Formal schooling, identity and resistance in Ethiopia

LORRAINE TOWERS, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

This paper attempts to theorise a different approach to understanding the implications of schooling for identity and resistance in Ethiopia. A dichotomous paradigm, delineating ‘modernity’ and the obliterating power of the ‘modern’ West as opposed to the static ‘tradition’ of the ‘Third World/Developing World’, is rejected as the basis for analysis. Instead argument is made for the historical dynamism and diversity of indigenous agency in the development of schooling within the Ethiopian state. Based on fieldwork in Ethiopia (1995-96; 1998) and a reading of works by authors from Ethiopia, it hopes to begin to show the possibilities of this alternate view through the experiences of Oromo people within modern schooling. It is therefore far from, nor is it intended to be, a descriptive account. Rather, it seeks to define theoretical problematics in the context of ongoing empirical research. It proposes a current working understanding that the development of the modern school system in Ethiopia has been mediated by dominant partisan interests which have sought to circumscribe access to and control of the modern urban sector and state power. This circumstance is shown to have been consistently resisted and actively contested. The final section of the paper explores the utilisation of ‘alternative’ traditions of knowledge and symbols within the school system in the context of federal regionalism instituted in 1993.

Ethiopia is usually positioned in academic and policy discourse in the constellation of ‘developing’ nations or ‘traditional’ societies of the ‘Third World’. These entities are seen to be subject to progressive and profound alteration through their exposure to ‘modernising’ influences through the increasingly pervasive spread of ‘western’ institutions, technique and interests. Paradoxically, while this is an era in which diversity has been recognised and even valorised, the technologies which are seen to facilitate this have been identified as those which may, even more surely, lead to a progressive homogenisation. An homogenisation of not only system and technique, but culture and identity is seen to lead to a convergence of form and substance of human thought, behaviour, governance and materiality on a global scale.

‘Modern’ formal schooling, an assumed archetypal institution of modernity, has been considered a critical factor in the extension of such convergence. Historically, the orthodox western vision of development for the Third World through modernisation
placed this education at the centre of its policy and practice in intimate relationship with the intention to extend the modern/western polity and economy. Despite the purported rise of the more direct influence of western cultural products and identities through the extension of consumer markets and the electronic media, modern education is widely considered to remain of prime importance in the implementation of the 'international' vision for Third World development. Formal schooling has become essentialised as education, the norm by which other forms of education are measured or dismissed – the *sine qua non* of the modern development which has been reified as 'social progress'.

However, to the degree that the institutional form of modern schooling is relatively homogenous, there exist fundamental differences of intent which derive from an understanding that this modernising possibility has a specific meaning in the particular context of the non-modern. What schooling is meant to achieve in the 'developed', western world, as distinct from the 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' Third World, is radically different, even though an ostensibly similar form and substance is pursued. In this construct, the multiple ramifications of the sociopolitical context of schooling and how it is positioned within the nation-state are subsumed or simplified according to a primary dichotomy. This dichotomy rests largely on a notion of the West *being* modern, as opposed to the Third World potentially *becoming* modern. Modern formal schooling is privileged with a critical role in effecting this change: of creating the *being*.

Modern formal schooling has become intrinsic to western developed nations, a normative institution, a given universal, an integral, constitutive part of economic and social being – 'natural' to the extent that it is considered organic to western society. In contrast, the institution of modern formal schooling in the developing Third World is predicated on an assumption of having a profoundly transformative capacity on the basis that it operates, with explicit intent, in direct contradiction of existing indigenous values and institutions, both familial and extra-familial, that is 'tradition'. Transformation is defined in opposition to pre-existing social orders. Rather than an accommodation to the sociality of participants there is a presumed removal or alienation from 'indigenous tradition'. By definition there is an acculturation to modernity that is neither based on traditional knowledges or modalities, nor seen to have any epistemological connection to them, and indeed which is most usually seen to be antithetical to them.

Thus the institution is commonly considered as foreign, alien, as something adopted or indeed imposed, sitting 'on top of' or 'outside of' traditional indigenous society. It is most usually conceived of in orthodox western theory, policy and practice as an institution and process constituted outside the intellectual and material bounds of the Third World, and applied to it. Critiques of this orthodoxy have failed to shift an understanding of it, as other than an institution and practice that is virtually a total derivative of the West. A consideration of modern schooling as a process of essential transformation for its Third World participants from the traditional to the modern continues unabated: transformation in desire, attitude, expectation, motivation, modality, technique, allegiance. It is a process of reconstitution of the subject, orientating its being away from its original environment, to which it is no longer natural, to that which has created it: the
modern world; epitomised by the West in general, and its specific metropolitan sponsors in particular. A process then not only of modernisation, but also of westernisation, or even Americanisation. Modern identities become the product of western intent, the function of western institutions, manifested in the increasing use of European/international languages, idioms and icons which progressively displace the traditional orientations and associations. Any contribution from within is most usually acknowledged as traditional, and therefore most likely to be categorised as the forces of conservatism and reaction, which inhibit or divert modern intentions.

