birraa in the United States in 1996. No representative from the Melbourne community was able to attend.

⁸ Interview, February 1997.

As Shantam describes, the popular music of Ali Birraa and other Oromo artists embodies, and not just represents, the personal stories and values of the average Oromo living in exile and in Oromiya.

These connections are evident in the articulation of music with banal everyday activities, as demonstrated by the use Jamal made of a cassette while travelling in his car. While the cassette played in his car stereo, Jamal enthusiastically narrated to me a complex distant story as we sat with the windows-up surrounded by peak-hour traffic in Melbourne city:

This song is about how this Oromo man, who loves his wife dearly, heard on the radio news that the Ethiopian government knew where he was hiding because his wife had informed on him. But he still loves her and is hiding in the country. The man, I can't remember his name, has been a guerrilla for thirty years fighting against the Ethiopians. In the song he says that Oromiya will win even though his wife has informed on him and the Ethiopians know where he is.

The song is a story of love, betrayal and struggle, which triggered an emotional effect, a collusion between the performer and the listener that was engaged rather than detached, knowing rather than knowledgeable (Frith, 1996b, p. 117). Remarkably, despite not remembering his name, Jamal spoke as if the singer were his closest friend, as if he were talking about his brother. Waiting at the traffic lights in inner-city Melbourne, the song re-activated memories, transformed an unnamed guerrilla into a related hero, and re-connected Jamal with a rural past as an ongoing struggle. An effective structure of linking was manifest as the sound sent out 'lines of flight' that established real connections with Jamal's historical context.

Despite his separation in space and time from the maker of this song, Jamal's use of the music put in place an aesthetic process that forged relations between the singer and the listener. Jamal entered into the performance of the song and made it his own. He heard this music as authentically Oromo. Additionally, I, the non-Oromo, was drawn into the experience, visualising the man and his wife, the countryside where he was hiding, and the Ethiopians pursuing him.

The episode demonstrates how music listened to in ostensibly the most 'out of place' location or context can be used to transform the limitations of present

surroundings. Jamal works long hours in a factory, lives in the inner-city, and is among those in Australia who might generally be regarded as marginal 'Others'. Furthermore, his life story as a persecuted Oromo is greeted, at best, with apathetic acknowledgment by his neighbours and fellow workers. Suddenly, with the cassette playing, a story is told of great significance, a story that places Jamal at the centre, as the music provides points of sodality with a rural world and the struggle of the past. The music does not merely evoke nostalgic memories of a place now gone, but becomes the primary means by which Jamal is able to transform and relocate himself from being an anonymous, socially peripheral city-bound person to one with a real and distinctive rural-centred identity.

Martin Stokes (1994) has argued that music provides the means of 'transcending the limitations of our own place in the world, of constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space' (p. 4). Similarly, Jamal was able to transform the place he inhabits by 're-locating' himself through the use of his own private cassette. The private collections of cassettes found in the cars and households of the majority of Melbourne's Oromo constitute, as it were, the collective means for transcending the limitations of their marginal place in the world. These musical activities are part of a process of searching for and creating some kind of space for living (Turino 1993, p. 251).

Creating space for living means reconnecting with the 'essentialness' of community and tradition which are severely fragmented in the postmodern urban setting. Music has become the medium of articulation for the many ambiguities and contradictions of postmodernity and the legacy of pre-modernity, as experienced daily by migrant communities throughout the world. The common factor is a separation from their cultural locus by a gulf of time and space (Stokes 1994, p. 89). The following paraphrase from Turino's *Moving Away from Silence* (1993)—a comprehensive study of the role of music in relation to the experience of urban migration among rural Peruvians—eloquently highlights the importance of music in the process of reconnection for Melbourne's Oromo:

For both the community and the musicians with rural backgrounds, music is an antidote to silence and to being alone: the silence between musical celebrations together; the silence of rush hour in downtown Melbourne; the silence of one's children away from home; the silence of the television; the silence of unemployment and inflation; the silence separating the

ancestors from the living; the silence of relatives detained back home; the silence of voices silenced by racism.

(Turino 1993, p. 252, paraphrased and adapted)

As the paraphrase suggests, place, for many migrant communities, is something which is constructed through music with an intensity not found elsewhere in their social lives. In the case of Melbourne's Oromo, the performance of language through song is able to re-organise and manipulate everyday experiences of social reality, to blur and, in some cases, subvert common-sense categories and markers (Stokes 1994, pp. 97, 114).

It is no coincidence that the heroes of Irish music have made their names and records in migrant communities in the United States. More often than not, notes Stokes, popular musicians are separated from their cultural locus by a gulf of time and space. Similarly, many of the heroes of popular Oromo music have experienced forced migration and perform outside their homelands: Ali Birraa, Elemo Ali, Kemer Youssef, Saalah Galmo and Amaartii in Toronto; Shantam Shubissa, Afandi Siyo and Ture Lenco in Melbourne. Significantly, the three singers in Melbourne are separated by time and space both from their homeland and from the North American exilic centre. As commonly articulated, living in Melbourne means feeling like you are at the bottom of the world, a long way from any Oromo centre where there is a direct audience. Nevertheless, despite these feelings, their music is circulated among the scattered Oromo exile population throughout the world, and also back home in Oromiya. Ironically, while they find themselves unrecognised and displaced as musicians in Melbourne, their recordings are famous overseas and among their people in Oromiya.⁹

By having to cope with the pressures of being both migrant and musician, displaced musicians, as Heather Russell (1986) argues, are doubly disadvantaged. The usual outcome is that 'ethnic musicians ... gradually cease to see a role for themselves as professional musicians in Australia' (p. 30). The double disadvantage is acutely felt by Melbourne's Oromo musicians Shantam Shubissa, Afandi Siyo and Ture Lenco. Lamentably, these men are unable to return home to perform to their

⁹ A number of new arrivals in Melbourne who recently departed Oromiya, and the few who have visited back home, have spoken of the fame of the three Melbourne-based singers (especially Shantam Shubissa). When I visited Oromiya, I discovered Oromo people listening inside their homes to Shantam's cassette that was recorded in Melbourne.

many fans: as they express it, their greatest suffering¹⁰ (cf. Hirshberg & Seares 1993).

Through their music, Shantam, Ture and, to a lesser extent, Afandi, have made significant contributions over many years to the Oromo struggle. They now find themselves trapped and marked by their past activities; they cannot escape their past lives. As they perceive it, their faces and names are so well known that to visit Ethiopia would endanger their lives. Even to go incognito would be very difficult and the personal risks would be too high. This is the grief that both features in and gives shape to their music and lives.

In his discussion of Shantam and the group of emerging musicians, Thomas Zitelmann (1990) sarcastically reproaches the anthropological blindness to the development of contemporary popular ('low') forms of Oromo culture (vis-à-vis 'high', 'traditional' cultural practices), noting that 'the developments in the sixties escaped from the eyes of the professional Ethiopian watchers. Nothing really happened. Some youngsters made modern music, singing incomprehensible texts. That was certainly not what the anthropologists had identified as the "galla culture"' (p. 14). During a time of pervasive sociocultural repression, these youngsters simply played their music, and—directional but not directed, like a Deleuze-Guattarian becoming-other—they were forging a new cultural nationalism that eventually combined with the issue of the Oromo nation (political nationalism). The stories of Shantam and Ture and the emergence of Oromo bands in the 1960s provide a valuable background for understanding the paramount importance of music for Melbourne's Oromo.

Shantam Shubissa is regarded by sections of Melbourne's Oromo as 'the father of culture',¹¹ and is widely known throughout the international Oromo exile population and among those back in Oromiya as a troubadour storyteller and poet. Within the Melbourne community he is seen as the number one poet, the custodian of much Oromo oral history and folklore. Shantam comes from Dirree dhawaa in eastern Oromiya and started singing when he was a schoolboy—writing poems and songs at a very young age when it was strictly forbidden to sing in *afaan Oromoo*

¹⁰ On numerous occasions these musicians have spoken of their sadness and desire to perform to their people back home.

¹¹ The term 'father of culture' has been echoed many times among sections of Melbourne's Oromo. Additionally, various Oromo in North America, England and Oromiya have spoken of the significance of Shantam as poet, historian and songwriter.

(for further description of Shantam's life story see Zitelmann 1990, pp. 11-14). Despite such restrictions he was able to circumvent the prohibition. As Shantam explained:

I began to write poems: I am known as the first man to write poems in my country. My writings are also short stories and drama for theatre. I also use poems for songs and modernise them. In our culture, in music the most important thing is the lyric—the poem. The value of the song is dependent on the poem—the message of the song. The words give value and weight to the song as mostly our people like to listen to music with a poem. Music is a large part of Oromo people's daily lives, they sing in every area of their lives—this is why we musicians are so famous.

I started singing in Oromo language which is spoken by the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian people. But the government which was led by Emperor Haile Selassie did not want another language to grow, so they insisted to promote the Amharic language, to destroy the other and to bring only Amharic as the Ethiopian language. So they came and arrested us whenever we were practising our music or performing in front of people. But we soon started touring and playing in the places where they could not find us.¹²

Since arriving in Australia, Shantam has seldom performed. But he has remained busy writing and recording. The anguish of having all these songs, poems and history in his head and being unable to share them with his people back in Oromiya dominates his life:

I must go back and sing to the people, because I am getting older. It is all in my head and if I 'go-under' [die] it is all forgotten. Therefore I must go and perform before it is all lost. Over there [Oromiya] everybody knows me, I can perform anywhere and people will come from all over the country to see me; if you don't believe me you can ask anyone in Melbourne. It is true. I must go and perform because it is all in my head. I must write poetry. You know, I never played for money, I never looked to make money by singing for the government or charging for my music. Instead, my music was for the people.

¹² Interview, September 1996.

It is a new government now, perhaps I can go. Besides, I don't care if I go under, as long as my music is sung. I am going to Ethiopia anyway I can. I have risked my life before; I did not run away. I directly challenged the Derg on the radio; I read out poems against them. But I was saved from death. I did not run this way or that way. Instead, I stood and remained to resist. But those who ran, they were killed and missing. I do not fear this government [the current EPRDF regime], so I want to find people who can help me organise a trip and concerts.¹³

A troubadour without an audience. Shantam's agony is that he is a displaced musician, with a large following in Oromiya—where his more recent Melbourne-recorded cassettes have been circulated. Shantam explained how his cassettes are in large demand both in North America and more importantly in Oromiya.¹⁴

Like the true troubadour, Shantam's music is his life. In May 1998 he desperately commenced his first 'world tour'. Unemployed, with meagre finances and very little support from Melbourne's Oromo, he managed to purchase a round-trip airline ticket to North America, Europe and the Middle-East. I drove him to Melbourne airport; with very little money in his pocket and unsure of the reception he would receive at his destination, Shantam bade me and two other non-Oromo farewell—unsure if and when he would return.

Ture Lenco's story, at once inspiring and saddening, has many parallels with Shantam's. When I first met him he introduced himself as an Oromo musician, and spoke for hours on end about his life and music. Ture's musical career started in the early 1960s when he was involved in the first modern Oromo band, *Urjii Bakkalchaa*—'the morning star'—the band of troubadours, later nicknamed *Afrran Qalloo* (*qalloo* being the name of the father of four Oromo sub-groups: *oborraa*, *babilee*, *dagaa* and *alaa*). The band was founded in 1962 by Abuubakar Mussa (nicknamed Dr Gaarrinfata) in the east of Oromiya in the mixed town of Dirree dhawaa.¹⁵ It was towards the end of the band's life that Ture Lenco joined *Urjii Bakkalchaa* and sang one love song, called *Shaq godhi*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The following accounts are based upon interviews with Ture Lenco and Shantam Shubissa who have detailed knowledge of *Urjii Bakkalchaa*. Shantam provided the names of the band members, most of whom came from Dirree dhawaa. The sixteen members included: Abuubakar Mussa (nicknamed Dr Gaarrinfata), Ali Shabbo Waddoo, Ismail Mohamed Adem, Mohamed Yusuf Ahmed, Abdurahman Yusuf Umer, Saalihee Mohamed, Mohamed Ibrahim Waday Kombbolch (nicknamed Koophi), Abddi Yusuf, Ahmed Yusuf Ibrahim (an important composer who wrote most of Ali Birraa's

By all accounts, *Urjii Bakkalchaa* was very significant for the emerging Oromo national movement in the 1960s (cf. Zitelmann 1990). Performing at a time when Haile Selassie's Ethiopian regime forbade the formation of any band for the promotion of Oromo language and culture, *Urjii Bakkalchaa* travelled to Finfinnee and recorded seven songs at the Radio Ethiopia Studio, which were broadcast across the country late one night. The songs were subsequently unavailable, the tapes most likely destroyed by Ethiopian authorities. Given the restrictive context in which the band operated, the event assumes legendary significance—it was the first time that modern Oromo music was broadcast across the country. Following the recordings the band members fled to Djibouti.

Geographically, the band's success was tied to audiences outside its own country—which, as argued throughout this thesis, is in many ways the locus for emerging Oromo self-identity. *Urjii Bakkalchaa* recorded a number of their performances and distributed the tapes in Djibouti where there was growing interest in their music. At the time there were few Oromo living in French colonised Djibouti—it was not until 1978 (the time of the Derg regime's infamous 'red terror' campaign)¹⁶ that mass migration of Oromo people to Djibouti began—and it was the Djiboutis who were interested in their eclectic music. In 1964, when they attempted to re-enter Ethiopia, the band was involuntarily dissolved as the members were arrested and jailed for illegal entry.

According to Shantam and Ali Birraa, *Urjii Bakkalchaa* acted as a catalyst for the formation of many other Oromo troubadour bands all over Oromiya, including *Hiryyaa Jaalalaa* ('A friend of love') and *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* ('Unity of love').¹⁷ *Hiryyaa Jaalalaa*, formed in 1964, was led by Ali Birraa and closely tied to *Urjii Bakkalchaa*. This band continued until 1969 when Ali Birraa went to Finfinnee and joined Haile Selassie's bodyguard band. *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* was founded by Shantam Shubissa in 1963 and continued until 1969 when the members were arrested and charged with sedition. According to Shantam the official charge was 'agitating against the unity of the country by dividing the country into tribe and

early songs), Ture Lenco, Suleeymaan Yusuf Ibrahim, Yusuf (Shantam was unable to provide the full name of this man), Abdullhamed Ahmed Boruu, Ali Ahme, Ali Mu and Abdalla Mohamed Kotobee.

¹⁶ The 'red terror' was a campaign by the Derg military junta to eliminate supporters of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). State sponsored terror, beginning in Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) and spreading to the rest of the country, occurred from 1977 until March 1978 and involved massive numbers of killings, detentions and assassinations.

¹⁷ Interview, February 1997.

language'. The basis for the charge lay in the large following the band attracted whenever they troubadoured around.

Shantam described how *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* initially played only in Dirree dhawaa, but as their popularity grew they began playing to wider Oromo audiences in the countryside. The band's music was very simple: a guitar and piano accordion accompanied by singing. The real trouble started when they became more popular than the Amhara bands that regularly toured the countryside. On one occasion there was a conflict when *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* played at a wedding in the town of Gursum in eastern Oromiya. The wedding was paid for by an Amhara landlord who was keen to please all sides (the function was attended by Somali, Amhara and Oromo guests). The entertainment included both *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* and a famous Amhara band from Finfinnee. The wedding was attended by hundreds of people and two separate stages were built for the bands: a cheap stage for *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* and a very beautiful one for the visiting Amhara band. After *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* had played just four songs they stopped and the Amhara band started playing. This was followed by demands from the audience for *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* to resume. The police did not arrest the band members that night, but the popularity of *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* led the local authorities to fear that the people were beginning to favour the music played by the Oromo band more than the Amhara renditions.

Before playing at the wedding, the members of *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* had been arrested on other occasions while performing, but had always been released the next day following a payment to the police. After the wedding incident they became more intensely targeted by the authorities. The inevitable finale for *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* came in July 1969 when they arrived back in Dirree dhawaa after touring the countryside. One-by-one the police handcuffed the twelve musicians in their homes, charging them with sedition.

The band members later appeared at the regional court in a show trial that sought to prohibit them from ever playing in their language again. Eleven of the band members accepted the conditions of bail while Shantam, who was eighteen years old at the time, refused bail and was offered a pardon by the judge on the condition he swore loyalty to the Emperor Haile Selassie. Shantam, seeing that his time would be short-lived if he refused, readily obliged and was released. On the

very day of his release Shantam fled across the Somali border and went to Mogadishu.

The story of *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* illustrates the Amhara-exclusive Ethiopian identity narrative which has dominated Ethiopian discourse since the late-nineteenth century. Shantam and his colleagues were arrested and tried for the alleged crime of ‘agitating against the unity of the country by dividing the country into tribe and language’. Because the public singing of the Oromo language asserted an alternative representation of Ethiopia it was regarded as dissident and seditious by the Ethiopian authorities. Shantam described how:

It was only because of the language—we did not sing political songs, we did not interfere with the government’s affairs. We just tried to bring our culture up and to sing our language. That was very, very strictly forbidden; the government made it a crime. Then I could not live there, so I fled to Mogadishu in Somalia.¹⁸

Based upon earlier extensive interviews with Shantam Shubissa in Cairo, Zitelmann (1990) notes further reasons for the arrest of the *Tokummaa Jaalalaa* band members. Apparently the band had also become known as *maskub* (Moscov) because of the red clothes they wore. Eventually when they were arrested, three charges were made against them: firstly, the name *maskub* symbolised a land without religion; secondly, they were using an anti-national language (*afaan Oromoo*); and, thirdly, they were inspiring their listeners towards mystical beliefs. According to Zitelmann’s account, this last allegation was not clear to the young musicians. He attributes the charge to the possible rendering of the term *tokummaa jaalalaa* as ‘the love to the unity of God’. The word *jaalalaa* carried ambiguities: while simply meaning love to the band members, it could also be seen to refer to the Oromo devotees of Shiek Hussein in Bale (*jaallalo*, the ‘lovers’). Combining the ‘secular and the religious interpretation of “unity” ... the Ethiopian administration were perhaps more aware about it, than the musicians themselves’ (p. 12).

In February 1997, Ali Birraa and Shantam were together in Melbourne. Seizing this rare opportunity, I met with them and the issue of the name *maskub* (Moscov) arose in our discussions. Shantam, who still refuses to accept the name, was reluctant to discuss the subject. Ali Birraa introduced another element into the

¹⁸ Interview, September 1996.

mystery with his disclosure that the name ‘was related to Moscow, and the communist government over there. They called them “Mosco Belaghari”. Belaghari is a neighbourhood to the east of Dirree dhawaa, I don’t know why they got labelled with this name, I don’t know the details of it’.

Regardless of these uncertainties, what is clear is that the young Oromo men in *Tokummaa Jaalalaa*, in presenting an alternative source of cultural entertainment, threatened the status quo. As demonstrated in Chapter Four’s description of the Oromo presentation at the African cultural festival, the assertion of an Oromo identity—whether spoken, written or sung—is regarded as illegitimate dissident nationalism by the hegemonic Ethiopianist discourse. It is regarded as not only illegitimate but, additionally, a threat to the mythologised ancient state called ‘Ethiopia’ which goes back thousands of years to a biblical past. Consequently, any attempt to represent Ethiopia in alternative, non-Amhara narratives is viewed as a negation of the ‘ancient state’ of Ethiopia. Such negative reaction from Amhara Ethiopianists accords with Sorenson’s (1993) assertion that ‘Greater Ethiopian identity is in reality an expression of Amhara chauvinism’ (p. 5)—manifest in essentialist ideas of Ethiopian identity and the perceived linguistic superiority of Amharic over *afaan Oromoo* and other subaltern languages.

While the dominant themes of *Tokummaa Jaalalaa*’s music were concerned with everyday life and celebration, the band’s performances—like Bakhtin’s (1984) politics of carnival—quickly became ‘politicised’ by the very attempts on the part of local authorities to eliminate them (cf. Stallybrass & White 1986, p. 16). The conjunction of the band’s performances with the historical period constituted a political challenge. The local authorities were right: to the extent that it offered cultural resistance to the Emperor Haile Selassie’s aggressively assimilationist policies, the music was indeed political—though, ironically, nearly all of the songs performed and recorded at that time were concerned with love themes. The ban was far more than an attempt to prevent Oromo people from singing in their own language: it reflected the deeply held view among the colonising Amhara masses that the Oromo language was unworthy of the nation and not suitable to be sung and performed in public.

Any recorded or open-air live performance of Oromo music was represented as ‘low’ entertainment and vulgar carnivalesque. Recollecting his experience

growing-up in Dirree dhawaa, contemporary Oromo artist Saalah Galmo saw the common debasement most graphically illustrated in the hilarious Amhara assertion, 'If the Oromo language is broadcast or sung on the radio it would blow-up the God-damned speakers'.¹⁹ Stigmatised as grotesquely vulgar, the Oromo language was ridiculed as offensive and unworthy of musical performance. Meanwhile, Amhara styles of musical composition were actively promoted as classically far superior.

Asafa Jalata (1993, 1998b), in his discussion of the role of music in the sociocultural origins of the Oromo national movement in Ethiopia in the 1960s, makes the point that the musicians and their bands were able to enunciate an alternative reality to the colonial relationship that existed between the Oromo and their Amhara rulers. Specifically referring to *Afran Qalloo* (known earlier as *Urjii Bakkalchaa*), he argues that musical forms of cultural resistance were crucial to the re-emergence and promotion of a national consciousness among the Oromo and 'registered a new chapter in the development of Oromo cultural nationalism' (1998b, p. 7). Certainly, with the contraband tape recordings circulated throughout the country and played inside people's homes, popular music was very significant for the re-emergence of Oromo national consciousness.

But this is a retrospective view, and it needs to be kept in mind that the politically nationalist significance of what these young musicians were doing was not necessarily apparent to them at the time. Given the tight restrictions in place and serious consequences for those who dared assert an alternative, the political message contained in the music was not always intended by the artist who composed the song. Among Shantam's early songs, *Yaa haadhatoo* was very popular and touched many Oromo people throughout Oromiya. The song, an ode to his mother, was composed in 1968. According to Shantam, 'It is about how she brought me into this world and how she came to make me a man: all the effort and care she took for me and how she looked after me. In the song I really describe a mother's capacity in keeping the family together and bringing the children up'.²⁰ The song embodied a deep universal message: there is no-one born without a mother who is not nurtured at the breast. As explained to me, the language of the song conveyed a subliminal political message. While clearly about mothers in the domestic sphere, the song was also heard by listeners as speaking of the land (*biyya*). Unbeknown to Shantam at the time of its composition, the meaning of the song was widely interpreted as

¹⁹ Interview, March 1997.

²⁰ Interview, February 1997.

Oromiya the motherland, something all Oromo have in common (the gendering of the land and nation is discussed in detail in Chapter Eight).

Such interpretation illustrates how the artist's output enjoins with the conversations of others (over which the artist does not have total control) and results in unexpected outcomes. In this case, Shantam in no way anticipated that *Yaa haadhatoo* would effectively launch the production and distribution of popular Oromo protest songs.

Another example of such 'subliminal doubletalk' is Ali Birraa's early hit *Maal Jaanee*. The enormous impact of this song is often referred to by both older Oromo living in Melbourne who grew-up listening to it, and the younger ones whose parents played it inside their homes. Many recall how the song (composed in 1972), by resonating with and articulating a collective anguish, had an unforgettable message which profoundly affected Oromo people throughout the countryside. One informant recalled how the song first came to him when he was in prison. He felt 'as if he [Ali] was singing about my problem. Especially it came to me at a time when I had the same feeling'.²¹ Ali Birraa described the song's mass popularity:

Long ago in 1972—a most difficult time for the Oromo people—I first sang that song. At that moment the song touched every single person. I did not know any Oromo person that existed at that time who was not affected by the lyrics. In English the main lyric says:

What could one say?
What would one care?
When one gets miserable,
When one could not understand existence.

The song is question after question. It was not a clear message to the [non-Oromo] Ethiopians who understood *afaan Oromoo*, but for our people it was clear. If I told you now you would not understand the message: it was sublime. The song is one hell of a song which carries one hell of a message. At the time when I sang this song it was really flammable with a strong message. The appreciation has diminished day-by-day, but you could say that it does not diminish; rather, it remains there.²²

²¹ Interview, May 1997.

²² Interview, February 1997.

These transgressive, Janus-faced polyphonic songs, like the troubadours who performed them, functioned as a virtual cipher for the carnivalesque, enabling Oromo people to disturb the 'natural order of things'. These popular songs were heard as authentic, the subliminal message not so much reflecting the genius of the artist as the listeners' ability to performatively play with and hear what sounds right (Frith, 1996b, p. 110). Ultimately, the music provided a focal point in the transformation of Oromo individuals into an Oromo nation as they were listened to during the most quotidian activities (sometimes even within prison).

As with Shantam, in Melbourne, Ture Lenco's living situation in a high-rise public housing estate in inner-city Melbourne—unemployed, unknown and displaced—stands in stark contrast to the alternative reality of his life as defined by the struggle for Oromiya's independence. The contrasts and dynamics of Ture's life apply to the majority of Melbourne's Oromo: distinctive rural people living in anonymous urban settings. For Ture, like many displaced Oromo, it is music which continues to provide links with the rural past.

The links are graphically demonstrated in Ture's 1997 cassette, *Laga Jaalalaa*, which means 'River of Love'. The cassette features a cover photo that shows Ture standing by the Yarra River with the Melbourne skyline behind him (cf. Plate 2, between pp. 162 & 163). Ostensibly, there are no archetype Oromo symbols or anything else on the cover that indicate Oromo background. But the river (*laga*) is central to Oromo cultural survival, and is considered special by all rural Oromo. The mythically sacred *odaa* trees, where the leaders of the Oromo nation used to meet every eight years under their self-governing *gadaa* were apparently always located near water. One well known Melbourne Oromo explained his view of the primordality of water and trees:

Maaddaa means 'spring' [as in spring of water] and *Maaddaa Wollabbu* is the 'Spring of *Wollabbu*' in south Oromiya where the *gadaa* council used to meet every eight years. The spring is close to the river, the place where we find our hope and our future. The river is the means of our survival: we depend on it. In the *gadaa* the elders are going to the river; they are finding the *odaa* near the river. When they find this tree they sit down under the shade of it and make culture there. Any Oromo holiday or celebration is around water, especially the women's holiday is at the river where the men

cannot go. All the Oromo in Melbourne are sharing this same outlook together; the impression was with us for hundreds of years. Without water we die.²³

The cassette cover graphically highlights the ambiguities of place among Melbourne's Oromo: the title conveying a rural theme while the photograph shows Ture, the rural Oromo, wearing a suit, standing in front of the metropolis called Melbourne. But between Ture and the city-scape there is the river. The juxtaposition, with the city rising out of the river, combines the rural and urban elements which constitute the reality of Oromo life in exile.

When asked why this location was chosen for the cover photograph, Ture responded that it was a 'beautiful view' and a 'nice place' to take a photo. To anyone familiar with the city of Melbourne, the cover photograph clearly suggests where the cassette was made. As the cassette celebrates 'the river of love', Ture has, perhaps unwittingly, invested in what is otherwise an all-consuming urban setting an alternative symbolic meaning. The signs are there—the river and the title *Laga Jaalalaa*—but the signs are not merely translated from one setting to another; rather, they are given new meaning in their articulation with and within the urban metropolis.

It is not Ture Lenco, however, but Afandi Siyo who is the most active of Melbourne's Oromo musicians. Afandi is a superb musical craftsman constantly experimenting with an eclectic range of new rhythms and sounds. His low-pitched electric lead guitar work and strong dance rhythms combined with his distinctive deep, growling vocal (*goomaraa*) make his music unique. He has recorded two albums in Australia with his band *Abbaa bokkuu* (all non-Oromo professional musicians), the songs combining lyrics in *afaan Oromoo* with distinctly pan-African musical aesthetics (congos and fast rhythmic tempos).

Like Shantam, Afandi was born and grew-up in Dirree dhawaa, where he first started playing Harari/Adaree²⁴ songs and where he first started writing songs. Following after the earlier troubadours of the 1960s, he began travelling around playing his music in the 1970s. As he described:

²³ Interview, June 1997.

²⁴ The Harari, also known as Adaree, are a nation from the east of Ethiopia whose land is encircled by Oromiya.

I saw my people suffer very badly and it was very sad. I started singing in my language [*afaan Oromoo*] for the first time in 1974. I do not know how I started but I saw myself there and I had to tell my people about Oromo because a lot of them cannot read or write. Music is vital to communication so I had to sing to tell them what was going on. I travelled from village to village singing with Shantam. Finally in 1977 I left my country for political reasons and I arrived in Australia in 1987. Now in Melbourne my music is my hobby and I sing for my people at no cost.²⁵

Afandi wrote and performs the currently-popular dance song among sections of Melbourne's Oromo, *Baddaan biyya tiyya*, which, according to him, means 'my homeland, my bush'. Afandi attributes the song's popularity to its capacity to address the dilemmas of city-dwelling Oromo identifying with rural settings:

The message is simple: it is about the countryside and how the true home of the Oromo is in the countryside. In Oromo language we call the countryside *badda*. The title *Baddaan biyya tiyya* literally means 'this countryside is mine'. It is successful because it taps into the hearts of all Oromo living away from home, especially their love for the country. I wrote this song because ninety-nine percent of Oromo in Melbourne grew-up in the country. I always 'scratch' where my people 'itch', and the country is the heart of our people.

The Oromo are a country people and their past lies in the stories told about life in the country—Oromiya—as it is in the song. I am always listening for the issues and needs of my people. It came to me quickly; the music was easy but the words were hard. It is very difficult to translate the meaning of the song to English. but the verses say:

Countryside is my country,
The roots of our nation start in the country,
Countryside or city, all is Oromiya.
Today our people are everywhere,

²⁵ Interview, April 1997.

Whether country or city we are still together,
 Everybody's roots come from the country.
 The city is not better than the country,
 You have to be ashamed, we know which one is right and
 which is wrong.
 We write down Oromo constitution for all, we are not
 different.
 You have to know about real Oromo:
 If he lives in the city or country still he has to struggle.
 The country has gun, the city politics.
 They push you to look for freedom,
 Take the yoke off your back to be free.²⁶

The song feeds the imagination of sections of Melbourne's Oromo by offering sentimental points of connection with an imagined rural world and a struggle for liberation. As Afandi says, 'I always "scratch" where my people "itch", and the country is the heart of our people'. *Baddaan biyya tiyya* is a song that reinforces Oromo nationalist sentiment by appealing to popular organising symbols (rural homeland and struggle) and using these symbols to evoke emotional resonance (Sorenson 1993, p. 49).

The correct literal translation of *baddaan biyya tiyya* would be 'highland of my country', not 'my homeland, my bush' as asserted by Afandi. While the song has remained very popular, the use of *badda* and the discrimination between 'country' and 'town' Oromo has been divisively controversial, apparently tapping into longheld tensions between highland and lowland Oromo (*gammojii jiraaccuu manna badda taau wayya*, 'better to live on highland than to live in a lowland'). Lowland plains and 'town' Oromo in Melbourne have criticised the song as discriminatory. Nevertheless, despite the controversy, Afandi sings about the rural roots of Oromo, which is an outlook shared by most, if not all, in Melbourne—so it is perhaps excused by plains Oromo.²⁷

The key verses of *Baddaan biyya tiyya* acknowledge the ambiguities faced by displaced Oromo in Melbourne and elsewhere:

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The attitude towards the song would seem to depend upon the context where it is performed and listened to—within an Oromo setting it will be controversial, while in the presence of outsiders, it will be presented as a song about Oromo unity.

Countryside or city, all is Oromiya.
Today our people are everywhere,
Whether country or city we are still together,
Everybody's roots come from the country.
The city is not better than the country.

Afandi's statement, 'everybody's roots come from the country' is followed by the defensive, 'the city is not better than the country'. Perhaps here lies the source of contention in the song for city-born Oromo: tied to the polarity between city and country is a derogatory Abyssinian colonialist discourse endured by rural Oromo people for the past century, a discourse that Afandi rejects. The song reflects the common outlook that, prior to the Abyssinian expansion into Oromiya, the Oromo led a communal rural lifestyle where there were few towns and cities. Moreover, modern cities did not emerge from their own cultural development but were established as administrative centres by the Abyssinian invaders. Though not historical fact—for example the large town of Jimma was previously an Oromo centre with its own dynasty—the invention of a utopian rural heritage, as opposed to the oppressive urban world of the colonisers, provides a powerful nationalist mythology. One informant, Suleeymaan, echoed this constructed, but strategically essential, mythological 'essence' in his description of the rural/urban dichotomy:

Before the Abyssinians came we did not know city or town; a communal *gadaa* system formed our strong unity as a nation in which there were only villages. We had a responsibility to share what we had with others passing through our villages. Even if you went all across the country you would not find a town, only villages. Our political centre was at the tree [*odaa*] where our leaders met to discuss the nation. This is Oromo society.

The unity of the Oromo is not artificial but it is natural; in our society the *gadaa* was a strong cultural tie that kept our unity. The *gadaa* system is our identification, it is everything for us—our trees and our rivers. The trees and the rivers are vital to our *gadaa*, and without the *gadaa* system we cannot identify as Oromo. This is why the Abyssinians chopped down our trees.

But the Abyssinians started a feudal society which they began by building towns and then a city. Then the Oromo people felt that the town

is the centre of Abyssinian administration; whenever they go to town they have to pay taxes—animal, property and food taxes. They hate the town, they feel that the town is built by their enemies. But even if we wanted to, we did not have a chance to get into the town unless we became like them [the Abyssinians] and spoke their language [Amharic].

This is why we feel like country people, because when we come to the city we meet bureaucrats and we must speak a different language even to catch a bus. Eventually all our people that are living in the cities are like Abyssinians because they speak Amharic and dress differently. The Oromo living in the country call the Oromo in the towns and city ‘Amhara’ because they have changed. In the towns at school the Amhara call us [Oromo students] stupid country people. Still now ninety-five percent of our people are in the countryside.²⁸

Suleeymaan described a nativist dichotomy which the song, *Baddaan biyya tiyya*, potentially transforms by affirming that there is no necessary opposition between the rural and the urban: all are Oromo, a ‘double capture’—city and country. This dissolution of the dichotomy represents the development of the contemporary formation of Oromo cultural identity—an accommodation of different positionalities under a pan-Oromo umbrella. Afandi affirms the value of the countryside as the foundation of Oromiya while simultaneously acknowledging that ‘today our people are everywhere’, city and country. Perhaps unwittingly, Afandi appeals to a national symbol rooted in the past and incorporates it into a vision of the present and future. To be Oromo now does not mean to be only country people who meet under the tree; rather, the sites of the ‘tree’ and the ‘countryside’ have changed.

While primarily about land, the song simultaneously portrays a deterritorialised sense of place (‘today our people are everywhere’), which transcends the colonial situation back home. The song enables those exiles in Melbourne symbolically to transform and relocate themselves from marginalised city-bound people to city-based Oromo with rural identities. As with Ali Birraa’s triumphal *Oromiyaa*, Afandi’s song embodies the unifying themes of fatherland/motherland and struggle: emphasising the common struggle and homeland for all Oromo, whether rural or urban.

²⁸ Interview, April 1997.

The circumstances of *Baddaan biyya tiyya*'s composition embody the message of the song, which was composed on a process-line at the Bradmill textile factory in Melbourne's industrial western suburbs where Afandi has worked for the past ten years:

I write all my songs at Bradmill—that is my studio. I work on a machine that takes twenty minutes for every cycle, so while I am waiting I am always thinking of the words or the melody and running it through my head. *Baddaan biyya tiyya* was written at Bradmill: I made it all up there. While I was working in the factory my mind was over there in Oromiya in the countryside. My body was here but my mind was there. The people who work in my section are always looking at me and thinking that I am crazy because I block out all their noise and just think about my music which I construct there. I have written about seventy songs at Bradmill.²⁹

The Bradmill textile factory is a huge industrial complex, a site of mass-production. The front employee car park portrays images of through-put and automation as hundreds of workers change shifts from morning to afternoon to evening. Inside, a division of labour is clearly practised as each worker stays in one section at a time, operating one machine. Surrounding the factory are streets of cheap housing and large busy roads. It is a place characterised by urbanisation and geographically far removed from the Oromo rural homeland and struggle. Out of this unlikely urban site a new liminal place emerges, capable of transforming the limitations of time and space. Through his music, Afandi transforms a place of automation and drudgery into a space of cultural development and affirmation. Space and time shrink as Afandi's music transcends the physical surroundings.

His experience supports Massey's (1994) contention that the identity of place is unfixed, because 'place is thought of as simply a set of the interactions which constitute space, a local articulation within the wider whole' (p. 115). The specificity of the local place is constituted through its articulations with the 'outside' global. Indeed, the global has always been part of the construction of the local. Massey refers to this as 'an internationalist constitution of the local place and its particularity' (p. 117). The specificity of Afandi's workplace is constructed as a site for the creative interaction of the local and global as Afandi describes the factory as

²⁹ Interview, April 1997.

his 'studio'—the place where he does all of his creative work. Similarly, his car is the 'place' where he listens to an eclectic range of global music while driving to work—where local and global interactions occur.³⁰

If places are conceived of as constituted via a multiplicity of articulations, then understanding the specificity of place is best approached through an analysis of the particularity of the social interactions which intersect at the location. These social interactions and their interpretations are ever-changing to produce new effects and social processes. The global is part of this process, as the character of all places in today's world has been at least partly formed by their wider surroundings and interactions with the 'outside'. As this chapter has shown in relation to the production of place through their music, Melbourne's Oromo, though far from their 'home', are creatively interacting with the 'outside' and transcending the conditions of their exile and displacement. As described in the following chapter, special impetus was given to the transformative role of music in the creation of 'home' with Ali Birraa's visit to Australia in February 1997.

³⁰ Afandi described how both his car and his workplace are the most important areas for the creation and development of his music.

CHAPTER SIX

ALI BIRRAA KEENYA:¹

THE LEGEND CONTINUES

The musician, like music, is ambiguous. He plays a double game. He is simultaneously musicus and cantor, reproducer and prophet. If an outcast, he sees society in a political light. If accepted, he is its historian, the reflection of its deepest values.

Jacques Attali (1985, p. 12)

Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them.

