

**Constructing Past And Present In Harar**  
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**Introduction-Concurrent Historical Narratives**

Historically, Harar has served as both the city centre of a region and an important regional subcentre to an Empire and nation. In the New Ethiopia, the city has been identified as the administrative centre of Region 13, recognizing its importance in the federalized union. For centuries it was Harari, or Adare, or in their own terms of reference, *Ge usu'* [1] (literally, "people of the city"), who exercised dominance and control over the surrounding region.

In recognition of their historic preeminence, the *Ge usu'* have been granted the power to rule over the city which they identify as their homeland and the region which has historically been under its jurisdiction. In this paper, I explore the dialectic of relations between Harar and the *Ge usu'* and these two centres and make explicit the use of alternate historical constructions in the negotiation of these relationships.

Relations between Harar and the Christian highland administration and Imperial centre were dominated by tension and conflict largely phrased in religio-political terms, though perhaps most concerned with control over lucrative trade routes linking the interior with the coast. At a local level, the *Ge usu'* monopoly over the political economy, which made them a viable rival against the central administration, was dependent upon their domination in relations with neighbouring groups.

As Donham notes, "the complexity of local histories is not simply determined through relations to the centre ... and the notion of what is peripheral is always relative to how a community was situated vis-a-vis a hierarchy of centres" (1986: 44). The complexity of local relations have, through processes I document here, contributed as much to the undermining of the traditional sources of *Ge usu'* power and prestige as have the major structural changes brought about in relation to the larger centre.

While this produces complementary concurrent histories, they are of course complexly interwoven and interdependent. The two perspectives which dominated political debate in Harar during the time of the transitional government are, as I suggest here, oriented differently with respect to which of the centre/periphery debates within which they locate themselves. By referring to different historical narratives, each side of the debate fails to acknowledge the complex interdependency of the two and the vitality and importance of the other.

The relationship of the city to the Ethiopian centre, is generally characterized in terms of hostile foreign invaders undermining local autonomy and seizing wealth and power from the hands of the *Ge usu'*. This historical perspective risks failing to acknowledge the complexities of local relations in which the autonomy and wealth of the *Ge usu'* at the center are largely derived and dependent upon activity sustained by members of other ethnic groups, principally Oromo, in the region surrounding the city. The reality that present day Harar houses a multi-ethnic society, shaped by multiple influences and united through obligations to one another as common residents and to the local saints around which local Islamic orthodoxy is oriented, is also obscured within this narrative.

By focusing alternatively on local relations between the *Ge usu*' who have stood at the apex of what Sydney Waldron has called a "pyramid of ethnic stratification" over other populations who have come to reside within and beyond the city walls (1974: 7), we risk losing a sense of the importance and place of the city for the *Ge usu*' in terms of the definition of themselves as a group. Without taking into account a long history of autonomous rule in which *Ge usu*' were politically and economically dominant over the region, we would fail to identify the legitimacy of their claims to reinstate self-rule.

### **Contemporary Political Debate**

In recognition of their claims to the city and in defense of their now precarious position as a numerical minority in the region, special dispensation was made in agreement with the Transitional Government and the early official representative body of the community, the Harari National League, to ensure a *Ge usu*' majority in the new administration.

The move to restore autonomous rule to the *Ge usu*' requires a reconstruction of borders blurred by processes which I explore in this paper. While the political changes and repercussions of the Mengistu era have restructured the economic relations upon which much ethnic distinction in Harar is based, inter-ethnic relations fostered through centuries of interaction in trade, and commonality afforded through coresidence and shared religious orthodoxy, had, I would argue, already done much to obscure previously defined borders between ethnic groups in Harar. Local responses to the situation of being granted the right to autonomous rule have differed not so much as we might expect between ethnic groups in Harar, but within the *Ge usu*' community itself.

Where in most other regions a Provisional Council was set up to represent the region in the pre-Election period, in Region 13, members of the *Ge usu*' community could not agree to vote for membership of such a council. As a provisional measure, the TGE gave authority to the League, as the dominant political body of the *Ge usu*', to appoint their own council members. As such, this arrangement gave the party, in the first instance, control over the administration of the region during the transitional period and, in the second instance, ensured that *Ge usu*' would effectively control the region by holding an ethnically-based right to veto power in the administration voted into place in June, 1995.