In positing the non-West Third World as ordered only by static, unnegotiated tradition, by definition then the non-West or Third World plays no active part in the process of modern change. Participants can only be considered initially as embodied representatives of the 'traditions' which exists outside of the modern 'site' of the school. Their participation is constituted accordingly in terms of success or failure in the realisation of western models of schooling and corresponding economic development. At the extreme this can manifest in a racial essentialisation in which the modern remains essentially alien to the Third World, forever foreign, not natural. Change itself has come to be theorised as a naturalised process in the West (Beck 1994) and yet change in the Third World is frequently conceived of only in terms of an absolute break with the past and in adoption of the modern.

How then are the implications of modern formal schooling in Ethiopia for identity and resistance to be read? To frame an investigation on the basis of the normative assumptions of modern formal schooling, crediting it as an homogenising process leading to predictable outcomes, is to confine, in the first instance, its possibilities to a measurement of the relative effectiveness of modern formal schooling. This effectiveness is defined by success in the inculcation of modern/western behavioural attributes, orientations and technique. It is also to measure the impact of this process on the devaluation of tradition and its reduced valency in the creation of identity. Such lack of potency is opposed to the viability of the modern state and citizen. The use of a modern language, particularly English; the acquisition of modern beliefs, values, tastes; the use of modern technology; all these become indicators of schooling's efficacy in the process of modern change. Difference within the nation becomes of secondary concern, emerging primarily in a comparison of the relative extent of change between different 'tribes' or ethnolinguistic groups. Following this logic, any conception of constructive agency must tend to focus only traditional reaction against the modern institution and process.

What then of the diversity of language, culture, religion, socioeconomic and political history constituting Ethiopia? In a country of more than 53 million people (Tekeste Negash 1996) who speak at least one of more than 70 different languages, what is the significance of the use of one these, Amharic, as the official language of the state and government and the official language of primary schooling and other modern institutions for the most part until 1993? Is such circumstance to be seen as inconsequential compared to a consideration of the use of English? Is the use of Amharic a mere reflection of local colour, of no substantive importance? What of the state's long-term association
with Orthodox Christianity in a country half comprised of Muslims? What are the implications of participation in schooling, classically an enterprise of the urban, when the huge majority of the population is involved in rural pursuits? If the implications are to be measured only in terms of the advance of foreign/western languages, cultures and identities and a corresponding diminution of traditional Ethiopian forms under the influence of the modernising project of schooling, then both the nature of the enterprise and its significance is misconstrued in its lack of perception not only of diversity, but of difference.

Such a construction is devastating in its theoretical separation of the consciousness and actions of Ethiopians from the praxis of modern formal schooling and its implications, except in so far as they are its transformed object. Modern education is conceived of as being applied to, or consumed by, Ethiopians - a process and product which is constituted as perpetually alien, its consequences therefore only derivative from and explicable in terms of foreign/western forms. Explanations for the failure of the national schooling system to produce improved socioeconomic benefit and modern citizens may therefore be sought only in deficit: lack of enough modern education or the resources for its proper conduct. The inability of the reactionary forces of tradition to cope with modernity or the capability only to wreck its project may also be invoked. Nepotism and corruption, based on traditional affiliations, may be the only credits to indigenous agency.

Implicitly, then, this denies the conception of any proprietal or intellectual rights for Ethiopians in its present conduct or future development, except under the aegis of dominant orthodox international/western models and expertise. The constitutive difference of strategic interest and the historical articulation of peoples within the Ethiopian state become subsumed in the construct of totalising western power and authority. This perpetuates an understanding of the implications of schooling in terms of the articulation of one pure form with another, of the modern West with traditional Ethiopia, on an ongoing, virtually ahistoric, basis. The nature and implications of differing and contesting historical traditions and their impact on the conduct and experience of school, becomes largely irrelevant in the face of what is seen as the dominant homogenising processes of the modern school.

Modern formal schooling, however, is neither the force of unadulterated modernity, acultural, apolitical, nor is it in praxis merely the cultural, political and economic institution of the West. From either perspective, to constitute change, in all its respects, in such a unilateral and unilinear way credits the West not only with the material force to impose its domain, but credits it also with the conception of change itself, and therefore with ownership of change. Identified as the bearers of modernity, the West remains not only the economic and political governor of the material development of education, but also the seat of modern intellectual creativity in perpetuity. Thus, Third World participants are denied the legitimacy to contribute in an authoritative manner to the future development of schooling and argument over its philosophical direction, or to have proprietal rights in education. The challenge, then, is to examine the implications of modern formal
schooling beyond a consideration of it merely as a western institution applied to an alien environment, which it must either inevitably 'develop' or corrupt.

DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE: THE IMPACT ON THE NEGOTIATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES THROUGH SCHOOLING

It is the intention here to argue for the constitutive importance of sociocultural diversity and difference of interest on modern formal schooling. The institution of schooling in Ethiopia is seen to be constituted in praxis, through the formative contribution of participation at all levels, within the complexity of competing strategic interests. Rather than causing a complete abrogation of existing traditional authorities and modalities through the imposition of an alien authority, modern formal schooling is considered as providing new scope for the persistence of ongoing contestations and claims for control of the Ethiopian empire/state. This struggle can be seen as being pursued through the potential of modern formal schooling to configure articulations between individuals or groups based on various interests and the state. As an icon of modernity and a distributor of skills, certification and, consequently, material opportunity in the modern world, modern schooling can be seen as a major facility for the consolidation, maintenance and evolution of national power on a partisan basis. This is seen to be effected through the utilisation of schooling's potential to confer or deny cultural legitimacy and socioeconomic efficacy to specific languages and identities. As part of this process, access to modern schooling and the nature of participation in it are strongly linked to the mandated use of specific indigenous languages and the promotion of particular identities to the exclusion of others.

Argument will be made therefore for a consideration of the ongoing evolution of traditional authority and modalities through its mediation of modern schooling, facilitating the ongoing development of specific manifestations of modern schooling. The development of such forms need not in any way be considered inevitable but is highly indicative of the strategic manipulation of the possibilities of modern formal schooling for partisan interest. It is contended therefore that modern formal schooling is partisan not just in the sense of those changes it is seen to effect from tradition to modernity, or, indeed the westernisation of individuals and society – rather that it is also partisan in the constitutive contribution made by sectional Ethiopian interests in a nation of diverse political, social and cultural interest. To see such partisan interest as merely western, or indeed as merely derivative of western power, is to underestimate modern formal schooling's viability as an agent and broker of status, authority and power through the currency of symbols and modalities which are distinctly internal to the Ethiopian nation. In this sense, then, resistance can begin to be conceived of beyond the confines of the explanatory parameters of traditional capitulation to or reaction against the modern.

This is not to deny the ramifications of international contingencies driven by the intent of western interests, and the manifestation of these through the power and authority of its international and national educational and financial agencies. Certainly it is, however, to reconsider western power as monolithic, and to differentiate between its intent, implementation and outcome. It is also to understand the existence of difference
of interest and its dynamic manifestations not only between, but also within the nations of the Third World. If it can be said that modern schooling is both a conduit and an authorising agent of a superior power, then that power is not readily identified here as exclusively foreign or western. It is seen that modern formal schooling has been established in Ethiopia not merely, or only, as an extension of western hegemony; it is of necessity reliant on diverse Ethiopian agency. While the reproduction of western institutions may be seen as a preoccupation of western policy and program intent, this is not seen to have been translated automatically into reality.

This construction is reinforced by the orthodox tendency to consider Ethiopia as an interchangeable national unit of Africa, or at least sub-Saharan Africa – a tendency reflected in the continental studies which induct description and assessment from one particular circumstance to the general and, conversely, from the general deducts to the variable specificities. The significance of national and intranational differences are usually only acknowledged in dominant educational discourse in one of two ways: only in so far as they represent part of a common order of traditional difference in opposition to modernity; or in so far as relative difference in ‘progress’ from the traditional to the modern is assessed. The mediation and negotiation of western agendas and the development of syncretic forms is rarely a topic of concern within the orthodoxy. It has not, however, been totally absent in educational theoretical discourse; the focus on the failings of the modern project and a growing theoretical interest in the West in ‘hybrid’ forms has created an arena for the consideration of difference and agency in western academia.4

SCHOOLING IN ETHIOPIA

While the constitutional profile of Ethiopia is polycultural and polylexical, largely rural in residence and economy, and religiously affiliated to Islam slightly more than Orthodox Christianity, although increasingly less so to animism, these differences have not been reflected proportionately in either the participation, pedagogy or administration of modern schooling for the greater part of its existence. Rather, the development of modern schooling in its formative years, particularly after 1941 until at least 1974, could be considered as a product of the established dominance of an Amharic (Amharinya) speaking Orthodox Christian elite over a heterogeneous and volatile empire. While material wealth and geographical location are certainly significant factors affecting access and participation, these have not developed independently of ethnolinguistic configurations (Hough 1987). Regional differences reflected in historically unequal rates of access and participation are in fact highly indicative of unequal rates of ethnolinguistic participation. This is not to claim that non-Amharas and non-Christians have not participated. In fact, some particular groups like the Muslim Aderis of Harar have maintained a very high participation rate for both males and females. Rather, it claimed that the mediation of the development of modern schooling by dominant interests has affected the nature of access and participation of non-dominant groups, in particular the most numerous, the Oromo.