Simon Frith (1996b, p. 111)

Ali Birraa received a spectacular welcome on arriving at Melbourne Airport on Tuesday the 11th of February 1997. Following some initial confusion about the whereabouts of his flight, the large gathering of Oromo there to greet him ran frantically from the international to the domestic terminal where he was discovered waiting at the baggage carousel. Screams of rapture were immediate: 'Its Ali!', 'Here he is!'. Ali was instantly mobbed by over fifty people: the younger women screamed in delight while the older men embraced him. For some this was a reunion that was long awaited, while for most it was the first time to meet the legend. For all present it was a liminal experience. Befitting his stature, following the greetings, Ali was chauffeur-driven in a limousine to his accommodation in Footscray. Throughout the next two-and-a-half weeks carnivalesque ecstasy featured among Melbourne's Oromo, as people delighted at being in the presence of such a famous Oromo (cf. Plate 3, between pp. 162 & 163). As contended in this chapter, for many in Melbourne, Ali Birraa's presence served to fill a vacuum of identity, as he is both the purveyor and conveyor of Oromoness: the embodiment of pan-Oromo identity. He is the public face of an identity that was once hidden.

Ali Birraa's visit to Australia had been a long-time coming and was surrounded by clouds of uncertainty. The previous year, failed attempts to sponsor Ali by two separate parties had resulted in deep division and mistrust (an episode

¹ 'Our Ali Birraa'.

explored in Chapter Seven). Nevertheless, the news quickly spread that Ali was coming and on the day of his arrival people were clearly stunned to see him in person. It had been thirteen years since the first Oromo arrived in Melbourne, in 1984; they had been deprived of their ‘legend’ Ali Birraa all this time and were longing to see him. From the outset, the concert organisers, Abdulhamid Ali and Jamal Youssuf, wanted to promote Ali’s visit and concerts as widely as possible, adopting the title, ‘The East African Singing Legend’ to describe him on the posters, leaflets, radio and television promotions. The term ‘legend’ implies an aura of grandeur and sublimity: ‘this man is a “legend”, you must see him’.

Publicly equating an Oromo with the title ‘East African Legend’ was bold. In promoting Ali as both their own (Oromo) and an ‘East African’ legend, the organisers were hoping to attract an audience beyond the Oromo community. For this reason, Ali Birraa’s Oromo identity was not given prominence in the promotions, which represented him as the ‘East African singing legend who sings in Oromo, Harari, Somali, Arabic and Sudanese’. The promotions described Ali’s visit as ‘Direct from his Music Africa Award winning performance in Toronto, Canada’. In none of the promotional material was there reference to Ali singing in Amharic—this was an obvious omission which provoked cynical comments from a number of non-Oromo Ethiopians, including Elzabet, who complained:

Why doesn’t he sing in Amharic also. How can he be an ‘East African Legend’ if he will not sing in Amharic? I will tell you why he doesn’t; it is because of politics. If he sang one song in Amharic most of the Oromo people would hate him. Many Ethiopians want to hear him sing because he is a great singer, but they will not come [to the concert] because they don’t understand Oromo language and he refuses to sing in Amharic. He is a great Amharic singer: he used to sing in Addis Ababa and was very popular in Ethiopia. But now he won’t sing in this language—it is crazy!²

Elzabet was perhaps justified in questioning the advertising, and correct in her analysis that Ali Birraa is politically motivated. Despite the advertising, this was to be a concert featuring Oromo music, with a few other songs included, and largely attended by Oromo. There were no non-Oromo Ethiopians involved and there would be no Ethiopian language (Amharic) spoken during the concert—Ali Birraa is

² Interview, February 1997. This young Tigrayan woman goes to most of the concerts in Melbourne featuring Ethiopian artists.

an Oromo artist and this was a production coordinated by Oromo people. The presentation of Ali as the 'East African Legend' was an attempt by Melbourne's Oromo to present one of their own as a central African figure: the marginal Oromo nation presenting one of its own over-and-above anyone else in talent and greatness. This could be interpreted as an act of voicing and affirming their importance as a nation to themselves and to outsiders.

The promotions allowed the marginal to assert itself as central. The advertising simultaneously gave public notice of Ali's appearance and allowed Melbourne's Oromo to feel excited and proud to have one of their own presented throughout Melbourne on posters, leaflets and television. This lead-up to Ali's arrival and the concerts ensured that Melbourne's Oromo were anticipating a momentous occasion.

The aura of grandeur and hero-worship that surrounds Ali in Melbourne is striking, given that possibly as many as eighty-five percent of Melbourne's Oromo had never previously met him or seen him perform.³ Indeed, many of the younger Oromo were born well after Ali began his singing career in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, Ali's audience in Melbourne consisted primarily of Oromo aged thirty years and under who were overawed meeting, dancing and talking with him. Many of these young Oromo were either born and/or grew-up outside Oromiya in cities such as Cairo, Nairobi, and refugee camps in Djibouti and Sudan. Many of those under fourteen years have spent most of their lives in Australia.

These young ones had grown-up listening to cassettes of Ali and stories about him by their parents and elders. Iffraa, who is seventeen years old, had never previously met Ali but always enjoyed listening to his music on cassette. Her favourite video-recording—which she has viewed many times over—was a show that Ali performed in Toronto. Upon hearing the news of Ali's arrival, in a pitch of excitement she asked to meet him in person. Likewise Nadjuumaa, who is just twelve years old, waited in expectation for the night of the concert when she would escort Ali to the stage. During the concerts her younger brother Bonna took the opportunity to rush on stage and be with Ali. Bonna is shy and often unconfident

³ The estimate of eighty-five percent was given by Ali himself and the tour organisers.

speaking *afaan Oromoo*—he plays basketball and identifies with the ‘Aussie’ kids—but Ali’s arrival stirred within him feelings of excitement that surprised his parents.⁴

Lalisee and Ayyaantuu, both aged twenty-two, adore Ali and could not wait to meet him. They attend university, have lived in Melbourne since 1984, and grew-up big fans of Michael Jackson. They have distant memories of their country and rely upon photographs to recall their early years in Djibouti. But for them, and the others already mentioned, the arrival of Ali Birraa gave tangible form to an identity that is both unclear and ambiguous. For these young Oromo, Ali is the personification of *Oromumma*, an intermediate agency between their present lives in Melbourne and a past homeland and struggle they never really knew.

Ali Birraa’s role as mediator is by virtue of the fact that Oromo people in Melbourne want to hear him. They want to hear him not only because he is a magnificent singer, but also because of the aura of greatness that surrounds him as a figure: he is an Oromo ‘legend’. Among Oromo in Melbourne, he is heard with a fresh set of ears in a context far removed from Oromiya. Therefore, to meet and sit with him, and (even better) to have a photograph taken with him, provides a means of connecting with a past unknown but revered. These young ones, and the majority of Melbourne’s Oromo, have little knowledge of past Oromo cultural heritage or of the historical role Ali Birraa has played for the Oromo over the past thirty years. Nonetheless, they are prepared to declare their faith in the legendary status of Ali Birraa. Like filling a void, for many the past is constituted through the use they can make of Ali Birraa as a ‘legend’ in the present.

The creation of legends requires a large degree of faith. That there are many other singers and Oromo heroes who have sacrificed much, and perhaps even more than Ali Birraa, over the years is irrelevant to Melbourne’s young Oromo. Their ‘legend’ Ali Birraa speaks to them where they are now: he is a ‘legend’ who serves to fill a vacuum that currently exists. As with many legendary people who often regard their status as fortuitous, Ali Birraa described his rise to legendary status as being largely attributed to the need of his people to link themselves with a hero:

I can only view my success to timing, because there was a gap to be filled and there was no-one at the time. I mean lately with the emergence of many

⁴ Iffraa, Nadjuumaa and Bonna have talked with excitement about their love for Ali Birraa. The parents of Bonna expressed their delight in his interest.

Oromo organisations all these figures are coming-up to the surface. But once upon a time that was a vacuum that had to be filled. Any people need a hero; and in that regard I was considered by the people worthy of being placed in that vacuum for the time being.⁵

These comments illustrate how most popular artists often don't know how people will respond to them or their work. Ali Birraa's early artistic output, like that noted of Shantam Shubissa in the previous chapter, enjoined with the conversations of others and often resulted in unexpected outcomes (cf. above pp. 131-2).

As Ali expressed it, he certainly did not expect to be of such importance to young Oromo in Melbourne, many of whom were not even born when he recorded his most popular songs years ago.⁶ But for the young Oromo in Melbourne, Ali Birraa becomes the embodiment of an unknown history; he and his popular music are a means of making history, through which the indiscriminate and unknown past is brought into clear focus in the present.

The meaning of past history for many Oromo living in Melbourne could be summarised thus: 'We have a history—we don't know what it is, but we have it'. There is no 'uninterrupted inheritance that reaches into the present from the past'; instead there are 'bits and pieces that exist in the present', as history is 'present in reality in the form of the ruin', as 'irresistible decay' (Chambers 1994, p. 102). For those in Melbourne, and especially for the younger ones, Ali Birraa is Oromo heritage: his presence could be equated with the arrival of a sacred artefact that demonstrates a heritage otherwise unknown.

There are two dimensions to Ali Birraa as Oromo heritage, both inextricably linked: his persona and his music. Ali Birraa is both the *purveyor* and *conveyor* of Oromo culture and identity. Through his person and music he provides, supplies, transmits and imparts Oromo culture. He has successfully spoken above the conventional portrayal of Oromo (as marginal 'Other') by re-constituting what it means to be Oromo in the late-twentieth century. As explored in the preceding chapter, the songs of Ali Birraa speak to many Oromo living and growing-up outside their homeland. Through his music and persona the hearts of many Oromo have been touched.

⁵ Interview, February 1997.

⁶ Ibid.

Because he is made available to his people, the persona of Ali Birraa as ‘legend’ was further enhanced by his visit to Australia. But, unlike most ‘Western’ ‘legends’, while touring he lived with his people in their part of town, and ate their food. He was accessible to his fans. He even attended the birthday party of a five year old Oromo child who was born in Melbourne. Ali visited people in their homes, watched television and joked with them. These acts contributed to the collective ownership of Ali Birraa and his persona.

Despite this collective ownership, as with all ‘legends’, the persona of Ali Birraa is associated with prestige and exclusiveness. While visiting Melbourne Ali was invited to dine in the homes of various elite members of the community. Upon arrival he would be presented with a banquet of food and a photograph or video-recording would be taken of the hosts and Ali together. Perhaps in the host’s mind was the thought that this photo and video would go somewhere for other Oromo people to view—perhaps even family overseas. A photo with Ali Birraa would indicate to their families back home that they are happy and doing well—perhaps even wealthy.

Abdella S. Omar, an influential person among sections of the Melbourne community, described how those without a chance to see Ali ‘look at him as a distant star’. To see him and get close to him is a dream: ‘it is like having Michael Jackson in your house for dinner’.⁷ While for some Ali’s visit provided opportunities to lavish him with the fruits of their apparent success in Australia, for others it was a time of diffidence. This was especially so for those living in public-housing estates who felt unable to invite Ali to dine in their humble homes.

Abuubakar, who lives in a disreputable public housing estate, wished to invite Ali to dine with his family, but sadly concluded, ‘How can I invite him to my place. We can’t have him here’. This comment was more an expression of respect than a class issue, and Abuubakar was later very angry when hearing that Suleeymaan had invited Ali to his small flat in another high-rise public estate, exclaiming, ‘How could he invite Ali into housing commission [public housing], which is too rough and dirty?’⁸ Contrary to Abuubakar, who felt the need to

⁷ Interview, March 1997.

⁸ Ibid.

safeguard Ali Birraa, Suleeymaan felt no such reservation and invited him, explaining that his place was ‘good enough for Ali’.⁹

Either way, Oromo like Abuubakar and Suleeymaan saw Ali’s presence in Melbourne as an opportunity to bring Oromo history into the present and in so doing affirm their unique Oromo heritage. It is well documented that heritage is not the same as authentic history (cf. Lowenthal 1996; Davison & McConville 1991; and Appleby, Hunt & Jacob 1995). Lowenthal describes the manner in which the past is enlisted for present causes:

In domesticating the past we enlist it for present causes ... We are apt to call such communion history, but it is actually heritage. The distinction is vital. History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes ... At its best, *heritage fabrication* is both creative art and act of faith. By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we come from, and to what we belong.

(Lowenthal 1996, pp. xi, xiii, emphasis added)

Heritage fabrication implies both creative art and an act of faith because, in the case of Melbourne’s Oromo, it involves piecing together a past that has been simultaneously hidden and marginalised—and declaring faith in such a past. Manufacturing heritage involves the application of creativity to re-present and structure a past that is hazy and distant: to domesticate the icons of the past and thus promote continuity with the present. Both of Ali Birraa’s Melbourne concerts provided excellent forums to combine strands of the past into a tapestry of heritage.

The two Ali Birraa concerts were held in Croatia House located in Footscray, and while the concerts were held upstairs, downstairs the members of the Croatian club met to drink and play bowls. The name ‘Croatia House’ echoes nationalist and familial connotations patently evident throughout the building. Upstairs, the hall is decorated with a multitude of Croatian icons displayed prominently on the walls, and the stage is bordered by paintings of famous Croatian patriarchs, and even a picture of Queen Elizabeth the Second. However, as detailed below, despite the presence of these iconic Croatian artefacts, the name ‘Oromiya House’ more aptly reflects the nationalist and familial symbols operative in the building on the night of Ali Birraa’s first concert.

⁹ Interview, April 1997.

Although the first concert was advertised to start at 8 p.m., most people, especially the younger women and men, were studiously late in their arrival. The conventional practice for Oromo functions is to start the event about two hours after the advertised time, and the concerts were no exception. By 10.15 p.m. there was an aura of anticipation as the crowd awaited the arrival of Ali Birraa.

After arriving at Croatia House by limousine, everyone was upstanding and there was a huge applause as Ali entered the venue. He was led in by a prominent and influential member of the community, Gole Baso, dressed in traditional Oromo clothing and carrying a red plastic stick. Accompanying them were three girls—Iftuu, Nadjuumaa and Hannan—carrying flowers, medallions and a trophy. Upon reaching the front of the hall, Ali was seated at a special table with Shantam Shubissa and my supervisor Professor Ron Adams, representing Victoria University, with the concert sponsors Jamal Youssuf and Abdulhamid Ali sitting close-by. Meanwhile, the accompanying party, including Gole, were seated on the stage. Such seating arrangements indicated a community structuring of the event: both Shantam Shubissa and Ron Adams were accorded similar status to Ali. Collectively, the three figures represented the elders of the occasion.

Following the arrival and procession, awards were presented to Ali by Shantam Shubissa and Ron Adams, the young girls on the stage handing the awards to Afandi Siyo before they were passed to Ali. The ceremony continued for twenty-five minutes and included speeches. To an outsider, with little knowledge of the Oromo, the formalities of welcoming and awarding Ali would probably not seem remarkable. But to the initiated Oromo, they contained strong references to ‘ancient’ Oromo cultural practices.

The leader of the procession, Gole Baso, dressed in traditional Oromo clothing and carrying a red plastic stick, signalled that something ‘ancient’ was to be enacted. To the uninitiated—including many of those present who had very little knowledge of what was happening—it would have appeared that he was simply carrying a red plastic stick which was presented to Ali Birraa before the music commenced. But, to the initiated, the stick represented something far more important: a *bokkuu*, the pre-eminent emblem of authority in the ancient Oromo *gadaa* system. Description of the significance of *gadaa* in ‘ancient’ and modern

Oromo society provides valuable background for appreciating the importance of the *bokkuu* presented to Ali Birraa in Melbourne.

While there is a growing range of literature on *gadaa*, most accounts are concerned with the recent practice of *gadaa* amongst the Guji, the Gabbra and the Booran, who dwell in the southernmost areas of Oromiya. There is scarce detailed writing concerning the past and present role of *gadaa* within the broader area of Oromiya.¹⁰ What is known is that the *gadaa* system influenced many aspects of Oromo life: it guided the religious, social, political and economic life of Oromo for many centuries, and also their philosophy, art, history and method of time-keeping.

It was not until Abyssinian colonial expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century, the introduction of trade, and the spread of Islam and Christianity, that *gadaa* began to lose its influence in most areas of Oromiya. Previously, the activities and life of each and every member of the society were indirectly and/or directly affected to varying degrees by *gadaa* (cf. Baxter 1978b; Hinnant 1978; and Mohammed Hassen 1990). As late as 1961, Asmaron Legesse (1973, p. 12) found evidence of *gadaa* rituals in all parts of the Oromo-speaking communities throughout Oromiya, except in the Tigray province. However, in none of these regions did the *gadaa* system operate as a comprehensive political system.

While Eritrean scholar Asmaron Legesse and most Oromo scholars and nationalist writers (cf. Asafa Jalata 1993; Sisai Ibssa 1993; and Gadaa Melbaa 1980) emphasise the political role of *gadaa*, non-Oromo scholars such as Baxter (1978b; 1990, p. 236), Bartels (1994) and Hinnant (1978) stress the ritual dimension. Like Aguilar (1997c, p. 11), and following Bassi (1994, 1996), I would contend that, as with most symbols, *gadaa*, 'manifests itself in a wide range of social phenomena, including prescriptive rules, ceremonies, rites, public offices and actual physical villages' (Bassi 1996, p. 150). On the occasion of Ali Birraa's first concert, *gadaa* moved beyond a conceptual abstraction for Melbourne's Oromo, to become a real structure in the present. Through various ideological, cultural and discursive practices, *gadaa* articulated with the realms of ceremony, politics and public office, to create effective structures of living, linking and voicing *Oromumma*.

¹⁰ References to *gadaa* here are primarily taken from Asmaron Legesse's *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society* (1973); Baxter's 'Boran Age-Sets and Generation-Sets: Gada, a Puzzle or a Maze?' (1978b); and Hinnant's 'The Guji: Gada as a Ritual System' (1978). I have questioned Oromo in Melbourne but, predictably, found that people know very little about the complex system.

According to Asmaron Legesse (1973), within the *gadaa* system the power (ritual and jural) to administer the affairs of the society belonged to the male members. Every male member of the society who was of the age of a *gadaa* grade had full rights to elect and be elected. Similarly, all men had the right to express their views in any public gathering without fear. The system was based upon clearly defined age-sets that classified the male members of the society. Within the system there were officials with specific duties who held office for eight years before their replacement by a new group of elected officers. The titles of these officials varied according to different accounts, but it is generally agreed that the senior council consisted of a small number of office holders. The major office holder was the *abbaa bokkuu* or *abbaa gadaa*—often referred to as the chief of the nation or tribe (Bassi 1994, p. 15). Following this position were two other *abbaa bokkuu* and a small number of other senior counsellors.

The *abbaa bokkuu* are the chief officials who are accompanied by counsellors and assistants delegated from the lower assemblies called *hayyuu*. The position *abbaa bokkuu* is named after the *bokkuu*, a handmade wooden sceptre and emblem of authority kept by the *abbaa bokkuu* president. Reportedly, the man holding the *bokkuu* during the meeting of the assembly has the highest status in Oromo society (Asmaron Legesse 1973).

The *bokkuu* used to honour Ali Birraa in Melbourne was not handmade from special wood, but was manufactured by a trophy-maker in Melbourne. Abdella S. Omar, who devised the ceremony, described how the group of organisers selected the *bokkuu* for its symbolic authority:

We chose the *bokkuu* because it reflects our respect for Ali. We wanted to provide both him and the people with a special memory in recognition of his contribution to Oromo culture and language. So we decided to bestow upon Ali the highest status—that of *abbaa bokkuu*, the president. Not only did it show our respect for Ali but it also reflected the originality of Oromo because the presence of the *bokkuu* made it more like an Oromo ceremony.¹¹

¹¹ Interview, March 1997.

As Abdella explained, apart from the different materials, the red colour, thickness and length of the sceptre were about the same as the traditional *bokkuu*. This fabrication of heritage involved creative art: the application of creativity to promote continuity with the present by re-presenting a past to a largely historically ignorant audience of young Oromo.

Nobody questioned the legitimacy of this *bokkuu*, it did not matter if it was made of plastic or wood, or where it was made. On that evening, the *bokkuu* was re-created, to play a pivotal role in the life of Melbourne's Oromo. Everybody present appeared to sense something sacred in what was happening: the presence of the *bokkuu* and the legend Ali Birraa made the moment definitively Oromo. For those present with little or no experience of anything 'truly' Oromo this event provided a site for the articulation of varying 'lines of flight' or strands of *Oromumma*. Moreover, it gave the blessing for the ceremony of Ali's music that lay ahead.

Like the *gadaa* system, the *qalluu* institution is one of the most important in Oromo culture and society. The *qalluu* are like high priests, the spiritual leaders of indigenous Oromo religious practices, who are regarded as the most senior people in traditional Oromo society. According to Asafa Jalata (1998c, pp. 35-7), the leader of all *qalluu* and the spiritual father of all Oromo is known as *abbaa muuda* (father of the anointment). The function of *qalluu* is to mediate between the people and *waaqa* (Oromo divinity title). Though not a political office, traditionally the *qalluu* was a repository of important ceremonial articles (collective symbols) in the *gadaa* ceremony, such as the *bokkuu*. Moreover, the *qalluu* would organise and oversee the election of *gadaa* office bearers. At the meeting of each assembly he would give a blessing and pass the *bokkuu* to the president (Knutsson 1963).

On the evening of Ali's reception, it was Gole Baso, dressed in traditional Oromo clothing and carrying the *bokkuu* into the hall, who ensured that the concert was blessed. His role was that of *qalluu*—the most senior person, spiritual leader and mediator between the people and *waaqa*.

While the speeches occurred, Gole was seated upon the stage with the three young girls behind him. The presence of the elder *qalluu* and the Oromo children seated behind him visually reinforced the continuity of heritage (the past and the

future). That the three children were all female provided stark contrast with the male-dominated ceremony and traditional *gadaa*; the past was here modified to suit present purpose—heritage was fabricated. Directly below the stage was the table of dignitaries, the special members and honorary visitor, serving as the equivalent of the senior office holders, and the large assembly of onlookers.

It did not matter that the venue was Croatia House rather than a shaded spot under an *odaa* tree: through language in its various forms the *gadaa* and *qalluu* were re-presented to Melbourne's Oromo as the language of speech, poem, song and ceremony ensured that what was once hidden was made public. In many ways this concert was a celebration of language. As Ali Birraa sang beautifully for hours on end, every song telling a story that touched the hearts of the listeners, an authorial presence signifying the meaning of Oromo was conveyed.

The organising committee (a small group of prominent men from the Oromo Community Association in Victoria) wanted a ceremony to welcome Ali that authorised the meaning of being Oromo and Australian. As evidenced by the audience response,¹² the combined presentation of the *bokkuu* and an Australian flag to Ali Birraa effectively articulated an original Oromo/Australian way of honouring him. As Abdella S. Omar described:

Originality is very important to our people, so the honouring of Ali had to be distinctly Oromo but also original. I thought about many possibilities. I watched a video of an event in Minneapolis in which they honoured Ali; it was excellent, but ours had to be different: it had to be distinctly Australian and Oromo, while theirs was American. I watched another video ceremony honouring the famous Ethiopian singer Telahun in which they crowned him. But I rejected this because crowning is not Oromo culture. Finally, I decided that Ali should be escorted with the *bokkuu* and presented with an Australian flag. We did it in an Oromo/Australian way; some of the things were not strictly cultural but it was unique.¹³

Abdella and the organising committee devised what they believed was distinctly Oromo/Australian and authorised it through ceremonial splendour. His comment that it was 'not strictly cultural' reflects how certain aspects of the ceremony

¹² Many people commented on the originality of the ceremony and the manner in which it successfully juxtaposed being Oromo and Australian.

¹³ Interview, March 1997.

stressed the likeness of past and present by bending the past to suit present needs. Or, as Lowenthal (1996) puts it, perhaps a little crudely, ‘stealing, forging and inventing much of our heritage’ (p. xiii).

The recall of the past featured prominently throughout the concerts, often tapping into emotions ranging from melancholic to euphoric, as described by concert organiser Jamal Youssuf:

Our people in the diaspora feel melancholy and the music eases that feeling. In this respect I would like us to see it [the concert] as ‘marking time’: it is not just music but it is an age. For some it marked the time when they first heard Ali play, while for those generations that used to hear these songs, when they heard them on Saturday night [the first concert] they remembered their past. It reminds them how old they are and where they were when it was first played to them. It reminds them of their childhood. It reminds them of many, many things. It reminds them of their socialisation back home. It reminds them of the friends they were with, their families and good and bad times that they spent with people. It even reminds them of the landscape and sound of the countryside they have come from. I see it that way; this is why people have close feelings with the music. Like last Saturday, it becomes very, very emotional.¹⁴

The performance of the songs mediated the journey from the present to the past, marking the stages of people’s lives leading up to the present. Many of the audience had no photos and certainly no books from the past, but all had songs to recall. The songs recalled the intricacies of their past lives: the sounds, smells and noises of life back home. These same sentiments were expressed by Shalingee:

Ali’s visit is so important because it helps us to forget about all the politics in Melbourne and troubles we have here. Really it is a time for us to be together and remember our past. To dance together and celebrate our community. Ali will bring us together and all of his songs will remind us of our lives.¹⁵

Such comments emphasise the manner in which the live performance of Ali’s music both symbolises *and* offers the immediate experience of collective identity. On such

¹⁴ Interview, February 1997.

¹⁵ Interview, March 1997.

occasions the music is collectively appropriated: the songs absorbed into the lives of those present, the rhythms into their bodies. As Jamal recognised, both are immediately accessible because Ali's songs tell life stories and give immediacy to collective identities shaped by the narratives of the music.

Emotions ran very, very high during both concerts, so much so that some people were in a state of delirium. A major problem during the second concert was the desire of many people to climb-up on the stage and be with Ali. On one occasion the crowd had to be cleared because Ali was unable to play: the smothering of people all around him prevented him from reaching his keyboard. When Ali asked someone from the audience to give him some space an aggressive reaction followed which broke out into a minor brawl between the security staff and a few of the young Oromo men. The concert organiser, Jamal Youssuf, was then required to make an announcement requesting everyone to 'cool down' and not come up onto the stage when Ali was playing. Predictably, as soon as Ali recommenced playing more people rushed up to be with him.

The intimate interaction between Ali and the crowd highlights the mutual enactment of Oromo identity that occurred. Responding to the music, both the performer and the listening crowd were drawn into emotional alliance, a collective experience of identity expressing the liminality of the occasion—Ali Birraa later commented that it was one of his most memorable shows because 'the energy from the audience was so strong'.¹⁶ Such liminality corresponds with 'becoming-Oromo': entering into a transformative realm of 'becomings' which is the outcome, not of make-believe fantasy, but real, material activities of language, gesture, bodily significations and desires (Gilroy in Frith 1996b, p. 123). Paraphrasing Gilroy:

These significations are condensed in musical performance ... In this context, they produce the imaginary effect of an internal core or essence by acting on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition that are produced in the intimate interaction between performer and crowd. This reciprocal relationship serves as a strategy and an ideal communicative situation.

(Gilroy in Frith 1996b, p. 127, paraphrased)

¹⁶ Interview, February 1997.

Such intimate relations were articulated in the act of giving money to Ali while he performed. The main practice of those—usually men—running-up to be with Ali on stage was to place money (in the form of notes) on his forehead or under his hat. This involved someone placing five, ten, twenty, fifty and in some cases one-hundred dollar notes on Ali's sweaty forehead while he performed. The money would stick to Ali's forehead for all to see while the giver danced around him before returning to the audience. Not only did this enable people to get up close to Ali but it also provided them with a chance to feel special by publicly showing their respect and love for him, and 'owning' him as their cultural artefact. Additionally, their reputation and position within the social hierarchy was enhanced by such public displays of generosity.

To be seen with Ali Birraa was very important and especially there was status to be gained from placing money on his forehead while he performed. Not only did the audience get to see this display of generosity but, hopefully, it would be captured on video to be seen by a worldwide Oromo audience. The mobility of the videocassette means that it will go home to Oromiya and perhaps also to North America where most Oromo in Melbourne have friends and relatives. As various informants indicated, if an Oromo in Melbourne can be captured on video looking great, giving money and dancing with Ali Birraa, perhaps his family and friends back home or in North America will think he is doing well in Australia.¹⁷

Waterman (1990) describes similar patterns of interaction between popular Yoruba performers and their audiences throughout southwestern Nigeria, where audience members press money to the sweaty foreheads of the band leaders. He observed that such stylised behaviour is commonly practised by the wealthy celebrants and hosts, serving to reinforce the social hierarchy by enabling them to boost their reputations (p. 373). But unlike the Yoruba performances, at Ali's concerts, amongst the markedly poor Melbourne Oromo community, those who gave were not wealthy. Rather, they were economically marginal people publicly denying their marginality.

While these displays were often ostentatious and occurred in spontaneous moments of ecstasy and euphoria, other times they were premeditated with the giver waiting for the right moment and then calmly walking-up, placing the money on

¹⁷ Interviews, April 1997.

Ali, kissing him and then leaving the stage. One man took two fifty-dollar notes and after purposely dancing around and showing them to the cheering audience he proceeded to place them upon both sides of Ali's forehead. This particular man is unemployed and has meagre financial resources¹⁸—the act possibly, not middle-class pretence, but a dramatic denial of the significance of straitened circumstances. Many others repeated the gesture during both concerts, giving away over one-hundred dollars each.

These public acts of generosity seemed to take on a competitive form, whereby the men tried to outdo one another in their generous affection for Ali. Meanwhile Ali, the recipient, always appeared unmoved and indifferent to the sum of money being placed on his forehead, or stuffed inside his coat pocket. Not until the set of songs was finished would he discreetly pick up the cash that lay at his feet. It is difficult to analyse and demarcate the motivations for such competitive giving. Certainly, it is easy to attribute such acts to the ego of the givers, but there are perhaps other reasons beyond the pursuit of social prestige. Mauss (1990) suggests that 'by giving, one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one 'owes' *oneself*—one's person and one's goods—to others, (p. 46). Seen this way, these acts might be viewed as constituting an attempt by the givers to affirm their relations with Ali. To this end, the honour of the giver and the recipient are engaged as the fans give of themselves to Ali (in the form of their financial resources).

Analysing and demarcating cultural behaviour is fraught with difficulties because it invariably reduces complex actions to simple determinations—for example, when later asked why they gave money to Ali, most people could not articulate specific reasons, they just wanted to. Aware of these limitations, I suggest that there are at least three analytical angles from which to view the gesture of giving large sums of money to Ali. Firstly, as already described, giving money was a sign of importance for both the giver and the recipient; secondly, the money was irrelevant, because no price could be put on such an incomparable experience; and thirdly, there was an unconscious cultural genealogy behind their actions.

Viewed from the third angle, these public acts of generosity might be seen as according with the traditional Oromo cultural model where livestock are sacrificed to honour and bless special guests.¹⁹ Within the traditional Oromo pastoralist

¹⁸ I witnessed this event and know the man.

¹⁹ Ron Adams first suggested this analytical approach to me.

society (epitomised by the Booran and Gabra Oromo of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia)²⁰ cattle are considered the most important asset to the family and community. Furthermore, as Aneesa Kassam and Gemetchu Megerssa (1994, pp. 93-4) describe, within Oromo society the ritual offering of cattle is central to occasions of prayer and thanksgiving, and special times of celebration and rejoicing. The sacrifice of cattle signifies the destruction of wealth, which is willingly made to keep the peace between and bless various parties. Even in the towns where people do not own stock, numerous head of cattle may be purchased, at great cost, and sacrificed to mark a special occasion such as a wedding or the arrival of an important guest. The killing of the animal is a public affair, the throat is slit and blood literally flows. Later, the slaughtered animal provides food for special guests.

The gesture of giving large sums of money to Ali could be viewed in a similar way to the offering of cattle back home, with the givers (perhaps unconsciously) following a transformed cultural model. Although the money was desperately needed to pay bills and cover living expenses, it was willingly and joyously sacrificed. There was no holding back as people 'sacrificed their wealth' to honour and bless Ali. Just as back home the head of cattle equated with the blessing, so too here the money sacrificed would deliver an intangible but priceless return. This perhaps accounts for the apparent competition between the givers as, like Mauss's (1990) description of potlatch among the indigenous people of North America, the destruction of wealth took on a ritually competitive form.

The competition extended to the women, albeit in a different way, as the Ali Birraa concerts provided an opportunity for them to be seen looking beautiful by a large number of people. One Oromo woman commented how if she did not look beautiful on the video her mother back home in Dirree dhawaa, when seeing the video, would exclaim, 'Why does she look so skinny?' She wants her mother to think that her daughter is happy and wealthy in Australia.²¹ Many women spent a great deal of money on clothes and came to each concert dressed in a new outfit; creating financial problems for many families. In some cases women would spend over \$500 preparing for the concert(s) (this does not include the entrance fee of \$40 per adult

²⁰ The Booran and Gabra are expert pastoralists and herdsmen. The Booran inhabit the highlands and are traditionally cattle pastoralists, whereas the nomadic Gabra dwell in the lowlands. The Booran are considered the elders of Oromo society and provide the ideal in all matters relating to culture and the law (Kassam & Gemetchu Megerssa 1994).

²¹ Interview, March 1997.

in addition to children).²² But, again, the money was not important, because no price could be put on such an unforgettable experience. Moreover, if they were back home and Ali Birraa was performing in Finfinnee, they simply could not have afforded the travel and expensive ticket prices to see him up-close: the concerts in Melbourne were at least affordable.

The finale of Ali's short visit occurred the afternoon before his departure. The farewell function was held at Saalihee's house, located in an outer-western suburb of Melbourne. The neighbourhood where Saalihee and his family live consists of winding streets and brick veneer houses surrounded by flat paddocks. On this particular day, as with most Oromo gatherings, there were cars parked haphazardly all over the street, blocking driveways and causing chaos for local residents.

Saalihee's house, crammed with over sixty people, was buoyant with celebration and excitement, each person insisting on having one last photograph taken with Ali. This event was to be an all night affair before the next day's early morning farewell trip to the airport. The backyard of Saalihee's house was decorated with balloons and streamers. Underneath the carport there was a large Persian rug on which all the men sat in a circle, while the women and children were located at the back—sitting on carpet on the lawn. Ali Birraa sat with Shantam Shubissa and the older members at the front of the carpet near the rostrum (a trestle table), while the younger men sat at the back around the edge of the carpet. This was an important juncture for Melbourne's Oromo as the time had arrived to farewell a legend.

That afternoon the 'Birraa Legend Club' was inaugurated. The club was named in honour of Ali Birraa and chaired by Hafiz Adem, who launched the club before the formal honouring of Ali. The formalities that followed included numerous speeches (including one from myself) and presentations of signed plaques to all those who assisted with the concerts. There were over twenty plaques awarded and each involved the recipient coming to the rostrum and embracing Ali.

²² The extent of expenditure was disclosed during interviews with a number of women who attended the concerts.

The inception of the ‘Birraa Legend Club’ might be interpreted as an attempt to continue the fabrication of heritage and ‘invention of tradition’²³ that started with the Ali Birraa concerts. The ceremonial dimensions of the occasion—the seating, the plaques, poems and the speeches—conjunctively fused to produce an effect of making history. Behind the rostrum was a painted banner in *afaan Oromoo* that read: ‘*Sabaa Oromoo kan Awistraaliya keesa*’ (the Oromo nation in Australia). Like the Oromiya car sticker (the ‘stickered nation’) described in Chapter Four (cf. p. 110), the banner telegraphed what was happening at Saalihee’s house—the gathering of a nation. In the various ceremonies, the shape and form of the nation was made visible and distinct for every member to see. But as the banner indicated, the nation was demarcated or reterritorialised in Australia. Like the ceremonial welcoming at the first Ali Birraa concert, the banner conveyed the uniqueness of being Oromo in Australia.

The ceremonial invention of the ‘Birraa Legend Club’ served to establish lasting continuity with the historic events of Ali’s visit to Australia and to confirm his legendary status. The club established its own past history by reference to the presence of Ali in Melbourne at its inauguration. Moreover, those who received the plaques have personally signed artefacts that can be displayed in their loungerooms for all to see. Not only were there plaques but also T-shirts and baseball caps emblazoned with ‘The Legend Continues: Ali Birraa, Melbourne, February 1997’. These artefacts are worn and displayed with pride, boldly declaring, ‘Yes, I was there, I participated in that historic time for Melbourne’s Oromo’. Through the wearing of these garments and the display of the plaques, the past—real or invented—to which they refer is re-presented.

During the inauguration and farewell, the most significant speech came not from an Oromo man but from a young Oromo woman, Dursituu Mussa. Her speech was striking because it was unprecedented: coming from a young woman (fifteen years old) and spoken in English. Dursituu had never met Ali before he visited Australia and, at the request of her father, composed the following tribute for him:

Ali Birraa has been singing in the Oromo language for over thirty years. In the 1960s and 1970s he sang beautiful songs to the African society. In the 1980s and 1990s he introduced these songs to many countries around the

²³ This term is taken from Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s book *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).

world including: Africa, Europe, America, Canada and Australia. Between the 70s and 80s the socialists invaded Africa and at that time Oromiya and the Oromo people suffered a great deal under the colony of Abyssinia. Without fear for his life, Ali sang songs of freedom without hesitation. To Australia and many other countries around the world he is a hero of the Horn of Africa and the greatest Oromo singer that I and most children had ever known in our lives and I congratulate you on behalf of all the Oromo kids of Australia.

Ali Birraa was the first Oromo singer who introduced the Oromo language and culture in the Australian society. We as Australian/Oromo children were not born in Oromiya and therefore knew nothing of our culture, language or country. We thank Ali for teaching us the Oromiyan language, culture and our beloved country through his songs.

We welcomed you to Australia in a delicate way and it has been a pleasure to have you here. It will be sad to see you go but we will remember your first visit 'Down-under' for years to come. We hope you can come to beautiful Australia every year and thank you for being here today. To show you our gratitude I, Dursituu Mussa, would like to present a gift to you.

You are an inspiration to all Oromiyan kids and many of our great singers here in Australia, including Afandi Siyo and Shantam Shubissa. I hope we will meet again in the future.²⁴

Dursituu represented 'all the Oromo kids in Australia' and, in accordance with this role, the gift she presented to Ali was not an Oromo artefact, but a wooden clock featuring the Australian national symbols, the kangaroo and emu.

