# From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation:
## Actual and Potential Role of Stories and Storytelling Among Marginalized Occupational Minorities in Southern Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** Throughout Ethiopia there are minority groups of craft workers and hunters that are excluded from the mainstream society. Pottery is fundamental for carrying water and making food, hoes and iron plough shares are essential for agriculture; cotton cloth is indispensable for clothing; leather products are used for transporting grain or storing. And yet, the specialized workers who produce these items have such a low status that many of them are still considered to be "not human" by their surrounding majorities. The phenomenon of marginalised occupational minorities is so widespread in the country that Levine described it as a "pan-Ethiopian cultural trait". This paper aims at exploring the role of culture in perpetrating the discrimination against occupational minorities and its potential to lessen it in the societies in which they live.

## Introduction

Throughout Ethiopia there are numbers of marginalized minority groups who are defined by occupation or notional occupation. The dominant farming population articulates the social and cultural exclusion of craft workers by giving them different labels and considering that their profession is polluting. Members of occupational groups are known for being potters (e.g. the *Mana* in Kaffa, Sheka and Dawro, the *Ch'inasha* in Wolaita and the *Hawuda* in Konso), tanners (e.g. the *Awacho* of Sidama, the *Degala* of Dawro,), smiths (e.g. the *Tumano* of Kambata), weavers (e.g. the *Shamer* in Gurage), woodworkers (the *Fuga* in Gurage) and hunters (e.g the *Manjo* in Kaffa, Sheka and Dawro).

The unjust and prejudicial treatment to which these groups are subjected is manifested in different forms or dimensions. According to Freeman and Pankhurst (2001), they are spatially segregated, economically disadvantaged, politically disempowered, socially excluded and culturally subordinated. These dimensions of discrimination are starkly manifested in every aspect of daily life.

A pervasive approach to understanding occupational minorities is the caste paradigm transposed from the Asian context. Marginalised minority groups in Ethiopia, and generally in Africa, can be considered similar to the "untouchable" low-caste groups in India (Cerulli, 1922 and 1930; Hambly, 1930; Seligman, 1930). In the Ethiopian context the concept has been used widely (Cerulli, 1922, 1930; Conti-Rossini, 1937; Levine, 1974), particularly to describe the social system in the south and southwestern part of the country, where the social exclusion of these groups is more institutionalised than in the rest of Ethiopia (Freeman and Pankhurst, 2001).

The focus of this paper is the role of oral tradition (stories and myths), transmitted from a generation to the next, that has played a crucial role in keeping the discrimination still alive today but that is also the most encouraging hope for its end.

The central idea underpinning the study is that in addition to intellectual and academic analyses of issues from many dimensions as peacebuilders, scholars and practitioners do, there ought to be a component of the peace building process that is highly effective in transforming attitudes and relationships. A creative tool based on the use of local culture can fulfil this role in peacebuilding, because of its power to transform perspectives and relationships.

The next paragraphs intend to provide an historical overview of the discrimination of these groups throughout the Ethiopian history and to present the main features of the societies in the south and south-western region of Ethiopia where the minorities are still discriminated against. Lastly, the dual role of the culture as conflict bringer and potential peace bridger will be examined.