In the 1995 election, only *Ge usu*' were eligible to run for those seats on offer inside the city wall, thereby ensuring they would regain control over their traditional homeland. While they still represent the majority of the population inside the ancient city walls, which demarcate their homeland, in the total area of Region 13 they represent only 15% of the total population - far outnumbered by Oromo and Amhara populations (CSA 1984: 34, 36).

In the rest of the region, an equal number of seats were open to candidates irrespective of ethnic identification. This resulted in the current arrangement in which the League claims all the seats within the city wall and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (the OPDO), hold all the remaining seats in the region. The inner-city council however, as the primary council, is that which can pass laws uncontested by the secondary council and has veto power over those motions proposed by the latter.

Numerically the situation appears curiously weighted. *Ge usu*' are far better than proportionately represented and invested with much greater political power than the Oromo who form the ethnic majority in the region. What is more problematic though, is that local *Ge usu*', who have not been able to establish a united political front which adequately represents the range of experiences of the group, are now officially represented by a single political party. It is this conflict, which dominated political debate, and conflict in the transitional period while I was in the field.

Tensions within the League led, in 1992, to the formation of a splinter group and ultimately, opposition party-the Harari Democratic Unity Party, known colloquially as Hadiyuppa. The League, through agreement with the TGE, chose for the Provisional Regional Council members of their own party, thereby excluding Hadiyuppa supporters from participation in the pre-election administration and causing considerable conflict within the community.

The reality of the city's ethnically mixed population has led to a clear division within the community between those who support the exclusivity of *Ge usu*' rights to authority over the region on the basis of their historical dominance, and those claiming rule over Harar should reflect the ethnic diversity which the city has come to house over the centuries.

In very simple terms, the League as a nationalist party seeks to reinstate indigenous rule over Harar and its environs demarcated as Region 13. While securing rule over the Region, the party seeks to unite all *Ge usu*' on the basis of shared history and culture. The party's broad base of local membership is thus strengthened by support from the *Ge usu*' communities resident in Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and abroad. Hadiyuppa is a locally based party, whose membership, although primarily *Ge usu*', cuts across ethnic lines.

Hadiyuppa and the League ultimately differ on their vision of historic and contemporary ethnic relations in Harar. In Hadiyuppan terms, to be Harari is to reside in and identify with the life of the city, which does not demand identifying as *Ge usu*'. This makes the "democracy" of ethnically based privileges to govern on the basis of an earlier economically defined ethnic hierarchy at least questionable, if not, for many members of the community, untenable given the degree to which ethno-structural relations have shifted throughout this century.

The League's demand to reestablish *Ge usu*' as the rightful rulers over the city over which they formerly governed relies upon a historic rendition of past preeminence undermined through incorporation and captured symbolically in campaign language [2] and the projection of imagery which is suggestive of the injustice of their defeat and incorporation. Addressing the population as a persecuted minority, two thirds of whom now live outside Harar, half of these scattered as refugees throughout the world<sup>3</sup>, allows the League to use historical references in an emotive appeal, to great affect and introduces a global perspective to the issue of centre and periphery.

For the League's opposition, the recognition of the present multi-ethnic constitution of the city necessitates a different historical perspective. From this perspective, the interaction of various ethnic groups and the local and national economics and politics which have brought them together, looks to historical reconstruction, which evidences inter-ethnic relations and alliance.

### **A Brief History Of Harar And Its Relations To The Centre**

Where the greatest conflict in contemporary Harar appears to exist within the community, much of the historiography of Harar is dominated by attention to conflict between *Ge usu*' and external forces.

As the city developed from the 9th century into a seat of Islamic scholarship and authority, its missionaries actively campaigned for the conversion of the surrounding Oromo populations and waged episodic Jihads against the expanding Christian Empire. The most famous of these is the brutal campaign of mass forced conversion led by Imam Ahmed al Ghazi, or Gagn as he is known, while Harar was capital of the Adal Sultanate from 1529 to 1543. The Jihad was so forceful and effective that, as Hassen

states, "(It) threatened the very survival of the Christian state in north east Africa for 15 years," (1980: 228; Pankhurst 1982: 49).