Dursituu's speech reinforced the legendary status of Ali Birraa. Her statement, 'Ali sang songs of freedom without hesitation', portrays belief in his legendary status. The statement is a declaration of faith in Ali Birraa's infallibility while facing Abyssinian force. Dursituu's account of Oromo history selectively makes use of past tales to create a 'credulous allegiance' (Lowenthal 1996, p. 121). She presents Ali as the purveyor and conveyor of culture for a generation of Oromo without access to that culture: 'the first Oromo singer who introduced the Oromo

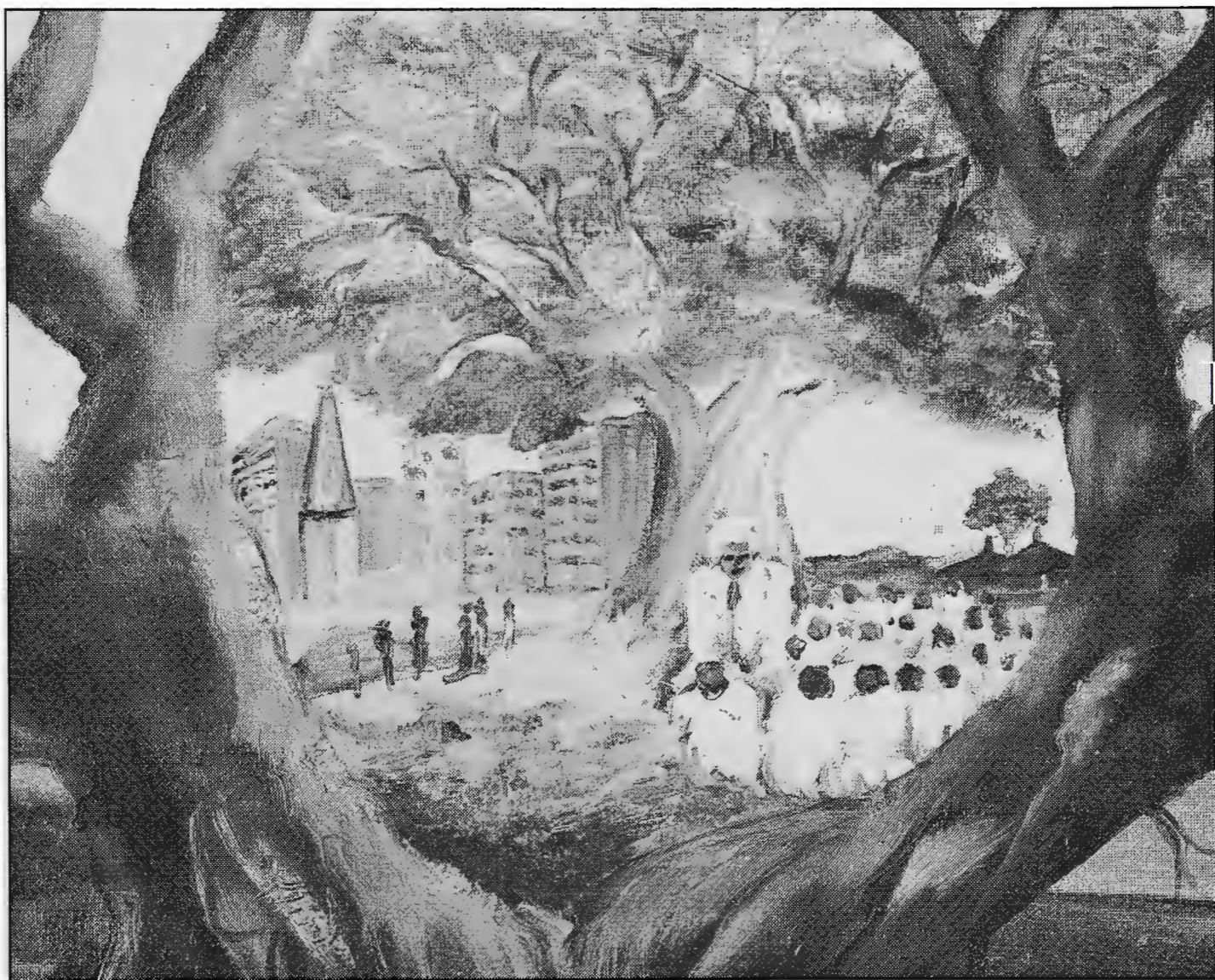
²⁴ Dursituu Mussa provided a copy of her speech that was autographed by Ali Birraa.

language and culture in the Australian society. We as Australian/Oromo children were not born in Oromiya and therefore knew nothing of our culture, language or country. We thank Ali for teaching us the Oromiyan language, culture and our beloved country through his songs'. Ali Birraa was certainly not the first to introduce the Oromo language and culture in Australian society. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the occasion, the fabrication of history was appropriate as a way of adapting the past to suit present needs. In this case, Dursituu was able to present Ali in such a way as to represent a source of identity and inspiration for Australian/Oromo children such as herself. Like the group of men who organised the *bokkuu* ceremony, Dursituu became one of the authors of Oromo identity in Melbourne, Australia.

While the presence of Ali Birraa in Melbourne may have been a source of inspiration for many of Melbourne's Oromo such as Dursituu, for others it was a cause of resentment. Ali's tour was boycotted by large numbers of Melbourne's Oromo who, astonishingly, refused to attend his concerts despite their love for the man and his music. On the very night of Ali's farewell at Saalihee's house, there was another concert featuring two younger Oromo artists from Toronto, Kemer Youssef and Saalah Galmo, organised by those who boycotted Ali's tour. These artists arrived during Ali's last week in Melbourne, unknowingly stepping into a circle of hostility between two groups of Oromo in Melbourne. On the occasion of their first concert both groups were aware of the activities of the other and refused to cooperate with each other. As the following chapter elaborates, the stand-off reflected the climate of 'cold war' that, until recently, has prevailed amongst Melbourne's Oromo.

Interlude

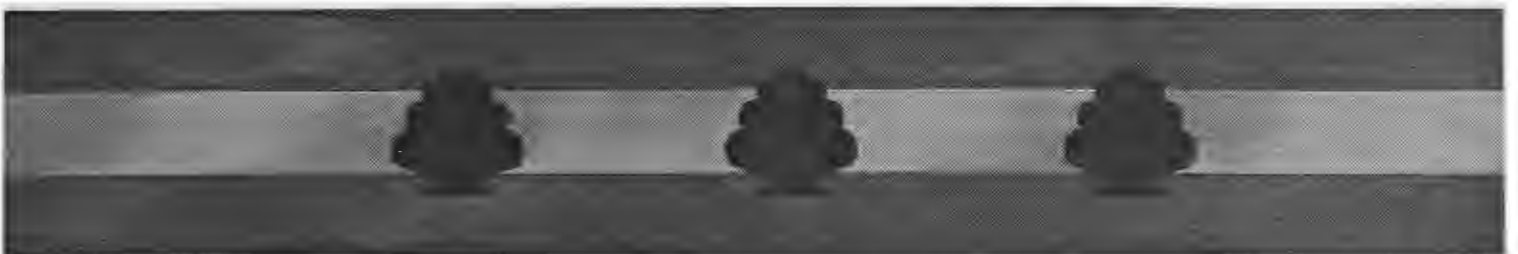
IMAG(IN)ING HOME





'The river is the means of our survival: we depend on it. In the *gadaa* the elders are going to the river; they are finding the *odaa* near the river. When they find this tree they sit down under the shade of it and make culture there. Any Oromo holiday or celebration is around water, especially the women's holiday is at the river where the men cannot go. All the Oromo in Melbourne are sharing this same outlook together; the impression was with us for hundreds of years. Without water we die.'

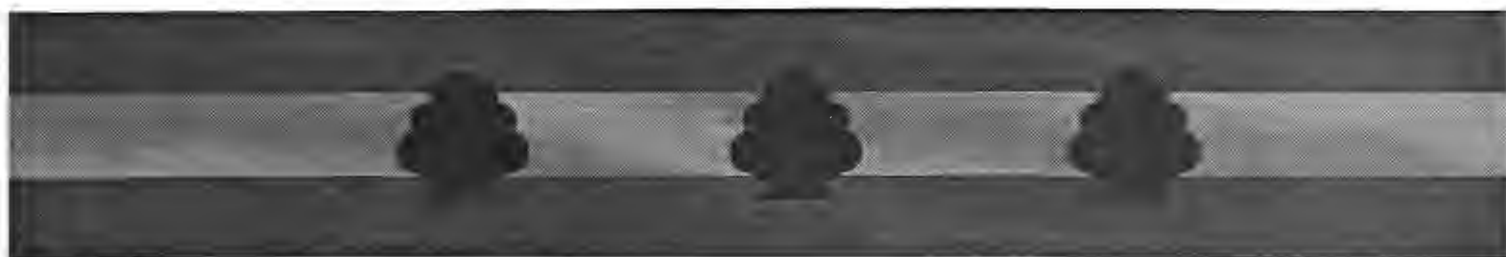
Melbourne Oromo
(cf. pp. 133-4)





'Ali Birraa was the first Oromo singer who introduced the Oromo language and culture in the Australian society. We as Australian/Oromo children were not born in Oromiya and therefore knew nothing of our culture, language or country. We thank Ali for teaching us the Oromiyan language, culture and our beloved country through his songs.'

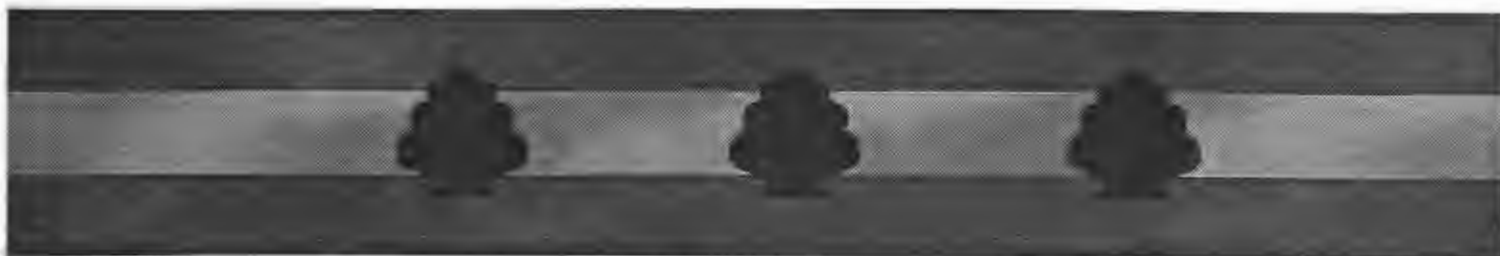
Dursituu Mussa
(cf. p. 160)





'There were undoubtedly many Oromo women who played major roles in leadership and the shaping of the Oromo nation. In fact, in the non-formal settings in rural areas, women played a major role, but often they are forgotten because of a lack of documentation. Because of cultural, religious and various biases against women, they were not recognised. It is our responsibility (both women and men) to change the course of history and recognise the leadership role women have played in rural Oromiya, in urban areas and in countries where they live in exile.'

Belletech Deressa

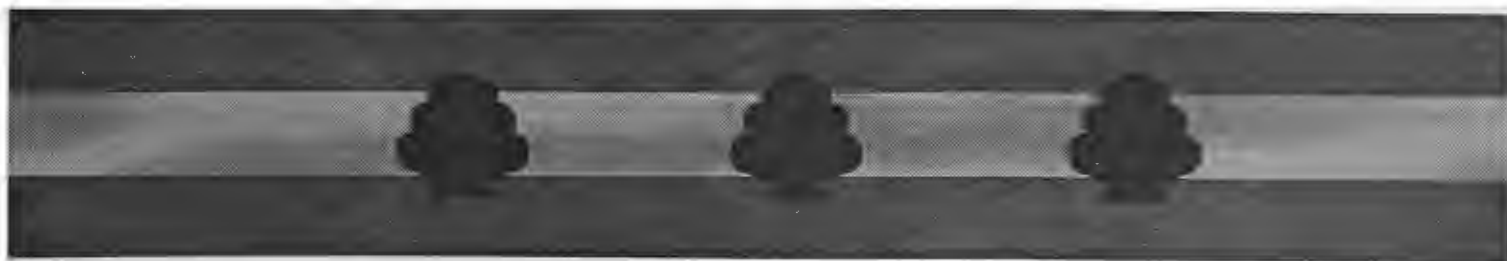




BAREDDU OROMO



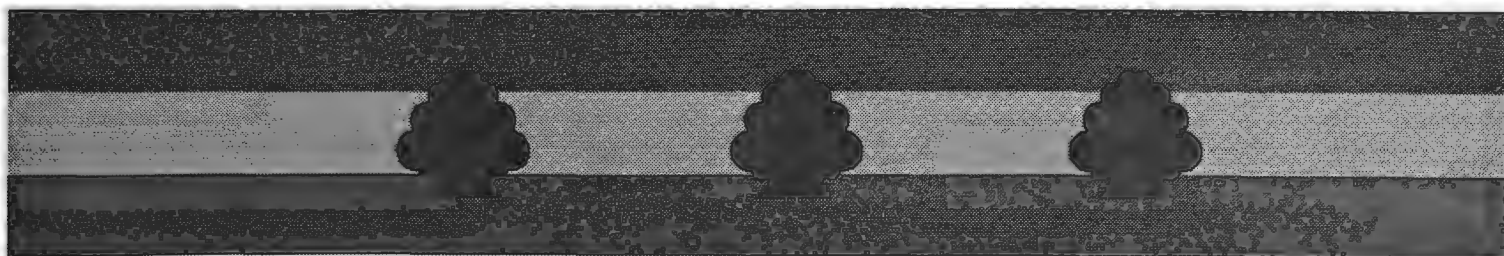
OROMIA





'Mother is the most important resource of the nation ... This mother-to-be is in a state of shock at what she saw at Aannolee. The nation was in shock and her face expresses that shock. Especially I chose to show the suffering of mothers in Oromo society. The mothers paid a lot more than anyone else. Their pain is always there. During the Derg, the biggest pain was with the mothers who lost their sons that were taken from them to fight in Eritrea. With no hope, and no rumours about their sons' lives, the mothers became blind with despair.'

Dawit Eteffa
(cf. pp. 202-3)



Birthday celebrations for one-year olds among Melbourne's Oromo move between symbols of Oromo nationalism and Australian popular culture. Often the cake is decorated in Oromo national colours and features the *odaa* or some other pan-Oromo symbol. With the guests huddled around the cake, an Oromo prayer of blessing for the child is offered by an elder before the candle is blown-out. While the nationalist symbols on the cake belong to another place and point to vexed political struggles 'back home', they are transformed into symbols of celebration in the present (cf. pp. 257-8).



Acknowledgments

Plate 1: 'Oromo in exile', painting by Dawit Eteffa; Plate 2: Ture Lenco's '*Laga Jalaalaa*' cassette cover photograph, used with permission; photograph of Lake Bishoftu featuring Gemetchu Haile by Greg Gow; Melbourne city and the Yarra River by Kevin McNulty; Plate 3: Ali Birraa photographs by Abdusalam Rashid and Greg Gow; Plate 4: Afandi Siyo's '*Yaa Biyya Too Dirree*' cassette cover photograph, used with permission; photograph of Oromiya girl and man by Dawit Eteffa; 'Mother Oromia' picture courtesy of Wako Adi; Plate 5: popular images of Oromo girls from Ethiopian Tourist Commission; Plate 6: photographs by Dawit Eteffa; Plate 7: Oromiya birthday cake, photograph courtesy of Shemsiya and Adem.

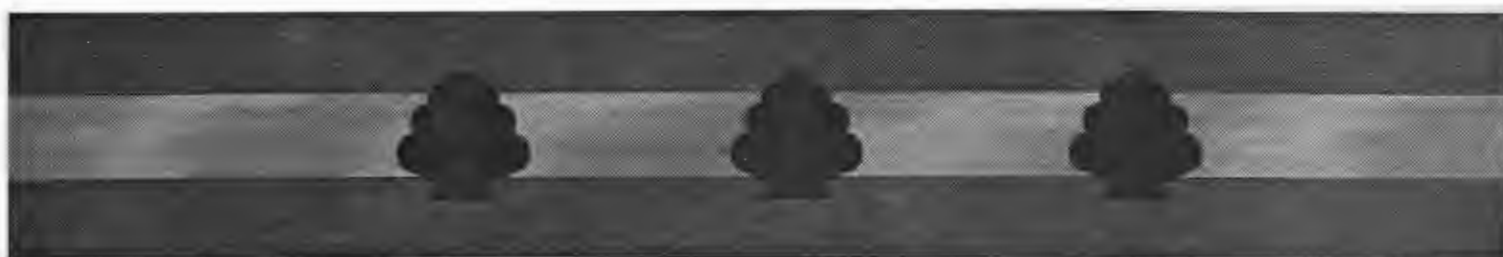


Plate 7

Part III Managing home:
A LANGUAGE OF DISSONANCE

CHAPTER SEVEN

MANGUDDO SABLOO:¹

STORIES OF CONFLICT, SABOTAGE AND EXCLUSION

Using the tension and hostility to Ali Birraa's visit as a basic point of reference, this chapter explores the divisions among Melbourne's Oromo through the re-telling (or voicing) of a series of stories. As the chapter contends, the conflict between voicing and silencing features in the mosaic of Oromo cultural formation in Melbourne. While the preceding chapters emphasised the performative act of giving voice to Oromoness, the following stories, read together, describe the silencing of voices (the negation of giving voice) through a range of tactics. As this chapter indicates, while facing a hostile Australian social environment and remaining dislocated from Oromiya, many Oromo in Melbourne have looked to the various Oromo community associations as a forum for the renegotiation of identities and the voicing of concerns, but, to their dismay, have found themselves entrapped by a language of silencing and conformity. The following writings—like a forum—facilitate the articulation of the experiences of conflict and exclusion that often remain muffled and unheard by the various élite cliques and fraudulent elders.

In January 1997 Ali Birraa's forthcoming concerts had been widely promoted in the Footscray business district, which has three cafés owned by east Africans: the 'Blue Nile Café' (formerly called 'Café Abyssinia'), the 'Mesob Café' and the 'Café de Afrique'. The café owners primarily rely upon African customers for their livelihood. Being popular meeting places for members of the wider Ethiopian, Eritrean and Oromo communities, each establishment was asked to assist with the promotion of Ali Birraa's concerts. The 'Mesob Café'—owned by an Eritrean woman and frequented by Eritreans and Tigrayans—obliged by placing a poster featuring Ali in a prominent position near the entrance and pamphlets on the counter. Similarly, the 'Blue Nile Café'—owned by Amhara—obliged. But the 'Café de Afrique'—owned by an Oromo and servicing largely Oromo clientele—refused any assistance.

¹ An *afaan Oromoo* phrase, meaning, 'elders who do not carry any weight'.

The owner of 'Café de Afrique', Mustafa Adurahman,² not only refused to provide a place for promoting Ali Birraa's concerts within his establishment, but was busy organising a visit of other Oromo artists to perform while Ali Birraa was in Melbourne. These events came as no surprise to many of Melbourne's Oromo: before Ali Birraa visited Australia the 'cold war' had an everyday presence made tangible through propaganda, subversion, sabotage, threats, coercion, sanctions and other measures short of open hostility.

The stand-off that occurred during Ali Birraa's visit deepened the hostilities between the warring parties and their social networks which had begun well over a year before, when the owner of 'Café de Afrique' attempted to sponsor Ali Birraa to come and perform in Melbourne. Meanwhile, another group of people led by Jamal Youssuf and Abdulhamid Ali was also attempting to sponsor him. Ali declined the invitations of both.

Unable to secure Ali, in October 1996 Mustafa Adurahman, sponsored popular Oromo artist Elemo Ali to perform two concerts. Prior to October 1996 no international Oromo artist had visited and performed in Melbourne. However, in the six months following October 1996 a succession of concerts were staged featuring popular Oromo artists Elemo Ali, Ali Birraa, Kemer Youssef and Saalah Galmo. The first two concerts, featuring Elemo Ali, were promoted in and around the Footscray business district. Although few had previously met him, Elemo's music was well known and very popular among the broader Oromo community in Melbourne.

From the outset, Elemo's visit was opposed by a group of people, including his cousin Raya, led by (among others) Jamal Youssuf and Abdulhamid Ali. When Elemo's flight arrived from Toronto on the 2nd of October 1996, his cousin was not present with the small party gathered at Melbourne Airport to welcome him. Throughout his time in Melbourne, Elemo was not invited to his cousin Raya's house; indeed, while the two had not seen each other for ten years, they did not spend any time together during Elemo's visit. Furthermore, Raya did not attend either of Elemo's concerts.

² A pseudonym. With the exception of musicians Ali Birraa, Elemo Ali, Kemer Youssef and Saalah Galmo, pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter.

As various informants subsequently revealed,³ Raya's absence from Elemo's concerts and his unwillingness to receive him was perceived among the broader community as a response to an instruction given to him by various élite within his social network—which formed the core of the Oromo Community Association in Victoria (OCAV)—who exerted considerable influence over him. One informant (not a member of the OCAV) despondently described how Raya was 'told to distance himself from Elemo; which really caused a lot of problems for the two community groups. It was crazy really, like putting petrol on a small fire and making it big. Anyway, most people could not understand why Raya was ignoring his relative which was terrible. I hated it. That visit was really difficult for everyone'.⁴ Others used the words 'stooge', 'puppet' and 'pawn' to describe Raya's behaviour. One informant disparagingly summarised the politics behind the situation in Melbourne, where 'everything depends upon how many puppets you have'.⁵

The derogatory term 'puppet' implies the appearance of independence by someone who is, in fact, compliant to another. This appeared to be the case with Raya, whose behaviour, while seemingly independent, silently complied with the wishes of the élite within the OCAV. Apart from Raya's behaviour, such compliant silencing was patently evident in the anonymous sabotage of Elemo's concerts by the OCAV social network. Various informants associated with the OCAV described how they received telephone calls from senior members instructing them not to attend the concerts. One man received a telephone call the night before Elemo's first concert, warning him firmly to 'stay away from the concert because they [the organisers] are making trouble in the community and promoting the Oromo Liberation Front [OLF]'.⁶ He followed the instructions, a source of regret, as he later reflected: 'I hated it, because I did not feel part of the conflicts they were promoting. I didn't want to participate in something I didn't believe in. But they pressured me and everyone else. It was a very difficult time because a lot of pressure was put on us'.⁷ The upshot was that few members of the OCAV (and their families) attended Elemo's show(s). Meanwhile their antagonists, members of the Australian Oromo Community Association (AOCA), attended in mass.

³ Interviews were conducted with a number of people who knew Elemo and Raya.

⁴ Interview, May 1997.

⁵ Interview, July 1998.

⁶ Interview, November 1996.

⁷ Interview, March 1997.

While the boycott calls from the élite clique of the VOCA were, from all accounts, intended to disrupt the Elemo concerts, in relation to the safety of both parties and the performer Elemo Ali they were perhaps sensible. A number of violent altercations between members of the two antagonistic parties had occurred earlier in the year. Probably most discouraging to the broader community was a scuffle between the chairperson of the VOCA and an élite member of the AOCA. Both prominent male figures in their respective community associations, like a declaration of war, their violent clash was followed by an escalation of violence between the members of both parties. Just one month after this incident, in April 1996, a brawl broke out when members from both groups gathered in large numbers at an Oromo wedding. Bottles were broken and used as weapons, with at least fifty men from opposing camps fighting with one another while the women distressfully looked on. The police were called in to calm the situation and the wedding celebrations ceased.⁸

The following day, committee members from both community associations independently visited the bride and groom to apologise for the havoc wrought on their wedding celebrations. The accounts of various informants indicated that the brawl began with an altercation between five men outside, but escalated out of control when nearly all the Oromo men present joined in. Following the brawl—reputedly the worst ever incidence of violence among the community in Melbourne—many Oromo expressed the feeling that relations among the broader community had reached an all-time low.

Despite warnings otherwise and the threat of violence, four members of the VOCA attended the first Elemo concert and socialised with members of the AOCA. One of the VOCA members who attended and enjoyed the show, which was free of violence, was accosted and manhandled on his doorstep a week later by three young men associated with the VOCA. He insisted they were ‘gangsters sent by their bosses within the Victorian group to teach me a lesson’.⁹ One woman, Muunaa, associated with the VOCA, also attended Elemo’s first concert. Shortly afterwards she found herself unwelcome within the VOCA network as false rumours about her sexually illicit behaviour circulated—which she insists were perpetrated by VOCA élite. Nonetheless, she voiced her determination to defy the

⁸ I was present at the wedding and witnessed the brawl.

⁹ Interview, December 1996.

élite men: 'I don't care what they say; I am sick of those men trying to dictate the way everyone should behave and who they should speak to in the community. I went to see Elemo because I like his music and he is an Oromo. I don't care about his politics or who sponsored him'.¹⁰

While incidents of open, 'hot' warfare occasionally broke out, more commonplace in the months following Elemo's visit were 'cold war' hostilities between the two groups. On one occasion when I was walking in the Footscray business district with Jamal Youssuf (who later sponsored Ali Birraa), Kareema, the wife of Mustafa Adurahman (who previously sponsored Elemo), approached to greet us. While I greeted her, Jamal stood next to me with his back to her. She ignored his behaviour and talked with me. Immediately afterwards I quizzed his offensive behaviour. He defended his actions by claiming that 'sanctions' were in place against Mustafa's family—implying that his behaviour was authorised by the community. As with many other cultures, given the high value placed upon greetings and the obligatory blessing of peace (*nagaa*)—even among 'enemies'—within the Oromo community (cf. Baxter 1990), such a snub was highly offensive and provocative, and attacked the fabric of community which the performance of greetings and blessings enacts.

Jamal's appeal to 'sanctions' suggested that the elders within the community authorised such behaviour. When quizzed about the origins of these sanctions, he vaguely responded, 'The community had decided them'. Judging from the accounts of other informants, it would appear that these 'sanctions' were anonymously decreed—a silent edict made by a small group of people in authority who, although most people knew who they were, remained 'publicly' nameless. Enquiring about these 'sanctions' with various élite members of the VOCA, I was told that there were no 'sanctions' against anyone. However, discussions with various rank and file members of the VOCA revealed that specific instructions had been given not to communicate with Mustafa Abdulrahman or his family by the very people with whom I had earlier spoken who denied the existence of 'sanctions'. While many Oromo in Melbourne, like Jamal, complied with such 'sanctions', and gave voice, as it were, to a language of silencing and conformity, a few others, like Muunaa, gave voice to their concerns and unwillingness to co-operate with the various élite 'cliques' and 'fraudulent' elders.

¹⁰ Interview, November 1996.

Borrowing from Bourdieu's (1986, 1991) definition of cultural nobility and economics of symbolic power, the term 'élite' is used in this chapter to distinguish not just those—in the Marxist sense—with economic resources (capital) and class mobility, but also those with a range of symbolic 'capital' (e.g. political, linguistic, social, cultural, educational, family and ritual) which enables them to 'legitimately' exert considerable influence over others. Viewed this way, in an attempt to re-establish their authority, the élite cliques among Melbourne's Oromo struggle against each other to get to the top of their community organisations and to authorise their power through the acquisition of a limited range of local 'capital' available to them. Authorisation is here understood in a Gramscian sense, where power is multi-dimensional and always contested, and where, as the preceding stories demonstrate, hegemonic relations are continually renegotiated with and authorised by the broader community. The plural 'élite cliques' is used because, invariably, power is concentrated around a few family groups (or households) who form exclusive ties with their friends and associates.

Usually within each influential extended family group, of which there are probably six in Melbourne, there is an elder, or a few elders. Among the various forms of symbolic capital, maturity in terms of age is commonly accredited as a sign of respect and authority. In keeping with the high value placed upon elders in Oromo society, those aged over forty years are usually endowed with a degree of symbolic power that eludes younger Oromo. They are commonly known as *manguddo* (but also as *jaarsa*, *guddaa* or *hangafa*). *Manguddo* are usually elderly wise people whom the younger ones seek out for guidance and assistance. The point is often made by Oromo that conflicts among people in Oromiya are usually managed and resolved through negotiation mediated by *manguddo*, who are expected to offer wise and impartial leadership to the community. As described by an older informant in Melbourne, back in Oromiya there is scarcely a day that goes by when an elder is not involved in one form of mediation or intervention. *Manguddo*, he stressed, are supposed to be neutral over every problem they are called to resolve.¹¹

Among Melbourne's Oromo the demands for wise and impartial leadership—the services of *manguddo*—are high. However, most of the elders who

¹¹ Interview, July 1998.

should be fulfilling such roles are themselves subject to élitist political aspirations and partiality. In short, they are themselves often the troublemakers, whom erode their legitimate authority as *manguddo* by pursuing their own agendas. To this extent they may be considered bogus *manguddo*—*manguddo sabloo*—who, as the preceding stories of boycotts, sanctions and silencing suggest, might be accorded compliance but rarely respect by younger community members. As a consequence, in many instances a skilled and neutral mediator is not available to Melbourne's Oromo, which helps account for why many interpersonal problems develop into larger divisive community issues.

The boycott and sanction calls in 1996 reflected the antagonistic relations between the élite cliques of the two community associations at the time and their determination to be seen as surpassing and disruptively asserting their superiority over each other. Other demonstrations included the organising of events conflicting with the 'other' community—placing many of Melbourne's Oromo in the difficult position of choosing between the two and, hence, implicitly asserting a political allegiance. An example of such attempted management and compliance occurred in December 1996, two months after the Elemo concerts, when both community associations organised their annual picnic trips on the same weekend. Each day trip—one occurred on Saturday and the other on the Sunday—was attended by over seventy people, none of whom went to both. To attend both would have been perceived as defection, guaranteeing certain mistrust from the élite clique in both communities.¹²

Although most people complied by attending their respective community association's outing, on that weekend many communicated with members from the other group and were familiar with their activities. On both days I observed what may be called minimal compliance, whereby people displayed a distinct lack of enthusiasm, and some discreetly asked me about the other group's activity.

Minimal compliance with the demands of élite cliques might be viewed as a form of resistance, which, in a social environment where open defiance is dangerous, is commonly masked by acquiescence (cf. Scott 1985). On the second picnic, organised by the AOCA, there were many who lagged when the rented bus

¹² Apparently immune from this threat, I was invited by the organisers of both outings and was the only person who attended both.

arrived to pick them up, and latecomers who missed the bus and then later joined the picnic. While punctuality is certainly not a feature of the community, on this occasion, as I travelled in the bus, there appeared to be an exaggerated lateness which meant that, despite the official 10 a.m. meeting time, the picnic did not begin until late-afternoon. Such collective ‘footdragging’ perhaps signalled routine compliance combined with routine resistance that took a ‘passive’ symbolic form.

While routine attendance at official community functions suggests ‘silent’ conformity, routine lateness might equally suggest ‘symbolic voicing’ of resistance. In this way, people may be seen to be supporting their community association and the various élite who run it, while also perpetrating a disruptive culture of ‘lateness’ which makes it difficult to successfully hold an event or conduct a meeting. Feigned ignorance is another disruptive tactic of ‘symbolic voicing’: by pleading ignorance people are able to conform while also resisting—to compliantly say ‘yes’ while disruptively whispering ‘no’. As this chapter contends, in the conflict between the forces of voicing and silencing that features in the mosaic of Oromo cultural formation in Melbourne, the collective and elusive whispers of ‘no’ confound the élite cliques and disrupt their attempts at management.

It was into this environment of heightened conflict among Melbourne’s Oromo that Ali Birraa stepped in February 1997. As described in the previous chapter, the legendary Ali received a spectacular welcome on arriving at Melbourne Airport, where more than fifty Oromo gathered to greet him. Those present were the core of the VOCA and their social network; there was nobody present from the AOCA. During Ali’s stay élite members of the VOCA and those associated with them ecstatically enjoyed his presence as he stayed in their houses and dined with them. Meanwhile, those Oromo associated with the earlier ‘sanctioned’ Mustafa Adurahman and the AOCA found Ali altogether inaccessible. Various members of the AOCA accused the VOCA élite of managing and manipulating Ali. One member complained that his attempt to invite Ali out for lunch was blocked by Ali’s sponsor; he later discovered that Ali was available but had not received the message of his invitation. Others spoke of similar difficulties.¹³ Predictably, when Ali Birraa performed in concert, all members and associates of the VOCA were present, but only a handful of members and associates of the AOCA (and none of the committee)

¹³ Interviews, April-May 1997.

attended. Predictably, members of the AOCA received telephone calls from various élite instructing them to boycott.¹⁴

As the boycotts of the Elemo Ali and Ali Birraa concerts highlight, the arrangement of the community into various organisations enables élite cliques to demarcate battlegrounds where they are able to pursue their own politics of management. Those most commonly subjected to intimidation and coercion are the new arrivals with few family members around them. Usually attempts are made by various élite to obtain their compliance through a range of tactics including the offering of assistance, inviting them for dinner, ‘smooth-talking’ and the control of information which limits their knowledge of and participation in the broader community.

One informant, Abdul-Murad, recalled how shortly after he and his brother arrived from Djibouti they were invited by an Oromo called Nassar to visit his home and join his family for dinner.¹⁵ After arriving, the two brothers were greeted by Nassar, his family and two other male guests. While the evening was pleasant enough and the food was good, Abdul-Murad complained about the manner in which he and his brother were interrogated through indirect questioning about the Oromo Liberation Front, Oromo community politics in Djibouti and their social connections in Melbourne. Abdul-Murad fended-off the questions as best he could. Additionally, the two guests flattered the newcomers with compliments and denigrated various members of the AOCA. Confirming his suspicions, Abdul-Murad later discovered the evening was an attempt by Nassar and the two other guests—who were prominent members of the VOCA—to assess how impressible and malleable the two newcomers were.

While Abdul-Murad’s experience signalled the covert testing of the impressibility and malleability of new arrivals by élite cliques, others are tested in more obvious ways. Another informant, Ebbisa, described his early days in Australia when he was presented with a clear test of his willingness to comply with the élite in his social network.¹⁶ Shortly after arriving in Melbourne he was asked to participate in a large *iqub* co-ordinated by one prominent family in the community. *Iqub* is a co-operative activity involving reciprocal financial contributions and relying upon

¹⁴ The boycott calls were disclosed in a range of interviews with AOCA members.

¹⁵ Story taken from an interview, June 1998.

¹⁶ Story taken from an interview, August 1998.

mutual trust between the members (cf. Tesema Ta'a 1996, p. 208). Among Melbourne's Oromo there are numerous *iqub*, involving networks of between ten and thirty people with various commonalities (such as regional alliances and community associations). The treasurer of the co-operative gains a degree of social status and usually approaches those he or she wants to participate in the venture.

Ebbisa received a telephone call from the treasurer asking him to participate. He declined because all the members were from Arsi and, despite being from Arsi himself, he wanted to avoid identifying with one regional group. One evening the following week, two Arsi men from the organising family surprised Ebbisa with a visit. They were friendly and he invited them inside. After twenty minutes of friendly chatting the conversation became heated when the men raised the issue of the *iqub*. Things turned nasty when one of the men picked up an ash tray and threw it at Ebbisa—just missing his head. At Ebbisa's request the men left, but warned him not to 'make trouble'. Over the next few months Ebbisa received no invitations or telephone calls from the Arsi group in Melbourne and learnt of false accusations of domestic violence passed onto his wife's family in Oromiya. As Ebbisa discovered, the pressure for compliance and conformity are self-evident to all concerned and in view of the sanctions—a bad name can be very costly, in terms of the social sanctions that can be brought into play to punish the bearer—it is little wonder that many newcomers feel obliged to accept the order prescribed by the élite in their respective social network(s).

Over the past three years, a combination of marginalisation and despondency has prevailed as most of Melbourne's Oromo have remained embittered by the inability of the two community associations and their élite cliques to co-operate with each other. Various informants voiced the grievance that Oromo in Melbourne with nothing to gain from the conflicts remained pessimistic about prospects for cohesion among the broader community—a pessimism mixed with a sense of resignation that there was very little that could be done to change things. Many preferred to reflect nostalgically upon the days in Djibouti, Cairo, Nairobi, or wherever it was, before coming to Australia, when things were good and people co-operated with each other. They could not understand why things changed when they came to Melbourne. Some spoke of it as a divisive 'disease' the community 'caught' when arriving in Melbourne. Others were sickened and wished to leave

Melbourne to start a new life in Perth or Sydney away from the community.¹⁷ However, most realised the experience of subjection in a hostile Australian society meant they had no real alternative but to seek the companionship of fellow Oromo.

So far the ‘forces of silencing’ have been spoken of in terms of the combined experiences of marginalisation and despondency within the broader Oromo community. But the concept of ‘silencing’ may be extended beyond the internal dynamics of the community to the condition of dislocation from Oromiya and migration to a hostile Australian environment—a condition located in a problematic space ‘between home and exile’,¹⁸ where the home door (Oromiya) is closed while the exilic door (Australia) is experienced as only slightly ajar. Seen this way, at both individual and group level, ‘between home and exile’ is a space marked by marginalisation and despondency, where the ‘forces of silencing’ exclude and muffle the voices of Melbourne’s Oromo. It is also the space where, possessing little of anything that white Australians value (i.e. sporting prowess, education and financial prosperity), Oromo must struggle to acquire local ‘capital’ in Australian society.

In the past, when collectively threatened in refugee camps, many of Melbourne’s Oromo experienced a unity and cohesion necessary for common survival. Now, although ‘free’ in Australia, they encounter a new form of silencing, giving rise to isolation and despondency. To this extent, the post-concentration camp experience of Viktor Frankl (1985) shares common ground with Melbourne’s Oromo: ironically, while the immediate threats are now gone and security and personal advancement are possible, many experience silence, isolation and a lack of meaning.

The irony is evident in the story told by Nadjat Taha.¹⁹ She recalled the early months of her life in Melbourne following her arrival from Djibouti. Her home was a three bedroom house in the working class suburb of Clayton. Everyday she used to view her elderly neighbour from the lounge room window as the woman walked past her front gate and, although she never spoke to her, Nadjat would sometimes greet her with a wave. Two days went by without Nadjat seeing the woman. After four days absence she became concerned and decided to go to the elderly woman’s

¹⁷ Seven informants expressed their wish to move interstate, away from the community.

¹⁸ The phrase ‘between home and exile’ was offered to me by fellow PhD student Erik Lloga.

¹⁹ Interview, December 1997.

house to enquire her whereabouts. After knocking on the front door a young woman answered and explained that the woman had died in her sleep three days before. Nadjat was astounded that someone could die without her neighbours knowing. It made no sense to her. Even in Djibouti, where many people died, she had never heard of someone dying alone like this. The frightening experience was unthinkable to her. The woman, who lived alone without family, had been lying dead for two days before her body was discovered. In the weeks following the woman's death Nadjat was depressed and experienced a heightened sense of isolation, silence and fear; as she expressed it, 'From that day on I hated the silence in this country. I have money now and nice clothes, but I would rather be a poor refugee in Djibouti than die in silence, alone in Australia'.²⁰

Certainly Nadjat experienced conditions of liberty in Australia which, compared with conditions in the Horn of Africa, made her personal advancement possible, but they also created anguish and divided loyalties—even cognitive dissonance—as the dominant values of individualism and self-advancement in mainstream Australian society conflicted with her longing for cohesion and community. Ironically, while longing for the community and a continuity of life back home, she and other Oromo like her in Melbourne are compelled to pursue personal advancement.