**Figure 1. Zones of the southern region of Ethiopia (Freeman and Pankhurst, 2001).**
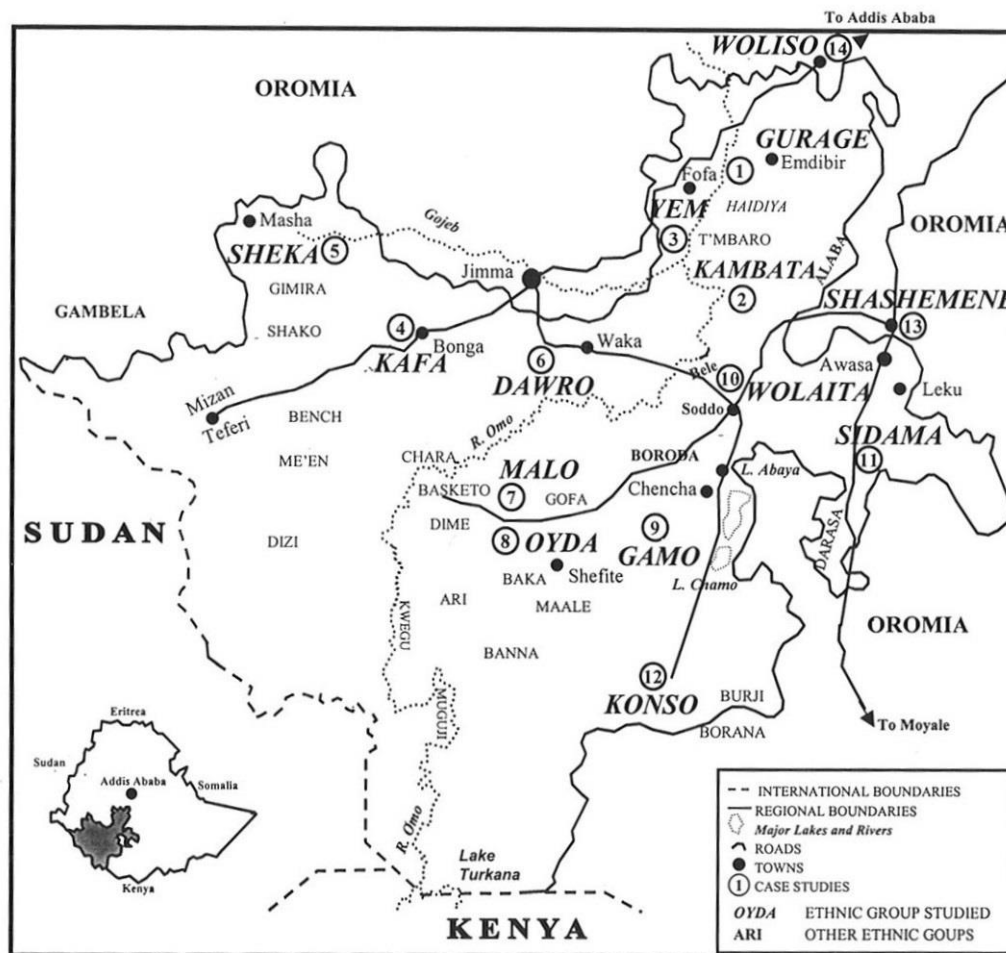
## Brief History of Discrimination

During the centuries of imperial rule (up to 1974) societies in Ethiopia were divided into high and low clans: land and slave owners, serfs, occupational groups whose status was inferior only to the slaves. Craftsmen were classified into weavers, smiths, tanners-potters, etc. They were held in low esteem and could simply not own land or hold political functions. Hunters assumed an even lower position than craftsmen because of the highest level of pollution associated with them.

But the last quarter of the twentieth century has brought dramatic changes into the lives of marginalised minorities. In 1974, the Marxist military regime known as the Dergue came into power and tried to break down traditional hierarchies based on landholding and to create a classless society. The ensuing land reform, which guaranteed access to land for all, had direct impact on the minorities. Even if the marginalised groups received less land than their farming neighbours, or land of inferior quality, this access to land provided then with the possibility of growing their own food, thereby ensuring some degree of independence (Petros, 2003). However, the social groups which had been particularly despised under the previous regime continued to be victims of strong discrimination and constituted the new social minorities.

In 1991, the Dergue was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF), and the notions of 'democracy' and 'freedom of ethnicity' replaced 'socialism and class struggle'. Ethiopia became a federal state that strongly recognized ethnic differences in its constitution. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century, in many cases social interaction between the dominant majority and most of the marginalised minorities has become less constrained (e.g. there are cases of sharecropping arrangements, wage labour, joint work parties, burial and religious associations).