Writers from Ethiopia must be given primacy here in pushing the edges of this perspective. A steadily growing body of literature has determinedly made the case for the
profound significance of diversity within the Ethiopian state in its expression as a difference of interest in, and articulation with, the nation-state; particularly in relation to peoples like the Oromo (see for example Mekuria Bulcha 1997; Mohammed Hassen 1998; Asafa Jalata 1993, 1998; Gadaa Melbaa 1999). This, it is argued, has been manifest in the subjugation of Oromo and other peoples through what are considered imperial conquests which greatly expanded the Ethiopian empire, particularly under Emperor Menelik II from the latter half of the last century. Central authority since that time, whether imperial, subsequently socialist or, more latterly, democratic, has been seen to be hostile to Oromo. The regime of land expropriation, labour exploitation and the demands for tribute to the imperial centre were gradually transformed into what could be called more precisely colonial relations between the subject peoples and the state. A process of intended ‘Amharisation’ (Hamdesa Tuso 1982): an enculturation to or forced adoption of an Amhara identity has been seen by this critical literature as a social and economic prerequisite for participation in schools, government, legal procedures and modern urban activities generally (ibid).

Modern schooling is therefore examined here as part of this process in terms of its extension of the premium of the Amharic language and identity at the expense of the language and identities of Oromo peoples and of the ongoing resistance to this process. The Oromo, now a socially and economically differentiated people adhering to a variety of religions and regional allegiances, continue however to share a common contemporary language, Afaan Oromoo, with only relatively weak lexical differences. Despite being the single largest ethnolinguistic group in Ethiopia (Tekeste Negash 1996), they have remained peripheral in terms of national political power, at least in so far as their identity has been maintained as overtly Oromo (Hamdesa Tuso 1982). The use of the Oromo language in government and schooling and the maintenance of overt Oromo identities has been, during the greater part of the development of the national system of schooling, either prohibited or actively discouraged and currently remains highly contested.

The introduction of modern schooling did not mark the initiation of this process of domination but rather provided a new modality for the extension of Amharic language and identity and therefore a critical means for the modification of the basis of imperial power, personified in the Emperor Haile Sellassie. This process was accelerated after 1941 when the occupying Italians were expelled and the emperor returned from exile after a five-year period. This particular form of partisan control of the schooling system was challenged in the events leading to the overthrow of imperial control in the revolution of 1974 and during the following military dictatorship. However, the modality of Amharic language and associated identities has only recently been fundamentally challenged by the 1993 constitutional enactment of federal regionalism permitting the use of vernaculars. The question of the impact of this partisan control and varying forms of resistance to it is pursued here through a focus on some preliminary analysis of material gathered in interview on the experience of the school participation of Oromos from different regions, socioeconomies and religions. A consideration will be given to the specific experiences of schooling which have required varying degrees of suppression, or even
denial, of Oromo identity and language. Here, only two revealing and interlinked issues related to school experience will be raised: prescriptive language contexts and name changes.

Amharic, the language of imperial authority over at least the last one hundred years has effectively been the prime language of instruction in school and its administration since the 1940s (Hough 1987) and this position was legislated for in respect of education in the 1960s. Effectively, the counterpart to this prescription has been the proscription on the use of other languages, including that of Oromo, in the classroom and even in some cases in the school grounds. Again, the manner of this proscription has varied. It was widely understood that only Amharic could be spoken in the classroom (except in English class), developing a normative notion that the schools were contexts for using Amharic, not other Ethiopian languages, these would be unacceptable: this was demanded and this was accepted as the path to education by many. This situation was generally supported by sanction: speaking Amharic badly or ‘with an accent’ or for breaking into one’s ‘mother tongue’ might bring corporal punishment as well as laughter and derision from either the teacher or other students, or both, or indeed corporal punishment to the offender. This was experienced in terms of physical pain and embarrassment but what was perhaps the most bitter sanction of shame, recalled by many for speaking Afaan Oromo which was mocked as the ‘language of the birds’.  

