Introduction

It is generally agreed that ethnic and religious identities are interrelated. Few attempts, however, have been made to study empirically or to conceptualize how connections between ethnicity and religion actually are materialized. This study seeks to fill that void and offers a new theoretical framework for a better understanding of these relations. Seeking to reign in excessively constructivist perspectives that see religion and ethnicity as disassociated, symbolic, and dislocated, I employ the concept of *peoplehood* as the core one and apply an integrated approach that underscores the concrete nature of local peoplehood and also recognizes how religion and ethnicity are always embodied in individuals and groups, as well as emplaced within socio-material realities.

The question of ethnicity has always occupied students of historical and contemporary Ethiopia. Religion in Ethiopia has, on the other hand, gained lesser attention. One important goal of this study, therefore, is to highlight and explore the often-ignored role of religion in the production of identity, as part of intercommunal dynamics, as well as in conflicts in Ethiopia. It similarly investigates the interplay between religion and ethnicity as integrative aspects of broader dynamics.

The study’s case in point for exploring these topics is the locality of Bale in southeastern Ethiopia – where animosity between the people, the ruling elite, and the state culminated in an insurgency that lasted from 1963 to 1970. It is my belief that a thorough investigation of the insurgency, and the factors leading up to it, has the potential to provide a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the intertwined roles of religion and ethnicity in fomenting identity, demarcating boundaries, and causing conflict. The insurgency was part of a larger context of armed uprisings across the eastern parts of the Horn of Africa during the 1960s, all of which were spearheaded by Muslims. The Bale insurgency was the most famous of these insurgencies and was led by the self-proclaimed general – and iconic – Waqo Gutu. It
originated in the eastern and southern lowlands of the Bale province, which soon came under the complete control of the insurgents. The Imperial Government was hard challenged to quell the insurgency and was only able to crush it in 1970, after several major offensives.

**Interpreting the Insurgency**

Gebru Tareke conducted the most detailed study of the Bale insurgency during the 1970s. Focusing on land tenure, taxation, and social inequality as the key driving factors, the overarching interpretive framework in this seminal contribution is unfortunately trapped in a rather simple Marxist class-struggle perspective. Gebru Tareke understands Ethiopian society as constituted by social classes – primarily the peasantry and the landowning class – and consequently views the insurgency as a *peasant rebellion*. He does recognize ethnicity and religion yet sees them largely as contributing factors and, more significantly, construes them as thwarting the development of class consciousness – in the sense that they “were classes in themselves and not classes for themselves” (Gebru Tareke 1977: 17). This perspective dovetailed clearly with Ethiopian political developments from the early 1970s, when the forces that led to the 1974 revolution heralded the question of class. The academic discourse followed these developments, as noted by Donald Crummey (1986c: 8), with studies on feudalist structures, class, land, alienation, and the hardships faced by the peasantry (Andargachew Tiruneh 1993; Clapham 1988; Keller 1988; Markakis 1974, 1987; Ottaway and Ottaway 1978; Rønning Balsvik 2005). While this did not render ethnicity completely irrelevant, it was, as expressed by John Markakis (1974: 7), “conditioned by, and usually subordinated to, class considerations.”

It needs to be added that Gebru Tareke in the published version of his dissertation (Gebru Tareke 1991) has a far more favorable view of ethnicity and religion, recognizing “nonclass forms of social identities” and toning down the Marxist rhetoric. However, he

---

1 Markakis later came to recognize the relevance of ethnicity, stating, “The widening application of class analysis in the study of African societies during the past decades appears to have inhibited discussion on its own merits of a major element of social conflict in the continent, i.e. the political manifestation of ethnicity” (cited in Tarekegn Adebo 1984: 542). Andargachew Tiruneh is moreover one of the few who denied any connections between the Bale insurgency and class struggle, arguing that it was “based more on ethnic and religious considerations than anything else” (1993: 54).
Interpreting the Insurgency

seems to be struggling with this; although he admits that not every conflict can be reduced to a question of class, economic exploitation and competing classes remain his overarching perspective (Gebru Tareke 1991: 6, 21). This study integrates many of Gebru Tareke’s findings; whereas I disagree with him on many occasions, I view my contribution as completing his perspectives.