Intense rivalry between Christians and Muslims in the Horn was largely motivated by the quest to secure control over the lucrative caravan routes to the coast (Hassen 1980: 22). For centuries, Harar was strategically placed on one of what Bahru Zewde refers to as the two major arterials linking the northern and southern spheres of the Ethiopian polity (1991: 21-2). By virtue of its advantageous position and political importance as a long-standing city-state with established connections to both the interior and the coast, Harar developed into a thriving commercial centre under the independent dynasty established in 1647 (Ahmed 1960: 33; Hassen 1980: 228-9). In the city's markets, the interaction, negotiation and exchange of goods, services and information from and between different regions and groups in Ethiopia was strictly regulated and guarded by the *Ge usu'* Amirate.

From the 16th century on, however, Harar was in a precarious position struggling to maintain control over lucrative trade routes while involved in ongoing conflict with warring Oromo groups (Caulk 1977: 369). Internal hostilities arose as the Amirate necessarily formed alliances with Oromo, weakening the political integrity of the state. When the Egyptian army seized Zeila and Berbera, the ports upon which Harari trade was dependent, Amir Mohammed saw little reason to resist the subsequent occupation of Harar in October 1875.

With the abolition of the Amirate the independence of Harar was relinquished, never to be fully reinstated (Hassen 1980: 232). While briefly resurrected by the British following the Egyptian evacuation in 1885, the general insecurity of its rule and the vacuum created by the Egyptian exodus ten years earlier presented Menelik with a viable opportunity to annex the regional subcentre (Hassen 1980: 232; Zewde 1991: 20).

At Chelenko, Menelik's more than 20,000 troops easily defeated the 3,000 *Ge usu'* foot soldiers rallied together by the Amir (Hassen 1980: 235). The Muslim city was thus incorporated into the Christian Empire when Menelik's troops entered victoriously in January of 1887 and Menelik employed his cousin, Balambaras (later to become Ras) Makonnen Walda-Mikael as governor of the new Ethiopian province (Caulk 1971: 15; Pankhurst 1985: 255; Zewde 1991: 63-4).

Pankhurst states that under Menelik, (and thereafter), the *Ge usu'* were effectively stripped of any sense of power beyond the tokenism of limited places in public office (1985: 256). The Ethiopian rulers strictly patrolled the hills surrounding the city, and the central mosque was destroyed and the Medhane Alem Church erected in its place. Haile Sellasie, taking a special interest in the city as the place over which his father had ruled, initiated the construction of numerous public works and installed his own son Makonnen as governor.

The standard historiography suggests the increasing marginalization of Harar vis a vis the Imperial state. This was compounded by the shift of trade and population to Dire Dawa with the building of the railway to the coast in the early 1900s. Harar, which was Ethiopia's second largest city at the beginning of Haile Sellasie's regime, had been superseded in size and importance by Asmara and Dire Dawa by the start of the Mengistu era (Donham 1986: 32).

## **Symbols Of Defeat**

The early incorporation of Harar into the expanding Empire under Menelik is definitive and pervasive in this view of relations to the centre. The Battle of Chelenko serves as the primary point of reference and dominant metaphor of the dialectic between *Ge usu'* and the Ethiopian state. While the effects of the

Mengistu era upon the city and its inhabitants are dramatic in and of themselves, they are, at least in terms of my observations in the field during 1994 and 1995, contextualized within this broader perspective of a near century of foreign domination.

In the present era, where the politics of autonomous rule necessitate a common orientation toward historical circumstances, imagery related to the Battle of Chelenko is constantly invoked in both political and popular discourse.

Despite the possible accuracy of the figure of 3,000 *Ge usu'* soldiers who Hassen states were killed at the Battle of Chelenko, it is commonly held that the number was 700; 700 newly married men sent off to defend the city and lose their lives in battle.

In memory of the hundreds of young men who died so tragically at the beginning of their married lives, a shawl is presented to each bridegroom on the occasion of his marriage. The shawl is known as *sati baqla*, which Leslau refers to in his etymological dictionary of Harari as a "cloth of many, many colours" (1963: 143). Literally though, *sati baqla* translates as "seven hundred" and the shawl to which this refers is, in fact, only two colours.