Those members who were interviewed from the original group who were taken as boys from Borana to be schooled in the capital by the emperor in the late 1940s did not remember physical punishments, but other sanctions were experienced. And yet participants saw themselves as somewhat above these power plays, and one remembers: ‘They [Amharic-speaking students] laughed at me … I laughed [at] them’. Former students from the areas to the west and south-east of Addis Ababa in somewhat later times have tended to describe more harsh sanctions, including physical punishments, one of which was to have pencils placed between the fingers of the hand and then having it squeezed. The current analysis of the research data in accounting for such difference of experience is leading to speculation that after Emperor Haile Sellassie’s initial ventures into educating the non-Amhara children of the provinces in the capital and other major urban areas, and as schooling expanded to lesser rural areas, an increased bluntness of application of the language proscription was possible. It is likely that increasing demand played a part in this transformation. The Boran had not been willing participants, at least not initially, and a number did ‘escape’. The interests of the emperor in the success of what was, in effect, an experiment to create modern, loyal, Ethiopian subjects, must have moderated its implementation. As a demand for education emerged, this moderating influence dissipated. Resistance was still evident according to some, however, through the persuasiveness of numbers: where Oromo were numerically predominant in the classroom the boldness of the children in speaking, at least amongst each other, in their mother tongue might be increased, particularly after the 1974 revolution.  

The significance of language use inside the classroom is intimately linked to patterns of usage outside these parameters. In the southern half of the country, in particular
where Oromo predominate or are identifiable in significant numbers, the historical significance of the language used sharpened in its connotation of both difference and distinction. Most obviously it signifies difference as a marker of ethnic origin and association. Significantly, the use of Amharic has had a valency as the language of the ruler, in the context of the direct imperial authority over these areas in at least the last one hundred years. Use of Amharic, even the single facility of orality, has historically acted to signify, in and of itself, the quality of being educated, civilised, modern, sophisticated, urban. By contrast the use of Afaan Oromoo has been identified in varying degrees with the disparaging term ‘Galla’ for its speakers, rather than Oromo by which they call themselves (Mohammed Hassen 1994, p.xi; Leenco Lata 1998, pp.128-50). It is associated with illiteracy, ignorance, being uncivilised, the primitive, even animalistic, a language of the countryside, unsuitable and inappropriate for use in modern circumstances.

The entrenchment of Amharic as the language of primary learning, particularly as the base from which to expand western education in foreign languages (particularly English) and as the language of the central state, has created an ongoing momentum in the creation of a valency for Amharic, making it highly resistant to the challenge of revolution and civil war. Its place as a modern language, fit for bureaucratic administration and modern pedagogy, has been asserted through a dominant understanding of its superiority over other Ethiopian languages as a written language, one with its own unique script, integral to what is presumed a ‘civilised’ and ‘civilising’ culture. The reconstitution of empire under the emperor Haile Sellassie through ‘modernisation’ is seen here to have entrenched the privileged status of Amharic language and identity. However, this is not considered as a clear-cut insertion of static traditional identity into a modern medium. Rather it is seen to involve a dynamic modification of elite Amharic identity to encompass and translate modern change. Modification that, while maintaining its predominant non-modern or traditional status and privilege, extended the valency of this identity and the veracity of the Amharic language in the context of Ethiopia’s changing socioeconomy and post-World War Two international relations.

The Amharic language and a specific urban, even urbane, modern identity associated with its use, is seen here as being a composite cultivated ideal. This ideal has been cultivated in the modern urban arena, especially through schooling, as the modality for a unified state that would subsume the diversity of the peoples of Ethiopia. Whereas this ideal was derived from emerging identities of the dominant ruling class, particularly the Shoan elite, the extension of a system of national schooling provided a means for its further development in a categorically different way. National schooling laid a solid basis for the continuing development of the Amharic language as the ‘natural’ interpreter or translator of modernity. It was positioned as interlocutor between the English/French/international and the non-Amharic speaking populations, including the Oromo, whose languages were considered neither fit for nor capable of such a task. Contiguously, schooling provided a protected and fertile ground for the development of an elite Amhara identity, the personification of the modern face of a changing Ethiopia. In the modern urban context, particularly in the school, the office and the court, the bearers of
this identity were ‘natural’: sophisticated, assured, educated – bringing the enduring sense of the ‘civilised’ to new contexts.

Modern schooling offered the possibility of an ‘education’ in the cultivation of an ideal identity for those for whom it was not considered a natural inheritance: Oromo and other non-dominant groups. However, whatever the degree of assimilation to this ideal, the personal name of the individual might clearly speak otherwise if non-Amhara or non-Christian names were retained. Names can be critical markers of identity and, certainly in the Ethiopian context, may proclaim much about the individual’s heritage and origin: an account of direct patrilinear descent and cognatic relations; a telling indicator of ethnolinguistic and regional origin and religious affiliation. Historically, name changes before the development of national schooling were frequently in the form of mass conversion by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in areas now in southern Ethiopia, but then newly coming under imperial domain. Modern schooling organised on a national level provided a new mass modality for such conversion of public identity and presumably, then, a reorientation of allegiances. A variety of accounts of name changes have been identified in interviews of school participants; from Oromo names, or possibly Muslim names used by Oromo in the Eastern regions, to Amharic Christian names.