Subsequent interpretations of the Bale insurgency have shifted the focus to emphasize ethnicity and ethno-nationalism. This is most conspicuous among Oromo scholars, clearly colored by ethno-nationalist sentiments, who interpret the insurgency as an early expression of a pan-Oromo ethno-nationalist movement (Gadaa Melbaa 1988b). Most of these perspectives struggle to relate the ethnic question to that of class, arguing that the fight “against land alienation and unbearable taxation” came to evolve into ethno-nationalist sentiments (Merera Gudina 2007: 89). This underscoring of ethnicity is a clear reflection of political changes from the early 1990s that deliberately brought ethnicity in from the cold and a direct result of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front’s (TPLF) ideological discourse enacted through Ethiopia’s new ethnic-based federalist structure. These developments spurred intense public debates about ethnicity and ethnic boundaries, much of it centered on accusations of past ethnic dominance and subjugation, notions of national unity, and the question of ethnic diversity. Such politicization of ethnicity also entered academia, seen by the production of a new body of literature devoted to the question of Ethiopia’s ethnic past and present (Asafa Jalata 2005; Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa 1990; Sorensen 1993). This study questions the – often simplistic – ethno-nationalist interpretations, and I agree with Sara Marzagora that these tend “to serve, sometimes very transparently, sometimes more discreetly, opposite political agendas” and present “power relations in the Horn in a one-dimensional way, positing only two macro-categories of the oppressors and the oppressed” (Marzagora 2015: 242).

Particularly critical is the lack of attention to religion as integrative to the insurgency. Gebru Tareke does point to the relevance of Islam, but he does not explore it in depth and treats religion in a rather instrumentalist manner (Gebru Tareke 1991: 154f.). There

---

2 This structure divides the country into nine regional states based on ethnicity. The constitution of 1995 grants the states a high degree of autonomy and even bestows each state the right to secede from the federation (Art. 39).
are also those within the ethno-nationalist camp who outright dismiss the religious dimension, seeing the insurgency as an ethnic movement that was deliberately secular (Abbas H. Gnamo 2014: 203f.). There has also been a tendency to view religion as secondary to other dynamics; Markakis, for example, warned against overemphasizing the role of religion during insurgencies in Ethiopia, arguing it “provided the rudiments of ideological construction,” before concluding that religion served a political function. As insurgencies were aimed at state power, they were “essentially political in nature” (Markakis 1987: 35). Tim Carmichael has on his part claimed that opposition to the Ethiopian Kingdom in the southeastern areas primarily followed ethno-nationalist lines, and that it merely was “supplemented by a religious stress on Islamic identity” (Carmichael 2001: 192). I argue that this remains too simple and will throughout this study demonstrate how religion remained a highly relevant dimension of the insurgency; rather than being submerged by or derived from other dimensions, it constituted a forceful factor for the demarcation of identity and for collective political action.

The lack of empirical investigations of religion has been a general deficit of Ethiopian studies. A few contributions have paid some attention to religion as part of Ethiopia’s past, seen, for example, in Tadesse Tamrat’s Church and State (1972), but it has mainly been treated as an ancillary aspect of the political center. Recent changes within the religious landscape, with the arrival of religious reformism and the exacerbation of interreligious tensions have fortunately spurred new interest in religion in Ethiopia (Ahmed 1992, 2001, 2006; Boylston 2018; Desplat 2010; Eide 2000; Hannig 2017; Haustein 2011; Hussein Ahmed 2006; Hussein Ahmed 1992; Hussein Ahmed 2001; Østebø 2012; Tibbe Eshete 2009). This development is highly welcome; yet, numerous areas still remain unexplored. We lack detailed knowledge about the importance of religion in the making of diverse cultures and communities, about the role of religion in Ethiopian sociopolitics, about determining power relations and processes of “othering,” and how these processes create distinct identities based on religious fault lines.

Imagined Peoplehood, Embodiment, and Emplacement

Given the limitations of the previous approaches to the insurgency, I now turn to the conceptual building blocks of an alternative approach...
that I argue will yield a richer account. This will frame my analysis of the insurgency’s origins, driving forces, actors, and effects.