Nonetheless, although both the Federal and Southern Region Constitutions contain provisions against discrimination on the basis of social background, the current emphasis on ethnic identity has seemingly led to a cultural revivalism in which previous values have been reasserted. Freeman and Pankhurst (2001) report several examples of renewed discrimination. Since most of the marginalised minorities are considered as 'social groups' rather than localised ethnic groups, their concerns have hardly been considered in the new 'ethnic politics' (Freeman and Pankhurst, 2001, p. 336).

## Social Stratification in Southern Ethiopia

Principles derived by kinship, age, and sex serve to differentiate people in different categories in all societies. These categories are also often associated with performance of different tasks in the division of labour in the society, and with unequal access to goods and services. Since time immemorial, the social and political stratification of societies in Southern Ethiopia resulted

from the arrangements of individuals into hierarchically ranked groups mutually superior and subordinated, privileged and unprivileged according to criteria of descent and work.

Descent refers to membership to a marginalised group which is acquired by birth, and, therefore, cannot be removed, unless one's origin is unknown (Commission on Human Rights, 2003). Work is linked to the occupational specialisation or functional role of individuals or groups (United Nations High Commissioner on Human rights, 2003).

In societies which perpetrate social discrimination on the basis of descent, it is observed that marginalised status is often associated with occupations which used to be and still are mis-regarded or considered dirty on the basis of generationally transmitted mythological explanations and negative stereotypes.

### The Power of Stories in Conflict Transformation

Throughout time and across cultures, people have gathered in circles to join their collective wisdom, energies and strengths binding them and guiding them into the future. All this happens through stories that we are told and we tell ourselves. A story is anything that tells or recounts what happened to us or people that we know (Mason, 1996). Humans have always used stories to explain themselves to others for many different purposes: social change, mediation, diplomacy, cross-cultural relationships building, among other reasons (Cruikshank, 1998). Stories reflect life, our personal cultural background and the way we elaborate identity issues and construct meaning around our experiences (Senehi, 1996). They "*...contain people in context*" (LeBaron, 2003, p. 276). They may be tales or relate to personal experiences or groups history, but they are never pure fact or fiction, they always have meaning as through them we implicitly locate ourselves and others in this world (Mason, 1996). When stories are told, choices are made – in how characters are portrayed, motivations explained, and closure achieved; meanings are made explicit and values communicated (LeBaron, 2003). The concept is repeated throughout the book. Thus there is no specific page to be quoted). Stories can be used to socialize people and confirm cultural values in support of peace, but can also serve to heighten cultural anxiety around particular chosen traumas (Volkan, 1997).

### The Mythical Rationale Behind Relations of Inequality: Destructive Stories

In Southern Ethiopia, in the context of historical, social, economic and political injustices, destructive stories are the main source of discrimination against occupational minorities. Through the recount of old stories, meanings of past generations are carried into current groups' perceptions; past ideas become the present culture, the only culture known for many generations. The more stereotypes in a culture, the easier it is to form public opinion, and the more an individual participates in that culture, the more susceptible he or she becomes to the manipulation of these symbols. Hence, conflict becomes encoded in the

identity of each group and becomes non-negotiable (Byrne, 2002, p. 138; Senehi, 2000). "Misperceptions result in a lack of trust and in a deep-seated hostility that frames the conflict in a conflict in a zero-sum intractable game between adversaries with unequal power" (Byrne, 2002, p. 138). Destructive stories "may intensify social cleavages when they privilege some culture while silencing others; when they generate or reproduce prejudicial and enemy images of other groups; and when they mask inequalities and injustice, inflame negative emotions, and misrepresent society" (Senehi ,2009, p. 203). Identities and meanings forged by misperceptions are perpetuated as group members continue to explain others in negative ways to themselves and to other members of their group.

The apprehension of  dominant groups about relations of inequality between farmers and craft-workers is based on  account of local oral traditions, which often reflect the persisting inequality as something that has happened by the creation of different groups. Cultural factors such as myths and negative attributes are thus used by dominant groups to justify and perpetrate the discrimination.