The bridegroom, in accepting the shawl from his father-in-law, is said to be acknowledging the death of those hundreds who died at this particular stage in their lives, fighting to defend the integrity of the *Ge usu'* and their rule over the city. The red stripe which runs down the length of the *sati baqla* is said to symbolize the loss of *Ge usu'* blood in the battle. It is worn over the shoulder on this and other special occasions. [4]

*Ge usu'* are further reminded each day of the blood shed at the Battle of Chelenko by virtue of the red earth floor, or *qeh afar*, which is found in every *Ge gar*, or traditional "house of the city". Every *Ge usu'* house I entered in Harar (and many of those of friends in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa as well) has a red floor in its main room. [5]

It is my opinion that the shared consensus of the meaning of *sati baqla* and *qeh afar* derives from their direct meaning in both the individual and collective lives of *Ge usu'*. Both the marital contract and the domestic sphere are entered into as individuals and embrace essential cultural ideals. In the context of the wedding ceremony, the presentation of the *sati baqla* reminds *Ge usu'* sons and daughters of the fate of 700 newlywed couples. The shawl symbolizes the cultural imperative to marry, reproduce and perpetuate the *Ge usu'* as a group and makes a lesson of the virtue of fighting when the integrity of the group is threatened.

Within such a small population, conformity produced through common orientation such as this is undoubtedly central to maintaining a sense of cohesion. By making interpretations of history a part of daily life, incorporating them into aspects of dress and architecture and ultimately "tradition" and culture, *Ge usu'* are reminded every day of their shared history in these particular terms. Since local history has been one of increasing distance between the *Ge usu'* and their traditional bases of wealth and authority, the exegesis accompanying these symbols has remained relevant, emotive and immediately accessible.

The symbol of defeat at the Battle of Chelenko has, in recent years, been appropriated into the public sphere by the Harari National League who employs its imagery on their flag. As League officials informed me, the red stripe across the top of the flag symbolizes the blood shed at the battle, the black stripe across the bottom representing the deaths incurred at the hands of the Christian invaders. [6]

Reference to these symbols effectively evokes a memory of invasion and defeat used to support the case for the reestablishment of self-government. While they are essential in terms of the narrative of relations between Harar, the *Ge usu'* and the centre however, they say little about the relation of the *Ge usu'* and their city in regional terms vis-a-vis neighbouring populations. Their object and point of reference is explicitly directed outward for political purpose. However, as I have observed, there is considerable interaction and commonality across ethnic lines, which poses a certain amount of difficulty for political campaigns expressed in these broad ideological terms.

## **Ethnography And Borders**

The conflict with Hadiyuppa arises as a response to the local, lived reality of blurred distinctions between ethnic groups in Harar. Decades, if not centuries of common residence and worship must have contributed to the blurring of borders long before the Mengistu era. Undoubtedly, however, shared experiences have been enforced and particularized through common oppression under the Derg.

Earlier historic and ethnographic works have failed to acknowledge the complex multi-dimensional inter-ethnic relations which have developed through participation in economic and religious structures through a fascination with the *Ge usu'* as an anomaly- a Semitic speaking enclave surrounded by a sea of Cushitic speakers - producing observations which could be used to support a historical narrative which suggests the *Ge usu'* are a distinctive, bounded entity.

In Burton's early observations in the 1850s, he identifies the Harari as "the descendants of a once mighty race," a distinct, self-governed, curious isolate, whose acute xenophobia and peculiar dialect, "unintelligible to any save the citizens," separates them from neighbouring populations (1856 (II): 15-19).

More than a hundred years later, Waldron describes the *Ge usu'* as a closed ethnic category, a bounded, endogamous cultural isolate who have appeared to remain aloof from Imperial administration by exercising strict control within the city walls and monopolizing resources (largely through their retention of an exclusive language) which place them in a position of privilege and prestige vis a vis neighbouring populations (1974: iii, vii-ix).

The *Ge usu'* remain, in Waldron's observations, a largely self-governing community despite the establishment of Harar as an administrative centre and military base under Haile Sellasie's regime. In his analysis, this is largely because the nearly exclusively Amhara officers of the Imperial government settled themselves beyond the ancient city walls (ibid.: vii/ix). With the wall as a physical and symbolic boundary, the *Ge usu'* are able to remain separate from others to the extent that they appear as an "island, remaining aloof from the outside world seemingly by choice... (whose) institutions and day to day interaction ... are surprisingly self-contained," (ibid.: 261).