The irony is manifest in the common complaint that, despite the apparent personal liberty offered in Australia, many Oromo had more control over their lives while living under conditions of immense deprivation and collective threat in refugee camps in Djibouti, Sudan and Kenya, and as illegal immigrants in Egypt. Mekuria Bulcha (1997), writing about Oromo exiles, describes this condition as a 'crisis of discontinuity' resulting from 'the multiple disruptions of life-goals and loss which characterise the lives of refugees' (p. 22). He highlights the disruptive impact of isolation from family and close friends remaining in situations of deprivation, and the intense feelings of guilt that accompany the inability to fulfil obligations. Furthermore, the recent tightening of immigration laws in Australia have introduced a new form of marginalisation and despondency: the gate has been bureaucratically closed to assumed future prospects of family reunion. Such feelings of powerlessness—especially amongst the more recent arrivals—are compounded by the actions of the élite cliques from both community associations who, perhaps

²⁰ Interview, July 1997.

anxious to re-establish their political lives in a new setting, engage in activities which serve to fragment the community.

While most Oromo in Melbourne have looked to either of the community associations for support and encouragement at one time or another, many have turned away dismayed by the tactics of silencing and conformity which pervade them. One woman, Kulaan, voiced her negative experience:

We have this real problem in our community where people are led too easily; they can't think for themselves and make their own choices. I don't know why we are like this. In the Victorian community [VOCA], and the other one is the same, there are a few individuals who just lead and manipulate everyone else. It is a joke really, like at the community meeting Abdul will make a proposal and he speaks really smoothly and everyone follows. He puts something forward and if you disagree with him everyone looks at you; like you are with the other group or something. They isolate you if you disagree and put pressure on you to conform. Abdul is especially like this, everyone blindly follows him. Tamam is the same but he does not come to the community meetings any more. Really, the older men still dominate and they don't want new ideas.²¹

Kulan's description shows a range of invidious silencing tactics which negate her voicing of concerns, including 'smooth talking', group stares and pressure if she disagreed. Group stares are especially effective: as Kulan described when Abdul 'puts something forward and if you disagree with him everyone looks at you; like you are with the other group or something'. Such a coercive environment ensures the negation of giving voice and the rejection of new ideas.

Among both parties there are clear expectations concerning political and social priorities enforced through threats of exclusion and, in some cases, as already described, physical violence for those unwilling to comply. But, threats of violence are usually withheld in favour of social sanctions. The involvement of women and young men in decision-making is very limited and the committees of both community associations have neither women nor young men (under the age of twenty five) participating. Among the forty people present at a members' meeting of the AOCA I attended there were no women or young men who attended.

²¹ Interview, April 1997.

It appears that most women are forced to follow their husbands and/or male relatives when it comes to community politics and important decisions. A number of women have confided how they were unwilling to ostracise various group members but had to follow the political line of their husbands, uncles or brothers. In the VOCA this type of coercion extended not just to individual women but also to their women's association, which was closely monitored by men. The following detailed account from one woman, Lula, illustrates the degree of control exercised over the women in the Oromo Women's Association affiliated with the OCAV:

The men are always wanting to dominate us and it is very hard for the women to work independently of them. We had a lot of trouble organising the women's association separately from the men because they always wanted us to be with them at the larger community meeting. But we cannot talk freely and discuss the issues when we are with them—they dominate and try to tell us what to do and the women remain silent. So we fought against that and insisted the women's association meet in a separate room.

Even if the men meet separately they still try and dominate us through their wives and sisters who they manipulate and force to push their agenda. Now the women's association is doing nothing; we don't even meet regularly and the last time we met we just sat around and chatted. We had some really big arguments between us. Many of the women, they don't want new ideas and they want to remain in control. Me, Fatuma and Mariyam, we were the office-holders a few years ago and we tried to do some new things like organising a course on running meetings for the women. We had a \$1000 funding grant for this, but the older ones, especially Suletii, just said, 'Why do we want to go to school again?' She just blocked it. She wanted to just spend the money on a barbecue, but we have barbecues all the time, so what is the use of that? We needed to organise but we could not.

It was very frustrating as many of the married women would just say what their husbands told them. Even now Zeinab is the chairperson and she is doing nothing. We pushed to have a re-election of offices but Abdul and the other men they just blocked it and put pressure on their wives to block it. They wanted to keep Zeinab, but she is not doing anything. So we are still stuck with a chairperson who does nothing and a secretary who has no time. We are doing nothing because we cannot work together and if a meeting is called no-one comes because we just sit around. I have to catch a train there

and it takes me time. Why should I bother doing that if we are just going to sit around? It is very disappointing that after twelve years in Melbourne there is no functioning women's association. The other community [AOCA] has one but I don't think they are doing much either.

The men are always going on about the past and the mistakes the OLF made in the past. Also they go on about the mistakes they made in the past and how they should have acted differently when the problem was small. They are just sitting around and talking, talking and talking, but they are not acting. It takes them all day to make a decision and then they don't act on it. Now in Melbourne things are bad because people have been separate for a long time, the longer we stay separate the more difficult it will be to come back together again. But not much action is happening, just talk.

Over the last year the men have been working closer with the other group and things have improved. But the women have just got worse, especially our association. We can't even work together. We have \$3000 in the bank for the women's association but it is not being used because we can't organise ourselves. Nura has the bankbook and it is being wasted.

The men they are always trying to get some of that money off us for their activities. They already owe us \$1000 but we won't get it back. They just want to have a women's association so that we can cook for them at their functions and if they are desperate they can use our money. They are not interested in us doing new things independent of them.

Last year the men tried to get money from us to form their soccer club. This really created serious problems for us as they were putting so much pressure on us to give them some of our money for their sports club. But some of us said no because it had nothing to do with the women and it was not going to benefit the women in the community. The husbands pressured their wives and eventually they took some money. Since then we have really had a lot of problems.

The men are so funny, like once Ali received a letter from back home and brought it to the community meeting. He put it on the table and acted as if he knew everything about what was happening back home, and then he said: 'Take it or leave it; this is the truth because I have it direct from back home'. I don't like it when the men act like they know everything. They think

they are politicians and they force you to agree with them. Like now, they are pushing us to support an Oromo political organisation and asking us to give money, but we are not being provided with any accurate picture of where the money will go or what it will be used for. They just expect us to trust them with it.

Lula described how the male *élite* used various bullying tactics to silence and sabotage the autonomy of the women and to appropriate their labour and resources, and the complicity of various women who, at the behest of their husbands, disrupted the group's activities.

As the episode demonstrates, efforts by some of the women to do new things were promptly blocked. Lula recounted how, because many of the women had no previous experience with committee meetings and running their own association the executive committee (Lula, Fatuma and Mariyam) decided it was important for the women to be trained. After submitting a proposal they obtained \$1000 from the Australian Government to fund a committee of management training course. As the three women later protested,²² the move represented a threat to the men because it showed that the women could acquire their own symbolic and economic 'capital' in Australia, apart from the men. Subsequently, the plans for the course were suppressed and the money appropriated for the men's sporting activities. The episode highlights how the new Australian setting offers women opportunities to give voice which were previously unavailable to them. But, in this case, these new opportunities heightened conflict between the forces of voicing and silencing and exacerbated the internal fragmentation of the women's association, as some women continued their silence and subjection by complying with the men, while others (like Lula) gave voice.

Lula's caricature of Ali bringing a letter from Oromiya to a community meeting and using it to reinforce his position of power is an example of giving voice—in this case through ridicule, through derisively highlighting the way he—like other men—used the possession of information and currency to re-establish himself in a position of power. In Ali's case, a small letter from a friend in Oromiya was used as a form of symbolic 'capital' to authorise his demands for political compliance and the negation of other voices—as Lula comically imitated Ali, with

²² Interviews, July 1997.

the letter held up for all to see, with his 'Take it or leave it; this is the truth because I have it direct from back home'.

Among the broader community, information and currency are used by elite cliques to compel people to follow their party politics. Nearly always, the line between personal acceptance and party political conformity is blurred and, although never stated, conformity is a prerequisite for acceptance in both community associations. For example, the elite members of the VOCA exhibit antipathy towards the OLF and favour towards the Oromo People's Liberation Front (OPLF) and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiya (IFLO)—both minor parties. Among the membership and associates of the VOCA there are no public supporters of the OLF. As various rank and file members complained, those who voice something positive about the OLF (or criticism of the minor parties), whether formally or informally, are promptly silenced through various exclusionary tactics.²³ Conversely, the elite members of the AOCA support the OLF and frown upon criticism of it—no public supporters of the OPLF or the IFLO participate in the AOCA.

Feeling dejected about the situation in Melbourne and back home in Oromiya, Lula effectively disassociated herself from her community and Oromiya because she viewed the situation as hopeless. Her location between home and exile combined marginalisation with despondency. As she showed old photographs of the Melbourne community, she talked about the past 'when we were together'. Matching her present experience of marginalisation within the community association and Australian society, was her despondency about her people back home: in Australia her life is lived with an eye to 'over there' in Oromiya—always a present reality for her.

While struggles for the acquisition of social, symbolic and economic 'capital' have featured in the fracturing of Melbourne's Oromo, Lula's story highlights the importance of gender in the Oromo experience of being located between home and exile. As the next two chapters elaborate, the nationalism advocated by the elite men in Melbourne remains a highly gendered discourse which simultaneously and ambiguously both exalts and marginalises Oromo women.

²³ Interviews, July-August 1997.

CHAPTER EIGHT

YAADANNOO AANNOLEE

COMMEMORATING CALAMITY AND THE EROTICS OF NATIONALISM

*The body is still the map on which we mark our meanings; it is chief
among metaphors used to see and present ourselves.*

M. Warner (1985, p. 331)

Like most anti-colonial nationalisms, the regulation of gender is central to the articulation of Oromo cultural and national identity. This chapter interrogates the nationalist conflation of ‘woman/mother’ and ‘nation’. Scrutinised are the erotics of nationalism and the male appropriation of woman’s body as national text manifest in the popular Oromo nationalist video cassette *Yaadannoo Aannolee*—a three hour documentary of the 1991 historical commemorative gathering at Aannolee, Arsi. It was not until Kuwee Kumsa’s very recent (1998) exposure of the dilemmas and problems Oromo women face within the national movement that the contestable nature of the relationship between feminism and male-controlled Oromo nationalist ideology was critically laid bare. As Kuwee convincingly demonstrates, triumphant Oromo nationalism invariably makes its gains at the expense of a subordinated feminism. Here, following Kuwee’s lead, the issue of women’s subordination is addressed, where—as evidenced in Melbourne—the manipulation of women’s issues as an ideological and political resource by Oromo nationalists commonly develops into the manipulation of women themselves as social, economic and sexual resource. However, as this chapter demonstrates, victimhood and agency are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, the centrality of motherhood in Oromo culture inscribes victimhood and agency simultaneously. As discussed below, such ambiguity is exemplified in the images of the female body (which feature in *Yaadannoo Aannolee*) by Melbourne-exiled Oromo artist Dawit Eteffa.

The Aannolee commemoration occurred in December 1991, during the turbulent transitional period of political change in Ethiopia. As described in the preceding chapter, the events of that time tumultuously impacted upon Melbourne’s

fragile Oromo community. Like the stimulation of an amphetamine, the period was characterised by momentary feelings of euphoria followed by a deep, depressing low. These extremes are continually re-enacted in Melbourne through the re-viewing of video recordings of the climatic Oromo mass gatherings that occurred in Oromiya throughout the later months of 1991.

Asafa Jalata (1993) alludes to these gatherings in his anti-colonial history *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992*. In the section subtitled 'Oromo Nationalism in Blossom', he describes the unprecedented events which rapidly unfolded following the collapse of the Derg military regime in May 1991:

The OLF opened its offices all over Oromia and sent its cadres to politicise the people. This condition enabled all Oromos to send their representatives to Habro, Arsi, Finfine, Nekemte, Ambo, and other places to discuss and develop a strategy for becoming active participants in the Oromo national movement.

OLF leaders and cadres openly explained what all Oromos should do to determine the future of Oromia. Oromo elders and community leaders gave their blessing and demonstrated their support for the OLF. OLF cultural and musical troupes used traditional and modern music, poems, and speeches to articulate the necessity of removing oppression, exploitation and cultural suppression. In all these events three important things were emphasised: Oromo unity, the OLF leadership, and the liberation of Oromia.

(Asafa Jalata 1993, p. 187)

These scripted gatherings were recorded on hand-held video cameras (camcorders), and the video cassette recordings (VCRs) quickly multiplied as they were copied and circulated around the world—resulting in the mass distribution of the amateur, blurred and fuzzy recordings that many exiled Oromo keep in their video cassette recorder libraries (VCR libraries). Consideration of the importance of the 1991 Aannolee nationalist video recording and VCR technology among Melbourne's Oromo provides valuable background for understanding their significance in relation to gender and nationalism.

The personalisation of television via the camcorder/VCR has enabled Oromo families in Melbourne to establish important VCR libraries, which usually include recordings of ‘rites of passage’, musical performances, community gatherings, nationalist programs, overseas Oromo gatherings, and ‘video letters’ from relatives back home. These libraries serve as ‘oral books’ or ‘video albums’ (Kolar-Panov 1996) in which people—many of whom are illiterate in English and *afaan Oromoo*—keep records of their individual and collective histories.

In contrast to the poor quality of production and lack of narration, the various recordings of the 1991 mass gatherings in Oromiya are highly scripted. No doubt they were produced by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to be circulated worldwide and, as Asafa Jalata (1993, p. 187) describes, the recorded gatherings emphasise Oromo unity, the OLF leadership and the liberation of Oromiya. The video recordings function as instruments of national re-unification on all fronts: in the Oromo homeland itself and among the worldwide exile communities. Through the representational practices made possible by VCR technology, the OLF leaders found an ideal medium for reassuring the Oromo exiles that they—and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) under their leadership—are the primary agents of national liberation (*bilisummaa*) (Kolar-Panov 1996, p. 294).

Manichean anti-colonial nationalist sensibilities, of the type discussed in Chapter Three, are evident throughout the video recordings. National unity is packaged and presented under the OLF flag, with the fervently compatriotic masses ready and willing to fight for democracy and self-determination against the ‘evil’ Abyssinians. To this extent, the recordings promote ethnic hatred towards the contemporary Amhara and Tigray—who are synonymously categorised as the invading Abyssinians/Habasha—and, multiplied by re-viewing, reinforce such antipathy. But perhaps surpassing the hatred shown towards the Abyssinians is the enmity displayed towards the contemporary Oromo ‘Gobana’, that is, those Oromo who support the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation (OPDO).

The numerous video recordings of gatherings at different locations in Oromiya suggest a repetitive performance genre common to spectacular nationalist rallies. The recordings follow a basic dramatic structure of gathering (e.g. masses arriving and cavalcades) and performing (e.g. speeches, musical pieces and chanting). The theatrical performances are permeated by cultural and political

fetishes: OLF flags, music (anthems, folk songs), uniforms (OLF coloured), and cavalcades of heroic political leaders dressed in 'Western' suits who deliver multiple speeches. More poignantly, of the numerous video recordings I have viewed, none shows the crowds dispersing, leaving the viewer with the image of a national collective gathered together in one place.¹

A striking feature of the recorded gatherings is the colourful display of nationalist images through various banners and paintings, all designed and painted by Oromo artist Dawit Eteffa (aka Sura Eteffa)—who since 1993 has remained exiled in Melbourne, where he continues to paint, albeit in a part-time way.² I have spoken at length with Dawit about the significance of his artwork. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of his work, which impacted not only upon those Oromo who participated in mass gatherings throughout Oromiya in 1991, but also among the worldwide Oromo exilic communities who viewed these images on their home VCRs.

Before 1991, it appears that no Oromo nationalist visual artwork had ever been displayed publicly in a town centre in Ethiopia, simply because under the oppressive Abyssinian rule there was no public space for Oromo people to display visual art portraying an Oromo theme.³ Since the Abyssinian conquest, like Oromo music, any form of art painted by an Oromo was regarded as potentially seditious—a serious crime in Ethiopia.⁴ Moreover, the images now easily recognised as definitively Oromo—such as the Oromiya map, the *odaa*, and the OLF flag—were very hidden and unknown to many Oromo people (especially those living in towns).

¹ Over the three year period of researching and writing I viewed many VCR productions of Oromo gatherings recorded during the period of transition in 1991. Among the most commonly viewed were the video recordings: *Ayyaana Odaa Bultum* in Hararghe, eastern Oromiya; *Yaadannoo Aannolee* in Arsi (discussed in detail here); the gatherings at Maskal Square, Finfinnee (Addis Ababa); and *Jibatfi Macha*, the gathering in Ambo, central western Oromiya.

² Dawit Eteffa works full-time in a factory in Melbourne and paints in his spare time. In December 1997, he exhibited some of his recent work at a large Oromo community gathering in Melbourne. Additionally, he produced an outstanding artwork honouring Ali Birraa in February 1997, which was presented to Ali at his second Melbourne concert in the same month (cf. Plate 3, between pp. 162 & 163).

³ This excludes official artwork painted by people of Oromo background which, authorised by the government, featured Abyssinian images or pro-government propaganda.

⁴ Dawit Eteffa recalled how he spent three days in prison in 1984 for simply painting a peasant woman and displaying the picture in the market at Bella, Wallaga. He was released with a warning following three days of interrogation about the 'real' meaning behind the painting. Whereas under the Derg regime the usual punishment would be long-term imprisonment or death, being only seventeen years old he was given a warning and released. Another Oromo artist, Yonas Gabissa, was also imprisoned during the Derg.

In early 1991, as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rebel forces moved closer towards Finfinnee (Addis Ababa), various areas were captured from the Derg regime. Nekemte in western Oromiya fell to the rebels and shortly afterwards—seeing an opportunity for visual art to impact upon the people—Dawit Eteffa, who lived in Nekemte, painted a large banner featuring a secessionist map of Oromiya and the caption 'Oromiya belongs to the Oromo' (painted in Amharic because people could not read *afaan Oromoo*). He boldly placed the banner in the Nekemte town centre and within five days it was destroyed by an unknown arsonist. Shortly afterwards Dawit fled Nekemte and went into hiding in the capital Finfinnee. After Finfinnee was captured and the Derg military regime collapsed in May 1991, Dawit again began painting.

With a makeshift studio based in the OLF office (*wagera*), Dawit responded to a vast array of requests, working day and night furiously painting banner after banner for the many Oromo gatherings that took place within a short period of time. His paintings carried a message for the people, and featured national icons of one kind or another—such as portraits of famous martyrs (all men), landscapes, the *odaa*, the Oromiya map, Dawit's own inventions such as the dove and the rising sun and, of particular relevance to the current discussion, images of anonymous Oromo peasant women/mothers.

In terms of the responses they evoked, these paintings 'spoke' to the people, both those from the towns and the countryside, who were the first generation of Oromo society to be exposed to contemporary visual art. The response was overwhelming: from all over the country, Dawit received orders, and at the various mass gatherings people queued to have their photo taken in front of the paintings (cf. Plate 6, between pp. 162 & 163). In Dawit's words: 'Peasants wanted their picture taken in front of my paintings because the art spoke a lot to them. The art spoke for itself and worked as the spice for the struggle'. Eventually, when the OLF pulled out of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in 1992, many of Dawit's artworks were seized from the OLF *wagera* and destroyed, apparently by EPRDF authorities. Certainly any of his artworks remaining in Ethiopia would not now be publicly exhibited.

Consideration of Dawit Eteffa's artwork is necessary because, since 1991, his visual art (and later the works of others) has been important to the worldwide

‘dissemiNation’ (Bhabha 1990b) of Oromo nationalism. Because his works were exhibited at all the video recorded mass gatherings, his paintings have also been exhibited via VCR technology to a worldwide Oromo audience, who regularly re-view these mass gatherings.

While Benedict Anderson (1983) speaks of earlier nationalisms emerging primarily through the technology of print capitalism, the impact of video recordings suggests another factor. Concurring with Anne McClintock’s (1993, p. 67-71) conclusion in relation to the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism (specifically her description of the *Tweede Trek*), these Oromo mass gatherings demonstrate national collectivity experienced pre-eminently through spectacle.

For exiled Oromo with ready access to VCR technology,⁵ these video recordings became mass commodity spectacles reaching into the loungerooms and the hearts of Oromo all over the world—each re-viewing offering more detail and the opportunity for the viewer to further narrate the art and events captured on the television screen. In this sense, when subjected to multiple reviewing, the recordings generate a type of Baudrillardian ‘simulacra’: a regime of production whereby the events are, for participants, a video-mediated experience of triumph (and catastrophe) (Morris 1990, p. 18)—even seven years after the events ‘really’ occurred in time and space.

Dobrow’s (1990) term ‘re-run ritual’ captures the performative dimension of repetitive viewing. ‘Re-run ritual’ may be regarded as tactical performance to the extent that, as viewers edit (via remote) and narrate the drama, they can collectively transform their marginal standing by locating themselves in the centre of the drama that unfolds before their very eyes on the television screen. Kolar-Panov (1996) provides a thorough analysis of ‘re-run ritual’ and the narrative power of VCR technology in her discussion of nationalist video recordings circulated among Croatians in Australia during the civil unrest and war in their homeland. The seemingly non-narrative structure of the video, she claims,

⁵ Every Oromo household that I have visited in Melbourne has a video cassette recorder (VCR), usually an expensive multi-system one, and many have camcorders. Kolar-Panov (1996, p. 288, referring to Court and Maddox 1992) notes that Australia has the second largest ownership of VCRs in the world, second only to Kuwait. She suggests that such massive numbers of VCRs create a ‘unique media environment that has relied on informal and formal video rental structures for an alternative to broadcast television’ (ibid.). Certainly the VCR is important for Melbourne’s Oromo, who frequently view informal video productions like the type described in this chapter. Such technology enables them to schedule programming according to their needs.

creates narratives through the video-viewer and viewer-viewer relationship creating meaning as it unfolds, relying mainly on the popular memory of the audience as well as on cross-referencing and intertextuality with other cultural texts and media ... The texture, the blurring, the fuzziness—which much of the time are the results of the tape being a second or third or even fifth generation product—only reinforce the qualities of authenticity that are attributed to such tapes (by the ethnic audience).

(Kolar-Panov 1996, p. 294)

Combined with multiple reviewing, these ‘authentic’ recordings generate a ‘real’ experience: faces in the crowd, voices, the surrounding landscape and skyline, the roads, and noises all become familiar. From close-up images of the OLF leaders to the broad sweeping shots of the masses, the viewer performs with the actors on the screen.

More accurately, it is the *male* viewer who performs, for, as I regularly observed in Melbourne, these recordings are nearly always viewed by male audiences in the domestic lounge room; and even on the few occasions when a woman was present, the remote control was always operated by a male (cf. women’s viewing of family events and ‘rites of passage’, p. 219). To what extent my presence demanded this male (remote) control is difficult to assess, but such control mirrored the rallies themselves which, despite a few marginal performances by women, were largely masculine events.

Paradoxically, the gatherings are considered by those who view them to be gender-neutral mass meetings of the nation—a repetitive message of the OLF orators. Despite such ideological rhetoric, the palpable absence of women from these narrative productions suggests that Oromo anti-colonial nationalism—the type which framed these gatherings—is, at its core, a male discourse. Moreover, it is a discourse that allegorically narrates a univocal ‘Oromo woman’ to serve the national purpose. In terms of the heroically masculine national narrative, the ‘Oromo woman’—like a ‘gendered schizophrenic’—is iconographically narrated into Oromo national historiography as both victim and goddess (cf. Sugnet 1997, p. 42).

The manipulation of ‘Oromo woman’ as an ideological and political resource by nationalist élite has, until very recently, remained largely unexamined by Oromo, ‘Third world’ and ‘Western’ scholars. With the exception of the current project and Sorenson’s (1996, pp. 459-61) brief discussion of gender and Oromo nationalism, there are no ‘Western’ scholars who have specifically addressed women’s issues in their writing about the Oromo. Among the minuscule collection of published and unpublished papers specifically concerning Oromo women’s issues, probably all have been written by Oromo women themselves.⁶ With little doubt, the most academically persuasive are the two recently published essays written by the exiled journalist/activist/scholar Kuwee Kumsa, who, in her 1998 essay ‘Oromo Women and the Oromo National Movement: Dilemmas, Problems and Prospects for True Liberation’, charges the Oromo national movement of oppressing Oromo women. Specifically, she targets the male OLF leadership’s undeniable failure to practise the organisation’s rhetoric of gender equality. It remains to be seen to what extent the currently unpopular, but very important, gender issues she has raised will be pursued or ignored by male Oromo élite.

Kuwee Kumsa’s feminist motif, specifically her discussion of the negative imaging of women in Oromo literature (1998, p. 169) needs stressing. Her earlier and overtly counter-insurgent text, ‘The Siiqqee Institution of Oromo Women’ (1997), is an attempt to reconstruct an ahistorical and universalistic notion of *siiqqee* as a formulation of culturally grounded Oromo feminism vis-à-vis hegemonic ‘Western’ feminisms. Although the motif of the text is a topic for the next chapter, it needs to be noted here that universally equating *siiqqee* with Oromo women’s subjectivity is fraught with difficulties because it bypasses the relationality of social class, locality, education and sexuality (cf. Mohanty 1991b, p. 64).

⁶ The published and unpublished papers I have collected consist of: Arfaase Gamada 1991; Belletech Deressa; Dureti 1987; Fayyise Biyyaa 1984; Kuwee Kumsa 1997, 1998; Liben B. Qumbi 1989; *Oromtitti* 1979; Qabbanee Waaqayyo 1991; Seada Mohammed 1993; Subboontuu Jiilcha 1992; *Waldhaanso* 1984; and Wellela Hirpassa 1997. There may be a few more, but it is doubtful that, altogether, there would be more than twenty papers and articles concerning Oromo women’s issues. To my knowledge, apart from Kuwee Kumsa’s 1998 work, there are no rigorous academic writings (i.e. whole dissertations or at least chapters within them) specifically addressing gender issues relating to the Oromo national movement. Rather, there is only one essay published in a book (Kuwee Kumsa 1998)—an incredible omission when one considers the steady flow of academic writings on the Oromo emerging since the late-1970s, the size of the female population, their contribution to the Oromo struggle, the many issues they face and the richness of their cultural backgrounds.

Without denying the necessity of forming strategic political affinities, like all subjectivities Oromo women are not subjects outside their social relations. Rather, again like all subjectivities, Oromo women are constituted through these very structures. Consequently, an unproblematic archaeology of a pre-colonial subjectivity called ‘Oromo woman’ is impossible. As Kuwee hints in her later essay (1998), any attempt to allegorise a univocal Oromo women’s subjectivity to serve the national purpose has serious problems because it subordinates women’s politics to a masculine, national master narrative. Put another way, within a nationalist master narrative the women’s questions raised by Kuwee are constrained to take on a nationalist expression as a prerequisite for being considered ‘political’ (Radhakrishnan 1992, p. 78; Sugnet 1997, p. 46). This is not to say that women’s politics and the politics of nationalism—both resisting two different but related forms of domination—cannot coexist, but, as Radhakrishnan (1992) argues, the relationship must not be predetermined by a nationalist master narrative.

The vividly evocative nationalist video production *Yaadannoo Aannolee* (‘In memory of Aannolee’)⁷ demonstrates how the subordination of women’s issues is discursively narrated by a language of nationalism. I have chosen to subject this video cassette to analysis with a view to how women are represented because of its popularity in Melbourne, the feature of Dawit Eteffa’s painting within it, and also because it documents a pivotal moment in the contemporary history of the Oromo national movement.

In addition to reading in the area of representation of women in nationalist writings, plays and films in Asia, Africa and America⁸ and the multiple re-viewing of the *Yaadannoo Aannolee* video cassette, I have discussed and viewed the recording with three women in Melbourne who witnessed the commemoration in December 1991. Two of the informants, Demma and Mariyam, are from Arsi and were in the large crowd gathered there; the third informant, Likyelesh Walde Gose (aka Likkee Waldee)—who appears in the video recording sitting among the group of delegates near the official area and delivering a speech—is a notable long-time

⁷ The video cassette *Oromiyaa (Aannolee): Seenaa Goototal Aannolee hin Iraanpanno Yoomillee* was produced in Toronto and distributed by the Oromo Center in Ontario (Waltajjii Oromoo Ontaariyoo). All proceeds from the sale of the cassette were directed to the OLF.

⁸ Texts consulted include: Blunt & Rose 1994; Cobham 1992; Fraser Delgado 1997; Geiger 1990; Grewal & Kaplan 1994; Heng 1997; Ibrahim 1997; Jacqui & Mohanty 1997; Jayawardena 1986; Kandiyoti 1991; Layoun 1992, 1994; Liu 1994; McClintock 1993; Nash 1994; Natarajan 1994; Nnaemeka 1997; Parker et al. 1992; Radhakrishnan 1992; Sen 1993; Stott 1989; Sugnet 1997; Walter 1995; Yuval-Davis 1993; and Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989.

political activist who is now exiled in Melbourne. She attended the commemoration in an organising and representational capacity as the Vice-Chairperson of the Oromo Women's Association, a nationwide organisation operating under the umbrella of the OLF. According to Likkee, the Association raised funds for the soldiers, educated and mobilised women in eleven provinces of Oromiya, and supplied food and refreshments for participants at the mass rallies.⁹

Like the many Oromo mass rallies in 1991, the gathering at Aannolee centred around a memoryscape—a landscape performatively woven into national memories (Edensor 1997). Located in Arsi (south-eastern Oromiya), Aannolee (or Jawi) is a remote site in the countryside, about one-hour's walk from the small towns Itayaa and Dheeraa. Most people who went to the commemoration met at Itayaa in the morning and travelled by bus, truck, car or foot to Aannolee for the afternoon gathering. Mariyam explained the feelings of that day:

There was a mixture of happiness and sadness on that day. People were excited in the town and happy to go and gather out there at Aannolee. It was a new experience for everyone—never before had so many Oromo met at the one place. Everybody was excited and preparing the flags and banners to carry there. I walked by foot; it took a long time, but there were thousands of people so we were all excited. But this changed in the afternoon when we arrived at Aannolee. We became very sad when we heard the elders talk about what happened there, about the bloodshed of our people.

This gathering was in fact the largest to have occurred in Arsi since May 15th 1966 when the Macha Tulama Association organised a mass Oromo gathering in Itayaa, the same town where people met before travelling to Aannolee.¹⁰ Despite vigorous attempts by Haile Selassie's regime to prevent people from participating, the gathering in 1966 was reportedly attended by as many as 100,000 Oromo peasants

⁹ These three women were exiled in the years following the gathering. They were my primary informants and provided me with interpretations of the events shown throughout the video recording. Their eyewitness experiences of the Aannolee gathering were invaluable to my analysis. As much as possible, they rendered the speeches, songs and poems into English for me. I could not find any men in Melbourne who were present at the Aannolee gathering.

¹⁰ The Macha-Tulama Association began as a self-help development association when it was formed in 1963 and was banned by the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1967 after it had grown to a large pan-Oromo movement. Most commentators attribute the Macha-Tulama Association as pivotal in the formation of Oromo nationalism. Cf. Mohammed Hassen (1998) and Olana Zoga (1993).

from the Arsi area, and is now regarded as a turning point in modern Oromo history (Mohammed Hassen 1998, p. 205).

Given this background, it is not surprising that the area of Arsi around Itayaa is significant in modern Oromo history. Aannolee is the site where thousands of Oromo—according to oral history as many as 12,000—were said to have been brutally dismembered by Menelik II's forces in 1886. The atrocities committed during Menelik II's European-backed annexational conquest of Oromiya have been documented by both colonial (Ethiopianist) and anti-colonial 'Western' and African historians (cf. Abbas Haji 1994; Abir 1968; Cerulli 1922; Holcomb & Ibssa 1990; Marcus, H. 1969a, 1969b, 1975; and Pankhurst, R. 1967). It is widely acknowledged that the utilisation of European guns and cannons, military, technical and political advisers by Menelik II's army was the key factor in their rapid expansion and victory against the less-equipped Oromo. As Holcomb and Ibssa (1990) assert: 'The discrepancy in armaments created by the Euro-Abyssinian alliance not only accounts for the ultimate outcome, but for the decimation of the population in many Oromo regions during the campaigns' (p. 103).

Among the various Abyssinian campaigns against the Oromo, Menelik II's conquering of the Arsi people in 1886-7 is widely considered the most brutal, and according to Oromo oral history—along with the massacre in the area of the town Calanqqo, eastern Oromiya, commonly called *Calanqqo Calli*, 'the silencing of Calanqqo'¹¹—probably the most heinous episode in the Abyssinian conquest. Of the scant knowledge that most Oromo in Melbourne have of the Abyssinian invasion of Oromiya, the historical and lengthy campaign against the Arsi is notorious. Despite the vastly superior firepower of Menelik II's invading forces, they met with stiff resistance from the Arsi Oromo, and it was not until 1887 that Arsi was conquered (Abbas Haji 1994; Kofi Darkwa 1975, p. 105)—after six different campaigns and perhaps the most sustained and bloody fighting that Menelik II's army experienced.

Matching the mode of invasion, the subsequent colonisation of the Arsi was brutal. Repressive colonial policies provoked ongoing resistance and, despite violent coercion, the vast majority of Arsi Oromo remained fiercely opposed to the presence

¹¹ As told by numerous informants, the massacre at *Calanqqo Calli* is regarded by Oromo from Hararghe as the most heinous episode in the Abyssinian conquest of eastern Oromiya. While the Aannolee gathering is well known, in 1991 there was no national commemoration held in Calanqqo—a source of consternation for many Oromo from that area, whose ancestors faced similar calamity to the Arsi at Aannolee.

of the Abyssinians compared with the levels of integration among Oromo elsewhere. For example, despite proselytisation by the Abyssinian Orthodox Church, by the end of the 1930s the masses of rural Arsi had converted to Islam. The point is often made that this religious movement was largely motivated by the Arsi's collective need to demarcate themselves from their invaders (cf. Haberland 1964; Knuttson 1969; and Mohammed Hassen 1992, 1994). As explained by Melbourne Arsi Oromo,¹² not only did religion provide a stratagem of evasion but, given that open defiance was dangerous, everyday Arsi relations with the Amhara settlers (*naftaanya*) embodied forms of minimal compliance and stubborn de facto resistance.

Similar to Sugnet's (1997) observations of the Zimbabwean (colonial Rhodesia) experience, Arsi men apparently were more assimilated with/in the colonial system, while women, even though victims of multiple oppressions, paradoxically were better off because they were less exposed to the official Abyssinian administration in schools, courts and offices. While certainly victims, Arsi women fought back in different ways from different locations, and exercised considerable power without directly challenging the formal order. Informal everyday covert acts of resistance such as feigned ignorance, illness, incompetence and foot-dragging, demonstrate that the line drawn between resistance and accommodation, agency and victimhood is sometimes difficult to draw. To this extent, the simple yoking of an ideology of motherhood and victimhood, which features in various strands of 'Western' feminist discourse on motherhood (cf. pp. 214-5), is inappropriate when applied to the motherhood experiences of Oromo women.¹³ As the story of Arsi women suggests, surviving by accommodation may sometimes be the only mode of resistance available (Sugnet 1997, p. 40).

One such example of 'de facto' resistance was the pervasive anti-colonial story-telling practices of Arsi mothers. It is often recalled how children were imaginatively instructed by their mothers to keep away from the *bineensaa* (the beast). Certainly by telling anti-colonial stories which narrated the invading Amhara as resembling *bineensaa*, mothers sowed seeds of antipathy within their children's developing psyche. And surely such early education in the politics of

¹² These conclusions are based upon detailed discussions with numerous Arsi Oromo concerning the conditions they and their parents lived under. Regrettably, I have not had access to older Arsi women with whom I could discuss earlier forms of non-compliance practised by women.

¹³ Although motherhood is variously represented in 'Western' feminist writings, the 'ideology of motherhood' is often equated with victimhood (cf. Cavarero 1992; Dally 1982; Devlin 1995; Ibrahim 1997; Kitzinger 1992; MacKinnon 1989; Oakley 1992; Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd 1991; Roiphe 1997; Trebilcot 1984; and Wearing 1984).

oppression set many Arsi up for national activism in their later adult years (cf. Kuwee Kumsa 1998, p. 155).

While forms of de facto resistance remain under-emphasised in the literature, there has been much written about the many instances of armed insurrection in Arsi—especially in the southern province of Bale¹⁴ (cf. Asafa Jalata 1993; Holcomb & Ibssa 1990). The evocative remembering of the armed uprisings of Oromo peasants in Bale (southern Arsi) between 1963 and 1970—commonly referred to as the Bale rebellion led by Wako Guto—reinforces the reputation of the Arsi as the most resilient Oromo people. Although very little is written about them, women too participated in these uprisings and, according to Asafa Jalata (1993), with no central command, women such as Halima Hassan, Haala Korme and Halima Waqo Korme took on leadership roles (p. 159).

Illustrating the respect shown by other Oromo towards the gallant Arsi, the front cover of the video cassette *Yaadannoo Aannolee* features the subtitle, *Seenaa Goototal Aannolee hin Irraanpanno Yoomillee* ('The history of the brave warriors from Aannolee—never forgotten'). On the side of the plastic video cassette case is the statement: *Yaadannoo Oromoota Aannoleetti Dhuman* ('In memory of the Oromo who were dismembered at Aannolee'). Such statements highlight the interdependence of national identity and the idea of memory. In Gillis's words (1994), 'the core meaning of any group identity, namely, as sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity' (p. 2). As argued throughout this thesis, 'memory' is here understood not as a fixed thing to be recalled at any time but, rather, as a representation of reality that is constantly revised to suit current identity needs. As a result, 'memory work' is 'embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end' (ibid.).

Just like identity, memory too has its politics. Forms of national commemoration are shaped by political objectives as 'memory' is communicated through the performance of different activities in particular places and around

¹⁴ One strategy the Emperor Haile Selassie used to manage the large and resistant Arsi Oromo population was to demarcate the Bale province (in southern Arsi) separate from the Arsi province. As described by Oromo from Bale living in Melbourne, contrary to such division, those from Bale generally regard themselves as Arsi Oromo.

certain artefacts (cf. Middleton & Edwards 1990). The mass Oromo pilgrimage to Aannolee, 105 years after the massacre, reasserts the national(ist) significance of Aannolee as site and historical event, and enables selective memories of the tragedy to be re-worked and reconstructed in the light of recent political developments within Ethiopia. By suggesting a continuity between past and present, the video recorded event articulates historical tragedy, political objectives and collective identities within a grand nationalist narrative.

The promotion of such tragic nationalist sensibilities was overwhelmingly evident among the responses of various Oromo in Melbourne with whom I viewed the video cassette. Most expressed feelings of disgust towards Menelik II and the Abyssinians, and asserted a continuity between past and present—expressed in the typical comment from both men and women, ‘Aannolee is being repeated today, the Abyssinians have not changed, they never will’. The three women who witnessed the commemoration spoke of the emotional impact it had upon them, Likkee Waldee stating, ‘I used to really hate Haile Selassie, but at Aannolee I learnt how terrible Menelik II was, he was horrible, much worse than Haile Selassie’. Demma described how ‘that day really killed us; it kills us now when we think about it. We learnt about what Menelik II did to our people, it was a very emotional experience’. Similarly, for me, viewing the video cassette with each of the women was highly emotional, particularly as they looked for faces in the crowd on the television screen and pointed out to me those who had since disappeared, been killed, or detained.

