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The Intimate Violence of Political and Economic Change in Southern Ethiopia

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[Konso people] produced cotton from their fields. They produced cotton cloth, but they sold it in ... other areas. [And] they wore leather skirts.... I procured cotton clothes and ordered [three] women to wear them. We went together to the market and we had a picture taken there. I then made a proclamation, ordering women not to use leather skirts anymore. I wanted to show them that in physical appearance we are the same, and in all things we are the same. They are my people. They are my countrymen. But because of their style of dress, they are distinct from me. I wanted to show them that I am better than them only because of my clothes....

I tried to abolish [harmful customs]. I tried to teach them. They accepted me. I am proud now to see them wearing cotton clothing. I am proud of it. Everybody tells you, whenever you ask them, that it was Tesfaye Hailu who told us to do this. Even they are proud of this.

———Tesfaye Hailu, former governor of Konso¹

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¹ All names of people from my fieldwork are pseudonyms. Most people I quote spoke almost entirely in Konso language, although a few, such as Tesfaye, spoke primarily Amharic. I worked with translators to conduct and record interviews, and later asked other translators to generate additional translations from recordings. I draw on both sets of translations and my field notes for the quotations in this article.

Kalle Tanapa: I was walking in the village here and someone saw me and demanded a fine. He came back here to my house and demanded [one *tekara*].² [I was wearing] a *komfa* [a skirt made from goatskin]. When they caught me, I cried. They then told me to pay the [fine].... And they hit me because I was wearing [the *komfa*]. That is why I gave them the money and then stopped wearing leather skirts.

JE: They actually hit you?

Kalle: When you wore the leather skirts, and those people found you, they would hit you.... Those people would go through the villages and look for people wearing leather clothing. But if you were at the market, that was where you really had to be careful.

———Kalle Tanapa, in her seventies in 2002

In 1960, women in southern Ethiopia's rural Konso district faced a violent campaign by local men to eradicate leather clothing following a ban imposed by the local governor, Tesfaye Hailu. Tesfaye, a man of the northern Amhara ethnic group, banned leather clothes along with bead necklaces and arm bracelets as part of imperial Ethiopia's "modernization," which was influenced by disparate sources, including the United States. Tesfaye saw women's attire as "backward" and "unhygienic" and as obstructing modernization; its elimination was a means to improve Konso culture and help the empire join the community of modern nations. The "culture" of "the Other" has often been cast as impeding "modernity" and requiring elimination or change, particularly the practices of women, from genital cutting in eastern Africa to veiling among Muslim women in the Middle East and Europe (Hodgson 2009; Masquelier 2005; Merry 2009a). So it was with the widespread, politicized transition to cotton clothing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century eastern Africa. The target was clothing worn by all women in Konso and made by women in the low-status category of "Xauta," sometimes referred to as a "caste." Leather skirts signaled important stages in women's lives, and became extensions of individual women's tastes, experiences, and identities. Women today recall the violence and punishments of the campaign, including being chased, beaten, imprisoned, and fined, and even having their skirts forcibly removed at home and in public. They offer contradictory explanations of who initiated the ban and the reasons for it, but they remember clearly the local men involved in eradication efforts.

The eradication campaign had immediate effects: it changed women's attire and reduced the numbers of Xauta women leatherworkers, who today make mainly utilitarian mats and bags. More significant, I will argue, was how the violence became insinuated in everyday social relationships and cultural knowledge in Konso. The campaign attacked the social position of women, whose adornment was officially labeled premodern and became subject to the dictates of men, who were conditionally empowered through imperial modernization. Leatherworkers and other Xauta people experienced

² Possibly a Maria Theresa Thaler, coins first struck in Austria in the eighteenth century and subsequently used widely due to their known silver content. They circulated in southern Ethiopia into the 1970s.

declines in their status after occupations that were previously “polluted” within regional cultural logics became “unhygienic.” By the end of the twentieth century, leatherworking had become the most despised Xauta occupation. Bonds among women of all backgrounds that had been materialized through leather clothing were reconfigured into a more rigid, “caste-like” system of relationships. These changes were amplified by the order to wear cotton clothes; male farmers, of the hereditary group known as “Etenta” that dominated Konso social and religious life, grew cotton, and some learned weaving, profiting from the new demand and partially displacing Xauta men from another “polluted” occupation.