Members of the original group taken from pastoral Borana to school in the capital did not change their names and those interviewed did not remember being asked to change. However, there is evidence that in the schools that spread in subsequent times to the Borana area, name change was at least suggested to Borana Oromo. By contrast, on the basis of initial analysis of interviews of Oromo in Neghelle to the west of the capital, the likelihood of Christianisation (Orthodox) of names is higher. It was not uncommon for children to be asked on enrolment if they would like to change their Oromo name to an Amharic/Orthodox Christian name, and the national exam in their sixth year of primary school seemed to be another critical time because the child’s name would be registered and would become more difficult to change thereafter. It is clear that some gave Amharic/Orthodox Christian names to their children without specific coercion, leaving the father’s name undisturbed, but heralding a break with regular Oromo name choices in order presumably to facilitate a child fitting in at school and not burdening it with any undesirable sociocultural connotations. Urban areas in the southern half of Ethiopia have generally tended to be the outposts of central authority, with Amharic the language of administration, court, and school. Explanation for these differences may be found in the greater contact of the resource-rich western regions with the central imperial state than those of the semi-arid regions of Boran, and also its far greater involvement in schooling.

The place of modern schooling and the education urban population were highly instrumental in the revolutionary challenges made to imperial authority, which ultimately lead to its overthrow. Schools were major seeding grounds of discontent and action against the regime and of the formulation of such challenges in terms of Marxist class analysis. Most significantly here is the co-opting of this analytical framework to a military and political challenge of ethnic hegemony. The assertion of the rights of the peasants against the landed gentry and urban aristocracy occurred contiguously with a
recognition of the dominance of Amharas in this class and an assertion of the rights of ‘nationalities’ to express and develop their identities, languages and association fully in the context of a modern socialist state. The possibilities arising at the time could be considered as explosive, given the assault made on the language and identity of the Amhara and its natural association with the educated modern world. The free use of other languages, including Afaan Oromoo, on university campuses constituted a direct challenge to the authority connoted by the use of Amharic and to the understanding that this language was superior, the only non-European language within the nation that was capable of understanding the past and communicating modern knowledge.

The massive literacy campaigns conducted across vast areas of Ethiopia in 15 languages (Mammo 1982) can be seen as a manifestation of this dual challenge, but one which was marked in its continued understanding and maintenance of Amharic as the only (Bhola 1987), even the ‘natural’, language of learning in the context of the modern school. Ultimately, the central revolutionary government (certainly not exclusively Amhara in origin), the Derg, subjugated numerous issues, including the question of the development of nationalities, in the quest for centralisation of power on an increasingly narrow basis. While the aristocratic Amhara identity was displaced, the Amharic language was maintained as the language of the nation within an idiom of ‘modernising’ socialism (Bhola 1987). Amharic remained pre-eminent as an ‘advanced’ language and specific institutional effort was made to increase its capacity to deal with modern change. ‘Minority’ languages were relegated to continue as languages of the unschooled masses and, as in the case of Afaan Oromoo, continued to be considered as unsuitable beyond a rural, non-modern application.

With the massacre of a large section of the civilian Left, including massive numbers of university students, in the Red Terror of 1976, opposition to the Derg was effectively forced out of the major cities into rural-based guerilla campaigns (Andaragachew Tiruneh 1993). It is significant that of those groups that survived and ultimately defeated the Derg, many were organised not only around various interpretations of socialism but on the basis of ethnolinguistic affiliation. One of these organisations, the Tigrayan Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF) played the major role in the Derg’s downfall. The TPLF went on to become the major player in the Ethiopian Peoples’ Republic Democratic Front (EPRDF), which it formed with other ethnolinguistic nationalist based organisations, and which subsequently assumed national authority in 1991 (Young 1996). Although the representative veracity of many of its component organisations has remained contentious, the EPRDF was returned in national elections held in 1995 (ibid).

Under the EPRDF’s policy of federalism, the creation of semi-autonomous regions based partly on considerations of ethnolinguistic density has, ostensibly, diffused the most potent issues of language and identity. The use of vernaculars in the institutions of regional authorities, and as the language of instruction in primary schools, has been constitutionally permitted since 1993, and this has allowed a certain scope for the development of vernacular languages. The legal use of Afaan Oromoo as the language of regional government in Region Four, Oromia, and its mandated use in regional schools as the lan-
guage of instruction is demonstrating the possibilities of a language that was previously considered unsuitable, incapable of coping with demands other than that of the rural, backward and traditional. A renewed interest has arisen in the language and its viability as a modern language. Its active promotion is pursued in a number of ways: through the publishing of written materials, the conduct of community study groups for adults in the capital, and the provision of Oromo language assistants in the schools in Oromia, seek to provide literacy in Afan Oromo to students, including those that are already literate in Amharic and possibly English.