The video narrates not only atrocities of the past but also of the present, as many of the ‘living’ on the television screen have since disappeared or been found dead. One man, whose face was clear on the television screen, had been Demma’s neighbour in Hadama. ‘He was a very rich man’, she related to me, ‘but he has now lost everything and left the country because of the Tigray. They arrested him many times and took his property. No-one knows where he is now. His wife is by herself in Hadama. Their children have left the country too. It is terrible what they are doing to our people now’. When I viewed the recording with Likkee she recognised at least forty people who were now dead or missing. Specifically, those men (and the few women such as her) who were among the central figures in the production have since either been detained, killed, exiled, or have disappeared.

From the outset, the three-hour video recording of the mass gathering narrates women as the central victims in the tragedy of Aannolee, and men as the liberators of Oromiya. The viewer is immediately confronted with the disturbing framed shot of Dawit Eteffa's large hand-painted commemorative banner with the bold title 'Aannolee 1886'—the banner also features on the front cover of the video cassette case.¹⁵ In the foreground of the painting is an unnamed and weeping rural peasant woman beautifully dressed in traditional Arsi clothing, leaning against a brick wall, with a blue background. Her hands are tied and her breasts dismembered and profusely bleeding. Tears drip to the soil, stylised as large drops of liquid exuding from her eyes. Beneath the nameless woman a dark cave-like crevasse is draped with human skeletal remains, and contains a written scroll with a feather quill pen, and a shield and spear (the traditional fighting weapons). Opposite the mother is a man with a dismembered right arm bleeding copiously. In the background is a peasant village (*ollaa*) and green fertile landscape shaded with blood red colours. The *ollaa* features two houses with green trees nearby. One of the houses is aflame; the sky is a crimson red with the sun setting. Across the banner are two large chains attached to a brick wall which intersect at the centre of the painting.

Without narration, the camera shot tracks-in from a distance, eventually holding a frame of the banner for about one minute. The camera focus is upon the peasant woman and, beginning with her head, tracks-in to her dismembered breasts. From this disturbing image, the viewer is taken to another framed shot—again a hand-painting by Dawit Eteffa—of a country woman whose face vividly displays shock-horror. The image is blurry and ill-defined, but the woman is dressed in traditional rural clothing, and appears to be pregnant. While the camera holds this frame, an unknown man stands alongside the painting and introduces the viewer to Aannolee by briefly explaining how the devastation of Arsi occurred: 'Women lost their breasts and men lost their arms here. It was Gobana Dacchie who trapped us and brought Menelik II here. After our forefathers fought five times with Menelik II's army, Gobana negotiated for Arsi and tricked us. He even betrayed his mother'.

¹⁵ Photographs of this banner and the artwork painted by Dawit Eteffa described in this chapter are exhibited on Plate 6, between pages 162 and 163.

The immediate emphasis upon the traitor Gobana Dacchie—the skilled Oromo fighter and son of an Oromo leader who rose to a position of leadership in Menelik II's army and was instrumental in bringing several Oromo areas under Menelik II's rule (Holcomb & Ibssa 1990, p. 285)—simultaneously betraying his people and mother is followed by an immediate close-up frame of the OPDO party flag and then a group of men holding aloft OPDO flags. The narrative strategy represents the OPDO as the contemporary Gobana, the 'new Gobana' who are betraying their mother—the Oromo nation. Such narrative stresses the continuity between past and present that features throughout the production—the Gobana of the past and the neo-Gobana of today.

The three-hour production features numerous OPDO party flags—and two background frames of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiya (IFLO) flag—held aloft by various people among the masses. Such an antagonistic presence is perhaps surprising considering that the Aannolee commemoration was organised by the OLF, who hate the OPDO and vice-versa.¹⁶ The most plausible explanation is that the OPDO people gate-crashed the event. My three informants described how OPDO people arrived with guns and asked the OLF to take their flags down and replace them with OPDO ones. Apparently a fight broke out and, with the masses on their side, the OLF controlled the event and flew their flag. Nevertheless, the OPDO people remained. As Demma explained, 'They could not send them away because they are with the Tigray EPRDF and by then they had many soldiers in and around the towns. Even then, before the elections, the Tigray and OPDO had begun harassing Oromo people. So they remained, but nobody wanted them there, and people told them to put their flags down'.

It was commonly put to me by those who had viewed the video recording that the OPDO people were present to 'gather information for the Tigray'. Conversely, a few people tentatively suggested that, given it was a commemoration for Oromo martyrs and the OPDO was an Oromo party, they had the right to be there. Whatever the actual reason for the presence of OPDO representatives, it is common knowledge that many participants in the Aannolee gathering were detained and/or disappeared in the months following the gathering, and that video

¹⁶ Unlike the presence of OPDO representatives, the marginal presence of the minor party IFLO's flag, and some of their representatives, was apparently not a source of hostility among the masses there. This is probably because, despite their altercations with and mistrust of the OLF and vice versa, the IFLO is also militantly anti-EPRDF/OPDO.

recordings such as *Yaadannoo Aannolee* were later used by EPRDF internal security—of which the OPDO are active members—to identify OLF supporters.¹⁷ Viewed retrospectively, the tragic irony augments the anti-OPDO message narrated in the video recording. As all of the speakers talked of Gobana and delivered anti-OPDO messages—one singer led the masses in a song, ‘Gobana is here among us today’—the viewer easily imagines the intense emotion manifest among the 20,000 plus pro-OLF crowd.

Following the close-up frames of the first two banners portraying peasant women/mothers, and the Gobana images of the OPDO flag, the viewer is presented with a third banner painted by Dawit Eteffa. It features a white dove perched on a spear with the flag of the OLF (*alaabaa*) attached to it, and the sun rising in the background. This banner featured at all the mass gatherings and was to be used as part of the OLF promotional poster for the 1992 elections. As Dawit explained, the rising sun symbolises the coming of peace and hope as at sunrise, and the dove the symbol of peace. It would seem that the spear with the flag attached symbolises the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) liberating the masses. Juxtaposed with the banner is the image of a large group of men, with spears aloft and the OLF flag blowing in the wind, victoriously chanting in call-and-response, ‘OLF - *abbaa biyya*, OLF - *abbaa biyya*’ (trans. ‘OLF - the father of the land’). One man leads the group in *geerasa*, boasting of the brave Oromo warrior, ‘Oromo is not scared of anything’.

These emotive frames lead in to the reception of the victorious OLF leaders, as the camera turns to the spectacle of the huge gathering of Oromo welcoming their heroes. Arriving in four-wheel drive vehicles, dressed in city clothes and stern-faced, the male leaders are received with the slaughtering of a cow on the road directly in front of their vehicles. The camera closes-in on the cow’s throat being slit and the immediate gush of blood. As described to me, such slaughtering invokes *waaqa* to keep ‘evil’ away and to bless the OLF leaders as they arrive, in the hope that the enemies are now dead and the horrible past of Aannolee will not come back again.

¹⁷ In a personal communication (August 1997), Trevor Trueman, the Chairperson of the Oromia Support Group (OSG)—the non-political organisation which collects information on human rights violations against Oromo people—commented that there had been numerous anecdotal reports of the misappropriation of these video recordings by EPRDF Intelligence. Additionally, by way of anecdotal evidence, numerous Oromo people have spoken to me of friends, relatives and others they knew of who attended the Aannolee gathering and have since been detained and/or disappeared.

Immediately following this performance the image of the large green tree-top (*odaa*) is shown. The camera slowly moves down to the base of the tree where a group of about fifteen peasant women weep with their heads down. One of the women laments out loud for the suffering of Aannolee, describing the terrible atrocities. The camera tracks-in and briefly holds the close-up frame of a young weeping mother nursing a baby. Breaking with this scene, another image of a large group of men is shown, again with spears held aloft and victoriously chanting '*Nadhii Gemedaa, Oromiya*'.¹⁸ Then another group of peasant women are shown, this time an older group of five or six, weeping while holding small green leafy branches. As they weep, they sing together, led by one of the women: 'We lost all these things, we feel faint, that is why we are weeping. *Bilisummaa* is coming but we are weeping'. Such early juxtaposition of weeping women with victorious men—the maternal with the warrior and the (female)nation with (male)nationalism—points directly to the gendered commemoration of national calamity evident throughout the rest of the production.

With the multitudes standing on the hillside and perched in the large tree to gain a better view, the political leaders gather with the local elders in a circle near the slightly raised patch of soil that served as a podium. Unlike other mass gatherings, specifically those in Finfinnee, given the rural setting, there is no stage or seating provided for the dignitaries. Three old peasant women come forward and, with stone faces, present each of the executive OLF leaders with a drinking cup (presumably containing *a'anan*, cow's milk, a ritual beverage among the Arsi Oromo commonly associated with fertility) and a small green leafy branch (an evergreen sign of richness).

After the brief appearances described above, women are absent from the centre of activities and do not feature again until one-and-a-half hours later when more speeches are given by representatives from various Oromo associations, including the Oromo Women's Association represented by Likkee Waldee. Following these later speeches, women feature again, serving traditional Arsi foods (*miichia* and *marqa*) and performing the *buna qala* ritual.

¹⁸ In this chant the head of the OLF political department, Nadhii Gemedaa, is heroically equated with Oromiya.

My three informants—Demma, Likkee and Mariyam—insisted that, despite appearances suggesting otherwise, there were thousands of women there, but they were mostly behind the scenes, looking-on from a distance. But, they add, in so far as they had to stay away to look after children, the vast majority of women were unable to attend. As Mariyam explained, ‘Like in the Oromo community in Melbourne, the women are always away from formal activities; it was the same there’. Although women do feature later in the production, the narration of the nation in the first twenty minutes invokes the powerful symbolism/metaphors which run throughout the production.

The episodes described above are framed by a combination of camera shots portraying the large *odaa* tree in the background under which the masses gathered, with an OLF flag tied to a branch and blowing in the wind. The huge branches of the tree reaching upwards towards the sky are featured in the slow tracking. These branches are emotively narrated by the first speaker as those upon which the dismembered body parts of the martyrs were thrown.

A deathly quiet descends upon the ten-thousand strong crowd as the first to speak into the loudspeaker, a local elder and oral historian, tells the horrific story of Aannolee:¹⁹

This is the place called Aannolee or Jaawii. My great-grandfather, grandfather and father told me that this is the place of massacre where the Oromo enslavement began: the place where many who struggled for the Oromo were killed.

When our forefathers refused to pay tribute to Menelik II and resisted his invaders, he sent Gobana Dacchie to trick us. Then terrible things happened. Our people were conquered and ruthlessly massacred. They [the Abyssinians] had guns and our forefathers had no chance. Menelik II committed terrible atrocities against our women by cutting-off their breasts so the mothers could not feed the children and attacking their reproductivity. He castrated the men so the Oromo people could not grow. He cut off women’s breasts, men’s arms and hands, and even heads, and

¹⁹ The events are narrated in the present tense to emphasise the viewers’ immediate and present experience of the gathering through VCR. Rendering the speech into English is very difficult, but I am assured by a number of Oromo with whom I viewed the production that this is the kernel of what the elder said. The same applies to the small excerpts of the speech by Nadhii Gemedaa.

threw them up into the trees for all to see [pointing to nearby trees]. Then our people had to take them down and bury them. Why did Menelik II do this? He did it in order that they [the Arsi Oromo] would obey him. He cut their bodies to make them obey him.

Following this re-telling, another local elder briefly speaks, insisting that, although their ancestors had died terribly, because they fought against Gobana they were struggling for their liberty. He emphasises how, like them, the Oromo today must keep fighting for their freedom.

The political leaders then speak at length about the significance of the occasion. First, Nadhii Gemedaa, head of the OLF political department (who disappeared shortly after, and is now presumed to have been killed by EPRDF militia), speaks of the spectacle of urban and rural Oromo gathering together ('city people and country people'): 'This is a day of happiness and no matter how long it takes, history [the Aannolee massacre and the suffering of the Oromo] shall not be hidden'. In a rallying method similar to that practised by leaders of the Derg regime, the crowd follows Nadhii Gemedaa's lead with raised fists affirmatively repeating his victorious chants:

The fire of *bilisummaa* has erupted!
We will not forget what happened!
From now on Oromiya is ours!
We got our freedom by the gun!
The gun will no longer suppress us!
From today we will not be slaves under any government!

An extended panorama of the surrounding landscape follows the lengthy speeches. With the crowds away and no-one present, the viewer silently appreciates the beauty of the Arsi countryside, the lush green plants and the large trees—those upon which the dismembered martyrs were thrown. In the midst of this powerful synthesis of natural beauty and calamity, the viewer joins the silent and intimate gathering of men—elders and political leaders—who have walked to the nearby mound of stones (presumably a mass grave) to lay a wreath upon the martyr (called *Aannolee hammeyna*, 'Aannolee memorial grave'). In this sober moment, the silence is interrupted with a eulogy for the victims, reflecting upon the tragic events:

‘After taking their body parts down from the trees, it was our people who buried them here. They put these rocks here’.

The celebratory gathering of the crowds at a nearby location follows the sombre wreath-laying affair. The masses sit on the grass and the music begins with popular Oromo performer Zereoun Wadajo (also since disappeared, presumably killed by EPRDF militia). At times the crowd appears rowdy and out of control, as evidenced by the presence of crowd-controllers striking people in the audience with long sticks. Apparently conflict erupted because the OPDO people would not sit down and insisted upon standing with their flag held high for all to see. This provoked sharp response from the massive crowd of OLF supporters there. But later the crowd quietens when a call is made for those with poems to come forward. One man reads aloud a written poem, commencing with the line: ‘Oromiya you are my mother, tell me what happened over one-hundred years ago’, and continues with praises for the motherland Oromiya: ‘She is so green, she is so beautiful’.

The production continues for another two hours with musical performers, more speeches, collective eating, *buna qala* (a coffee and butter ritual) and dancing. Throughout, various frames are shown of the disturbing painted banner described at the outset. Such framing clearly suggests that the image of the dismembered body of the unnamed peasant woman/mother featured on the banner was considered an important site of meaning by the producers. At the same time, the image is of contestable meanings. The other images of women scattered throughout the production iconographically narrate women as defenceless grieving victims and, simultaneously, exalted goddesses. Such narration suggests an ambiguity, a double capture, as peasant woman/mother is both agent and victim, both powerful and powerless.

The omnipresence of the mutilated and unnamed woman of the first banner suggests that the female body provides the critical angle for viewing the Abyssinian conquest of the Oromo nation. Read this way, the unnamed woman allegorically represents the nation Oromiya (of whom the Arsi Oromo are an integral part). Such a reading concurs with the artist Dawit Eteffa’s description of the banner:

Some elders from Arsi came to the OLF office in Finfinnee and told me the story of Aannolee. I met them on Monday and they wanted the paintings ready by Saturday to take to the gathering at Aannolee. So I

worked really fast on it. They wanted me to paint the picture within four days.

Because Aannolee symbolises our final defeat at the hands of Menelik II, the last lock put on the Oromo nation, I decided that the focus of the banner would be on the mother and her pain. And although I show the man suffering with his arm cut-off, the major focus is upon the woman. This is because she is mother, the ground for everything. She sacrificed everything for the nation, including all her children. The skeletons in front of her are the heroes and her sons sacrificed for the nation—this is her pain.

Mother is the most important resource of the nation, so when they cut her breasts, they cut the resource and put a chain on it for the final time so that the nation could no longer be fed and no reproduction could occur.

The blue background behind the mother symbolises peace, her past life in the nice environment of the *ollaa*. But the circumstances force her to cry as the atmosphere of bloodshed around her is reflected in the final sunset on Oromiya. With the *ollaa* up in flames the sun will no longer shine on Oromiya. The sun has set and the hope of the nation is going down with it. The hope is finally locked down with a big chain and a modern building.

The final chain Dawit speaks of is reinforced by the modern brick wall—against which the woman leans—a European structure that does not fit into the rural African setting. Most people with whom I viewed the video recording interpreted the brick wall as metaphor for European technology and the collusive Euro-Abyssinian invasion. As discussed earlier, with the help of the Europeans, Menelik II created an impenetrable ‘brick wall’ over which the Oromo stood no chance of escaping. But the painting also includes a scroll and quill pen upon which the sacrifices of the martyrs will be recorded and not forgotten—as the commemorative gathering enacts.

The allegorical woman/mother represents the colonised Oromo with their ‘backs to the wall’. Read this way—concurring with Asafa Jalata’s (1993, 1997), Bonnie Holcomb’s and Sisai Ibssa’s (1990) arguments in relation to the global forces

behind the Euro-Abyssinian colonisation of Oromiya—the banner shows the collusive nature of Abyssinian colonialism: the brute force of the Abyssinian invader and the invasive, and all pervasive, European ‘wall’ of globalising capitalism. Additionally, the brick wall may also be interpreted as a jail wall, synonymous with incarceration—something very familiar to probably all Oromo since Menelik II’s invasion.²⁰ The thick diagonal chains across the banner accord with this interpretation of the incarcerated Oromo national subject and the enslaved territory of Oromiya.

As already described, the focal point of the banner is the mutilated and weeping unnamed woman/mother. She has been assaulted by an Abyssinian man. This painfully familiar scenario for many women in Ethiopia signifies the rape of the peasant woman/mother by a male foreign intruder. But more disturbing, and highlighted by the narration at the commencement of the video recording, is the dismemberment of the woman’s breasts by the Abyssinian invader—an act of terror.

The second painting is equally disturbing, portraying a pregnant peasant woman in a state of terrified shock. As with the first banner, Dawit Eteffa chose to use a peasant woman/mother to narrate the suffering of Aannolee. In his words:

This mother-to-be is in a state of shock at what she saw at Aannolee. The nation was in shock and her face expresses that shock. Especially I chose to show the suffering of mothers in Oromo society. The mothers paid a lot more than anyone else. Their pain is always there. During the Derg, the biggest pain was with the mothers who lost their sons that were taken from them to fight in Eritrea. With no hope, and no rumours about their sons’ lives, the mothers became blind with despair.

But the mother-to-be in the painting is shocked at the noise of guns which she had never heard before the Abyssinians came. There were no guns in Oromiya until then, that is why the invaders are called ‘*naftaanya*’: ‘*naft*’ means gun and ‘*naftaanya*’ the holder of guns.

²⁰ While not all have been imprisoned, certainly all Oromo have relatives or friends that have been imprisoned. Often those outside (invariably mothers, wives and daughters) regularly provided food and clothing for their imprisoned loved ones whom they were not allowed to visit. One woman I know took food for her husband for eighteen months without seeing him. Finally she was told not to come again: the signal that he had been killed.

As evident in these paintings, the central events in Oromo nationalism's commemorative narration of the calamity of Aannolee are the attacks upon apparently defenceless peasant women/mothers. The men and women with whom I spoke in Melbourne similarly read the commemoration as a gendered affair, but voiced no objection to this. Like the men, the women commented that the gathering was to celebrate the victories of the OLF and the Oromo martyrs who died during the fight against Menelik II. They too read the dismemberment of women's breasts as synonymous with Aannolee. If anything, such gendered remembering taps into one of the most powerful cultural constructions of national collectives—defenceless women and children as the reason men go to war (Enloe 1990).

When it comes to the subaltern Oromo woman (and her children), the OLF, as evidenced in the Aannolee production, readily exploits her in order to solicit support from the larger population, but, as Kuwee Kumsa (1998) emphasises, invariably she gains very little from the liberation struggle.

(At this point in the current discussion of violations against Oromo women, a brief clarification is necessary. As noted in Chapter One (cf. p. 27), the choice to write about Oromo women is fraught with difficulties, not only because I am male, but, additionally, because I am a 'Western' white male who has never been raped or lived under colonial domination. To this extent, the sense made of violations against women is circumspect and derives from second and third-hand experience. Hence, I cautiously proceed while simultaneously interrogating my 'authorial presence': the perspective and the institutional locations from which I write (in a culture of male domination where I am at 'home') as a 'Western' man.)

While it is important not to diminish in any way the violence of the historical experiences of rape, throughout the *Yaadannoo Aannolee* production the meaning of that suffering for peasant women is primarily narrated in the immediate context of masculine anti-colonial struggle. The narrative representation of rape is not exclusively a factual female story of the violation of the Arsi women by the invading Abyssinian soldiers, but is also a 'national story' of the transgression of national boundaries. From this perspective, the female body is narrated as the site of purity and the nation violated, and to this extent women are not given any subject position: they are cast in accordance with the Oromo nationalist project and their

victimisation is used to allegorically represent, or more precisely, to eroticise the Oromo nation's own plight (Layoun 1994, pp. 73-4).

Viewed this way, the woman's body generates contradictory meanings by becoming the battleground on which men from opposing camps engage each other in their bid for sovereignty. Paraphrasing Lydia Liu's (1994) analysis of representations of the woman's body in Chinese nationalist literature:

In such a signifying practice, the female body is ultimately displaced by nationalism, whose discourse denies the specificity of female experience by giving larger symbolic meanings to the signifier of rape: namely, Oromiya itself is being violated by the Abyssinian rapist. Since the nation itself is at stake, the crime of rape does not acquire meaning until it is committed by foreign intruders.

(Liu 1994, p. 44, paraphrased)

The figure of woman/mother as a victim of violations serves as a powerful trope of anti-Abyssinian propaganda, whereby rape signifies both the violation of woman and, symbolically, the nation Oromiya.

The experiences of rape and the violations against women that pervade contemporary Africa are discussed in detail by Amina Mama (1997), who concludes that 'widespread violence against women is probably the most direct and unequivocal manifestation of women's oppressed status in Africa' (p. 46). She highlights the escalation of violations against African women since the epoch of imperialism began, but—concurring with other postcolonial studies (Geiger 1990; Parpart & Staudt 1989; and Tabet 1991)—also convincingly demonstrates that the contemporary phases of anti-colonial nationalist struggle, decolonisation and the formation of postcolonial states, despite their rhetoric of delivering women's emancipation via national independence, are notoriously unable to translate such victory into fundamental changes in gender relations. In most cases, despite women's substantial participation in the liberation struggle, postcolonial national ideologies remain hostile to progressive gender politics, usually calling upon women to serve the nation through their patriotic service as wives and mothers.²¹

²¹ Amina Mama cites Zimbabwean, Kenyan, Nigerian, Sudanese and Mozambican examples. She notes (endnote 14, p. 367) the failure of Eritrean liberation from Ethiopia to translate into progressive gender politics, despite the fact that as many as thirty percent of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fighters were women, and a great deal was written about the liberation of

In relation to recent postcolonial African nationalisms, as Amina Mama argues, despite their activism in anti-colonial struggles, the political agency of African women is typically couched in the ideology of motherhood (cf. Geiger 1990; McClintock 1993). The Oromo case is no exception: women feature in nationalist merchandising (usually postcards and wall posters) as mothers and objects of beauty, but, apart from a few minor references, are hidden in the various theorisations of Oromo nationalism (cf. Plates 4 & 5, between pp. 162 & 163). They remain blatantly absent as agents in the history of Oromo nationalism. Instead, accounts of contemporary Oromo nationalism stress the importance of the invariably male educated élite (who are presented as gender-neutral) in the representation and reproduction of Oromo national identity (cf. Lewis 1996; Mekuria Bulcha 1996; and Mohammed Hassen 1996).²² Against this, one could argue that it is primarily Oromo women, not the educated élite, who reproduce the nation—biologically, culturally and symbolically (Yuval-Davis 1993, p. 622).

While the African nationalisms that Amina Mama refers to are now mostly in postcolonial (or flag independence) phases, the Oromo national movement remains within an earlier antagonistic phase of anti-colonial struggle. Nevertheless, it too manifests the same hostility towards progressive gender politics. As Kuwee Kumsa elaborates, at the organisational level, the OLF—the vanguard of the national movement—has conflicting views on the question of women:

Eritrean women on the battlefields. Similarly, since seizing state power in 1991 and despite rhetorically stating otherwise, the TPLF/EPRDF regime in Ethiopia has failed to promote the political participation of women. For example, a critical article by Arfaase Gamada in *The Oromo Commentary* (1991, nos. 2 & 3, pp. 10-12) titled 'Women's Rights and the Conference on Transitional Programme in Ethiopia' describes how, despite the number of women in Ethiopia being over twenty-five million and the active role that women played in the struggle against the previous Derg regime, of the eighty-seven seats given to delegates from the EPRDF, EPLF, OLF and over twenty other organisations, none were given to women. The only woman present was an observer-delegate of a peasants' association. Such dismissal of the gender problem usually equates with a high tolerance of violations against women, as evidenced in post-transitional Ethiopia where international human-rights organisations have numerous reports of women being detained, sexually abused and tortured—usually Oromo women under the pretence of OLF involvement. But, as described below, the OLF, too, has dismally failed to practise an inclusive gender politics.

²² With the exception of Kuwee Kumsa's (1998) essay in Asafa Jalata's *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse*, such omission is evident in all the major written works on the Oromo. For example, of the twenty contributors to the recent landmark publication *Being and Becoming Oromo* (Baxter, Hultin & Triulzi 1996)—in which the three intext citations are found—there is one Oromo woman who contributes: Hawani Debella. But, unlike the other essays, her contribution is of a personal reflective genre written in collaboration with a non-Oromo woman, Aneesa Kassam. The other nineteen essays feature no specific discussion of issues relating to Oromo women. Another publication, Asafa Jalata's *Oromia and Ethiopia* (1993), an account of pre-colonial and colonial contact between the Oromo and the Abyssinian invaders, has only four short references to women in its 197 pages. Similarly, Holcomb's and Ibssa's *The Invention of Ethiopia* (1990) contains a thorough historiography of the making of the Ethiopian empire, with specific focus upon the Oromo, but within their 407 pages there is only one reference to women's organisations under the Derg.

On the one hand, it [the OLF] recognises the need for Oromo women to be mobilised and involved in the revolution because women's support is an essential key to success. On the other hand, Oromo men are reluctant to cede any decision-making position to Oromo women, and women are pushed out when it comes to the question of power ... The contributions of Oromo women have thus been demanded and solicited on the one hand, but remained unrecognised and devalued on the other.

(Kuwee Kumsa 1998, p. 155)

Such devaluation is displayed, as Nuala Johnson (1995) suggests in relation to commemorative war memorials, by the frequent recognition of women in an anonymous allegorical manner, portraying them in terms of the version of history being promoted (by men) in specific political contexts (p. 57). The framing of the Aannolee production with the banner featuring the unnamed woman/mother accords with the general pattern of war memorials, in which women are anonymously subsumed into a masculine world: they 'overwhelmingly die as civilians, neither choosing a glorious role nor named on war memorials' (Walter 1995, p. 37).

Overwhelmingly, women's bodies are symbolically subsumed into the national body in contradictory ways: the 'gendered schizophrenia' (Sugnet 1997, p. 41) of heroic and masculine nationalist ideology conveniently sets-up woman/mother as both victim and goddess (Radhakrishnan 1992, p. 85). But although relegated to the margins of Oromo polity, their centrality to the nation is constantly reaffirmed in nationalist rhetoric: the unnamed peasant woman/mother of Aannolee and the silent mourners in the production are narrated as victims, but simultaneously signified as active mothers of the nation. As they weep, they weep like mothers for their lost sons (no men are shown weeping).

I witnessed a striking example of such ambiguous national appropriation of the anonymous 'Oromo woman' in the United States in August 1997 when I attended an Oromo protest march in Washington DC organised by the Union of Oromo in North America (UONA). The protest was held following UONA's week of activities, which included the twenty-third Annual Congress and a two day seminar on 'Self-determination and National Unity'. The seminar was attended by representatives from various minor political organisations—including the IFLO,

Tokkummaa, and the Oromo People's Liberation Front (OPLF), but no-one from the major party, the OLF—and over one-hundred UONA branch members from North America. At the conclusion of the seminar, participants agreed to work towards the establishment of a worldwide coalition of anti-colonial Oromo political organisations under the umbrella of the 'Oromo National Emergency Taskforce'. During the week's activities, I observed no Oromo women participating in the political discussions. Although relegated to the margins of Oromo polity their centrality to the nation was in the protest march, when the large male gathering followed an unnamed young Oromo woman carrying the identifying banner 'Tigrayan soldiers out of Oromiya'. No other women participated as they marched from the White House to the Ethiopian Embassy, and then to the US State Department. In this instance the mascot, Ibsituu, was not a mother or a wife but an attractive twenty-year old woman whose uncle was active in UONA. She had been asked by the organisers to lead the parade because she would represent the women of Oromiya who are suffering, and gladly did so.²³

The choice of a younger woman and not a mother figure suggests the assigning of a 'positive erotics'—contrasting with the 'negative erotics' of the de-sexualised peasant woman/mother featured at Aannolee—whereby Ibsituu was chosen not only because she is an Oromo woman but also because she is an attractive woman. Such erotics are prevalent in Oromo nationalist merchandising. For example, the popular nationalist postcard featuring an attractive young peasant girl, anonymously titled '*BAREDDU OROMO. OROMIA*', is displayed in many people's houses. The title juxtaposes the beautiful young female subject with the country Oromiya (cf. Plate 5, between pp. 162 & 163).

Similarly, at various gatherings in Melbourne when there is an audience of outsiders, attractive younger women in the community are usually called upon by the male community organisers. Commonly they perform cultural dance or dress in clothing typical of the rural Oromo. A striking example of such 'positive erotics' appears on the cover photograph of Afandi Siyo's recent musical cassette *Yaa Biyya Too Dirree* ('My country Dirree dhawaa'). Three well known women within the Melbourne community—who originate from Calanqqo—feature in the cover photograph dressed in traditional rural clothing from eastern Oromiya, and adorned with jewellery, henna and various cultural artefacts (such as a calabash).

²³ Interview with Ibsituu, August 1997.

They are draped over Afandi, who is dressed in semi-formal city clothes (white jeans and buttoned shirt). Despite making no contribution to the music contained on the cassette, the women feature on the cover and may be read as receptacles and protectors of Oromo culture (cf. Plate 4, between pp. 162 & 163).

Such ‘positive erotics’ are not observable in the commemoration *Yaadannoo Aannolee*. Instead, women occupy a minor role in the mass gathering, which is foregrounded by their scripted appearance as unknown and weeping figures signifying the nation. Meanwhile, the male political leaders and elders are introduced and thereby personalised to the viewer. The figure of the lamenting mother is powerfully conveyed in the image of the group of peasant women silently weeping with their heads down under the *odaa* tree, and in the lengthy pause upon the young unknown lamenting mother nursing a baby. Framed with close-up shots of the *odaa* tree and the OLF flag, these powerful images articulate the many faces of mother—motherland, mother tongue, motherhood, mothering—with the nation (Nnaemeka 1997, p. 1).

The emphasis upon the ‘negative erotics’ of the maternal figure is heightened by the focus upon women’s breasts as the primary target of assault by the invading men. The mutilation of the large breasts of the nursing peasant mother leaves the infant to starve. Meanwhile, the remembering of Menelik II’s emasculation of male sexual organs at Aannolee is underplayed because, following the male/female and active/passive oppositions, if emasculated they would not then be able to fight. Again, by allegorising woman’s body, the dismembered breasts may very well be interpreted as symbolic of the land which once provided the nourishment for the nation—recalling how, following their defeat to Menelik II, the Oromo were reduced to serfdom on their own land.

Consistent with the high value placed on fertility in Oromo culture—as in many other cultures—the defeat and loss of the land is transferred onto women via the imagery of fertility. The loss of the land to Menelik II’s forces is narrated through the mother’s body, and her breasts read as symbols of fertility. Throughout the speeches, the fertility of the land is mentioned as the reason for the Abyssinian invasion, but little mention is made of the fact that the women’s breasts could only be mutilated once the men were defeated.

From this perspective, the emphasis upon the idealised asexual peasant mother figure as national subject blazons the connection with the land. Via the ‘biologism and essentialism of the idea of natural, organic, and intuitive closeness to nature’, the peasant woman is represented as close to the land and privileged as the bearer of cultural authenticity (Nash 1994, p. 229). To this extent, the peasant woman/mother—the epitomical female subaltern—is considered the true Oromo artefact. Yet, the hegemonic deployment of such nationalist narrations of the Oromo peasant woman misses the precariousness of the rural subject whose sexual, gender, class and national identities—heterosexual mother, woman, peasant and Oromo—clash rather than conjoin, resulting in a loss of identity and a fractured subjectivity with regard to the nation (Liu 1994, p. 45).

Certainly such issues of landscape, the body and ‘negative erotics’ arise in Dawit Eteffa’s artwork, which he has perceived as part of the nationalist ideological struggle. In his frequent use of the Oromiya map juxtaposed with the peasant woman/mother he connects the landscape and the female body: the political control of landscape and territory and the control of female sexuality (Nash 1994, p. 227).

Especially significant is the narration of the desexualised peasant mother figure as a counterpart to the victoriously progressive Oromo male. Such apposition may be read as signalling the engendering of national time. By dividing the past and the present along gender lines, as McClintock (1993 pp. 65-7) argues, nationalism’s incongruous relation to time is managed as a natural relation to gender. Along these lines, the primitivist woman represents the authentic ‘body’ of Oromo national tradition (‘inert, backward-looking and natural’), embodying nationalism’s continuity with the past. Conversely, man represents the progressive agent of the Oromo national struggle (‘forward-thrusting, potent and historic’), embodying nationalism’s progressive principle of discontinuity (ibid.).

Throughout the production *Yaadannoo Aannolee*, with few exceptions, men feature as politically active, outspoken and progressive leaders, whereas women are narrated in relation to the past. In this way, the Oromo national movement—using the arborescent metaphor of the large *odaa* tree—is temporally imagined as an organic process of upward growth, with the branching and blossoming of new progressive shoots of *bilisummaa* (cf. Asafa Jalata’s ‘Oromo Nationalism in Blossom’

referred to above, p. 182) prompted by the men. The women, marginalised in the narration of victory, provide the timeless roots of culture and genealogy.

Given the emphasis upon the roots of culture and genealogy, it is perhaps not surprising that the *odaa* tree features in the landscape of nearly all the video recordings of rural mass Oromo gatherings in 1991. As Davies (1988) highlights in his discussion of the evocative symbolism of trees, the tree may be thought of as a physical manifestation of ideas, ‘which aids in the process of gaining access to and of manipulating otherwise abstract concepts such as nationhood, kinship, self-sacrifice and womanhood and manhood’ (p. 33). Like the peasant woman/mother, the Oromo viewer does not simply see the tree, but is attracted to it by an apparent beauty whilst also conceiving of it through cultural and historical precedent.

Historically, like the atavistic peasant woman, the *odaa* tree presents the nation as *domestic genealogy* (McClintock 1993, p. 63). As an historical marker, the *odaa* stands, both literally and metaphorically, as a living entity spanning many generations, making events of the past—actual or mythical—dynamically present. Viewed this way, the *odaa* represents not only the political office of Oromo antiquity, but also a family tree with its many branches symbolising the expansion of the nation from its ancient origins to the present generation—Oromo is considered the ‘father’ of both the genealogies of *Boorana* and *Bareentumma* (or *Barrentu*) (Mohammed Hassen 1990, p. 4), popularly regarded as the founding fathers of the Oromo nation.

Like most questions of antiquity, there is uncertainty about the meaning of these two categories. Most Oromo think of *Boorana* and *Bareentumma* as the two distinct founding fathers of the Oromo nation and regard their ancestors as dividing into one of the two categories. Alternatively, Gemetchu Megerssa (1994, pp. 24-7) argues that the division is a mental one as opposed to a genealogical one; and he regards the two categories as designating the division of the social body into right and left respectively. He argues that the term ‘Oromo’ is derived from the eponym *horo* which can be traced to the verb *horu* meaning ‘to reproduce’, and suggests that the Oromo people, ‘the sons of Horo’, are divided into five groups, not two. Nevertheless, despite these uncertainties, nationalist ideology assigns *Boorana* and *Bareentumma* as the two distinct founding fathers of the Oromo national genealogy.

Among Melbourne's Oromo, an example of the nationalist and familial appropriation of *Boorana* and *Bareentumma* is the popular wall poster titled *Latinisa Hidda* (an arborescent genealogical term, 'branches going back to the roots'), which features a large 'family tree' with a four-fold symbolic segmentation into root/base, trunk, branch, and leaves.²⁴ The base of the trunk is titled *Oromoo*, and the trunk is divided into two sides. One side reads *Boorana* with three branches (labelled *Gujji*, *Kibbaa* and *Kaabaa*) and seven sub-branches and their shoots/leaves representing the genealogy of *Boorana*. The other half of the trunk, *Bareentumma*, has four branches (labelled *Ittu*, *Humbana*, *Arsi* and *Wallo*), and four sub-branches from *Ittu* and *Humbana* and their shoots/leaves representing the genealogy of *Bareentumma*.

In the Aannolee video production the family trope of ethnic nationalism is vividly portrayed through the negatively erotic image of the young unknown lamenting mother nursing her baby under the large 'family tree'. Another example of such nationalist family trope is a wall-poster (and postcard) recently disseminated among Melbourne's Oromo community, featuring a young mother breastfeeding her baby (cf. Plate 4, between pp. 162 & 163). The large poster shows a simple high-resolution black-and-white photograph of a beautiful young peasant woman gazing down at her baby drinking from her breast. The photograph is bordered by the traditional Oromo colours black-red-white (read symbolically: black for *waaqa*, red for warrior/defence and white for peace). Facing sideways, the photograph shows the right side of the woman (who is probably about eighteen-years old) with her breast exposed, dressed in a sarong-like garment commonly worn by nursing mothers in Oromiya. Her hair is short and braided, and she is adorned with simple country jewellery (necklace and bracelet) of the type worn by women in Boorana or Arsi.

The photograph accentuates the bond of dependency between the nursing mother and her baby. As the baby suckles the mother's breast, a tiny left hand clings onto the mother's dress, and the infant's head, with eyes closed, is supported by the mother's right hand. There is no background to divert the attention of the viewer away from the mother and nursed child. Rather, alongside the woman/mother and infant is a large capitalised question (in apparently misspelt *qubee afaan Oromoo*):

²⁴ Ironically, while the OLF is credited with developing the *odaa* into a popular anti-colonial national symbol, this poster was produced by the OPDO Bureau of Culture in 1994, and may be openly purchased in Oromiya. To this extent the *odaa* has been appropriated into the OPDO's cultural and political discourse, but not as the militantly anti-Ethiopianist symbol promoted by the OLF.