Xauta and Etenta, like minorities and farmers elsewhere in southern Ethiopia and in societies as far west as Senegal, have sometimes been referred to as “castes” or “caste-like” groups (e.g., Pankhurst 2001; Dilley 2004). Scholars have used these terms to convey notions of pollution associated with hereditary minorities and purity associated with those controlling political and religious realms, the enunciation of pollution and purity in inherited occupational exclusions and separate roles in rituals, and to support their assertions that group endogamy and ascription block mobility between categories and explain group persistence. In Konso, Etenta have historically controlled land, governance, and religion, while Xauta occupations have included blacksmithing, making pottery, weaving, trading, and leatherworking, the latter done mostly by women. In the twentieth century, Etenta denied Xauta access to farmlands, restricted where they could live, forbade their intermarriage and commensality, barred them from public meeting grounds, and excluded them from communal rituals except for specific polluted acts. They also selectively conscripted them to fight in Ethiopia’s wars, and targeted them with violence, especially during political upheaval. Rather than “castes,” however, I refer to Xauta and Etenta as “hereditary status groups,” because I want to avoid assumptions of unchanging composition, definitions, and relationships; these are emergent categories involving notions of descent and complex symbolic associations that people are continuously reworking.³

During fieldwork in 2001 and 2002, it became clear to me that the categories Xauta and Etenta have undergone substantial shifts over the last century. In Ethiopia today, for example, Xauta face new resentments for their

³ “Caste” conveys persistent hierarchy but it also perpetuates assumptions of boundedness and timelessness (see Ellison 2006: 667, briefly summarized here). Ethiopianists and Africanists have used “caste” to identify and explain relationships they posit have existed for centuries, thereby pre-judging interactions they seek to understand. Further concretizing the concept, other scholars have argued that “castes” only exist in South Asia. Despite the historical mobility of the word, critical debate about the concept, and much recent scholarship conveying the historical dynamism of such groups, caste has long implied “discrete, bounded, and ranked entities” from which mobility is “impossible” and “mutual isolation and distinctiveness is maintained” (Berreman 1968: 334–35), a conceptual legacy that I contend we have not escaped. (See also note 5.)

perceived success in liberalized markets, and their livelihoods are challenged as impoverished Etenta adopt Xauta occupations and identities hoping to improve their own lives (Ellison 2009). I refer to these relationships as “emergent hegemonomies”: they involve new relations of inequality that people generate using novel information and opportunities that also rework older, commonsense understandings of “proper” behaviors and social hierarchies.⁴ Although in the 1970s the socialist government banned “caste prejudices,” and the current constitution forbids discrimination, people have continually recreated such practices and their logics in new forms.⁵ The emergent hegemonomies of current economic and political liberalization involve relations of inequality that people reshaped in part through the violence of earlier decades, such as during the leather clothing ban.

Parallels between the experiences of women and Xauta following the ban and those of Tesfaye Hailu, who himself later faced violence during Ethiopia’s socialist revolution, help bring into focus the intimate violence of political and economic change. Praised by superiors for his modernization and development work, Tesfaye was rapidly promoted and ultimately reached parliament. During the revolution in 1974, however, socialists identified him with a “feudal” empire that obstructed the country’s modernization. He was imprisoned and beaten, his irreplaceable personal belongings were taken, and his family relationships shattered. Like the women targeted by his modernization efforts, his experiences of this violence were deeply personal, and they continue to shape his life and relationships today. When I visited Tesfaye, his modest and well-kept home reminded me of busts of deposed emperor Haile Selassie in storage at the national museum in Addis Ababa: toppled long ago, but present in an utterly transformed state. As we discussed his time in Konso, illustrated with the few documents and photographs that survived the socialist purge of his belongings, Tesfaye seemed unaware of the violence women experienced following the leather clothing ban. Instead, he remembers his service to Ethiopia’s modernization and Konso’s development, prematurely ended by a pointless and violent revolution that left him physically abused and his identity and relationships completely changed.

Tesfaye and the women of Konso were targets of state-sanctioned attacks on behaviors categorized as backward, and on those who practiced them, in order to bring about desired social and political transformations. The utopian goals of development and modernity—analogueous to the different goals of liberalization today—were understood as larger than the individuals involved.

⁴ I explain the genealogy of this concept in the book manuscript from which this article draws (Ellison n.d.).

⁵ Socialists framed Xauta and Etenta as distinct and timeless castes; forcing people to cross social boundaries and creating new “opportunities” for productive activities paradoxically fostered resentments that people readily acted upon in these terms.

Some categories of people, and individuals defined as belonging to them, were seen to be obstructing these goals and they therefore became objects that had to be changed or eliminated, including through violence. As Veena Das (2007) has shown in India, the violence of political and economic change is more subtle and long-term than the moments of immediate aggression. Women in Konso and Tesfaye offer overlapping perspectives on their subjection to seemingly arbitrary exercises of power, unrestrained and at the discretion of an authority, akin to Giorgio Agamben's "zone of indistinguishability between law and life" (1998: 59). Like intimate-partner violence, it occurred in mundane, personal places and had significant and long-lasting effects on people's identities, social relationships, and cultural knowledge.