Rather than talking about religious and ethnic groups, I believe that the concept of peoplehood, or imagined peoplehood, serves as a better analytical tool to address relations between ethnicity and religion and will in this particular case focus on Islaama and Amhara peoplehood. I argue that this concept allows for a greater degree of flexibility in construing the multiplicity of “groupness” and belonging beyond the nation-state. The dictionary definition of people is “a group of individuals who perceive and feel themselves as unified and distinct vis-à-vis other group(s).” The suffix “hood,” in turn, connotes a set of conditions, qualities, and shared histories and geographies that define a group’s specific character and self-awareness qua other groups. Imagined peoplehood is an obvious paraphrasing of Benedict Anderson’s term Imagined Community (1983) used to highlight, among other things, the central role of culture and language in the forging of the shared sense of belonging that is essential to the formation of modern nations.

Peoplehood has become a common term within Jewish studies, where it was first introduced by Mordechai Kaplan (1934) and applied to differentiate between people and religion in relation to American Jewishness. It gained much traction during the twentieth century and was seen as analytically fruitful by the way it “constructs and gives credibility to a radically new vision of collectivity, by underscoring the historical roots, timeless existence, and essential nature of what ultimately is an innovation” (Pianko 2015: 8). The concept of peoplehood has increasingly gained attention in other fields – for example, in political science literature dealing with questions of political identity in a globalized fluid world (Lie 2004; Smith 2003). Another area that has contributed to conceptualize peoplehood is the field of indigenous studies. The antecedents for this was the work of Edward H. Spicer, whose studies of indigenous groups in the American Southwest introduced the notions of “cultural enclaves” and “enduring peoples” to make sense of the durability and dynamic creativity of (ethnic) identities. This was the basis for Robert Thomas’s (1990)  

---

3 See Pianko (2015) for an overview of the scholarship.
4 The utility of the concept has also been contested, where critics argued that internal divisions among American Jewry made the concept ill fitting (Reinharz 2014).
5 See Croucher (2006) for a review of some of the most important contributions here.
development of peoplehood as a concept that could transcend ethnicity, statehood, gender, nationalism, and religion. He thus suggested a model where peoplehood consisted of four markers: language, sacred history, religion, and land – which he viewed as closely interwoven and mutually dependent. Tom Holm and colleagues (2003) helpfully termed the interaction of these four markers the Peoplehood Matrix.

In the literature on ethnicity, the concept of peoplehood has been used interchangeably with race, nation, and ethnicity and has also been associated with genetic characteristics (Wallerstein 1987: 380). Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd are among the few who have attempted to theorize around the concept, also linking it to religious identity. Ruane argues, for example, that peoplehood has important analytical value because “societies and cultures consist of multiple, interlocking ways of forming community and identity, of which the most important are ethnic, religious, linguistic, territorial and political” and that “[e]ach of these is distinct and none is reducible to any of the others” (Ruane 2010: 122). He and Todd therefore argue that the idea of the ethnic group, or community, is problematic because it creates an inappropriate “sharp demarcation of ethnic from other communities.” Instead, they find that peoplehood encompasses in a more inclusive manner such multitudes (Ruane and Todd 2003: 6). Their ideas are less clear when it comes to the relationship between peoplehood and religion. On one occasion, they differentiate between religious and ethnic peoplehood (Ruane and Todd 2003: 6f.), while Ruane, discussing the relations between ethnicity and religion, talks about both peoplehood based on ethnicity and religion and religious peoplehood (Ruane 2010: 122).

My own thinking around the concept of peoplehood owes much to the previously outlined scholarship; yet, it moves in a different direction. To begin with, I believe Ruane errs when he differentiates between religion, ethnicity, and peoplehood. Furthermore, I disagree with his separation of ethnic and religious peoplehood. Moreover, I find Thomas’s suggestion of peoplehood as consisting of language, sacred history, religion, and land problematic. He provides no justification for why these particular markers are chosen; one is moreover left with the impression of peoplehood as a static container of particular cultural content (cf. Barth 1969).