HAADHA KEENA QAABNA (trans. We have our own mother)

KABBIYATIF MAGABARNA? (trans. so why are we slaving for our land?)

At the base of the poster, printed in smaller, lower case font, is the statement (in *afaan Oromoo* and repeated in English):

Oromia, Haadha

Mother Oromia

Of the many Oromo people—both men and women—to whom I have spoken about the wall-poster, nearly all were moved by the picture and felt drawn to it as an image of the Oromo nation. As expressed to me, the dramatic question—HAADHA KEENA QAABNA KABBIYATIF MAGABARNA? ‘We have our own mother so why are we slaving for our land?’—rhetorically highlights the obvious injustice of the Oromo experience of colonialism.

The producer of this anti-colonial poster, Wako Adi, a Booran Oromo man who lives in Sydney, described how he wanted to equate Oromiya, mother and land as one and the same.²⁵ He intended to use the figure of the unnamed peasant mother as the iconographical image of the national land (*biyya Oromiya*). Like the ‘gendered schizophrenia’ of the unnamed woman’s body in *Yaadannoo Aannolee*, the body of the young and unnamed peasant woman/mother is appropriated as both victim and iconic goddess for the purposes of arousing anti-colonial nationalist sentiment. Again, the timeless image of the rural nursing mother (‘inert, backward-looking and natural’) represents the atavistic and authentic ‘body’ of Oromo national tradition.

This image, unlike the Aannolee peasant woman/mother, is positively erotic as the young woman exposes her breast, adorned body and face. Meanwhile, like the Aannolee image, she has no identity, and is eroticised as the mother of all Oromo, a figure who ensures a continuity with the past and the land (*Haadha Keena Qaabna, Oromia Haadha*). But she is also vulnerable: the defenceless mother with nursing child who, facing male invaders, requires men to come to her defence. To

²⁵ Interview, October 1998.

this extent, she is the symbol of the nation whose agents are men, regardless of the role women actually play in the nation.

On one occasion, I discussed this wall-poster with a group of two men and two women in Melbourne. None had seen the poster before I showed it to them. All gazed in wonder at the picture and the captions. One woman said she loved it, and the others indicated similar sentiments. After suggesting to them that perhaps the picture was degrading to women because it could be read as nationalist exploitation of their bodies, I was quickly rebuked. One of the women insisted that the poster was ‘uplifting of the Oromo mother because she is shown giving what she has to the baby—she is feeding the people. It is uplifting because we are respecting the contribution that she makes to the nation’. Similarly, one of the men explained how:

In Oromo society, you love nothing more than your mother. That is why we consider nothing more precious. Even if a boy marries, his mother will always remain closest to him. It is the same with the land Oromiya: she is our mother and we will always love her, but it is also the land of our father. The possession of the land is masculine but the qualities of it are feminine. That is why this picture is uplifting mothers.

Such idealised comments surprised and alerted me. They sharply exposed my own positionality: that I was perhaps falsely reading Oromo motherhood along the hegemonic and inappropriate lines of ‘Western’ feminisms, whereby motherhood is variously identified with domestic confinement, which in turn equates with patriarchal victimhood—the outside/inside, public/private, agent/victim binary distinctions. On the contrary, in Africa, and more specifically in Oromiya, as expressed in the above comments, the experience of motherhood is regarded as a cultural mandate and a privilege, and the distinctions between outside/inside and agent/victim are not clearly definable (cf. Ibrahim 1997).

Although feminist theorising has shifted in the past decade, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the writings of ‘Western’ feminists often construct the ‘generic victim’ as a ‘Third world’ woman/mother. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991b) contends that, ‘under Western eyes’, the average ‘Third world’ woman is variously represented as ‘ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised’. Such depiction facilitates and privileges the self-representation of ‘Western’ women as ‘educated, modern, having control

over their own bodies and “sexualities” and the “freedom” to make their own decisions’ (p. 56). Within this dominant narrative, ‘Third world’ women remain ‘gendered subalterns’ who are unable to speak (Spivak 1988a, p. 306; cf. Davies 1983 *Third World—Second Sex*).

As revealed by Oromo informants in Melbourne, my own assumptions reflected such imperialist constructions, which have been fiercely contested by ‘Third world’ or ‘subaltern’ feminists in recent years (cf. bell hooks 1988; Mohanty 1991a, 1991b; and Spivak 1987). The recently emerged and divergent ‘Third world’ feminist movement commonly rejects the universalistic claims of various ‘Western’ feminisms, and elaborates fundamental distinctions between ‘Third world’ feminisms and white/Western, middle-class liberal feminisms. Kuwee Kumsa’s attempt to articulate an Oromo feminism is part of this movement.

Among these distinctions is the rejection by ‘Third world’ feminists of the agent/victim binaries which characterise various ‘Western’ feminisms. ‘Third world’ feminists, by arguing that the contradictions between victimhood and agency are actually the tensions of mutuality and not antagonism, speak simultaneously about the victimhood and power of women (Nnaemeka 1997, p. 3). Such a conjunctive view accords with the ambiguous narration of Oromo woman/mother described throughout this chapter, whereby the conjunctive—paralleling the Deleuze-Guattarian ‘double capture’—is given primacy as the Oromo woman/mother is at once agent and victim. Similarly, from the perspective of ‘Third world’ feminisms, Dawit Eteffa’s paintings which feature in the video recording *Yaadannoo Aannolee* may be read as portraying woman/mother as both agent and victim.

Like the Arsi women in Oromiya discussed earlier, among the women in Melbourne’s Oromo community—who undoubtedly are victims of many layers of oppression—one observes instances of agency and resistance. But not necessarily agency as various ‘Western’ feminists might speak of it. As the following chapter describes, in the domestic postnatal celebration of fertility and motherhood called *ulmaa baha*, many of Melbourne’s Oromo women, through the combining of corporate action with ritual authority, collectively enact Oromo women’s subjectivity or, as Kuwee Kumsa calls it, *siqqee* culture.

Part IV Invoking home:
A LANGUAGE OF SACRALITY

CHAPTER NINE

ULMAA BAHÄ:

FREE WOMEN'S DAY

Maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies. And in all of them, the earth's fertility is traditionally linked to women's maternal powers. Hence the centrality of women as producers and providers and the reverence in which they are held.

Ifi Amadiume (1987, p. 191)

The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular festive and utopian aspect. The cosmic, social and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, p. 19)

Oromo women have experienced many layers of oppression which have compelled them to develop different ways of surviving. Amidst the past and present forms of subjugation, they have learnt strategies for survival which include both passive and active resistance ('resisting as best we can') and assimilation ('surviving as best we know how'). Central to such strategies was the effective demarcation between women's 'inside' and men's 'outside' space. In Melbourne, strategies of resistance and assimilation are manifest in varying ways. This chapter documents the performance of one strategy of resistance called *ulmaa baha*, a post-birth 'rite of passage' that offers an 'inside' space for women—via spoken and sung Oromo ritual and ceremony—to affirm their roles as not only mothers and wives but also 'strong minded nation builders' (Dureti 1987, p. 10) and guardians of their culture. For the mother (in the example below, Muniiraa Ahmed), *ulmaa baha* offers an opportunity to collectively celebrate her sexuality¹ and fertility and, in the process, as Kuwee Kumsa (1997) intimates, enact a contemporary *siiqqee* culture.²

¹ Heterosexual references are used throughout this chapter because homosexual relationships are not publicly condoned within the Melbourne Oromo community.

² Kuwee Kumsa describes *siiqqee* in pre-colonial Oromiya as a 'stick symbolising a socially sanctioned set of rights exercised by Oromo women'. The *siiqqee* stick was given to the bride by her mother on her marriage day and used to 'symbolically regulate a healthy and balanced relationship of power between female and male Oromo' (1997, pp. 115, 121).

Muniiraa Ahmed has been in Melbourne since 1991. She left Dirree dhawaa in 1984 when she was fifteen years old and fled by foot to Djibouti. It took her eight days to walk to Dikhil—a refugee camp close to the Ethiopian border—where she was sexually violated by Djibouti officials. She stayed in Djibouti for two years before coming to Australia.

Her experience is not uncommon among the many Oromo women in Melbourne who fled to Djibouti. Mekuria Bulcha describes the cruelty displayed by Djibouti officials towards refugee women, for whom,

life in Djibouti is a nightmare ... [they] can be picked up from the street or even from their homes for any reason and raped at any time by police ... For many female refugees, the ordeal starts the moment they cross into Djibouti territory where border guards often separate girls and women from male asylum seekers. (1997, p. 21)

Oromo feminist Seada Mohammed (1993) describes how, during the journey from Oromiya to resettlement elsewhere (in Muniiraa's case Australia), many Oromo refugee women³ experienced sexualised violence and forced termination of pregnancy. Like Aitchison's (1984) term 'reluctant witnesses', various Oromo women in Melbourne have stressed how, in the aftermath of these experiences, denial and silence are widely used as survival strategies ('surviving as best we know how') by women in the community.⁴ Given this silence, in no way do I wish to write about what they view as 'unspeakable' (Nordstrom 1994, p. 7), but merely to acknowledge the pervasive bodily and psychic pain, and the ongoing experience of violence and insecurity, that continues to oppress many Oromo women in Melbourne. Against this background, Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha*—with its motif of sexuality and fertility—can be viewed as a strategy of resistance.

Following the birth of her daughter Biftuu, Muniiraa spent forty days inside her house. On only one occasion had she ventured outside, to take her daughter to

³ The term refugee is broadly used in reference to Oromo women who have undergone forced migration. In Melbourne the vast majority of Oromo women were forced migrants and many passed time as refugees in countries such as Kenya, Egypt, Somalia and Djibouti before resettling in Australia.

⁴ Confidential interviews were conducted with ten Oromo women in Melbourne who spoke of the pervasiveness of sexualised violence and forced pregnancy termination. Of these ten, one spoke from first-hand experience, the others gave anecdotal information. Certainly, sexualised violence and forced pregnancy termination continue among the community in Melbourne, but not at the endemic levels evident in Djibouti.

the maternal health centre. According to custom, during this time her husband, Abdulrahman, slept in a separate room from her. At the conclusion of the forty day period of ritual seclusion, referred to as *ulmaa*, her *baha* arrived: both mother and baby were to go outside and a festival of celebration and blessing called *ulmaa baha* would follow. The guests began arriving after two o'clock, excited and expectant, specially dressed in beautiful colours and styles reminiscent of their world back home. The day signalled a 'rite of passage', for Muniiraa and her baby, combined with an array of commonly understood protection and divination rites. These rites were in the control of women, as men were strictly forbidden from participating.

Documenting the roles of mothers and wives in the community has been difficult. In the company of their spouses and other male members of the community, the women usually remained quiet and frequently offered little towards the discussion. It was not until the final stages of the research process that I gained access to various oral histories from women in Melbourne. To obtain their input it was necessary for me (the male researcher) to be accompanied by another Oromo woman close to those with whom I was seeking to talk. I attempted to meet with the women in a space that was free of the influence of their spouses and other adult male family members. Formal meetings seldom worked, and most of the ethnographic material derived from impromptu discussions where the women spoke freely to me via an interpreter (the Oromo woman accompanying me at the time).

The women were generous and showed video recordings of a range of women's gatherings and ceremonies. These recordings were described in detail and provided the means by which rituals and ceremonies that are usually prohibited to men could be observed. The video recordings served as 'oral books' where the women—most of whom are illiterate in English and *afaan Oromoo*—kept the records of their histories, which they frequently viewed (cf. the men's viewing of video recorded nationalist gatherings described in the previous chapter). Quite apart from their intrinsic value, it was necessary to rely upon oral histories simply because there is scant literature available that specifically addresses the roles of mothers and wives in Oromo communities.

As noted in the previous chapter (cf. p. 188), exiled Oromo scholar Kuwee Kumsa's (1997) essay 'The *Siiqqee* Institution of Oromo Women' attempts to

reconstruct *siiqqee* as a symbol around which contemporary Oromo women can organise (p. 118). Her informants indicated that the *siiqqee* institution functioned alongside the male-dominated *gadaa* system and enabled the parallel formation of women's organisations that actively excluded men (p. 119). By establishing a collective sisterhood, according to Kuwee, *siiqqee* enabled Oromo women to exercise authority and control over their sexuality and fertility, and over the most valuable material resources in and around the house (cf. gender dynamics among the Igbo of Nigeria, Amadiume 1987). Despite the onset of colonisation and the accompanying religious and social change, Kuwee regards *siiqqee* as a culture that remains 'deeply ingrained' in Oromo women. According to Kuwee,

today, even in the areas where the name *siiqqee* is only vaguely remembered, the songs, the poems, the folklore, and most of all the deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour that go down through generations, remain intact. Colonial oppression may have been complete in some ways, but ... it has failed to destroy the *siiqqee* culture because Oromo women have devised strategies to preserve a lot of the *siiqqee* resilience.

(1997, p. 135)

Like male Oromo nationalists in their treatment of *gadaa*, Kuwee—when referring to the relationship of *siiqqee* to Oromo women's identity—touches what Zitelmann (1990, p. 9) has referred to as the atavistic and nativist sentiments of the bygone world and links it to the aspired collective status of political self-determination.

Kuwee's essay is the first attempt to academically formulate an autonomous articulation of Oromo feminist concerns. While avoiding the popular idioms of the postcolonial subject (such as the hybrid, syncretic, or in-between), her essay remains a counter-hegemonic attempt to 'write back' in those Oromo women written out of history (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989). Kuwee's writing implicitly pre-empts the postcolonial, as she engages with the colonial experience that shaped her life and continues to oppress women in Oromiya today. In this regard, her writing may be considered part of the broader literature problematically referred to as 'Third world' feminist writing (Mohanty 1991b).

Kuwee's political agenda is evident in her 'Oromocentricity'. Her assertion of a pan-Oromo *siiqqee* culture rests upon notions of atavistic Oromo personality traits dormant within and exclusive to all Oromo women regardless of their level of

awareness. Accordingly, she interprets contemporary acts of solidarity among Oromo women as re-activating an ahistorical *siiqqee* culture. Her attempt to retrieve a subaltern consciousness may be read, as Spivak (1987, p. 204) is inclined to suggest in relation to the South Asian Subaltern Studies group, as a charting of what, in poststructuralist language, could be called the ‘subaltern subject-effect’.

Spivak elaborates how the subordinate academic activist (in this case the Oromo woman Kuwee Kumsa) is strategically compelled (or politically obliged), as the authoritative representative of subaltern consciousness, to locate a ‘will’ (here *siiqqee*) as the sovereign cause, when it is no more than (in the words of Spivak) a ‘subaltern subject-effect’: a combative restoration and claiming of a *positive* subject-position for the subaltern in history (Spivak 1988b, p. 16). Seen this way, Kuwee’s project—not unlike the project of the South Asian Subaltern Studies group (Guha & Spivak 1988)—is the crucially strategic subject-restoration of the Oromo woman—a sort of ‘creative aboriginality’ (Denning 1998, p. 15) in which her portrayal of *siiqqee* may be read as a ‘strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’ (Spivak 1987, p. 205). Or put another way, a sort of strategic going back to go politically forward.

As signalled in the previous chapter (cf. pp. 188-9), the monolithic category of Oromo sisterhood proposed by Kuwee cannot, as Mohanty (1991b, p. 58) suggests in relation to ‘Third world’ women’s subjectivity, be assumed on the basis of gender as a superordinate category that bypasses social class and the plurality of other locations among the diverse Oromo nation. Rather, as argued in relation to Oromo identity throughout this thesis, Oromo sisterhood must be forged in practical relations. The crucial point is that *siiqqee* culture (Oromo sisterhood) is not a monolithic category but an array of formations produced through relations *as well as* being implicated in forming them (p. 59).

While ostensibly nativist, Kuwee’s descriptive analysis does imply that it is through the practise of rituals and ceremonies that *siiqqee* is constituted part of Oromo cultural formation. She contends that the contemporary practise of ‘old time birth rituals ... create an exclusive space for women where they get together in the spirit of sisterhood to celebrate birth and to support women with no children’. Such gathering ensures that ‘the principles of *siiqqee* sisterhood are still in action’ (1997, p. 139). The corporate action and cultural transformation evident in the practise of

Oromo birth rituals among Melbourne's Oromo women, which Kuwee would probably regard as a manifestation of *siiqqee* culture, might actually result from the marginalisation experienced by all Oromo women in Melbourne. Putting aside speculation of possible causes and motivations, Oromo birth rituals in Melbourne could be viewed as combining women's corporate action with ritual authority to articulate what may be called *siiqqee* culture—which is constituted/experienced through such authoritative action.

Among the Melbourne community, traditional Oromo pre- and post-birth rituals are practised to varying degrees by Christian (Orthodox and Protestant) and Muslim Oromo women from different parts of Oromiya. Despite their differing religious and regional backgrounds, the meanings of these rituals are commonly understood and appreciated by all Oromo women, as demonstrated on the day of Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha*, when a diverse range of Oromo women attended and participated.

On the day of her *ulmaa baha* (as the video of the occasion documents), Muniiraa patiently waited in her bedroom with her baby until most of the women arrived. As she lay on her bed, immaculately dressed, adorned in gold jewellery, painted with henna and preparing to go outside, she was asked how she felt. She replied that it felt like it was her wedding day or honeymoon—'It is my second honeymoon'. The two women present responded, 'Then perhaps tonight your next child will be conceived'. She hoped so. Finally, she arose with her child to greet the thirty or so women who had gathered in her home to be with her. Immediately they greeted her with a loud and celebratory *elilebaa* to indicate their feelings of happiness and admiration for the mother and baby.

Following the greetings, as they prepared to go outside, one of the older women present was chosen to carry the baby because she was the one to give the blessing. As Muniiraa later described,⁵ she was also chosen to carry the baby because she was a quiet person, and it was assumed that the infant would grow to be a quiet child if she were nursed outside for the first time by someone with these qualities. A younger woman, Sebiidaa, was given the task of leading the group outside by carrying a small fire that burned incense. A third woman, Shegee, carried a basket with popcorn and three raw eggs alongside the baby.

⁵ Interview, March 1997.

According to Muniiraa,⁶ the small fire carried by Sebiidaa protected the baby from exposure to the ‘evil-eye’ (*ijaa bu-u*). Lambert Bartels (1983) has referred to the ‘evil-eye’ in his study of Oromo religion among the western Oromo, and suggests that there is no clear definition of what is meant by the term, noting that to ‘a great extent belief in the evil-eye ... provides people with easy explanations for misfortunes otherwise inexplicable. A normal way of saying that somebody is sick is still the expression “*Ijatu isa tuqe* - he has been hit by the evil eye” (p. 202). Similar understandings were expressed by various Oromo informants in Melbourne.

The eggs and popcorn carried by Shegee also symbolically served to protect the child. While the women were sitting at the door before going outside for the first time, the raw eggs were thrown and smashed on the ground while popcorn and other small items of food were thrown in the air. The smashing of the eggs was akin to a sacrifice, with the eggs—a powerful symbol of life—absorbing in the present any pain or suffering that may await the child in the future. Mircea Eliade (1965) has noted how the egg frequently features as a potent signifier of fertility in contexts where women secretly gather and ‘organise themselves in closed associations in order to celebrate the mysteries of conception, of birth, of fecundity, and, in general, of universal fertility’ (p. 79). Oromo explanations are less archetypal: according to one twelve year-old boy, Umar, the smashing of the eggs was ‘for the future, to protect the child’, while ‘the popcorn and small foods are in the air to keep away evil’.⁷ The women concurred, but added that it was ‘culture’ not ‘religion’.

The theme of protection featured in the prayers of the women as the eggs were smashed. A prayer for protection and thanksgiving was spoken in Arabic, and then a celebratory song about the child and the mother was offered in *afaan Oromoo* for their safety. Among the women there were no official leaders—the mother inviting the four women to take an active role such as holding the eggs, throwing the popcorn or praying—but it is usually an elder who prays for the child and mother. The actions constituted a ritual performance, but were also precursory to an array of rites performed afterwards when the women returned inside.

⁶ Interview, February 1997.

⁷ Interview, December 1997.

The demarcation between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ features in *ulmaa baha*. The ‘inside’ may be thought of as women’s physical and sexual space, separate from the ‘outside’, the space inhabited by men. As previously mentioned, prior to *ulmaa baha* the mother and infant usually will not have gone outside the home in the forty days since the birth (in Melbourne, a hospital birth)—although during this time the mother may have been on the verandah, which is ambiguously considered ‘inside’. Conversely, the husband will have been ‘outside’, symbolically and to a certain extent physically, as the ‘inside’, the inner sanctum of the home, will have been claimed and possessed by the wife and the women. Additionally, the mother’s sexuality (her ‘inner sanctum’) is closed-off to her husband, as he abstains from intercourse with her during the forty day period.

The perspective on ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in *ulmaa baha* articulated by various Oromo women in Melbourne does not sit easily with various ‘Western’ feminist assumptions about private and public domains. Judging power in ‘outside’ male, primarily white and middle-class terms, ‘Western’ feminist writings variously represent ‘home’ as the family household, and domestic confinement as patriarchal victimhood (cf. pp. 214-5). But, as Bhattacharjee (1997) similarly concludes in relation to South Asian women in New York, reading Oromo motherhood in Melbourne along these lines is inappropriate because ‘home’ and ‘family’ are defined at numerous levels—including the domestic household, the extended Oromo community in Melbourne and the nation Oromiya. Additionally, these layers of ‘home’ have to be examined in the light of the experiences of colonialism, forced migration and resettlement (Bhattacharjee 1997, pp. 313-4).

Diana Kay (1989), in her study of the politics of gender among Chilean refugee women in Glasgow, notes how in Chile the veneration of women as mothers gave them a form of ‘mother power’. By contrast, Chilean women in Scotland, finding few such privileges, ‘experienced an erosion of their power base ... and a fall in status for their traditional roles. They had lost their “women’s world”’ (p. 112). While the varying experiences of Chilean and Oromo mothers in exile should not be conflated, there are parallels: Oromo mothers in Melbourne claim a similar social devaluing of motherhood as, since their departure from Oromiya and arrival in

Australia, they commonly experienced an erosion of their authority and independence as *haadha mana* (wife and mother of the house/family).⁸

Dureti (1987), in a paper presented at a conference on ‘Oromo Revolution’ in Washington DC, briefly discussed the role of mothers in the preservation of Oromo values. She essentialised the role of mothers as educators for their children by reflecting how, back home,

You see women always with their children. While grinding, pounding, weeding, cultivating, building, walking etc., they have a baby bundled up either on their backs or on their sides. It is common that up to the ages of twelve or thirteen, children spend the large portion of their daily hours close to their mothers. The fact of the matter is that the poorer the family, the more time mothers and children spend together ... The mothers prepare the fields on which the seeds [of Oromoness] are to be planted.

(Dureti 1987, p. 11)

Such family dynamics usually depend upon a demarcation between the ‘inside’ domain of mothers (and aunties, grandmothers, sisters and female cousins) where the children dwell, and the place of the father (and male family members) which is separate and ‘outside’ that sphere—a demarcation problematised by the upheaval of forced migration.

Given that male-female relations are already problematic following forced migration from Ethiopia, factors in Melbourne, such as unemployment, the loss of kinship networks, access to single-parent welfare payments and partially state-funded child-care, introduce new dynamics which further problematise matters. For example, unemployed men spend large periods of time sitting alone at home watching television while, in the absence of extended family, children are placed in the care of strangers in day-care centres. Additionally, most women are required to learn English at school or are financially compelled to seek employment. While these factors may offer women new opportunities for independence,⁹ they also

⁸ Numerous mothers (and fathers) in the community complained about the devaluing of motherhood in Australia. Adolescents, too, complained about the lack of respect for mothers in Australia. The term *haadha mana* is a common mother’s title among the eastern Oromo in Melbourne. The title *haadha warra* (mother of the family) is also used, though less frequently.

⁹ Alongside the support and comfort offered by the extended family there is the perception of kinship control exercised over women’s lives, which, when reduced in exile, provides new opportunities for women to develop in a more independent ways (cf. Kay 1989, p. 115).

potentially alter their sense of control over their lives. Given these difficulties, the demarcation between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ worlds celebrated in the ritual *ulmaa baha*, and the power balance between men and women it signifies, may be viewed as representing a new kind of re-negotiation and re-alignment of male-female relations.

This potential for change is evident in the practise of birth rituals in Melbourne. Various female and male informants in Melbourne voiced what might be an idealised notion of *ulmaa baha* in Oromiya (which serves a political purpose today), explaining that these rituals were strictly for women and occurred in the village or local area where the women would all go independently of their husbands. Contrasting these idealisations, in Melbourne *ulmaa baha* is not entirely free of the influence of men: after all, it is often the husband who makes the decision whether the wife can have such a ritual party because he controls the money (it is expensive to have a large number of guests). Furthermore, many women (especially new arrivals), unable to drive or without independent access to a car, are dependent upon men (their husbands, uncles or brothers) to transport them across the city. Often, the men uncomfortably wait around in another room or outside the house during the ritual.

On one occasion the men held their own party in a suburban backyard, cooking meat together on the barbecue and drinking beer (also a ritual!) while the women were inside the house conducting their rites.¹⁰ Superfluous to the events inside, the men expressed their awkwardness and uncomfortableness; one of them commented how, ‘In Oromo culture, we should not be here; this is a women’s day’. Various men ‘tiptoed’ inside the house to get something from the kitchen; moving with extreme care and quietness. Such action indicated collaboration and negotiation (at some personal discomfort) on the part of the men to draw the lines of demarcation. In the new situation they were demarcating the ‘inside’ by defining and constituting the ‘outside’ (i.e. the barbecue area)—but not far enough removed, which gave rise to uneasiness. Seen this way, the nearby backyard barbecue was a liminal area of uncharted tensions and ambiguities for the men.

Contrasting the liminality and ambiguity of the men’s barbecue area, the women’s space inside the house was familiar and unambiguous because, as many

¹⁰ I attended this occasion and mixed with the men outside.

female and male informants insisted, the family home (*mana*) has always been the women's domain in Oromo society, the space where men are 'outsiders'. Contrary to popular conceptions of the family home as a politically neutral space (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 35), since the Abyssinian conquest the Oromo domestic home has remained a primary site for subversion and resistance. Like bell hooks' (1990, p. 41) description of 'homeplace' as a site of resistance and liberation struggle created by African-American women, and Partha Chatterjee's (1993) description of the dissenting Indian home in British colonial India, Oromo women too have recognised the subversive value of the 'inside' space of the family home. In the midst of the oppressive and dominating social reality the home offered an 'inside' space for Oromo women to speak and teach their children *afaan Oromoo*, and to create a nurturing community of resistance and self-recovery. However, while the home was the bastion of Oromo society, it was not exempt from state intervention (most notably during the Derg regime). In Oromiya today, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) internal security officials frequently enter private homes of suspected Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) sympathisers, and often detain women.

One Oromo man in Melbourne recalled how, as a boy growing up in Arsi during Emperor Haile Selassie's rule, despite the threat of such intrusion, his mother forbade him to speak Amharic inside *her* house. While failing to comprehend at the time, he later acknowledged the importance of the resistance effort that took place under the leadership of his mother in the domestic domain:

She told me to speak *afaan Oromoo* or leave the house. She was very angry because she could see that I was changing because of my school. I would come home and be smart and criticise her and our culture. This was what I learnt at school. Our mothers were very tough on us because of this. They were not touched by the Amhara like us [the men].¹¹

Although a far less oppressive context, these words accord with the Australian experience where women are continuing to claim space as theirs—as a space for engendering Oromoness. On the occasion when the men gathered outside around the barbecue the women transformed their novel suburban setting inside the house into a site of ritual that created 'traditional' Oromo practices and beliefs. The

¹¹ Interview, March 1997.

contrast between the men drinking and cooking meat together around the barbecue outside and the women performing rites inside vividly illustrates the differing impact of (post)modernity upon the men and women. The women can reconstitute their cultural point of reference, whereas it is virtually impossible for the men because the cultural model is not there. Instead, the men's space remains diffused and shared with non-Oromo (the backyard barbecue area, an Australian cultural icon). However, despite these limitations, it is possible that the barbecue with its collective cooking of meat made a connection with more ancient cultural models linking meat with the 'herd'.

In Oromiya, the mothers kept many of their traditions alive by not only speaking in *afaan Oromo* but also practising 'hidden' domestic Oromo rituals such as *buna qala* and *ulmaa baha*. The active role of women meant that men's status as head of the family was only nominal: it was the *haadha mana* who controlled affairs 'inside', where Oromo values were nurtured and passed on (Liben B. Qumbi 1989, p. 22). Aguilar (1996), in relation to Waso Boorana society, describes a similar role for women as keepers of the house and demarcators of the space outside and the space inside the house:¹²

Waso Boorana rituals ('national' and 'domestic') follow the distinctions which the Waso Boorana make themselves between the space outside the house and the space inside the house. The outside is associated with men, while the inside is associated with women. In the past and in most cases today, the daily lives of men and women are divided by those spheres of the outside as opposed to the inside. Men go outside the villages with the animals, while women remain inside the villages with the animals that are to be kept closer ... It is in relation to the inside sphere of the *manyatta* [small settlements of Waso Boorana] that domestic rituals and their related practices tend to involve places, spheres and social roles which in Waso Boorana society are closer to women. Women in that sense are conceptually linked not to the herd but to the house ... Men are not excluded from those domestic rituals, on the contrary they take part in them, but they are not the main actors.

(Aguilar 1996, p. 196)

¹² As Aguilar describes, 'The Waso Boorana of Kenya live around the area of Waso Nyiro in the Eastern province of Kenya. They are Oromo speaking peoples, and therefore related to the Boorana in Northern Kenya/Southern Ethiopia and the Oromo of Ethiopia' (1996, p. 191).

Aguilar's observation that women are conceptually linked with the 'house', whereas men are linked with the 'herd' accords with the broader context of gender relations in Oromiya—a context familiar to many of Melbourne's Oromo with rural backgrounds in eastern Oromiya.

Cultural identity requires, as it were, a stage (a context) on which the performance can be enunciated: in Melbourne, Oromo women can reconstruct their stage (the house), whereas the men cannot reconstruct theirs (the herd). Such a dynamic implies a fundamental redrawing of the features of Oromoness, in which the women's side of the equation assumes a greater prominence. This dynamic may be compared with the situation of other oppressed minority groups such as the Koori (indigenous southeastern Australians) in Melbourne: among their community women are generally seen to be the ones maintaining a sense of continuity, whereas men are often linked with gaol, alcoholism and mental breakdown.

Among Melbourne's Oromo, the women play the more important part in the domestic practise of rituals which enact traditional Oromo practices and beliefs. Among the eastern Oromo *kismedal* is widely practised. The rite involves the slicing of bread prepared by the mother of the house in order to keep evil away. Usually the first slice is eaten by the youngest girl present. In the case of *ulmaa baha* and *dhareeysa/sittina fatuma* (a pre-birth ritual), the presence of men is strictly forbidden, as the women are in control of the affair. One woman described *ulmaa baha* as a 'free women's day'.¹³

Inside Muniiraa's house the 'free women's day' continued as they sat together on the floor in the loungeroom. Like other scenes described in Chapter Four, all the furniture had been removed: reconstituting familiar 'traditional' space (cf. pp. 105-6). The older women sat quietly, leaning against the wall, while the younger ones chatted and laughed among themselves. It was mostly married women who participated.¹⁴ In the background, Ali Birraa's cassette blared and the small loungeroom vibrated excitement.

¹³ Interview, January 1998.

¹⁴ Married women are considered here to be those with a male partner whom the community recognise to be their husband (Chapter Ten describes the usual procedure, *guduunfa*, for the negotiation of marriage alliances within the community).

The women expectantly waited for the next part of the ritual to commence. Outside the front door under the stairwell two women, Gini and Fozia, were busy cooking the ceremonial porridge *dareemoo* (also referred to as *marqa*) in a big pot on a large portable gas stove. They stirred the thick barley flour cooking in boiling water with a huge wooden spoon, laughing together as the video camera tracked-in on them. Gini humorously boasted that they were doing a most important job cooking the porridge, the most important task for the afternoon. A close up shot of the boiling *dareemoo* was then shown on the video.

The use of porridge in Oromo birth rituals is common in Melbourne, and practised by women from various areas of Oromiya (central, southern, western and eastern). There are scant references to the porridge within the literature. Bartels (1983) describes a 'special porridge, "the porridge of birth giving", which is not eaten by man, not even by the smallest boy' (p. 319). He observed the symbolic importance bestowed upon the porridge by the western Oromo, as in the days following the child's birth when the women of the neighbourhood would come together 'several times in the house of their companion to sing and to eat a special porridge' (ibid.). An edition of *Oromtitti* (1979)—a publication of the Union of Oromo Women in Europe—describes how, in Oromo society, 'porridge is made as a food of speciality when a woman gives birth to a child. They make and eat this porridge for a boy on the fifth and ninth days of his birth while it is eaten only on the fifth day for the girl' (p. 12). There is extensive anecdotal evidence in Melbourne to suggest that the ritual use of *dareemoo* as a 'porridge of birth-giving' is practised by Oromo women from all areas of Oromiya, suggesting a pan-Oromo religious perspective articulating with Islam and Christianity—a theme discussed later in this chapter.¹⁵

Dareemoo was discussed in numerous interviews with Oromo women in Melbourne, where there is general consensus about the symbolism of the porridge. Confirming Gini's boast, all the informants considered the process of cooking the *dareemoo* in a pot to be an important part of the activities. Bartels (1983), in his description of the fertility rite known as *buna qala* (or *killa qala*), provides an example of the embryonic symbolism attached to the pot.¹⁶ *Buna qala* involves the

¹⁵ Among the non-Oromo Ethiopians in Melbourne there is another thick porridge-like food eaten after childbirth, called *gumfo*, though various non-Oromo Ethiopian informants insisted that it does not carry the same symbolic meaning as the Oromo practice described here.

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade (1965, p. 57) describes the pot as a common Indian symbol for the uterus.

cooking of cherry-like coffee fruits in butter in a large pot known as *wachitii*, which burst open when the hot butter enters them. Bartels' informants describe the ritual as an effective symbol of the 'hoped for result of sexual intercourse: childbirth' (p. 287). The purpose of the ritual is to ensure fertility and fecundity, with the chewing of the *buna qala* accompanied by prayers for offspring (children and cattle) and for an abundant life.

Many of Melbourne's Oromo who grew-up in homes where their mothers practised the *buna qala* ritual remember them preparing the butter and coffee-berries and the prayers that were offered. As they recall, the rite was only performed by married women, although men could chew the cooked coffee fruit. The older women in particular understood and most appreciated the significance of the pot in *buna qala*. As explained by an older woman who previously practised the rite in Oromiya, *buna qala* is not practised in Melbourne because 'it is too sacred and we don't have the right equipment; we need a special clay pot that is not available here. Without this pot we cannot do it'.¹⁷ Bartels' informants refer to the clay pot *wachitii* as symbolic of the group's lineage of descent, with each roll of clay symbolic of the lineage's cohesion. The pot also symbolises the womb in which the *buna qala* is prepared through the insertion of the stick used for stirring (1983, p. 289). On the day of Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha*, the large pot used to cook *dareemoo* (the 'porridge of birth-giving') was not made from clay but pressed steel and belonged to the Oromo Women's Association. The same large pot is used whenever the women need to cook *dareemoo*.

In the loungeroom, the women grew impatient as they waited for the porridge to be brought in. Finally, the *dareemoo*, now the perfect texture for eating, was carried into the loungeroom in three large bowls by Gini and Fozia. Like the arrival of an expensive delicacy, the women, sitting on the floor in a circle in three groups, expressed their delight by immediately eating the porridge. Using their right hands, the members of each group ate from their common bowl. The room was a raucous of noise as the women feasted on the porridge and laughed loudly. While all this was happening Ali Birraa's music continued blaring in the background. Matching the festive aura, one woman later explained how eating the *dareemoo* together was 'fun and a celebration, the most important part of the day'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Interview, January 1998.

¹⁸ Interview, December 1997.

After about five minutes of eating, the three groups jointly raised each bowl in the air above their heads and collectively sang a fertility song in *afaan Oromoo*. The leader of the singing, Zeinaba Ibrahim, the oldest woman present, sat by herself facing the three groups of women. The song consisted of a chorus and series of verses. As subsequently described to me by Zeinaba (through an interpreter), the song was ‘asking the God of motherhood for a blessing for the women to make them fertile and happy and to give sympathy to the childless woman’. Together they sang about the honour of the mother, that ‘the God of motherhood would give her peace and help us all when we are in labour, when we give birth’. The song also requested that sons be given to the childless women present ‘so their husbands would stop complaining’, and that ‘the fertile women will give birth again and again and never stop going to labour’ (cf. Bartels discussion of Maram the ‘divinity’ of motherhood, 1983, pp. 124-8). Immediately after the singing, Zeinaba lead the women in prayer, spoken in *afaan Oromoo* and finished in Arabic. Following each request, the group approvingly responded in an Islamic fashion with *aamiin* (amen):¹⁹

<i>Yaa waaqa nagaya nugodhi</i>	God give us peace
<i>Yaa waaqa nujabeeyssi</i>	God give us strength
<i>Yaa waaqa nagayaa fii faayyaa nuukhenni</i>	God give us peace and health
<i>Yaa waaqa kha qabuuf ida’ii khaqabanneef khenni</i>	God give those without children a new child and add for those who have children
<i>Yaa waaqa gammachu dhaloota ilmama lamadooti wallinu haa fidu</i>	God let us get together again for another child
<i>Yaa waaqa nu gammachiisi</i>	God give us happiness
<i>Yaa waaqa ilmama hegeree qabu nuuf khenni</i>	God give us a child that has a good future
<i>Yaa waaqa rabbi ilma khaayoo qabu kha ilmaa inta ifboodan ida’atu kha hiree bareedu qabu kha haadha fii abbaa khabaju nuuf khenni</i>	God give to the child the opportunity for more brothers and sisters, respect for mother and father, and a successful life

¹⁹ Details of the song and prayer were given in *afaan Oromoo* by Zeinaba Ibrahim and interpreted by Muniiraa Ahmed and Sofiyaa Ahmed while I viewed the video-recording of the event with them.

[Arabic] *Peace be on the Prophet Mohamed and on his followers.*
Their blessing be on us
Because he passed away peace be on him.

As the prayer finished the women spontaneously issued a loud celebratory *elilebaa* to indicate their feelings of happiness and cheer and resumed eating the *dareemoo*.