What results from Waldron's work is a striking picture of the isolation of the group and its internal conformity and homogeneity. He boldly states that "The *Ge usu'* exclude others from their kinship, friendship and afocha (funeral and wedding observance associations) organizations" (ibid.: 108/111), the three fundamental forms of social organization which in Waldron's analysis are essential to *Ge usu'* citizenship. Class in Waldron's analysis is based upon the degree of participation in kinship, friendship and afocha activities (ibid. 7), which implies that by excluding non-*Ge usu'* from these organizations, the group maintains itself as a closed class category.

Waldron asserts that "Ethnic differences are class differences in and around Harar," and that amongst the *Ge usu'*, who sit at the pinnacle of an ethnically based class hierarchy, "clear cut class differences are

difficult to discern" (ibid, 108-9). This is achieved largely through denying impure, or non-*Ge usu*' ancestry, through concealing wealth and through according status on the basis of age (ibid: 109-10).

### **Challenging the Portrayal of the Ethnic Exclusivity of the Group**

It may be possible to suggest that ethnic exclusivity within the principal social structures observed by Waldron, operates as a largely theoretical principle, which obscures the possibility of ethnic difference within their memberships. This is undoubtedly both the result of a situation where *Ge usu*' still retained considerable authority over local governance despite incorporation, and of tendencies within ethnographic enquiry of the time to assert the wholistic, functionality of community.

The fact that the concept of *Ge limaad*, "learning the city," or the way of life of its people, is an entry in Leslau's etymological dictionary of Harari suggests that local usage of a concept of enculturation, whereby outsiders "become" *Ge usu*', was, at least as of the mid-1960s, a recognized phenomenon.

The *Ge usu*' are positioned as a prestige category to which members of other ethnic groups might aspire. *Ge limaad*, as a process, requires internalizing the local religious orthodoxy, conforming to the precepts of *Ge ada*' which is the "culture of the city," speaking the "language of the city," *Ge sinan*, identifying the city as the source of one's heritage and finally, participating in the basic forms of social organization of *Ge usu*' life, which are, according to Waldron, the family, the friendship group, and the *afocha*. [7]

In my observations, while perhaps still desirable, a pretence to ethnic exclusivity is difficult to maintain in present day Harar. Within those traditional institutions discussed by Waldron the degree of *Ge usu*' purity may still persist as an issue at a theoretical level, but it is a question of degree and contextually defined and dependent.

### **A Demand for New Perspectives on Ethnic Relations in Harar**

While it can be argued that the traditions of the city have largely been shaped by *Ge usu*' from their position of historical dominance over neighbouring groups in the area, changes in the political, economic and demographic structures in the region have significantly impacted upon how populations are defined and how they interact.

In very broad terms, I look at how changes since 1974 have contributed to the dismantling of the place of the *Ge usu*' in political and economic terms. These changes have observably contributed to commonality of lived experience for all Hararis, and posited them in opposition to central rule. I follow this with material gathered from the field, which documents non-politically derived evidence of solidarity in residential and religious terms.

### **Political Changes And The Restructuring Of Relations**

At a political level, individuals of non-Amhara extraction and aspiration across the country have shared the common experience of oppression under the Derg of being subject to an intense campaign of Amharization and the denial of non-Amhara languages and cultures, of participation in pan-ethnic anti-Derg political movements such as the EPRP, and of mass annihilation at the hands of Derg officials for expressions of dissent. Being united in the face of a common enemy has undoubtedly fostered a sense of identification and purpose between members of different ethnic groups on many different levels.

The major economic reforms brought about under the Derg regime have also contributed to a restructuring of economically defined ethnic relations. With the introduction of the Derg's land reform policies, the ethno-structural relations, which kept Oromo in a position of effective serfdom vis-à-vis *Ge usu'* landowners were virtually destroyed as rights to land were seized from absentee landlords. Although many creative strategies were employed whereby *Ge usu'* retained nominal or de facto control over their lands, the basic economic structure through which relations between *Ge usu'* and Oromo have been organized was dramatically altered.

Increasing economic marginalization of *Ge usu'* in Harar has perhaps been the greatest pull factor in the emigration to the larger urban centres of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa, where sizeable *Ge usu'* neighbourhoods now exist. Push factors, in particular, political persecution for political opposition to the Derg, have forced an even greater number of individuals, particularly younger men, even further afield. The current demographic breakdown of the location of *Ge usu'*, estimates that only one-third of the *Ge usu'* population remains in Harar (see note [3]).