6 Goody similarly argues that the term “ethnic” is popular “because it gets around the problem of defining what it is that makes a people – that is, an ethnos – distinctive” and claims moreover that it “covers all as well as covering up” (2001: 8).
I favor a perspective that starts with peoplehood as a more all-encompassing concept – one that enables us to analyze the multiplicity of groupness. Peoplehood is a concept that allows for flexibility, that is, similar to the notion of community, clearly of a segmentary nature, ranging “from the family, the lineage, and the clan to the nation or the race” (Brow 1990: 3). For example, Irish or Polish peoplehood is, on the one hand, delimited by nationality and territory, but it also entails being Catholic – something that extends beyond such boundaries to being part of a global community: “[t]o be Polish is to be Catholic” (Demerath 2000: 128). This does not mean, however, that we are talking about two distinct peoplehoods. Rather, it points to the fluid nature of peoplehood in the sense that it generates multifaceted belonging. Another example relevant for this study is how an Oromo could belong to the Arsi branch of Oromo and be part of, let us say, the Raytu clan and the Doyo sub-clan, and who might view himself or herself as part of Ethiopia. If this Oromo was a Muslim, he or she would also belong to the worldwide umma (global Muslim community). The concept of “peoplehood” therefore serves, broadly speaking, as a trope that encompasses kinship groups, clans, ethnic groups, religious communities, or nations, being inherently elastic to allow for the intersecting of multiple and simultaneous boundaries and identities. While not everyone is part of a professional group, voluntary association, or political party, everyone is part of a peoplehood. Having said that, peoplehood should not be construed in any essentialist manner as having an a priori existence. Instead, it always needs to be adequately historicized and contextualized.

Crucial for my understanding of peoplehood – which I will elaborate on in the sections to come – is that religion and ethnicity constitute foundational dimensions of peoplehood. Barth has characterized ethnic identities as “absolute” and “comprehensive” and claimed that ethnicity is “superordinate to most other statuses” (Barth 1969: 17). Richard Jenkins argued in similar ways that ethnic identity is the “basic or first-order dimension of human experience,” a primary identification within which he includes humanness, gender, kinship (2008: 75). My argument falls along the same lines. However, while I recognize that religion and ethnicity are clearly imagined and constructed, I also argue that they are inescapably grounded on visceral experiences.

The point to be made is that peoplehood cannot be fully understood without recognizing humans as embodied and emplaced beings. This
recognition necessitates a perspective that reconsiders some basic epistemological assumptions, and I will in the following outline an alternative approach that involves such rethinking. While these ideas are generated from a particular empirical case that has enabled me to ask critical questions of my data, I do believe that my suggestions are broad enough in ways that make them applicable for other contexts.

To begin with, I argue that we need to move away from perspectives that view social and cultural realities as isolated, self-referential systems of symbols. We also need to be mindful of excessively detached constructivist perspectives based on a Cartesian epistemology that unduly dichotomizes mind-body, abstract-concrete, culture-materiality, finite-infinite, and the cognitive-emotional. Such a detached constructivism incorrectly understands humans as dislocated and disassociated; moreover, it vitiates our thinking of identity, rendering it overly fluid and abstract. A relevant example here is Stuart Hall, who, despite important contributions in cultural studies, disavows any location and construes identity as a process of becoming rather than being, thus eliminating any possibility for stability (Hall 1996: 4; cf. Butler 1990). This results in a disposable, fluid, and empty self – one that deflects any possibility of continuance, stability, and location.

While acknowledging identity as dynamic and as constructed, I argue that rather than seeing the individual as constantly “becoming,” a more appropriate perspective is one that acknowledges how the individual always self-defines and is defined in relation to a continuum of cultural and material realities. What we need is an approach that is grounded in a more integrated understanding of humanness – as bodies located in the interplay among concrete, material, social, and cultural environments (Vasquez 2011: 83). While the notion of embodiment has gained increased attention in recent years, there is a tendency to treat the body as a representation of something else, or as detached from agency, and construed as a passive physical shell for the mind. Nonrepresentational theories (Thrift 2007) have

7 Hall invokes Derrida’s concept of diﬀerence, in which meaning inﬁnitely diﬀers and is deferred, and claims that meaning as related to identity can only be made through a “temporary break” in the endless semiosis of language (1996: 3).