Zeinaba Ibrahim, who is considered a ritual expert by various Oromo in Melbourne, described how prayers offered during *ulmaa baha* do not follow a strict format but do have three basic requests that remain the key lines:

<i>Yaa waaqa kha qabuuf ida'ii khaqqabanneef</i> <i>khenni</i>	God give those without children a new child and add for those who have children
<i>Yaa waaqa gammachu dhaloota ilmma</i> <i>lamadooti wallinu haa fidu</i>	God let us get together again for another child
<i>Yaa waaqa ilmma hegeree qabu nuuf</i> <i>khenni</i>	God give us a child that has a good future

These three basic requests (which were offered during the eating of *dareemoo*) perhaps explain why the women gathered together. Mircea Eliade (1965) would probably attribute their closed gathering or cult association to a pre-eminent women's 'cosmic sacrality' or form of religious experience (pp. 79, 80). In a similar vein, Kuwee Kumsa (1997) refers to a 'cosmic sacrality' among Oromo women: the power of the divinity *ateetee* invoked by them in the belief that they will be fertile and prosperous (p. 139). While the name *ateetee* was not spoken at Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha*, certainly prayers were offered and powers evoked that were neither of a distinctly Islamic nor Christian flavour; rather, they appeared to be from another, more ancient, source.

Immediately following the prayer and eating of *dareemoo*, an array of foods—rice, sauces, sambosa, fruits, popcorn and sweets—were brought into the room and the musical performances commenced. For the following two hours the women ate, danced and sang together. The celebratory dancing combined commercial and religious styles. The younger women, while lyrically improvising in

afaan Oromoo, enjoyed dancing *shaggooyyee*—a jumping style of dance with a growling vocal (*goomaraa*) made popular in eastern *Oromiya* by the group *Urjii Bakkalchaa* and artists such as Ture Lenco (cf. pp. 126-7). Following Samiiraa's rhythmic lead on the bongo drum, they added their own innovation with tambourine and wooden spoons against plastic containers.

With the focus now upon Muniiraa's imminent resumption of sexual relations with her husband, the theme of fertility continued into the musical performance. As the video of the occasion documents, the older women (those past child-bearing years) sat on the floor watching, while the younger women (those of child-bearing years) expressed heightened female sexuality through hand gestures and erotic dance movements (shaking their breasts and torso) as they teased and flirted with one another. The improvised lyric boasted about Muniiraa's sexual prowess as others displayed mocking envy and jealousy. The song continued for about twenty-five minutes until fatigue set in and they took rest.

Following the break, the older women assumed musical roles different from the younger ones. Emphasising their status as the carriers and upholders of Oromo tradition (and de-emphasising their sexuality), they led the group in a mixture of prayerful dance and singing commonly called *heellee* (from the Hararghe region of eastern *Oromiya*). The performance of *heellee* enabled a number of the older women to creatively lead the group in prayer while rhythmically dancing and clapping (with no accompanying percussion instruments) as the prayers were spontaneously composed and sung in *afaan Oromoo*. Praying with hands held up in worship, they sang for Muniiraa, all the women present, and for freedom in *Oromiya*. The women's faces expressed a sense of wonder combined with sadness as they sang a lament for *Oromiya*. In *afaan Oromoo* (not Arabic), the prayers evoked the ancient pre-Islamic source of the divine. Contrasting the flirtatious playfulness of the younger women, the older women's de-emphasis (or negation) of their sexuality might indicate a tension between tradition/culture and sexuality—women's sexuality might be perceived (by men) as *threatening* the cultural order.

The invoking of divine power, with sexually explicit singing and dancing by the younger women, was made possible by the seclusion of the domestic venue. Such behaviour would be unacceptable in the public, male-dominated religious domains previously described (cf. pp. 105-7). By providing a private forum for musical

expression where the many social and religious restrictions regarding behaviour in the public domain were lifted, the women could ‘sing their secret songs without fear of the men overhearing’ (Nettl 1983, p. 335).

It would appear that the women’s activity was not considered culturally significant by most of the men. When it was mentioned to various Oromo men that I was writing about *ulmaa baha*, they often responded with scornful laughter and raised doubts about the point of it: ‘Should not you be writing about the more important cultural things like [the male-dominated] *gadaa*?’ When asked about the women’s ritual activities around childbirth, one man, whose wife had recently given birth, commented that they are ‘just silly women’s things that she does not need to do. She wants to have it [*ulmaa baha*] but I think it is just a waste of time and too much trouble’.²⁰

Unlike the male-dominated ritual occasions, *ulmaa baha* is an occasion marked by forms of ritual based on laughter. In the official religious realm of Oromo life in Melbourne (managed by the Islamic sheiks and, to a lesser extent, the Christian pastors), these ritually connected ‘silly’ activities are not condonable because they constitute a ‘second world’, characterised by grotesquely exaggerated bodily behaviours, billingsgate, comic debasement and oral parodies. Like Rabaleis’ world (Bakhtin 1984), the second world of *ulmaa baha* is sharply distinct from the seriously official, ecclesiastical rites and ceremonies presided over by male religious leaders. Outside the reaches of officialdom, and to the extent that it offers a completely different, grotesquely real extra-ecclesiastical and extra-political second world to its participants, *ulmaa baha* may be considered a carnival ritual.

The notion of grotesque bodily realism is pivotal to Bakhtin’s (1984) analysis of carnival festivities in the European Middle Ages. The female body as grotesque (for instance, in pregnancy or ageing) is a powerfully resonant symbol of carnival (Russo 1986). Although the spectacle of Muniiraa’s *ulmaa baha* was ‘inside’, and not therefore strictly carnival according to Bakhtin’s schema, the emphasis upon the female body and fertility brought a grotesque realism to the occasion. Sensuous images of the female genital organs ready for conception featured throughout the afternoon’s activities. What amounted to a celebratory effigy of the womb began with the first steps outside for the mother after forty days of sexual reclusion,

²⁰ Interview, March 1998.

followed by the new child's blessing, and included the messy collective eating of the porridge of fertility *dareemoo*, the fertility prayers (spoken and sung), the erotic playful dancing (featuring maternal breasts) and singing, the festive eating, and the parodies and flirtatious stories of lovemaking.

Belonging to an overtly different sphere than Islamic and Christian religiosity, the private themes of copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, eating and drinking were blended with the bigger cosmic picture of the creator, creation and the natural cycles of life. The feast of *dareemoo* related to the occurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle—fertility, reproduction and birth—and conveyed a festive perception of the world and the cycles of birth and death. Offering examples from European social orders of the Middle Ages, Bakhtin (1984) suggests that such earthy aspects of the world and of the deity were once considered equally sacred and official in 'primitive' communities, but were later transferred to a non-official level (p. 6). This observation, although Eurocentric (like Bakhtin's work in general), is relevant to the diverse range of sacred earthy rituals which would appear to have been officially practised by Oromo people before the changes wrought by Islam, Christianity and empire.

Confirming the existence of official and non-official levels of ritual, none of the women informants referred to *ulmaa baha* activities as sacred or religious.²¹ Instead, they were spoken of as social ceremonies which had nothing to do with religious rituals. However, the distinction was not always clear. One informant, while insisting that it was not religious, described how the occasion of *ulmaa baha* 'basically had to do with prayers'.²² Another woman, in contrast, insisted that 'the porridge is just culture, there is no religion; they just eat the porridge and then pray for the child to be happy'.²³

Muniiraa asserted there was no sacred element to the activities held in her house, that the event was strictly cultural—Oromo culture. She distinguished Islam as her religion from these Oromo cultural practices, explaining how there was 'no power in the eggs to help the child or the ritual. The only power was in praying to

²¹ Twenty Oromo women were interviewed about the significance of these birth rituals. They were predominantly Muslims from eastern Oromiya (Hararghe and Arsi), but also included Christians from the west (Wallaga).

²² Interview, December 1997. Cf. Bartels' comment that 'the invocation of some mystical, superhuman power does not need to be explicit' (1983, p. 34).

²³ Interview, January 1998.

Allah for help. Even some of the older women wanted to use butter [a traditionally sacred ritual item among the Oromo] on my head and face but I refused. This would have been too much an offence to Allah'.²⁴ The phrase 'too much an offence to Allah' perhaps carries with it the implication that Muniiraa was aware of the potential of the rite to confirm a source of power beyond praying to Allah: a more ancient Oromo source. Another woman, who had recently given birth, declared that she would not hold *ulmaa baha* because she did not believe in it—as in belief in Allah—but later conceded that she would have a small social gathering to eat *dareemoo* together.²⁵

While speaking of these practices as largely social activities with no religious meaning, the women continue to enact ostensibly 'religious' dimensions within them (e.g. the fertility song and prayer). The common rationale for the ongoing practice was 'It is our culture'—which perhaps signifies the distinction between the expression/celebration of 'culture' (by women and ordinary men) and the theoretical elaboration of 'culture' (by the official religious leaders). One woman elaborated how a 'similar cultural practice in Australia is the christening of babies. *Ulmaa baha* is like an Oromo "christening" that happens at forty days. It is a social time when the women meet to wish the child and mother well. It is also like the shower parties that women have in Australia'.²⁶ Like the largely secularised christenings and consumerised shower parties, Oromo cultural practices keep alive ritual traditions whose origins are largely forgotten. Nevertheless, despite participants' expressions of equivocation, the authority of *ulmaa baha* rests in its efficacy: it is performed because the participants believe in its capacity to successfully produce the intended results which range from the protection from evil (religious) to the gathering of women together for the celebration of culture (non-religious/social) (cf. Bartels 1983, p. 35).

Tied with efficacy is the insistence that rituals must follow a proper procedure. A person with ritual expertise must be brought in—somebody who understands the correct use of the ritual symbols. Within the Melbourne setting these experts are the few older women available, women who know the traditional prayers and the correct way to perform them. These occasions provide opportunities for these select women to establish their personal authority as those who carry and

²⁴ Interview, December 1997.

²⁵ Interview, February 1998.

²⁶ Interview, January 1998.

uphold the Oromo traditions. Unlike the male religious leaders—notably, the sheiks—they possess no title; rather, authority is bestowed upon them because they are custodians of the Oromo traditions. These older women offer advice to the younger ones, who often go to them if they have a problem. They function as elders even though they do not have a formal role.²⁷

In contrast, the male religious leaders find their authority in Islam, which dominates the religious landscape for many of Melbourne's Oromo men.²⁸ During the strict fasting period of Ramadan the men visit the mosque while the women stay home preparing food and looking after the children. The men have commonly been instructed in Islamic prayers and rituals from a young age while the women remained 'inside' and—unable to read the Koran—limited to a simple Islamic *fatihaa* prayer. Aguilar observed similar social arrangements among the Waso Boorana, where,

The place of women in [the] process of community cannot be underestimated. After all ... Boorana men in the Waso area tend to live in the public sphere of the town, the mosque, the market, and the government administration. Children go to school, however, and from their birth spend more time with their mothers than with their fathers. Due to the fact that women have a less prominent role in the practices of Islam, Boorana women in the Gabra Tulla, for example, perceive their traditions as more important, and many of them leave Islam if they are divorced by their husbands, or if their husbands die.

(Aguilar 1996, p. 196)

Again, Aguilar's observations among the Waso Boorana women accord with the situation in Melbourne, where collective activities such as *ulmaa baha* signal the women's desire—with no prominent role in the practices of Islam—to include Oromo ritual moments in their lives (Aguilar 1996, p. 195). Kuwee Kumsa (1997, p. 148) notes the 'renaissance' of birth rituals among Oromo women and considers it reflective of an emergent Oromo 'cultural nationalism'. This is the case in Melbourne, where many Oromo women commence participating in these rituals for

²⁷ The roles of older women were conveyed in a number of interviews with both younger and older women in the community.

²⁸ The majority of Melbourne's Oromo have Islamic backgrounds; consequently the leaders of the Oromo Christian Fellowship carry little authority among the broader community.

the first time and seek to creatively evoke and confirm their *Oromumma* to each other, and to their children.

Given that many Oromo women in Melbourne had never previously performed *ulmaa baha* for their own children, the efficacy of the combination of rites would seem to lie in their capacity to mediate a liminal experience. Such liminality, which often characterises public rituals among oppressed groups (such as Melanesian cargo cults or frenzied working-class Pentecostals), is sometimes regarded as basically conservative: a means of reinforcing status distinctions through the purging of participants' anti-social sentiments. But perhaps, in direct contrast, as Victor Turner would argue, such rites may also create social conflict by relaxing or suspending some of the requirements of everyday social relations, making possible alternative social arrangements. Viewed this way, a motivation behind *ulmaa baha* may well be the desire to temporarily transcend the social and existential limitations impacting upon the participants' lives (Turner in Alexander 1991, p. 17).

In this context, Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha*—through the performance of language (spoken and sung)—can be seen to have enabled the articulation of a collective identity that transcended the many 'outside' pressures impacting upon the participants. The combination of dance and music with spoken and sung language represented a form of carnival celebration, the ritual activities constituting a liminal experience for the participants. Dwelling 'inside' Muniiraa's house—eating, dancing, singing and praying together—the women creatively renegotiated mutual ties (of *Oromumma* or *siiqqee*) and affirmed commonalities. In this respect, Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha* mirrored other ritual activities among Melbourne's Oromo which similarly enable the transformative renegotiation of mutual ties and kinship within the broader community. As will become clear in the next (and final) chapter, such renegotiation may be viewed as following a transformed cultural model of *moggaasa*.

CHAPTER TEN

MOGGAASA:

RENEGOTIATING AND INCORPORATING AFFINES

These spaces where we are neither one thing nor another are spaces of defining rather than definition. The ordinary moments of living are interrupted for a time by abnormal moments when the focus is on identity and the meaning of things. Sometimes we call these moments ritual. Sometimes we call them theatre.

Greg Denning (1998, p. 86)

The negotiation of ties and affinities is central to the collective reality of being Oromo. The past ‘home’ was marked by extensive patterns of kinship which, like a ‘household’, provided a space in which to safely negotiate identities. In the context of exile—where kinship patterns are severely fragmented and one’s social base and identity eroded—the household has been demolished. But, as this chapter elaborates through a series of episodes, among Melbourne’s Oromo the household can extend and incorporate a range of affines via three forms of ritual: migration, engagement (*guduunfa*), and birthday/naming celebrations (*gudisaa*). These ritual modes mediate the transformation of kinship by providing contexts for the renegotiation of affines: the building of a safe place from which Melbourne’s Oromo are able to engage the world around them. Ritual practices act as pathways to liminal thresholds, enabling people to reinvent themselves and their collective identities. Such affinal renegotiations may be viewed as following a transformed cultural model of *moggaasa*: the Oromo cultural genealogy of growing, fostering and prospering together with affines through mutual bonds of peace (*nagaa*).

Many Oromo in Melbourne are without any relatives nearby. Exile under these conditions is most painful: they are ‘easy targets’ and often isolated within the broader community. The arrival of relatives signals long-awaited relief. Mariyam arrived in Australia in 1994.¹ Before her arrival she spent three years as a refugee in Nairobi, where she was surrounded by an extensive network of kin. She began a new life in Australia after being sponsored by her husband. The marriage was

¹ The following story is from interviews conducted with Mariyam and her family members, March–April 1998.

arranged in Nairobi between the two families and, like other Oromo women with similar arrangements, shortly after arriving in Australia Mariyam became very unhappy.

Mariyam's marriage was placed under tremendous stress and she left her husband nine months after arriving in Australia. Immediately, the husband's brothers called her uncle in Nairobi to complain about the actions of his niece; he responded that the girl had a right to leave him if she was badly treated. Despite her uncle's defence—via long distance telephone call—Mariyam's actions compounded her isolation and, having no male relatives in Australia to defend her, she incurred the condemnation of the older men within the community. To refuse a husband was not considered 'cultural' and brought shame upon the man. As her social network quickly evaporated, leaving her with no household from which to gain a credible base in the wider community, attempts were made by her husband's associates to have her sent back to Nairobi.

Relief finally arrived two years after Mariyam's separation when the Australian Government issued residency visas to her two brothers and two sisters. Four relatives were to arrive from Nairobi on the same flight. On the evening of their arrival Mariyam nervously waited at Melbourne Airport with a small group of friends. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, the new arrivals exited the customs lounge and the greetings followed. Mariyam cried ceaselessly for the next half hour as they travelled back to her home in the car. Her brother Iliyaas, delighted to be in Australia, was puzzled. He asked her, 'Why are you crying like this?' She responded, 'Because we are now five'.² The response indicated her feelings of relief at no longer being alone in Australia. Having her people nearby meant she was secure. Her status had changed and she could no longer be so easily isolated within the community.

Mariyam's story is not unique. For Oromo in Melbourne, gaining a social base in the form of kin is vital to acceptance in the wider community. A hierarchy of 'ritual worth' is observable, whereby those with large households gain a credible social base in Melbourne's wider Oromo community. In contrast, those without such a base are suspect and easily subjected to character assassination. In Blackhurst's terms (1994), 'the household provides the passport to community membership' (p.

² Interview with Iliyaas, April 1998.

35). As employed in this chapter, the term 'household' refers to kinship units spread throughout Melbourne which, although not dwelling in the same house, can be referred to as extended households. These households are commonly located in the same geographical area, in some cases a few streets apart; others are spread throughout Melbourne and some are inter-city. In any case, via local telephone and automobile they are in close proximity.

One year after Mariyam's relatives arrived in Melbourne she moved to Sydney, where none of her relatives lived. Contrary to appearances, the move did not constitute a return to isolation; rather, the fact that her relatives were in Australia within close communicative proximity meant that her household was nearby. Unlike life in Oromiya, the availability of communications technology and easy access to transport in Australia ensure that close geographical proximity is not necessary for the maintenance of households. Just having those with the same tribal affiliation and paternal pedigree in Australia provides security in the form of a household.

The importance of paternal pedigree and tribal affiliation in relation to ritual and social significance is examined by Blackhurst in regard to the Shoan Oromo in Arsi. He comments that 'both are seen as media through which ritual worth and social purity are documented and passed on from generation to generation' (1994, p. 32). However, despite the significance of these two criteria, he suggests that other openings of incorporation into kinship units (households) are available which enable households to grow without compromising their basic principles of kinship. In Melbourne, confirming Blackhurst's findings, a degree of social ambiguity surrounds the processes of kinship incorporation.

Central to this ambiguity is the disposition or capacity of Oromo people to assume 'fictive kin' relations in order to survive. The capacity for the inclusion of outsiders within a household is frequently touted by Oromo nationalists as an essential characteristic of Oromo society in contrast to the exclusiveness of their Abyssinian conquerors. Leaving aside the nationalist rhetoric, numerous scholars who have worked closely with the Oromo in various areas of Oromiya suggest a marked communal disposition towards inclusiveness (cf. Baxter 1994; Blackhurst 1994, 1996; and Haberland 1963). Indeed, since the publication of Mohammed Hassen's (1990) book *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History 1570-1860*, scholars of the

Oromo have generally acknowledged that the rapid and successful population upsurge associated with their northward expansion, beginning in the sixteenth century, may be partially attributed to their capacity to incorporate outsiders (cf. Blackhurst 1996). The mechanism for such incorporation is referred to by Blackhurst (1994) as *guddifachu* (to adopt) and Mohammed Hassen (1990) as the Oromo institution of *moggaasa* (adoption and name giving).

Under the umbrella term *moggassa*, Mohammed Hassen (1990, p. 21) delineates two forms of adoption: *guddifacha*, individual adoption by a household, and *moggaasa*, the practice of adoption of a group or individual into another group such as a clan or a tribe. In anthropological terms, *moggaasa* might equate with ‘fictive kinship’, which is employed throughout this chapter in reference to relations between persons who, while unrelated by either blood or marriage, regard one another in kinship terms. Actual kinship bonds serve as the models for affective obligations among non-kin, and with the designation of ‘kin’ status comes both respect and responsibility: ‘fictive kin’ are expected to participate in the duties of the household (cf. Chatters, Taylor & Jayakody 1994).

Regardless of what the exact terms may be, throughout this chapter *moggaasa* is used to signify the transformation of kinship among Melbourne’s Oromo, and refers to a ritually sanctioned cultural model of affinal growth. As Blackhurst (1996, p. 242) suggests, while *guddifachu* (or *guddifacha*) may refer to the nurturing the adopted receives from a household and the growth of that household, *moggaasa* denotes the public change in status that accompanies incorporation into a group. In Melbourne, as the episode of Mariyam’s divorce, exclusion and reunion with her household demonstrated, incorporation into an Oromo group or household often involves a public change of status vis-à-vis credibility and security among the broader community.

With limited opportunities for family reunion, Melbourne’s Oromo have looked to immigration as a medium for the negotiation of ‘fictive kinship’. Sponsoring the migration of non-relatives becomes a way of extending their households as the combining of sponsorship with various ritual moments enables newly arrived non-relatives to be accepted as household members. Here, *moggaasa* might be said to refer to the incorporation of new affines via sponsorship and migration.

The process of sponsoring someone to migrate to Australia is costly and takes a number of years: usually the application forms are lodged at least two years before an entry visa is granted. Immigration guidelines are strict—permitting only the sponsorship of blood relatives or spouses—and many applications are rejected. Nevertheless, fraud is common and not very difficult, especially given that identification papers in the Horn of Africa are scarce and often forged. Because immigration laws are heavily invested in marital relationships, the quickest and easiest way to get someone to Australia is to sponsor them as a fiancé/spouse. Hence, the fraudulent sponsoring of a fiancé/spouse is prevalent—often for the purpose of enabling a non-relative to escape from the harsh conditions of refugee life in places like Djibouti and Nairobi.

As already described, Djibouti is probably one of the harshest places to be an Oromo refugee (cf. p. 218). Since the collapse of the Derg, the Djibouti government has cooperated with the current Ethiopian regime by arresting Oromo community leaders, banning the Oromo Relief Association (ORA), and forcibly repatriating a number of Oromo asylum seekers (Fossati, Namarra & Niggli 1997). Abbaa Mohamed, a noted elder among the Melbourne community, agonised over his son Youssuf's welfare in Djibouti where he lived for five years without any legal rights. Desperate for the welfare of his son, Abbaa Mohamed approached Sofiyaa Ahmed (the sister of Muniiraa who featured in the previous chapter), a single woman in the community, in the hope that she would enter into an agreement to fraudulently sponsor Youssuf as her fiancé.³

Arriving in 1986 after spending three years in Djibouti, Sofiyaa was among the earlier Oromo people to migrate to Australia. Her husband sponsored her and she divorced two years later. Like Mariyam, she was without relatives in Australia and the divorce compounded her isolation. Finally, in 1991, her sister Muniiraa and brother-in-law Abdulrahman arrived from Djibouti. In 1994, as her younger brother's process to migrate was near completion, he died from a treatable illness in Nairobi. His death, medically preventable in Australia, was a cause of great grief.

³ The names of those who feature in this episode are pseudonyms. The details are from interviews with them and various members of their families.

Agreeing to Abbaa Mohamed's request, Sofiyaa began the sponsorship process. Thereupon, she commenced socialising with Abbaa Mohamed's relatives and became close with his household over the two year period before Youssuf's arrival. Additionally, her sister Muniiraa and brother-in-law Abdulrahman began mixing with Abbaa Mohamed's family. Youssuf's imminent arrival in July 1996 intensified the newly formed bonds.

Both households gathered at Abbaa Mohamed's house on the Saturday afternoon before Youssuf's arrival. Busy in the kitchen preparing a banquet, the women excitedly talked together; meanwhile, the men reclined in the lounge room, chewing *jima* (the green leaf stimulant widely known as *khat*), and discussing the finer details of Youssuf's trip to Australia. In the background, mixed with the blare of Ali Birraa's cassette, the children noisily ran from one room to another. Youssuf's flight was due to arrive at midnight. The men coordinated the transport and, apart from the two women who remained behind to look after the food and little children, everyone left for Melbourne Airport at 10.30 p.m. The drive to the airport, which took thirty-five minutes, was a time mixed with feelings of relief and elation, but also uncertainty for Abbaa Mohamed and his household. Like entering a new threshold, a place where he had never been before, Abbaa Mohamed became very serious and remained silent.

The flight arrived as scheduled and within forty-five minutes Youssuf appeared. Like the arrival of Mariyam's relatives, tears flowed as everyone embraced. The gathering quickly dispersed to drive back to Abbaa Mohamed's house. The return drive signalled a change as all were affected by Youssuf's arrival which brought great satisfaction to Sofiyaa, relief to Abbaa Mohamed and joy to the others. Upon return to the house, everyone partook of the banquet prepared earlier.

Consideration of Abbaa Mohamed's 'fictive kin' relation to Sofiyaa suggests how immigration may act as a medium for the transformation of kinship. Immigration via sponsorship might also be seen as a ritual process, in the sense that it has certain 'rites of passage' and often involves what amounts to a prescribed agreement reached between two parties, whereby a household extends and incorporates a range of affines while in exile. In the case of Abbaa Mohamed's son, Sofiyaa entered into a negotiated exchange agreement that rewarded her household with new affines. In this case, the 'rite of passage' commenced with the journey to

Melbourne Airport, and was sealed by the shared banquet at Abbaa Mohamed's house.

The preceding accounts of Mariyam's reunion and Abbaa Mohamed's affinal ties with Sofiyaa feature the airport as a site of symbolic importance. A rich ethnographic location, the airport may be viewed as a place where affinal ties are renegotiated via rites of incorporation. Throughout the research process I frequently visited the airport to participate in such rites. Invariably, the emotional responses of both the new arrival(s) and those receiving them are unpredictable. So too, the drama of waiting is unique to each occasion, as sometimes up to three hours pass, at other times just thirty minutes before the new arrival(s) appear from the customs lounge. Nevertheless, like all ritual occasions, there is a repeated procedure: pre-arrival gathering, travel to the airport, flight arrival, intense waiting, appearance of the new arrival, greetings, travel back to the house, and communal eating.

The drive to the airport, like a journey into a 'twilight zone', becomes a rite with its own capacity to mediate liminality as the participants approach something unknown, an intensely emotional experience that they are often ill-prepared for (usually official flight details are given only days before the impending arrival). The drive to-and-from the airport establishes an arbitrary boundary that separates a before and an after—the isolated Oromo and the Oromo with kin, or even the whole set of Oromo without and the set of Oromo with extended households.

As Bourdieu (1991, p. 118) has noted, the symbolic efficacy of 'rites of passage' lies in 'the power they possess to act on reality by acting on its representation'. Like a process of investiture, Mariyam, Abbaa Mohamed and Sofiyaa all journeyed back from the airport as transformed people. First, because the act of sponsoring migration transformed representations others had of them and the behaviour adopted towards them (most obvious was the increased prestige given to them by the broader community). Second, because it simultaneously transformed the representation they had of themselves and the behaviour they felt obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation—financially supporting and socially guiding the new household member(s).

For most individuals who already belong to a large household, the journey to the airport carries less significance. But the prestige still increases when a new

member arrives. One person, Abdullahi Mussa, is regarded as something of a father figure among sections of the Melbourne community because he has sponsored numerous people. One informant commented how ‘he has a big family when he counts all the people he has sponsored’.⁴ Abdullahi’s family has expanded, but the expansion extends beyond relatives to those ‘fictive kin’ whom he has sponsored. Via migration he has incorporated many people into his household. Apart from some of the earlier arrivals in the 1980s, every Oromo in Melbourne has affinal ties with a household that sponsored them. As demonstrated on important ritual occasions such as *gaddaa* (or *taazi’a*), these ties typically remain despite personal differences and emergent conflicts.

The conflicts that characterise relations between various households in Melbourne are open to transformation via marriage and immigration. In June 1996 a marriage took place in Nairobi between Sofiyaa’s sister and a man whose cousin, Iftuu, lived in Melbourne with her husband Abdi and two children. The couple had arrived in Australia in 1989 and had no relatives here. Being alone in Melbourne, they faced isolation and, like Mariyam, were easy targets for accusations from various members of the community. They led a private life and tended not to mix with the broader community. Muniiraa and her husband Abdulrahman lived in a neighbouring suburb and did not mix with Iftuu’s family. Likewise, Sofiyaa did not socialise with Iftuu. But immediately following the marriage in Nairobi both households started mixing together: they were tied together across transnational space. Shortly after their marriage the new couple migrated to New Zealand and their close proximity to Australia meant that both households had grown and, accordingly, their status in the community improved.⁵

The establishment of affinal ties between Iftuu’s, Sofiyaa’s and Abbaa Mohamed’s families enabled all three to extend their households in Australia. The ‘marriages’ were utilised to extend kinship by establishing contractual ties between the three households otherwise isolated from each other. The relationships were entered into not just by individuals, but by members of three groups of affines. In this way members of each group had joint interest in the rights, duties and obligations of the relationship.

⁴ Interview, November 1996.

⁵ Details of this episode are from interviews conducted with members of both families, September–October 1997.

Such joint interest was manifest on the occasion of Sofiyaa's official and genuine (vis-à-vis her fraudulent sponsoring of Abbaa Mohamed's son Youssuf) engagement to Dine in May 1998. After living in Minneapolis for the past fifteen years, Dine came to Australia for the purpose of his engagement to Sofiyaa. They had known each other for three weeks before their engagement and Sofiyaa's parents were not involved in her choice of husband. In her mid-thirties, unmarried and childless, Sofiyaa explained that she primarily chose to marry Dine because she had little hope of marrying otherwise. Accordingly, three months after the engagement, with Dine back in the United States, Sofiyaa expressed her uncertainty about their impending life together. As she described, 'Sometimes you have to take a risk. I don't know him that well and I don't know how it will turn out. But that is life. We will see when he comes here to live in Australia'.⁶

Although both Sofiyaa and Dine were in their mid-thirties and had lived the past decade outside Oromiya, they chose to celebrate their relationship within a traditional Oromo framework combined with Islamic ritual. Especially for Sofiyaa, such a choice contrasted with her pre-marriage lifestyle. She was widely regarded as an independent, outspoken and 'modern' woman who stood-up to the men, and she preferred to live by herself in a suburb away from the community. Her engagement/marriage to Dine was consecrated via the combined performance of the Islamic *nikah* and the Oromo *guduunfa* ritual processes.

Nikah is an Arabic word equating with 'tying together' and is the common name of the Islamic ritual of marriage which, in the presence of a sheik, involves negotiation, dowry and blessing which ritually consummates the couple's union. Similarly, *guduunfa* is an Oromo word meaning 'to tie together' and the common name for the Oromo negotiation process which, unlike *nikah*, equates with engagement in 'Western' societies (the first stage of a couple's official union). *Guduunfa* is a distinctly complex Oromo ceremony that follows different formats according to the type of marriage, but commonly involves a series of lengthy negotiations (talks between the two parties) and gifts (*gabarru*). *Fuudhaafii heeruma*

⁶ Interview, June 1998. Abbaa Ahmed, arguably the most knowledgeable informant on Oromo cultural matters in Melbourne, described five types of marriage practised in Oromo society (cf. Oromtitti 1979, pp. 13-19): *butee* (boy kidnaps girl and sends elders to negotiate with her parents); *sokka/asenna* (girl runs away with the boy she loves and sends elders later, or an older unmarried woman with little hope of marrying approaches the man she wants, leaving him unable to refuse); *irradeba* (the parents give girl to the boy without a wedding party, often because of economic reasons); *howee* (boy makes secret marriage agreement with girl); and *daala* (man inherits his deceased brother's wife and children). Within this schema, Sofiyaa's and Dine's marriage would probably be closest to *asenna*.

follows *guduunfa* by ritually consummating the couple's union in Oromo society. Bridewealth, *araara* (usually cattle, blankets and clothing), is given to the girl's family.

Sofiyaa's and Dine's *guduunfa* occurred on a Saturday afternoon at Sofiyaa's two bedroom flat.⁷ The men gathered in the lounge room to perform the rite while the women waited in the bedroom—a common arrangement among the Hararghe and Arsi Oromo in Melbourne. The gendered demarcation within the house displayed an intersection of Oromo and Islamic traditions which followed throughout the rite. Various informants described the disparities between town and countryside *guduunfa* practices in Oromiya. According to their descriptions, in countryside eastern Oromiya *guduunfa* is often performed in the presence of men and women gathered together, with a few elements of the Islamic *nikah* attached. Conversely, town people (e.g. those from Dirree dhawaa) usually perform *nikah* with a few elements of the Oromo *guduunfa* attached. Four video cassettes of *guduunfa* recorded in countryside and township locations, and viewed in Melbourne, confirm these differences of approach.⁸ The countryside occasions were marked by men and women (on one occasion of both Islamic and Christian backgrounds) sitting in the same room. The township recording showed an overtly Islamic rite (with men and women in separate rooms) that included some elements from Oromo religious traditions. Additionally, the township Oromo who combine *nikah/guduunfa* consider it the most important day for a new couple's relationship, which is consummated in sexual union, whereas the country Oromo generally regard *guduunfa* as engagement, and sexual union remains prohibited until the wedding day.⁹

The occasion of Sofiyaa's and Dine's *guduunfa* signalled a religious diversification by creatively enacting an amalgam of countryside and township practices which included important ritual moments combining Islamic with more 'ancient' pre-Islamic Oromo practices. Without compromising Islam (their religion

⁷ I attended this occasion and observed the negotiations as I sat with the Dine's accompanying party. The following account is based upon my observations and numerous interviews conducted with the participants.

⁸ Four video recordings of engagement rites recorded in Oromiya were viewed. Two were recorded in rural locations near Calanqo and Deder (in Hararghe), one in the large town Dirree dhawaa, and another in the Arsi town Assala.

⁹ Gebi Genemo, Khalid M. Abdulfattaah and Abbaa Ahmed provided details on the various practices of *nikah* and *guduunfa*. They also provided interpretations of the various terms and titles associated with *guduunfa*.

of the Book), the occasion was distinctly Oromo, insofar as the participants were able to creatively evoke and confirm their *Oromumma* to each other.

The men sat on the floor in two parties facing each other. The boy's accompanying party, *hamamota* (fifteen men), were represented by their *saddeeta* (spokesman) Sheik Hassen. They faced the girl's team of representatives (seven men) with their *saddeeta* Abbaa Mohamed (the father of Youssuf whom Sofiyaa earlier sponsored). The two older spokesmen, sat in the centre of the room, taking on the functions of *hayyu* as they ensured that correct procedures were followed.

Both Sheik Hassen and Abbaa Mohamed were not consanguine relatives of Dine and Sofiyaa whom they respectively represented. Rather, they were 'fictive kin' who shared close affinity with the boy and girl respectively. Apart from Abbaa Mohamed, among Sofiyaa's representatives were Abdulrahman (her sister's husband) and Abdi (Iftuu's husband), two men from Dirree dhawaa where she had grown-up, and two men from Arsi, her deceased father's place of origin. Although she had never lived in Arsi, and in Melbourne her social network was primarily among those from Dirree dhawaa, she specifically requested the presence of Arsi people to assume the role of next of kin—her closest relatives in Melbourne. This was appropriate because Sofiyaa's household was considered to be among the Arsi, where her paternal clan origins lie. This accords with Blackhurst's (1994, p. 32) assertion of 'ritual worth' corresponding to tribal affiliation and paternal pedigree, documented and passed on from generation to generation, in the absence of blood relatives.

While the Arsi connection was clear, the conditions of exile left a degree of ambiguity in the selection of other kin. Those from Dirree dhawaa—where Sofiyaa was born and raised—were not relatives, but also acted as next-of-kin. Abbaa Mohamed, whose origins are in Kulubi (countryside Hararghe), not Dirree dhawaa or Arsi, was chosen by Sofiyaa to act as the spokesperson for her family. In keeping with life back home, Abbaa Mohamed was chosen because he is a *manguddo*, somewhat like a clan elder among segments of the Melbourne community, who is often called upon to preside over important cultural occasions. Like a *hayyu*, he is known for his knowledge of Oromo culture. But there was another, more personal context for the choice of Abbaa Mohamed as spokesman for Sofiyaa: through

Sofiyaa's sponsorship of Abbaa Mohamed's son Youssuf's migration to Australia, they had become like kin.

Prior to the arrival of the boy's party (of which I was part), Sofiyaa's representatives sat inside waiting. Finally, outside the door, the boy's *hamamota* recited a collective request:

Saddeetoo saddeeta galmaa ilteenya?

Saddeetoo saddeeta galmaa ilteenya?

Saddeetoo saddeeta galmaa ilteenya?

As Abbaa Mohamed later described,¹⁰ the boy's party sang the apology/question, 'Sorry we came here, but can we come inside?' In response, to test their patience, the girl's party gave no answer to the first two requests, but kept them waiting. Finally, after the third request, Abbaa Mohamed responded:

Hobbayi nulleen galma khanaaf deemna.

(trans. Yes come, and tomorrow it may be the same for us).

This, apparently comical, pattern of interaction is unique to *guduunfa* and sets the tone for the serious negotiations which follow. The positive response of the girl's *saddeeta* was sought by the boy's party, which began with the humble request to enter. The girl's party responded, 'tomorrow it may be the same for us', to indicate the sense of mutual dependence and the importance of cooperation in the negotiations that followed.

Once inside and seated, Sheik Hassen commenced by reading from the Koran and offering an Islamic prayer (in Arabic). Then Abbaa Mohamed began speaking (in *afaan Oromoo*). Nobody else spoke during this time: the boy's *hamamota* especially must remain silent in the hope of securing the goodwill of the girl's family. Abbaa Mohamed gave a general introduction to the importance of the occasion. Offering an oral recollection of the importance of negotiation in Oromo history, he mentioned that this was part of the *gadaa* heritage that all present belonged to, and talked about the importance of both parties being at peace (*nagaa*) with one another. He described how the negotiations that followed would continue

¹⁰ Interview, August 1998.

the tradition and be conducted in a similar way to their ancestors. This precursory information led to the topic of *guduunfa* and the guidelines to be followed. He explained the role of the two *saddeeta* and the two blessings that would normally be given to the couple on the occasion. By connecting what was about to happen to past traditions, Abbaa Mohamed's introduction framed the occasion and defined the events that were to follow.

Abbaa Mohamed's first question to the boy's speaker was, 'So what do you want today?' Sheik Hassen, with Dine sitting beside him, responded with a request for the girl and a description of the boy's intentions. He followed this request with a speech (in *afaan Oromoo*) praising the girl and boasting of the many good qualities of the boy's family. While praising the girl, he skilfully avoided using her name, which is forbidden. In conclusion, he persuasively turned it around by suggesting to Abbaa Mohamed that next time it may be the girl's family that is asking for favour. Abbaa Mohamed listened, with his eyes looking down at the floor.

After twenty minutes he responded with his message (*dhaamsa*). He spoke of the manner in which the girl must be treated by the boy's family and his expectations regarding their care for her. His message underlined how the occasion was really about the two families and the trust of the girl's family handing over their child to the care of the affines. Finally, after forty minutes he blessed the union, agreeing that the boy's family was well respected and suitable for the girl's family. The two men embraced and everyone shook hands. An Islamic blessing was read from the Koran, and an Oromo blessing was spoken by Abbaa Mohamed. Once the blessings were done, the news was passed to the girls' room and greeted with a loud celebratory *elilebaa*. The first sequence of negotiations was now successfully completed.