Simultaneously, forced resettlement has brought thousands of Amhara into the region, and in the old and new cities combined, Oromo and Amhara currently constitute the majority of the population. The visible presence of the officers of state -the *neftennya* settlements around the old city-compounds a sense of "native" referring to all peoples of Harar in opposition to the Amhara soldiers and settlers.

### **Non-Politically Derived Evidence Of Inter-Ethnic Solidarity**

It is my opinion that what also now exists on many levels is a sense of common identification across ethnic lines which has developed for reasons other than shifts in relations brought about through political and economic change and upheaval.

In addition to the family, friendship group and *afocha*, which Waldron sees as the essential frameworks through which *Ge usu'* are integrated into a community, there are broader structures with which Waldron, though recognizing them as fundamental means through which *Ge usu'* commonly identify, is less concerned. These are the neighbourhood, or *toya* and local religious orthodoxy founded on belief and practice regarding local saints. In my observations, these two systems are as central to *Ge usu'* identity as they are within the lives of other residents of Harar.

Within its ancient walls, the city is structurally organized in terms of the *Ge usu'* concept of *toyach* or neighbourhoods, many of which are oriented around the shrines of local saints who in turn constitute the primary point of reference for local Islamic beliefs and practices. Each *toya* has its conceptual boundaries, its informal membership and a reputation or character referred to by members of other *toyach*. In the old city of Harar, before the mass emigration of *Ge usu'* in the 1970s and 80s, *Ge usu'* appear, according to Waldron's observations, to have been able to maintain borders between neighbourhoods characterized by their ethnic exclusivity (1974: 108-111).

The current population distribution within the old city necessitates interaction and co-operation between members of different ethnic groups to a degree so far unparalleled. The *toya*, is, in my view, functionally similar to those social forms identified by Waldron in the sense that it encourages social cohesion, and demands interaction and the fulfillment of obligations between its members. It is different in the sense that it does so explicitly across ethnic lines.

While the ethnic composition of the majority of the traditional *toyach* within the city walls is highly varied, the traditional obligations which *Ge usu'* share as co-residents of the same *toya* continue, despite the mixed composition of a neighbourhood's residents. One is born into a household in a particular *toya*,

and it is expected that individuals within the same toya will take on particular responsibilities toward each other and toward the upkeep of public property in the neighbourhood.

Public property includes essential resources, such as water, as well as the mosques and shrines around which the majority of neighbourhoods are oriented. It is an essential premise of my thesis that it is at neighbourhood shrines that the greatest level of cooperation is evidenced between what appear to be the most disparate peoples. Across lines of gender, ethnicity and even political difference, people honour and respect local shrines, worship together, and respect the worship of their neighbours.

Shrines and the saints they represent are the central features around which local Islamic orthodoxy is structured. The spatial and temporal organization of life in the city, explicitly reflect the ideals of local Islam and in turn embody and reinforce the centrality of saints in the lives of the people of the city at both a community wide and personal level. If we view the neighbourhoods and shrines in terms of their centrality in the social structural organization of the old city, we see how issues of difference within and between communities become peripheralized in the day-to-day lives of the people of Harar.

I argue that the inclusiveness, which characterizes popular thinking about the saints and activities at their shrines, absorbs political differences in much the same way as it has historically accommodated and admitted ethnic, economic and gender differences. Local religious experience, largely shrine-based, may thus go some way toward neutralizing current political conflict while also indirectly challenging a politics which calls for the reconstruction of borders between groups resident in Harar.

Within the vast legendary of the saints, all residents of Harar can find validation of their presence within the city. Alternative historical constructions are accommodated since the vast compendium of saints reflects both the exalted past of the *Ge usu'* who are their descendants, and the multi-ethnic origins and existence of life in Harar. Multiple ideologies and mythologies are accommodated and able to coexist within the arena of the saints, as are the disparate peoples who come to worship at the shrines of Harar.

While I have suggested several ways in which ethnic distinctions are minimized or made secondary to other concerns in day to day life in Harar, shrines, where such distinctions become peripheral to common identification as neighbours and Muslims, do perhaps represent the only public space where it is possible today to leave aside the issue of political difference within the *Ge usu'* community.