Although these developments are generated through the modern education system they incorporate, idiomatically, the non-modern: Oromo culture and history, rural socio-economies and religion. The legitimacy of Oromo identities is asserted within modern contexts: the learning of modern knowledge and skills, the use of modern technologies’ and the practice of modern bureaucratic government. A valorised understanding of the heritage of the Gada, the original sociopolitical organisation and guiding ethic of Oromo society, has become at least symbolically integrated at the school. At a high school in Borana in the south, a large mural of the Abba Gada (‘father of the Gada in power’: leader; Mohammed Hassen 1994, p.14) is prominent in the school yard, and inside the library on the wall is a list of the Abba Gadas going back to the 1400s. This is being effected in large part through the mediation of those who have experienced the partisan education and government of the Ethiopian nation dominated by the Amharic elite. The experience of schooling in Oromia is being constructed, then, in specific relation to overturning the pre-existing order and to providing an alternative referential framework based on an understanding of a unifying Oromo origin, shared history and culture expressed through Oromo language and emergent identities. These forms derive their authority from original tradition but effectively extend its validity and capabilities to new modern urban contexts.

The use of the vernacular in government and school however has in some respects only fuelled the intensity of contestation for the language and identity of modern contexts and therefore, perhaps, ultimately of the nation. The politicisation of debate over the use of qubee, the Oromo alphabet based on Latin characters, demonstrates this clearly. This is interpreted by many Amhara, particularly from the old elite, as an overtly political act, one without linguistic rationale. Oromo justify the use and promotion of the qubee on the basis of its suitability to the Oromo language (Afan Oromoo) and the inadequacy of the Amharic alphabet (fidel). At a primary school in the Neghelle in the western Oromia (Region Four) the qubee is prominent in the playground, and a resource centre run by the teachers manufactures teaching aids from wood, nails and paint to support the new curriculum. These efforts demonstrate both the enthusiastic determination and the pragmatism of teachers, in a context not just of material poverty but of what is considered to be political censorship. In 1996 new school texts were still being eagerly awaited, and despite protestations of the difficulties of production by educational authorities it was believed by some that the texts were being vetoed because of their overt Oromo perspective.18 New curriculums for senior students in Oromia, taught with texts in Afan Oro-
moo, identify certain famous figures in Ethiopia as Oromo rather than stressing their 'Ethiopianess', effectively claiming their worth for Oromo and Oromia.

The current situation, then, has led to a more explicit dispute over the authorising and empowering possibilities of schooling, effected through a demarcation of language contexts and the related promotion of language-based identities. Effectively this is seen to express itself at one level in terms of a dispute to gain a direct relationship with English and the international, and the advanced education, science and technology with which these are associated. Although English is officially the language of instruction from year seven, in practice, in many schools, it is only in the senior years that this may be the case, and even then skills may not be well developed. Consequently, even without continued legislative proscription, the place of Amharic has maintained its entrenched position in pedagogy in the schooling system at a higher level than is mandated in policy statements. This has occurred in a context in which Amharic has continued to dominate as the language of central administration and to be a lingua franca between staff in high schools and frequently in tertiary institutions, when the staff originate from multiple ethnonlinguistic background.

However, while ethnonlinguistic-based contestations have radically affected the constitution of schooling and therefore its negotiation by participants, the choices made under these circumstances should not be seen as mere reflections of these demarcations. This may elevate such distinction as the only salient feature through time and define the understanding of motivations and agencies as perpetually discrete and homogenous according to static ethnonlinguistic affiliations. Again this would be to replicate the theoretical macro divide between the western or 'modern' world and the Third World or 'traditional' world. Specifically, it would be to miss the differences within ethnonlinguistic populations; these must be considered, as indicated earlier, as a counterpoint to a totalising view of the ethnonlinguistic divide. Rather than the urbanising potential of schooling resulting in the development of an entirely alienated, detribalised, urban elite, dependent on the West for sustenance, it can provide a powerful medium for the growth of traditional modalities and realignment of political configurations based on notions of tradition.