The second sequence involved the negotiation of the *gabarru* (jewellery, clothes and/or cash usually paid to the parents of a bride). Abbaa Mohamed asked, 'So what did you bring?' Sheik Hassen presented Abbaa Mohamed with a large suitcase full of gifts to be given to the girl's family. Within the suitcase were *jima* (green leaf stimulant), *buna* (coffee beans), *uwwisa* (blankets and clothing—including shirts and dresses for her parents, brothers and sisters) and *hori* (money, \$5000 cash). The suitcase was taken to the girls' room where the money was counted and the contents examined. Baxter (1996) has described the role of *gabarru*

among Arsi Oromo in the negotiation of marriage. Similar to its role among sections of Melbourne's Oromo, all the marriages he observed were accompanied by bridewealth. Various informants in Melbourne indicated uncertainty about the role of *gabarru* in the process of marriage: some referred to it as the gifts offered at *guduunfa* and later at the wedding day, while others said the *guduunfa* gift was *gabarru* and the later *fuudhaafii heeruma* (wedding) payment was called *araara*. Either way, there is agreement that the term *gabarru* refers to gifts presented to the family of the bride. Prior to Abyssinian conquest, cattle were usually transferred and the amount negotiated, but colonial disenfranchisement left many affines unable to fulfil such obligations (ibid.). Nevertheless, the exchange continued, albeit with fewer cattle and in different forms; for example, blankets (*woccu*) were expected to be given to the father and brothers of the bride-to-be.¹¹

After agreeing that the *gabarru* was commensurate with the wealth of the boy's family, Abbaa Mohamed declared a new status upon them. The *guduunfa* was now complete and the two families officially recognised by the community as *soda* (affines). This status was sealed by the ritual and considered permanent, even if the couple should separate or divorce. In this way the ritual assumed a transformative role whereby the two parties were bound together by socio-spiritual ties—tied together via ritual kinship. Baxter (1996), referring to Booran and Arsi affinal relations, notes how the ties continue despite divorce: they are unbreakable 'because marriage is unbreakable, even by death'. Furthermore, 'the relationship with a wife's brother is as unbreakable as that with a brother' (p. 182). This apparently permanent tying together of the two parties suggests that the efficacy of the rite lies in its capacity to transform the representations both parties have of the other and of themselves.

Usually, following the blessing of *guduunfa*, food would be used to symbolise the new ties. For example, as shown on the video recording, in Arsi the boy and girl, and the boy's affines, drink *a'anan* and eat a delicacy called *michiia*. As explained by a number of informants, these ancient, pre-Islamic rites follow Oromo religious traditions, whereby milk symbolises fecundity and food represents wealth. Usually the boy would give *a'anan* to his new affines while kissing them on the forehead. The kiss expresses the new ties, and the drinking of milk might be seen as

¹¹ One video recording of *guduunfa* in Arsi showed blankets being given by the boy's representative to the father and brothers of the girl.

incorporating a fertility rite into the occasion. The rite of drinking and eating together is commonly called *dararra* and is tied to the desire for fruitfulness and offspring. The affines partake of the milk and food and in so doing collectively affirm the new ties.

A'anan and *michiia* did not feature at Sofiyaa's and Dine's *guduunfa*. Although Khalid, one of the Arsi representatives, explained to both parties that these ritual elements should be included, they were excluded because, as he later noted, their reference to ancient pre-Islamic religious practices meant they were not appropriate in the presence of Sheik Hassen.¹² In contrast to the use of 'profane' elements (e.g. eggs, fire and porridge) by the women at Muniiraa's *ulmaa baha*, the presence of the elderly Sheik (whose authority rested in a religion of the Book) at Sofiyaa's and Dine's *guduunfa* constrained the inclusion of various Oromo ritual elements considered 'profane'.

Subsequently, Abbaa Mohamed (who grew-up in the countryside) insisted that the occasion was 'not really *guduunfa*', because it did not follow the proper procedure. Drawing a line between *guduunfa* and *nikah*, he stressed that the occasion was more *nikah* because there were ritual elements missing.¹³ Another informant, who grew-up in the town Dirree dhawaa, and with less previous exposure to *guduunfa*, commented that the occasion was 'not strictly *guduunfa*', but it was an exciting attempt at 'pretending or trying to imitate what really happens at home', a 'blending of the town and the country ways'.¹⁴

As argued throughout this thesis, Oromo cultural practices in Melbourne, while consciously mirroring 'traditional' aspects of the past, simultaneously involve transformative innovation—the new context of performance pointing beyond cultural *translation* to cultural *formation* (cf. Adams 1998, pp. 242-6). Sofiyaa's and Dine's *guduunfa* was no exception, as the performance transformatively combined elements of Islamic *nikah* engagement ritual with indigenous Oromo practices in an urban Melbourne setting. But the flavour of the occasion was distinctly Oromo: as one participant commented, 'This one was the best ever in Melbourne; the way Abbaa Mohamed talked was really Oromo'.¹⁵ Evidently, to those present it was

¹² Interview, June 1998.

¹³ Interview, July 1998.

¹⁴ Interview, June 1998.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Abbaa Mohamed's spoken message (*damsa*) and his negotiations with Sheik Hassen that made the occasion distinctly Oromo.

Spoken language played a dynamic role in the ritual process. Abbaa Mohamed's skilful oration and discussions with Sheik Hassen typified the Oromo cultural model of negotiation and the high value placed upon harmonious affinal relations (a prerequisite for all the blessings that flow from *waaqa*). On this occasion, as later commented on by many of those present, the act of negotiating and praying together was understood as a public statement of unity in peace (*nagaa Oromoo*). Like *ulmaa baha*, the combining of imagination, talk and symbols (Abbaa Mohamed's use of *afaan Oromoo*, the gifts and the food) enabled the transformative articulation of the dreamed-of and the present lived-in order. The invisible world referred to in the rite (countryside Oromiya) was made manifest and the subjects placed within it, as they experienced, to varying degrees, a liminal and 'multidimensional alteration of the ordinary state of mind' that overcame 'barriers between thought, action, knowledge, and emotion' (Myerhoff 1990, p. 246). The combination of several people uniting in *guduunfa* acts (the dialogue, gifts and eating) involved a 'mutual transference of personality', effectively linking one to the other as Oromo affines.

Immediately following the successful negotiations and the blessing, a messenger was sent to the women's room, where the women, upon receiving the news, again cheered loudly with the usual *elilebaa*. The formalities were now complete and it was time to eat. The women brought food into the loungeroom and both parties ate and drank together, the common meal and collective digestion signalling the mutual bonds of peace. Van Gennep (1960), commenting on the role of food in 'rites of passage', identified the eating and drinking together on such occasions as 'clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union', sometimes called a 'sacrament of communion' which usually ends the negotiations during betrothal (p. 29). The meal is 'eaten in common following the last payment of the bride price or dowry, a communal meal which is not connected with economic stipulations' (p. 131).

Such collective eating—as described in the preceding chapter when the women ate *dareemoo*, the porridge of birthgiving (cf. p. 231)—features prominently in Oromo ritual practices in Melbourne. Two other commonly

practised examples are *gaddaa* (or *taazi'a*) discussed in Chapter Four (cf. p. 108) and *kismedal*. Apart from these overtly ritual occasions, eating together is mandatory when people visit each other. Often a comical situation, the host expects the visitor(s) to eat before leaving; being in no position to refuse, they must always accept and voice their appreciation of the food. In this way, one is committed to gulping down large quantities of food, in order to 'do honour', as Mauss (1990, p. 41) puts it, in a somewhat grotesque way to the host.

This occasion of *guduunfa* not only tied together new affines from different areas of *Oromiya* but also provided a schooling in Oromo culture for those who wanted to learn. Among the dominantly Hararghe Oromo gathering the two Arsi men, Khalid and Adem, acted as advisers, offering instruction in Arsi culture to those present in the men's room, which enabled the articulation of Arsi and Hararghe Oromo traditions with Islamic religious practices. The intersection of the various localised ritual traditions occurred under a pan-Oromo banner and constituted the renegotiation of pan-Oromo affines, the building of a new *mana* via the tying together (*guduunfa*) of the disparate Oromo threads: a renegotiation that may be spoken of as a contemporary articulation of the Oromo cultural genealogy called *moggaasa*.

Sofiyaa's and Dine's *guduunfa* brought together Arsi and Hararghe Oromo. Other ritual occasions which have enabled the production of pan-Oromo identity on top of difference have involved greater diversity. At a birthday party held in December 1997 for a one-year old girl named Ayyaantu,¹⁶ there were many households present among the one-hundred and fifty guests, including people from the Jimma, Arsi, Boorana, Wallaga, Hararghe, Shoan and Wollo areas of *Oromiya*. Such a large number and diversity of guests on the occasion of a child's first birthday was unusual, especially given that birthday celebrations are not practised in rural *Oromiya* and generally not considered important by Oromo people in Melbourne. Nevertheless, birthday celebrations for one-year olds have become increasingly popular among Oromo families in Melbourne: over the period of fieldwork, I attended eleven such birthday celebrations.

¹⁶ I attended the party and later viewed the video recording of the occasion. Details were also provided by interviews with other people who were present, including Ayyaantu's father.

Like the *guduunfa*, these new birthday celebrations provide an opportunity to articulate Oromo cultural genealogy. Together with most Oromo children born in Melbourne, Ayyaantu was given an Oromo name at birth. Many names, like Ayyaantu (God's creativity), are rich in meaning and refer to objects of worship and beauty: such as Illili (flower), Shegee (beautiful girl), or Biftu (sunlight). Others are patently nationalist, such as the names of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) martyrs (e.g. Elemo, Baro); or references to nationalist symbols such as Hayyu and Odaa (which feature in *gadaa*), Urji (the star featured on the OLF flag). Additionally, some names refer to 'ancient' genealogies and Oromo clans (e.g. Barentuu, Arsi). Naming one's child is considered part of affirming one's identity as Oromo and passing this onto them. The previous dominance of Arabic (Muslim) and to a lesser extent Amharic (Orthodox Christian) names has waned as the broader community now admires original Oromo names, many of which are copied and thereby made fashionable. Even those few children given Arabic names at birth may have them spelt by the parents in *afaan Oromoo* to subvert the Islamic flavour of the name (e.g. Ferdusa may be spelt Firdoosaa).

The move away from written and spoken Islamic and Christian titles towards overtly Oromo identifications is another example of the transformative role of language explored throughout this thesis. Furthermore, in place of previous regional and religious ties, the collective appreciation of such naming by the broader community highlights the formation of wider pan-Oromo affines. In this case, the child's name, Ayyaantu, a variation of the popular pan-Oromo word *ayyaana*, relates to no particular region, nor to Islam or Christianity. Rather, it is understood by all to refer to an Oromo religious perspective. As Ayyaantu's party demonstrated, in recent years first birthday celebrations in Melbourne have provided a workable context for the ongoing renegotiation of pan-Oromo affines.

Birthday celebrations for one-year olds among Melbourne's Oromo often move between symbols of Oromo nationalism and Australian popular culture. The convergence of Oromo iconography and mainstream Australian 'rite of passage' allows the symbols of independent Oromiya to be socially and symbolically relevant to the everyday life of the community. The occasion is made distinctly Oromo as the name is written on the cake and the child held up to the wider community. Often the cake is decorated in Oromo national colours and features the *odaa* or some other pan-Oromo symbol. On one occasion, the cake was decorated with the OLF flag,

with burning sparklers and the candle highlighting the inscription *Happy Birthday Urji* (cf. Plate 7, between pp. 162 & 163). With the guests huddled around the cake, an Oromo prayer of blessing for the child was offered by an elder before the candle was blown-out. The traditional English song ‘Happy Birthday to You’ was sung, the cake cut and then eaten in common. The significance of the cake was indicated by the refusal of Urji’s father to cut it because, as he later commented, ‘it would feel like destroying the Oromo national flag’.¹⁷ This ‘sacred’ (and edible) symbol of nationhood was baked and decorated, using a photograph of the OLF flag for the icing pattern, by a Vietnamese patisserie in Footscray.

Like *guduunfa*, the occasion consisted of important rites of incorporation, including a blessing, a prayer and the collective eating of the cake (akin to a ‘sacrament of communion’). The articulation of Oromo nationalism with a child’s first birthday party demonstrates how ideologies may be integrated into everyday life and rendered visible (Kolar-Panov 1996, p. 103). While the nationalist symbols on the cake belonged to another place and pointed to vexed political struggles ‘back home’, they were transformed into symbols of celebration in the present. Such transformation ascribes a central and dominant status to the Oromo culture as opposed to its marginal status in mainstream Australia.

For Ayyaantu’s first birthday celebrations, her father, Abdulkarim, hired a large community centre, called the people, organised for two local Oromo bands—*The Gemetchu Band* and *Birraa*—to perform, purchased an expensive birthday cake, catered for the guests, and included an Oromo blessing rite into the occasion. The community centre, elaborately decorated with balloons and streamers and with tables set out for all the guests, was a venue for a jovial party, as the women danced, the children ran around and the men sat and talked—until the music stopped and, without any forewarning, Baabbo, a Booran Oromo, appeared dressed in *ejja* (Booran white wrap-around cloth) with earrings and sandals, announcing that it was time for a naming rite called *gudisaa* to be performed. Abdulkarim brought Ayyaantu—dressed in a pretty pink dress—to Baabbo. On the table nearby were the ritual materials, a *cico* (calabash vessel used as a bottle in rural Oromiya) filled with *a’anan* and ritually referred to as *miju* (meaning filled to the top), *cokorsa* (a fresh bundle of green lush grass shoots), and three *badalla* (corn cobs). Baabbo took the items and explained the purpose of them in *Booran* culture to the hushed audience.

¹⁷ Interview, October 1998.

According to *Booran* practices, he explained, each of the items was considered blessed on the day of *gudisaa*: the *a'anan* a source of life, the green lush *cokorsa* symbolic of life itself, and the *badalla* a sign of fertility. Humorously, he commented that the rite would require some improvisation, as the grass was '*faranjii* [foreign] *cokorsa*, not the tall, lush grass found back home'.

With the child beside him in her father's arms, Baabbo, invoking *waaqa*, the traditional Oromo divinity, offered a prayer of blessing and protection:¹⁸

<i>Daa'ima xiqqaa kan aka waaqii nuu guddisuu</i>	May God help our baby to grow
<i>Ilmaa Hadhaa fi Abbaa salfatuu waaqii haatochuu</i>	May God make this child respect her parents
<i>Ilmaa Oromoo gulbaahu waaqii haatochuu</i>	May this child be one that follows Oromo traditions
<i>Xiqaan hagudatuu guddaan habulluu</i>	May the young ones grow-up and the elders live longer
<i>Oromiya nagaan, Oromiya haa bilisoomtu</i>	Peace for Oromiya and may Oromiya be free
<i>Raaba gadaan nagaan</i>	May peace be on our land and our creatures
<i>Namaaf sa aan gagaa dhalatuun nagaan</i>	May peace be with the growing grass
<i>Aka ardha biyaa alaa kessatti waltti dufnee waaqii waar duranaale walbire ejaan-jattu hanuu tolchuu</i>	As today we come and stand together in a foreign country may God assist us to stand together in our own country
<i>Biyaa teenya biyaa nagaahya taquufa waaqii hanuu tolchuu.</i>	May God make our country peaceful and plentiful.

While Baabbo prayed he poured the *a'anan* over the *cokorsa* and then over the child's forehead. The corn remained on the table.

¹⁸ Baabbo Adii wrote the Booran blessing in *afaan Oromoo* and the English interpretation. In a later interview he described the meaning and purpose of the occasion as well as the names of the various ritual materials (July 1998).

As the rite finished, one woman, Caaltuu, immediately stood-up and asked why the child's mother (Halima) was not there, and why Baabbo had not reconciled the parents. A stunned audience silently looked on, mesmerised by the preceding rite and shocked by the sudden questioning of Baabbo. Unaware that the mother was not present—Abdulkarim, whom he did not know well, had asked him to perform the rite just two days beforehand—Baabbo was taken aback. He had no idea that Ayyaantu's parents had bitterly separated just months before. Unsure how to respond, he simply stated that he had already pronounced a blessing upon the girl's family. Caaltuu sat down and the party continued.

Afterwards, Baabbo privately commented¹⁹ that the mother's absence was 'entirely inappropriate' because, according to Booran practice, she should have held the child while the blessing occurred—a procedure he did not follow. Indeed, the rite should not have been performed without the Melbourne *manguddo* and the older affines of Abdulkarim and Halima mediating reconciliation between them. In keeping with the high value placed upon 'mutual bonds of peace' (*nagaa*) in Oromo society, Caaltuu was thus justified in her public questioning of Baabbo and of the validity of the rite in the absence of the mother. Halima, who had been sponsored to Australia by Abdulkarim two years earlier, privately expressed the anguish caused by the party and the rite conducted in her absence. Being without relatives in Australia and with little support among the community, she regarded the event as an attempt by Abdulkarim to further isolate her.²⁰ The episode, like the earlier description of Mariyam's divorce (cf. pp. 240-1), demonstrates how, in an exilic setting where kinship patterns are severely fragmented and qualified *manguddo* unavailable, affinal ties are very fragile.

Given the mother's absence and the diverse backgrounds of those gathered, it was not surprising that there were mixed responses among the onlookers as Baabbo performed the rite (which lasted about five minutes). Some began to respond in an Islamic fashion with *aamiin* (amen) following each request. Others remained silent and unsure how to interpret what was happening. For probably all gathered there the prayer was new because it combined traditional themes of fruitfulness, growth and peace with contemporary nationalist themes. Baabbo prayed for Oromo liberation and expressed a collective longing for return:

¹⁹ Interview, July 1998.

²⁰ Interview, September 1998.

Oromiya nagaan, Oromiya haa bilisoomtu

Peace for Oromiya and may Oromiya be free

*Aka ardha biyaa alaa kessatti waltti dufnee
waaqii waar duranaale walbire ejaan-jattu
hanuu tolchuu*

As today we come and stand together in a
foreign country may God assist us to stand
together in our own country

As he prayed these lines, the group responded with sighs. Baabbo later described how, at that point, he felt that the prayer connected with the collective grief present in the room.²¹ A very emotional moment followed, relieved when a few of the women issued forth an *elilebaa* applause.

Apparently, the vast majority of those present had never before seen this Booran naming rite performed. Nevertheless, judging from the comments afterwards, the *cokorsa* (green grass) and *a'anan* were immediately recognised as Oromo ritual elements by probably all those present, and most were impressed by their use. As one informant commented, 'The grass and milk instantly reminded me of my childhood experiences when I used to watch some of the elders in our area use them in funny ways that I did not understand'.²² While for some the rite recalled childhood memories, for others, like the male Islamic religious leaders (including Sheik Hassen), it was a source of anxiety. They were not impressed because, as some of them expressed it, the rite was 'pagan and contrary to the teaching of the Koran'.²³ But perhaps other factors were also at play, such as the potential erosion of their ritual authority among the broader community. Abdulkarim described later how he should have expected this uneasiness because his family were of Muslim background and no reference was made to *Allah*. Moreover, inviting Sheik Hassen and giving him no formal role in or forewarning of the child's rite could have been perceived as a deliberate snub.

The audience, reflecting the demographics of the broader community, were predominately Muslim. To this extent, the rite could be said to have occurred in a dominantly Muslim religious setting. Nevertheless, as already described, people knew that it was a distinctly Oromo moment. But unlike *guduunfa* and *ulmaa baha*,

²¹ Interview, July 1998.

²² Interview, August 1998.

²³ Ibid.

it was not considered a purely cultural affair, or the combining of Islamic ritual elements with indigenous Oromo practices. Rather, Baabbo unequivocally invoked *waaqa*, the Oromo divinity. Like Aguilar's (1995) interpretation of the *buna qala* ceremony among the Waso Boorana, the rite 'recreated a religious past in a Muslim setting', as both Abdulkarim and Baabbo intended it to be a public statement of Ayyaantu's Oromo religious identity (p. 15).

The choice of Baabbo by Abdulkarim to perform the rite might have contributed to generational tensions and competition for political and ritual leadership among the men in the community (cf. Aguilar 1995, p. 53). Baabbo was only thirty three years old and, being one of four Booran in Australia, relatively isolated in the community. Like most Booran, Baabbo does not identify with Islam or Christianity, but with indigenous Oromo religious beliefs. Being a newcomer to the wider community, and publicly practising 'traditional' religious rites, Baabbo is regarded with a mixture of suspicion and respect by the various élite members of the community.

It would appear that Baabbo had been granted a large degree of ritual authority by the wider community: excepting Caaltuu's query of the mother's absence, nobody present publicly questioned his right to minister the blessing to Abdulkarim's daughter. Apparently, his authority largely rests upon his Booran tribal affiliation. As described elsewhere in this thesis (cf. pp. 38, 60, 149, 157, 211-12), Boorana is an area in southern Oromiya where many of the 'ancient' traditions remain intact, and Booran people are ascribed ritual authority far exceeding other clan groups. One of Bartels' informants describes how the authority of Booran is grounded upon the perception that they are 'nearer to Waaqa. They are nearer to Waaqa as an eldest son is nearer to his father than his brothers are, and this is a great deal' (Bartels 1983, p. 148). Generally regarded as being of 'pure' Oromo descent, the first-born among the people, the blessing of a Booran is highly valued because they possess not only the power to pass on *waaqa's* blessing to the people, but they are also obliged to do so (Bartels 1983, p. 138).

In keeping with this ritual heirarchy, it was appropriate for Abdulkarim to choose Baabbo to bless his daughter. As he explained, the blessing of a Booran was the highest gift he could give his daughter on her first birthday: it would spiritually

incorporate her into the Oromo society and—capturing the occasion on video—materially provide a reference point for her Oromo identity as she grew-up.²⁴

Before conducting the rite, Baabbo explained to the audience how, according to Booran tradition, *gudisaa* celebrates a newcomer by giving identity to the child within the society. In Ayyaantu's case, *gudisaa* was to be used to incorporate her into pan-Oromo society (as embodied in Melbourne) and give her a sense of belonging. In Boorana the child would normally undergo *gudisaa* before turning eight years old; in this way they could enter into the *gadaa* age-set system on their eighth birthday. As Baabbo described, without the ritual the child would not be considered 'fully human and part of society'.

In this deterritorialised Melbourne performance, conducted in an inner-city hall, the Booran rite was refurbished and subsumed under a broader banner. Perhaps equating with Abdullahi A. Shongolo's (1996) observations concerning the political role of the famous poetry of the Booran Jaarso Waaqo²⁵ (and not unlike Bhabha's 1990b 'dissemiNation'), Baabbo combined a traditional Booran genre with nationalist themes to disseminate a modernising pan-Oromo political message (Abdullahi A. Shongolo 1996, p. 270). Viewed as a contemporary model of *moggaasa*, the rite constituted the renegotiation of pan-Oromo affines, the tying of disparate Oromo threads into one knot.

Like *guduunfa*, the rite assumed a transformative role, binding the households present together by the socio-spiritual ties of ritual kinship. The performance of the rite, while recalling aspects of the past, involved innovation and transformation as the rite took those present to a threshold, a liminal place beyond the deeply despondent reality of their divided community and depressing conditions back home. Such transformative practise enables the re-building of 'home' (*mana*) which, like a household, provides a space in which to safely negotiate identities. But perhaps like any large household full of adopted people thrown together by circumstances beyond their control, the dynamics among Melbourne's Oromo are not always, if ever, harmonious. However, rituals such as those described

²⁴ Interview, July 1998.

²⁵ As Abdullahi A. Shongolo (1996) documents, Jaarso Waaqo was a Booran of the Nonitu clan living at Tuqa in southern Ethiopia. He joined the OLF in 1991 or '92 and began recording his political poems (in a traditional Booran genre) on audio cassette and disseminated them to create political support for the OLF's pan-Oromo project. Apparently his poems were very popular among the Booran of southern Ethiopia and Kenya. Jaarso died on 21 September 1994 after being seriously wounded while fighting TPLF forces. Evidently, he shot himself rather than be taken prisoner.

throughout this thesis (e.g. *gaddaa* (or *taazi'a*), *ulmaa baha*, welcoming new arrivals, *guduunfa*, birthday parties and *gudisaa*) offer some respite and the chance for the various members of the household to transcend (albeit temporarily) their difficulties. Central to all these rituals is the performance of language in all its various forms (spoken, written and sung), which, combined, articulate Oromo cultural formation in Melbourne. One final performance in this unfolding narrative of Oromo cultural formation and transformation will be offered by way of conclusion: a story to balance the sort of homecoming which introduced this thesis.

Postlude

ANOTHER SORT OF HOMECOMING

... diasporas are also the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective identities collide, reassemble and reconfigure.

Avtar Brah (1996, p. 193)

The Prelude to this study of Oromo cultural formation featured the story of Duretii's homecoming to countryside Oromiya: a story of anticipation, promise and shattering of illusion. The Postlude, recounted on the remaining pages, tells the story of another sort of homecoming. The subject is a young Oromo man, Barentuu, living in Melbourne, whose life journey poignantly sounds the counterpoints of home and language which bring together the various parts of this thesis. Although I am the storyteller, the following writings were co-produced with Barentuu, and I have tried as far as possible not to intrude authorially upon his self-account. As Walter Benjamin (1968) would assert, the story, not its explanation, must tell the story (cf. Josephides 1998).

Barentuu's story begins in 1975 with his birth in the town of Dirree dhawaa in eastern Oromiya. He was the fourth child (and first son) of seven siblings. He was given the name Tofik at birth—a name he kept until he was twenty three years old, and which I shall use in reference to him during those years. While the rest of his family lived on a small farm in Wahel, about twenty kilometres from Dirree dhawaa, he was raised by relatives in the town and on weekends would visit his parents in the countryside.

Tofik's memories of Oromiya are obscure and the line between his own experience and what he was later told about Oromiya is blurred. Nevertheless, as Carter and Hirschkop (1996-97, p. x) note of personal histories, much of what he does remember probably depends less upon a conscious decision to record than upon his ability to forget. Psychic motives are bound up with the need to remember and forget, and for Tofik some events cannot be forgotten (cf. Ganguly 1992).

The event of his father's exile from Ethiopia in 1981 radically altered Tofik's life course. Tofik's father was well known among the thousand-odd people of Wahel, and, being a sheik, he was relied upon as a religious leader. When the local

people in Wahel were told to elect an official to represent them in the Derg administration, they chose him. But he refused. With his life at risk, he was compelled to leave Ethiopia and head for Saudi Arabia where he had previously studied. In the absence of her husband, Tofik's mother took care of the farm and, at one stage, with the assistance of the local community, fought off attempts by government authorities to confiscate the small property. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, Tofik's father eventually found employment with the Saudi government, who sent him to Nairobi in 1981 to teach Arabic literature to Kenyans.

About one year after his father left Ethiopia, Tofik, aged seven years, travelled unaccompanied on a plane to join him in Nairobi. The memory of travelling by train to Finfinnee from Dirree dhawaa, being later taken to the airport, and then boarding the flight for Nairobi remains with Tofik. One can readily imagine the fear felt by the young boy flying alone from one big city to another in a foreign country. When the airline stewards asked for the arrival cards to be filled, Tofik, unable to write, fearfully looked to the man sitting next to him for assistance. He recalls the face of the stranger writing on his card. Finally his fears were allayed when his father met him at the airport in Nairobi and they travelled together in a car to his new home.

In 1983 Tofik's mother and most of his siblings (except for two of his older sisters who married in Ethiopia) joined them in Nairobi. For the next seven years the family lived together in two adjacent flats in a modest Nairobi neighbourhood. While in Ethiopia Tofik spoke *afaan Oromoo* and Amharic, arriving in Kenya he quickly learnt to speak Swahili and English. Not unlike the linguistic dynamics in Oromiya, *afaan Oromoo* was only spoken at home by Tofik and his family. Because Swahili and English were used all the time outside, it was easy for Tofik to learn those languages and to 'forget' *afaan Oromoo* (not unlike the experiences of Oromo children speaking English in Melbourne). Before long, Tofik and his siblings started speaking Swahili everywhere, even inside the home. Indeed, because the communication between Tofik and his parents was minimal (he was living in the flat adjacent to them), he seldom spoke *afaan Oromoo*.

Contrasting the obscure recollections of his early childhood in Oromiya, Nairobi is clearly registered and fondly remembered by Tofik as the place of his childhood. It was there that early friendships were formed, his schooling conducted

and the childhood places of familiarity located. The thought that his parents will be leaving Nairobi in 1999 to join his sisters in the United States is a source of sadness for him, because their departure will further displace his childhood and disjunctively erode a sense of continuity in his life.

If 'home' is considered in nativist terms as the geographical territory of one's origin (or birthplace), then Oromiya could be spoken of as Tofik's 'original' home. But his experience problematises any essentialist defining of 'home'. Combined with the inability to return back, his departure at a young age has limited his identification with the place Oromiya to the extent that Tofik speaks of his 'roots' residing not in Oromiya but Nairobi. His parents' presence in Nairobi is the primary source of continuous identification with that place, to the extent that when they leave Tofik expects he will feel like a tree that has lost its roots. After their departure, when he goes back to Nairobi for a visit he will be just like any ordinary tourist who stays in a hotel without deeper attachments.

But these attachments to Nairobi should not be construed as meaning that Tofik has lost all affinity with Oromiya. On the contrary, even though he was thousands of miles away from his place of birth, he could not escape from the daily reminders of the subaltern place of the Oromo within Ethiopia. Growing up in Nairobi he felt like he was never far from the hostilities facing the Oromo because they were played out everyday in the classroom where he sat with Amhara and Tigrayan students. The conflicts haunted him in those early years, and he accommodated himself as best as possible by speaking Amharic and being 'Ethiopian' when necessary; nonetheless, as an Oromo he was never quite granted equal status among the Ethiopian students.

The differences between himself and the Amhara and Tigrayan students were acutely felt following holiday seasons, when other students would visit Ethiopia for vacation and return talking about all the nice food they ate and the things they saw there. Comparing himself with them, Tofik felt like his world was very limited. He too wanted to visit Ethiopia but could not do so. It seemed that the other students had rich parents in government positions and lived in big houses in expensive areas of Nairobi. Feeling inadequate, Tofik blamed his parents for not fulfilling his desires. At such a young age, the broader sociopolitical reasons for his apparently subordinate position alluded him. It was not until later, in his teenage

years, that Tofik began to come to terms with the subordinate position of the Oromo inside and outside Ethiopia.

Given the precarious status of refugees in Nairobi and the inability to safely repatriate, by the late 1980s many Somali, Ethiopian and Oromo refugees sought residency visas for North America, Europe and Australia. Eventually, most of Tofik's friends with whom he shared his childhood started leaving the country to resettle in America or Canada. He quickly lost many good friends and faced the influx into his neighbourhood of new refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia. The departing Oromo insisted that Nairobi could never be 'home' for him because 'home' would always be Oromiya, but he could never go back there. As feelings of insecurity and danger overtook his once familiar and safe surroundings, Tofik too felt the urge to leave.

At the age of fifteen, Tofik decided to leave Nairobi. Unable to get a preferred Swedish entry visa he settled for Germany. Although various people told him Germany was not a good place for an Oromo to live, he decided, with a tourist visa in hand, to go and see for himself. Again, as on his flight to Nairobi, he flew alone, arriving in Frankfurt at 7 a.m. on the fifth of February 1990. The weather was freezing and he wore only a t-shirt and jeans. Standing alone outside the airport, freezing and confused (he was unable to speak German or read the signs), with a single small suitcase, Tofik looked for somewhere to change the US currency in his pocket. Finally some Morrocans helped him to telephone an Oromo contact in the country. Shortly afterwards he bought a one-way ticket and boarded a train bound for Hanover in northern Germany. Upon arrival and with great relief, his Oromo contact met him at the station.

Tofik spent three years in Germany. Because he was under eighteen years of age and an asylum seeker, the German government sent him to an institution for homeless boys in Neumünster, where social workers assisted him and where he went to school. Apart from one Iranian boy, the rest of the young people there were Germans. Again Tofik was linguistically marginalised and compelled to learn another language. Eventually he left the institution and moved to the town centre, where he lived for two years in a privately rented one bedroom flat. He made friends with some of the Germans there and became close with one boy who was thoughtful and polite to him.

Despite some friendships and a degree of hospitality, Tofik never felt welcomed in Germany because there was always a reminder that he was a stranger in a foreign country. This was especially so when he travelled outside of the town centre, where incidents of thuggery against visible minorities (such as blacks and Asians) were not uncommon. This worried him so much that he began carrying a small pistol. At the end of 1992 five Turkish people were killed in the area where he was living; because he felt this could happen to him at anytime and he had no permanent status in the country, Tofik decided to leave Germany. On the 21st March 1993, at the age of eighteen years, he boarded a plane back to Nairobi.

When the plane took off from Frankfurt, Tofik felt unsure about what lay ahead: perhaps he was making a mistake returning to be stuck in Nairobi—lonely and sad with no future. When he arrived, despite the reunion with his family, his first week back was melancholic.

But things improved. While he was away major changes had occurred in the Horn of Africa which transformed the Oromo presence in Nairobi. The OLF withdrawal from the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1992 had resulted in the arrival of thousands of Oromo refugees in Nairobi. In 1993 Tofik returned to a large Oromo community and for the first time in his life started sharing with and befriending Oromo his own age who had recently left Oromiya. Among the arrivals some came from Somalia and Sudan and many came direct from the countryside in Oromiya where they had been fighting for the OLF. Some of them still had bullet wounds. But all of them were proud of their Oromoness and talked about Oromiya all the time.

Defying his expectations, the two years following his return to Nairobi were a liminal experience for Tofik—perhaps the most significant of his life. The new arrivals introduced him to a world of Oromo culture and community that he had never before experienced. The street where he lived was colloquially named ‘Oromo Street’ by the Ethiopians who knew the area because the neighbourhood was full of Oromo people and *afaan Oromoo* was spoken freely on the street. Tofik found himself in the midst of a community where he heard *afaan Oromoo* spoken more than Amharic, Swahili, English or German. A hotbed of Oromo nationalism, unlike never before, Tofik was challenged to take pride in his Oromo background.

But again people came into and went out of his life. There was a constant movement of people coming and going in Nairobi and he lost very good friends who left for America or Canada. The departure of his close friend Ahmed from Nairobi to the United States in 1994 was a particular source of grief. The idea that he could be left there again was very frightening to Tofik. Looking back, the loss of friendships figured as a constant aspect of his life. It seemed that everywhere he went Tofik made friends and then lost them. Like others with similar experiences, the ongoing exposure to loss and separation made the mourning of loss a constant in his life, and something which became difficult to work through as, in anticipation of loss, he became reluctant to invest in new emotional ties.

The point of tension in Tofik's narrative is the apparent juxtaposition of nomadic urges with his strong desire to feel 'at home'. Surveying the past, Tofik volunteers that the tension originates from his childhood experiences in Oromiya. Being raised by relatives in Dirree dhawaa and growing up with the knowledge that Oromiya was insecure for Oromo people, he never thought of it in familial terms. Additionally, as an adolescent in Nairobi the sudden loss of significant people around him traumatised Tofik and eroded his sense of 'rootedness' in that place. With no physical attachment nor access to the place Oromiya, the erosion of ties in Nairobi and the experience of racism in Germany, Tofik could not feel very much 'at home' in any of those places.

However, it was not long before Tofik moved to another place. Before he went back to Nairobi from Germany in 1993, his older sister had gone to Australia and settled in Melbourne, where she began the process of sponsoring her siblings, including Tofik. While it normally takes about two years for processing, for some reason his sister's applications were not delayed and after eight months the Australian Embassy in Nairobi called them for an interview. The immigration official spoke privately to Tofik's other older sister and her husband for about twenty minutes while the others waited. Two days later, the official requested the family members have a medical check-up. Tofik breathed a sigh of relief; he knew he was travelling again.

All nine—one older sister, her husband, Tofik and his two brothers, and four children—travelled together and arrived in Australia on the 19th March 1995. It was Tofik's first flight when he was not alone, which in a way reflected the changes

in his life over the previous two years as he became part of the Oromo community in Nairobi. After they arrived, the nine of them lived together with their sister for one month in her two bedroom flat in Ascot Vale (an inner western suburb of Melbourne). Later, Tofik moved to Footscray with his two brothers.

Tofik's experience in Melbourne was different from his previous 'homes'. In terms of the present and the future he felt more secure and stable. Certainly life was not without its difficulties, but it felt like everything had changed. He was now able to have some control over his life. With new citizenship he was at last free to stay somewhere or travel anywhere, including Ethiopia if he wanted. To this extent he felt like he was making a new start, free from the collection of invisible chains that had previously limited his life.

Since 1993 in Nairobi, when he found himself in the midst of proud Oromo, he had considered changing his name from the Arabic Tofik to an Oromo one. In May 1998, after three years in Melbourne, he decided it was the right time to re-name himself. He telephoned his parents and relatives overseas asking for the names of family predecessors and, almost parodically, playfully looked for a name that sounded good and went well with his second name. Finally, after six months of deliberation, Tofik went to the registry office in Melbourne and officially changed his name to Barentuu—including the double 'uu' as opposed to the singular 'u' to emphasise the indigenous tone of the name. The name not only sounded good but referred to one of the founding fathers of the Oromo national genealogy discussed previously in this thesis (cf. pp. 211-12).

Barentuu considered the act of re-naming himself a demonstration that he was finally at peace with the tensions that had been part of his life. Seeking the connection he never had, following his journey to Nairobi, through Europe, back to Nairobi and to Australia, the re-naming was a virtual homecoming which enabled Barentuu to position himself in Oromiya (the land and the people) without physically being there: to be near when he was far away. Unlike Duretii, a physical homecoming to Oromiya was not important to Barentuu because he felt no physical attachment to the land and had no desire to go back. Nevertheless, being able to return if he wanted was very important to his sense of being Oromo.

The story of Barentuu's life journey encapsulates the themes of home and language which tie together the various parts of this thesis. For Duretii, homecoming meant a physical return to the mythical place of childhood; for Barentuu it carried different meanings. 'Home' was not the physical place of his birth but, rather, as Massey (1992, p. ix) would suggest, the imaginary point where here and there—where he now is and where he came from—are momentarily grounded.

His story embodies the conflict between the forces of silencing and voicing which have impacted upon all Oromo, and the power of language to transformatively break the silence. The apparently simple act of changing his name from Tofik to Barentuu demonstrates how language in everyday life constructs reality: the voicing of his name recalls and structures a past in the present (cf. Felly Nkweto Simmonds 1996, p. 113), and transforms how he sees himself and how others see him. As Barentuu's story suggests, and this thesis contends, Oromo cultural formation in Melbourne is constituted as real through the many acts of linking, voicing and living Oromoness, in which language, through its variety of forms, enables the transformative articulation of 'home' even away from 'home'.

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