There are, in my observations, many other powerful ways in which *Ge usu'* and Muslims of other ethnic groups, principally Oromo and Somali, are connected through common understanding and adherence to a local religious orthodoxy. While there is not room for me to discuss this in any detail here, I mention briefly the fact that many of the leading religious authorities, *sheikhs*, *imams* and *qadis* are Oromo and Somali. Recognized first and foremost as Muslims, religious leaders attract adherents of various origins. Traditional venues for the religious instruction of *Ge usu'* are respected by and open to all Muslims. Qur'an Ge, the traditional elementary religious educational schools in which all *Ge usu'* children were once enrolled, now takes in less than 5% *Ge usu'* children, the rest of the spaces filled by Oromo children.[8]

## **Conclusion**

To posit Harar as the center of a new Region and grant its rule to the *Ge usu'*, necessitates a focus on historical relations with the Imperial Centre in which the city and its rulers were increasingly marginalized. While the city was marginalized within the Empire, the *Ge usu'* were still to a large extent able to sustain their authority over the city and its environs. In so far as the reforms of the Mengistu era have served to undermine the traditional sources of *Ge usu'* wealth and power, what is perhaps more

significant is how this has dismantled traditional bases of ethnic distinction in Harar and contributed to a greater commonality of experience across ethnic lines.

While the complexity of local relations poses a challenge to the representation of the Region in the new federation, at certain fundamental levels within the city itself, -the neighbourhoods and the shrines as I have argued here - the politics of identity and representation become peripheral if not irrelevant to essential experiences of living in the city.

Despite the undermining of the local economy and its ethno-structural relations during the Derg however, *Ge usu'* remains a prestige category. The politics of the New Ethiopia which have allowed the League to mobilize around the issue of their past preeminence supports this as does too, somewhat ironically perhaps, the majority of the population who were forced to flee under threat of the Derg. As one *Ge usu'* gentleman in Addis Ababa, commenting on the relative affluence of the community remarked to me, "Our slightly extravagant culture is now entirely supported by remittances from abroad."

The conflict within the community is not however, supported abroad. The North American Congress of Harari took it upon themselves to refrain from engaging in the debate surrounding Hadiyuppa and the League. For *Ge usu'* in the Diaspora what is ultimately at issue is the survival of the group and the reinvigoration of the local economy in order to ensure its vitality and influence in the new federation. The issue of center and periphery widens in this way to include *Ge usu'* of the Diaspora, for whom a perspective of distance and marginalization views conflict at the center as threatening to undermine the cohesion of the community and city in which they locate their origins.

Although left with fewer resources with which to construct a distinct viable presence, *Ge usu'* are invited in the new era to reinvigorate their city in their own terms. Conflict within the community threatens to restrict what is possible within the group, a fact which is easily recognizable from the perspective of *Ge usu'* in the Diaspora. At a local level, however, the nature of the conflict may suggest a future of possibilities between groups resident in Harar.

## NOTES

1. Terms in the *Ge usu'* language of *Ge sinan* are bold and italicized to distinguish them from other foreign terms which are simply italicized here.
2. Slogans such as "*Ge tariqa, habasha tariqa ellum*" (the history of the city of Harar is not the history of Christian Highland Ethiopia) are used to involve a sense of the earlier autonomy and development of the city.
3. These statements were offered to me by *Ge usu'* statisticians working for the Central Statistical Authority during the collection of the 2004 Census.
4. I noted its prevalence at political rallies and the celebration marking forth anniversary of the overthrow of the Mengistu regime.
5. Traditionally, as its name suggests, the *qeh afar* was made from the red earth of the area. With the advent of concrete and tiles this colour is still retained. Usually by painting the floor red.
6. Interestingly, there has been some criticism of the use of what might be construed as negative, defeatist imagery by *Ge usu'* elders resident abroad.

7. To this I would also like to add the *toya*, or neighborhood and most recently political affiliations, suggesting that identity is fluid and responsive to structural changes..

8. In my analysis Oromo appear to have infiltrated and permeated many of the spaces formerly dominated by *Ge usu'*. This is certainly true with respect to agriculture, and very noticeably with respect to religious institutions. More recent developments include the appearance of Oromo *afochach* and Oromo supporters of the Harari National League.

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