Different versions exist of the origins of marginalized occupational minorities. All the variants, however, present in various forms share a common ground: they explain the social groupings and differentiation as natural phenomena and present mythological justifications for the low status of minorities. The myths portray minorities as associated with nature and the wild, or in extreme cases, as being descendent from unions with animals. Alternatively they may be portrayed as descending from a younger sibling with a lower status. In many cases negative myths blame the victims.

Many are the negative stereotypes attributed to - minorities. The nature of stereotyping varies from group to group, but some common features emerge: the marginalized are often portrayed as being anti-social, untrustworthy, unreliable, liars, cowards, quick to anger, lacking in morality, respect and shame. Many of the minorities have a reputation for getting drunk, singing and dancing at market places. Their houses are described as small and shabby. Some of them are alleged to have darker skin colour and different facial features. Those who are extremely marginalized are considered to be polluting and unclean and not to be "real people". The "polluting" nature of the minorities is often explained as being a result of the "impure" meat that they are said to eat. The meat can be either by hunted wild animals or farm animals that have died without being slaughtered.

Whether true or not in the past, today many minorities claim that they no longer eat such meat, although they are still suspected by the farmers to continue to do it in secret. It is not a simple matter for members of these groups to give up their food habits to be fully accepted by the majority. Even if they do so, tradition will prevent full acceptance (and belief that they actually have given up) by the majority. A negative foundation for relationship has been built long time ago, robust and resistance to change, unless something different happens to interrupt the pattern.

**Bridging Peace**

Avoidance and denial of the need for searching for common ground among people of different backgrounds cannot work indefinitely. Instead, such attitudes deepen divisions and allow for the supporters of violent solutions to gain more power. Therefore, the task for people who espouse the notion of peacebuilding is to vigilantly explore possibilities for constructive conflict transformation. One strategy for bridging the gap between groups is through the understanding and then revisioning the myths and stories upon which individuals and groups build their identity, and which are used to justify discriminating behaviours.

In fact, stories' role in the transformation of worldview, identity, and relationships can assist the change process in a positive way. Peacebuilding stories that stress positive values in a society can help neutralize or overcome destructive stories that fan the flames of hatred (Schirch, 2005).

Constructive stories help people recognize the connection among us, although through our life we experience changes in relationships, roles and identities (LeBaron, 2003, concept reiterated throughout the book for this reason I don't think there is the need to add reference to specific pages). When a constructive story is told we experience a safe transition from an identity to another more compassionate one, from a self-centred or exclusive way of understanding a situation or relationship to a more open/inclusive way: from enemies to friends, combatants to citizens, and marginalized to equals; all of this happens in safety. The sense of security is due to the fact that the recounting of stories happens in times outside ordinary time, when normal patterns of communication are suspended.

**The role of a third party**

In the heat of conflict, parties locked in violence and entrenched positions are usually not in the best position to think creatively. Because they are engaged in conflict, it can be difficult for them to see a way out, as perspective is diminished and emotions run high (Jeong, 2005).

For this reason, when the story or myth recall ancient hatred and refer to the other side (the "enemy") as the source of all problems, outsiders can help more than insiders in reshaping this perception. Because they are not part of the conflict their perspective is not affected by ancient prejudices and they are more open to different cultural ways of seeing, and more able to guide in the passage from mutually exclusive to more reciprocally tolerant and inclusive identities (Volkan, 1997).

Through the revision of myths or the co-creation of stories, it becomes the mediator's or third party's job to restate what each party has said in a way that causes less resistance or hostility.

## Revision of Myths

Considering the importance of myths, their revision definitely plays a role in shaping people's feelings and mutual relationships. Once again, when discrimination is deeply embedded in society, practitioners are more oriented towards the search for common ground in conflict than insiders (Chayes and Minow, 2003). They play a crucial but delicate role in promoting coexistence after conflict.

Hence, they can give inputs to exploring and revising myths as an important part of inviting multiple voices into the way history is told (Smith, 1999; Volkan, 1997). This can happen by excluding from history those myths that deny the possibility of multiple voices being heard and by stressing the ones in favour of justice and commonality. The process can help re-imagine history and envision a new future that does not perpetrate controversial myths connected to threatened identities. The project undertaken by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Burundi is an example.