As the opening quotations suggest, women in Konso and Tesfaye do not refer to a single "event," in the common use of the term, offering shards of information that can be reassembled to reveal a whole. Instead, they recall their experiences with diverse interactions and confrontations, and they do so by reflecting on the struggles that occurred as inseparable from what resulted—in their personal lives, in their views of society, and in ongoing changes in social categories, statuses, and relationships (Stoler 2002: 203; Donham 2006: 28–29).⁶ To Tesfaye, the cultural meanings of leather clothing were irrelevant in the national imperative to modernize; yet memories like Kalle's are common among women in Konso, and they disrupt Tesfaye's perspective. Eliminating "harmful customs" was part of the broader "egalitarian promise of modernity" that, in practice, created new forms of exclusion and transformed hierarchies in diverse locations (Briggs 2001: 686; Anderson 2006). Konso women's memories provide a window into the conditions of their existence within, and their exclusion from, the modernizing Ethiopian state. Yet there is also great variation in what the women recall.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND INTIMATE VIOLENCE

Through an examination of these memories I argue that the violence of political and economic change is a form of intimate violence, which has its most enduring if least-examined effects in people's subjectivity, social relationships, and cultural knowledge (Das 2007: 8; Stoler 2002: 210; and see Das et al. 2000). Those effects are more than immediate and mechanistic; they develop through a range of interactions, from moments of extreme aggression to shifting undercurrents of hostility in everyday, gendered interactions taking place over years or decades (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1–2). The considerable scholarship on violence in recent years has paid relatively little

⁶ Whereas social history in Africa since the 1980s has sought people's memories to provide otherwise unrecorded evidence about events (but see White, Miescher, and Cohen 2001), anthropologists often examine memories as constructed, contested, and entangled with social contexts (Halbwachs 1992; Connerton 1989).

attention to the effects of violence in “the recesses of everyday life, within local communities, kinship networks, and families” (Das 2008: 293)—the terrain of intimate violence. My focus here is on such intimate violence, with “its potential to both disrupt the ordinary and become part of the ordinary” (Das 2008: 295; 2007), and through which people “reweave their lives” (Shaw 2007: 67).

The concept of “intimate violence” often refers to domestic abuse, specifically rape and sexual assault, but it also includes a range of violence among people sharing close personal relationships, from bullying and harassment to physical and emotional torture.⁷ Intimate violence implies coercion and the exercise of force in unequal interpersonal relationships, and the targets most often know the perpetrators, although the events are also entangled in various aspects of broad cultural and socio-political contexts.⁸ Intimate violence has lasting psychological and cultural effects, and its reverberations in people’s subjectivity, including their notions of self and how they live their day-to-day lives, can continue long after the parties separate. Building on these understandings, I use the concept here to refer to violence at the intersections of political and economic forces and people’s “intimate” realms (Stoler 2002; 2006), their personal relationships and understandings of themselves, and their social categories and cultural knowledge. The violence I describe here stemmed from a kind of terror initiated to assert control, change behavior, and redefine hierarchies. It was carried out among neighbors and took place on community paths, in village markets, and in the sanctuary of people’s homes. The violations were personal: they threatened bodily integrity and objects that were extensions of the self.

This ethnographic account puts into motion models of structural violence and biopolitics that are sometimes used to interpret such violence. Structural violence concerns the “social machinery of oppression” (Farmer 2004: 307) that is exerted through “historically entrenched” political-economic patterns by people occupying unequal social positions (Bourgois 2004: 426). In Konso, as state agents intervened in people’s lives, one could chart the processes by which people were pitted against others in hierarchically opposed social-structural positions, such as Xauta and Etenta, women and men, and “Konso” and “Ethiopians.”

⁷ The “intimate violence” concept resists easy delimitation. Most literature using it concerns domestic abuse and violence against women, including its physical, social, and psychological effects (e.g., Hattery 2009). It is also used to examine violence among various family members and those without clear kinship or sexual relationships (e.g., Daniels and Kennedy 1999). Judith Herman (1992) links domestic violence to political economy in the forms and effects of trauma, while Kristin Bumiller’s (2008) more Foucauldian analysis shows women’s experiences of domestic violence becoming entwined with the therapeutic and administrative languages of neoliberalism.

⁸ Angela Hattery refers to “systems of racial domination, class oppression, and patriarchy” (2009: 17).