8 The body is often viewed as a tool, an agent, and as the locus for symbolic meaning. This latter aspect is found in Mary Douglas’s writings that reduce the body to a “symbol of society” (1970: 93), as a “text” that can be read. The body is alternatively understood in relation to certain spheres of human activity, such as the body and gender, the body and health, etc., while perspective on the
made a point of moving away from seeing the body as a mere representation of some sort of symbolic meaning or as just a metaphor, instead emphasizing the concreteness and materiality of the body and, thus, of the human itself as the primary datum (Csordas 1999). A dilemma with some of these perspectives, however, is that they risk emphasizing the flesh to the extent of underplaying the integral cognitive dimension of the body. I believe Ian Burkitt manages a fruitful balance here, seeing the mind as entailing the body – and humans as “thinking bodies,” which moreover extends to the integration of the self’s organic and social aspects, enabling an understanding of humans “as embodied social beings” (1994: 8), as “socio-natural entit[ies]” (1987), and of the self as an “ecological self” (Neisser 1988).

Focus on embodiment is a methodological field recognizing “embodiment as an existential condition” (Csordas 1999: 147; cf. Csordas 1994) and is primarily about the realities, experiences, perceptions, and imaginations of being in the world from the standpoint of the body. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception (1962), being embodied – and emplaced – runs counter to the notion of humans existing on the other side of materiality. He views perception as the primary bodily experience and claims that embodiment is the condition for perception, which in turn is the way objective reality becomes real. Our embodiment opens us up to an existential immediacy and intersubjectivity that is captured in the concept of *être au monde*. I find this concept particularly useful in framing this study; yet, I will also add the notion of *being-with-others*, reflecting Tim Ingold’s perception of the person being situated in “an encompassing field of *relationships*” with other bodies (2000: 144, italics in original). The concepts *being-in-the-world* and *being-with-others* refer to a concrete, embodied form of existential immediacy in the material world, in which humans are part of the world – inhabiting it as active purposive beings. A few studies employ Merleau-Ponty’s framework in relation to ethnic identity (Dion et al. 2011; Geurts 2002; Retsikas 2000; multiple body) divides it into entities as the individual body, the social body, and the political body. Michel Foucault (1979, 1980) perceives the body in relation to discursive processes of domination and as a product of power plays. Richard Jenkins (1996: 60f.) discusses embodiment and identity and relates identity to the embodied self yet ends up focusing on the mind and cognitive processes of identity formation and maintenance, thus reducing the human body to “a basic metaphor for symbolising and imagining collective identities” (1996: 143).
2007), and although I have found them inspirational, my thinking around this is rather different.  

According to Merleau-Ponty, the fact that the individual’s experiences and perceptions are from an embodied, emplaced, and located point of view means he or she sees the world as boundless, and which “arouses the expectation of more than it contains” (1962: 3). An important aspect of the being-in-the-world and being-with-others is the urge to make sense of this boundlessness, which entails a process of structuring elements as parts of a whole, mapping out and making sense of oneself and one’s realities. Such processes of abstraction – or social construction – are never linear but always complex and reciprocal, in the sense of being dialectically related to embodied interactions with other human beings and to the material world (cf. Tweed 2006: 158). This process of relating parts to a whole is, I argue, about belonging, about developing an identity in the process of establishing relations with other beings and objects and reciprocally relating oneself to these others. The relational character of belonging is clearly noticeable in the way the term has little or no meaning in itself. It makes no sense to talk about belonging unless we talk about “belonging to,” “belonging in,” or “belonging with.”

The ability of abstraction, or imagination, is a unique faculty among humans, which forms the basis for social construction, symbolic production, and categorization. Important here is that abstraction is never severed from human material existence but that it is the very embodied and emplaced reality that enables human imagination and abstraction. Humans are, I claim, simply incapable of abstraction severed from the material world. Building on Mark Johnson’s theory on metaphors, I suggest that abstraction is not about generating internal representations of external reality, as the dualist Cartesian worldview would have it. Rather, it emerges in the dynamic and intimate entwinement of bodily and physical realities (Johnson 1987, 1999; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors are vehicles for understanding, playing a critical role for any form of abstraction, and for human ability to exist. It is not about “consciousness of non-real objects but as a projection of a lived body in a lived environment” (Dion et al. 2011: 321), meaning that nothing abstract or imagined can exist