In Burundi, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) decided to explain the International Humanitarian Principle on which it is based through the words of local people. To this purpose ICRC brought together Burundians belonging to different ethnic groups and social classes, and over some months they were able to find in their culture saying and myths shared across society. They made a play out of them, which was then performed "on the road". (Paraphrased from Anderson, 1999)

## Story co-creation

Creating a story together may be done with people of all ages. Through the practice of story co-creation, outsiders can encourage emotional intimacy among the parties in conflict and facilitate a shift in conflict dynamics (Rousseau, Lacroix, et. al., 2005). Senehi (2002) argues that, in situations of protracted conflicts/tensions, where people are in need of a mental reshaping in order to recover from the polarity violence creates, listeners can learn to build relationships that are safe, trusting, intimate, and open, through constructive storytelling. By listening to each others' stories, gently emphasizing respect in their storytelling, places of connection and divergence may become clearer, leading to a better understanding of the conflict in context (LeBaron, 2003). Refocusing the imaginations of their listeners and modelling peace, peace practitioners can reintroduce the inner value of peace and equality to aggressors or victims of conflict, thereby providing a common ground for reconciliation.

This process begins with the sharing of stories by both groups and involves acknowledging the existence of a reality other than their own and building more expansive stories from this awareness (LeBaron, 2003). Each storyteller tailors the story and shows the pictures in his or her mind and passes them to the listeners' minds for being interpreted (McKay and Dudley, 1996). A good story designs "emotional bridges" because it puts the minds of the storyteller and the audience at the same emotional level; facilitating understanding, empathy and the creation of meaning (Senehi, 2009). The whole process helps to understand the past, live the present and plan a shared future.

The co-creation of story is a way of humanizing conflict, and in the process, celebrating what it means to be a human being (Senehi, 2009). Through storytelling, 'enemies' relearn the core human values that have been lost with months, years, decades or centuries of antagonist behaviour.

As noted by Kyoon (2009), in the hands of skilful peace practitioners, stories can question the status quo of hate that conflicts and violence create by questioning the moral values of such actions. If stories are constructively told with peace in mind, the hearers can make mental notes and judgements of the situation without any fear of threats. Justice can take place without resistance or a perception of unfairness.

**Conclusion**

Discrimination is a challenging issue. To make sense of our world, we organize our life around social norms and base our actions on values and beliefs. Sometimes these principles can also be the basis of discrimination against others, simply because it is too challenging to questions the principles on which we built up ourselves. From a personal standpoint, for it becomes a critical issue whenever social discourse perpetuates oppression. By undertaking research on the topic of the discrimination of occupational minorities in Southern Ethiopia, I wanted to strengthen my understanding of the issue of discrimination and explore ways to counter it. In a sense, this paper attempted to understand and outline a response to cultural violence which constitutes the root cause of the divisions and injustice that lead to the barriers for social groups in Southern Ethiopia to renegotiate shared meanings. In asymmetrical societies built on historical, social, economic and political injustices, oral tradition is the main source of discrimination but also the most encouraging hope for its end (Senehi, 1996). If a conflict stems from culture, solving the conflict involves coming back to culture. Cultural components forge our personal and social identity and contribute to peace-prone or conflict-prone attitudes. Stories and myths become a means to undermine the adversaries and are responsible for the creation of discriminatory behaviour and for its continuation across generations and centuries. If culture is the source of conflict, then local actors are immersed in it and their worldview has been built upon social injustices. People from outside the conflict have a more impartial perspective and may be able to re-enhance human rights principles forgotten in the culture.

Digging into myths, they can better understand different positions in conflict and then find the least intrusive way to change individuals' and groups' worldview. By listening to group stories they can help in co-creating new shared stories between adversaries. However, it is important to acknowledge that the use of this cultural heritage does not have to replace other tools for conflict transformation. Rather, it is a supplement to traditional "front-door" approaches to conflict that deal with issues in direct, rational and linear modes.

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