In the current context increasingly powerful assertions of the rights of Oromo have been made to allow them the same economic and social opportunities as the old Amhara elite and what is claimed as a new Tigrayan elite. Significantly, they demand these on their own terms, without denial of their Oromo language and identity and with a view to shaping the nation within which those opportunities are created. Schooling has provided one means against which and through which such assertions are being made. The growth of regional government, particularly in Oromia, has provided new scope for the employment of those educated in the vernaculars of these regions in many areas, not least of all in teaching and the educational bureaucracy. This has provided new incentive for education using these languages, and an increasing number of examples of the efficacy of Afaan Oromoo in modern contexts. This has not been without bitter contest; there has been a backlash in many towns in Oromia, which, despite being in a region domi-
nated by Afaan Oromo speakers, are actually urban islands dominated by first-language Amharic speakers, a legacy of imperial times. The pressure to revert to schooling in Amharic in these towns, and the sensitivity of public debate on the questions of language, identity and schooling, leave much room for speculation on the ramifications for political and statal allegiances. Whatever the outcome of the struggle to define the ethnolinguistic identity of modern schooling and the state, and even if the majority of participants are satisfied in this respect, the question of the utility and relevance of schooling will continue when access to it remains limited to such a small percentage of the overall population (Tekeste Negash 1996). It is, however, perhaps only through such struggle to determine the languages and define the identities of schooling that such issues may be negotiated, making an understanding of its processes a vital preoccupation for those who would seek to influence the course of Ethiopian education.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical basis for examining ‘modern’ formal schooling in Ethiopia has been the subject of challenge here in order to allow scope for an understanding of Ethiopians as diverse agents in a dynamic process. An understanding of this form of schooling as a basically homogenous institution, one that reflects only the increasing dominance of western modernity over a static tradition, is rejected. Rather, an attempt is made to show the importance of the diversity and difference of interests within the state for the construction of identities and the manifestation of resistance through schooling. For the greater part of the history of modern formal schooling in Ethiopia this has facilitated the development of Amharic language and an elite Amhara identity at the expense of politically marginalised peoples like the Oromo. Schooling has played a critical role in privileging this language and associated identities as ‘natural’ modalities of the modern urban context and the modernising state.

A brief examination of language use in schooling and associated name changes has been made to provide a view of the renegotiation of modern contexts and institutions through the dynamic development of particular traditions. In an analysis of material gathered from field research and alternative literatures, modern formal schooling is shown to be a site of resistance to existing privilege and of attempts to effectively overturn the status quo through the creation of new normative identities which are inclusive of Oromo.

NOTES

1. This endeavour is being carried out within the framework of research for a doctoral dissertation.
2. The reference here is to dependency theorists who stress the imperial nature of western schooling, beginning with writers like Martin Carnoy (1974).
3. This is perhaps the crux of the problem with those theorisations of globalisation and even cultural studies which take their lead from notions of globalisation as homogenisation.
5. These writers, amongst others, have taken issue with the tendency in the academic discourse to view the highland, literate, Christian peoples as the bearers of the true sociocultural essence of Ethiopia, and others like the Oromo as being historically peripheral or even antithetical to the development of the nation, except insofar as they are assimilated.

6. These interviews were undertaken as part of research for a doctoral thesis. Most of the interviews were conducted in Ethiopia over a period totalling more that ten months during 1995-96 and 1998. Additionally, some interviews were conducted in the Northern Frontier Zone of Kenya bordering Ethiopia in 1998 and a small number of interviews are ongoing in Australia.

7. These situations have been described by interviewees from various regions.

8. Boranaa here refers to the area in the far south of Ethiopia where Boran pastoralists are the majority population.

9. This person was, at the time of interview, a lecturer at a tertiary institution.

10. Interviewee from Western Ethiopia.

11. Interviewee from Ambo, west of the capital.

12. Only Tigrinya shares this script and its native speakers, the Tigrays, although dominant in government numbers, are not a majority people. They are seen, however, as linked to the Amharas and are referred to as Abyssinian or Habasha, frequently in a negative fashion by Oromo intellectuals.

13. Shoa is the area which was made the centre of highland Amhara power in the late 1800s under Menelik, who expanded the Ethiopian empire from this base and established the capital Addis Ababa there on the site known as Finefine by the Oromo.

14. Surnames are not used as such in Ethiopia. Identity is indicated in this sense through the father's name. For greater detail, the father's father's name and so on may be used.

15. Based on interviews of these former participants.

16. Interviewees who were students at the time have elaborated on this situation.

17. Under the supraorganisation of the EPRDF, a number of apparently ethnolinguistic-based organisations have been formed which are viewed by government opponents as 'front' organisations. This is the case with the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), which was formed under EPRDF auspices, while the leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) were expelled from the organisation and exiled from the country.

18. The interviewee was involved in education and textbook distribution in the west of Ethiopia.

19. This association is very widely held amongst diverse informants.

20. Essentialist explanations of ethnicity may obscure political contexts of action and justify acts of domination, as Campbell (1997) in some respects shows.

REFERENCES