Banning leather clothing and imprisoning and maltreating political opponents can also be viewed through the prism of biopolitics, “the regulation of populations through techniques of knowledge and intervention” (Fassin 2009: 54), “in which life and politics become one” (Agamben 1998: 149). Agamben’s work has been particularly influential in considerations of biopolitics. It addressed the violence inflicted on Jewish people in the Holocaust, as people who could be killed with impunity but not “sacrificed,” who were subtracted from both human and divine law in what Agamben calls the “sovereign ban” (1998: 82–83). In his analysis, the Nazi state included Jews by virtue of their exclusion from categories of humans with rights, denying them legitimacy while making them objects of state attention. Yet critics have found Agamben’s contributions weakened by his imprecise uses of history to serve theoretical concepts (Mazower 2008: 32), by a lack of detail on the workings of his concepts (Lancaster 2008: 60), and, most important for thinking about Konso, by his insufficient attentions to the complexity of cultural, social, and political relations (Comaroff 2007: 208–10; Ong 2006: 22–23).

In sympathy with Agamben’s critics, I view modernization and the leather clothing ban as but one important moment in the continuous reshaping of social relations and cultural knowledge involving men and women, Xauta and Etenta, Konso and the Ethiopian state—social categories used to build structural models. People of particular groups were included in modernization by the possibility of violent exclusion, to borrow Agamben’s framing. “Konso” people, who had been viewed as “Other” in the “Solomonic” Amhara empire since their nineteenth-century subjugation, became newly “uncivilized” in the state’s modernization.⁹ Xauta and their occupations, long viewed by Etenta as polluted, encountered new meanings of “filth” in the modern language of hygiene. Women, who had lower status than men in political, ritual, and descent realms, came to signify the premodern in relation to men and the state. Violence could be used against people because they belonged to these categories of gender, ethnicity, and hereditary status, but the categories themselves were emergent. Through the events of 1960, people further reconfigured relations that had been continuously transformed in the past, and the intimate violence of political and economic change reverberated in emergent hegemonies largely unknown to imperial modernizers. This process of change is my concern in this article: the manifestations of violence in people’s ongoing transformations of intimate relationships (Das 2007: 75) and of their social and cultural categories whose connections to governance are fortuitous.

⁹ “Amhara” has not been a monolithic identity either (Mackonen 2008).

IMPERIAL MODERNIZATION AND THE GREATER GOOD

Ethiopia's modernization is widely viewed as having been a means to extend imperial rule (Bahru 2000: 201–3; Marcus 2002: 155). In the era of the Bretton Woods Conference (1944), which spawned the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), later called the World Bank, postwar rebuilding in Europe and economic transformation in the United States showcased modernization through infrastructure development. In Ethiopia, this “American era” (Bahru 2000: 186) brought U.S. military support and U.S. and IBRD projects for infrastructure building and education. Ethiopia's emperor Haile Selassie, who cultivated an image as a pan-African leader, was aware of calls for development in neighboring colonies seeking independence from Europe. Aside from the potential benefits of development for Ethiopia, he also sought to allay growing criticisms of his failures to deliver in these areas, failures that led to a coup attempt in 1960. In southern Ethiopia, modernization meant replacing imperial clients—who enacted imperial rule in what amounted to fiefs—with a system of bureaucratic administration. By the 1950s, Haile Selassie was replacing urban and provincial clients with modernizers, and provincial administrators in turn appointed educated men like Tesfaye to lower-level posts. These people collected taxes rather than tribute, to pay for such things as clean water, new schools, infrastructure, and public health measures.

Education was promoted for poverty reduction and development, but it also enhanced a sense of northern uniqueness and nationalist cosmopolitanism among students who became “the governing elite” (*ibid.*: 203). Most of the very few with access to education were northerners. In 1959, 55 percent of the country's 4,200 secondary school and college students were Amhara, the emperor's ethnic group, which they interpreted as “self-evident justification of their political superiority” (Levine 1972: 115).¹⁰ Msmaku Asrat, who worked in the administration in the 1950s, writes of an “idyllic” time for students heading toward professions in the empire (2003: 72). He recalls Canadian Jesuit teachers using Canadian school supplies, and reading classics in Western literature that “fired our imaginations, facilitated our learning of English and were an easy and early introduction to Western culture” (44–45). Comprehensive elementary education included geography lessons that situated stories of the empire's three thousand-year history in a 1950s global spatiotemporal frame. As one student said at the time, praising an American teacher, “When we came [to school], we were Tigreans, Gallas, Amharas, and so forth. Now,

¹⁰ Twenty-two percent were Tigrean, also a dominant northern ethnic group. Less than 10 percent were female (Balsvik 1994: 86). Six schools in three subprovinces near Konso in the 1950s “existed solely for the education of the few Amhara” (Haberland 1966: 753), which some viewed as “promoting national unity through cultural ‘Amharization’” (Messing 1966: 754).

thanks to the director, we leave as Ethiopians, and as alumni of this school” (Levine 1972: 293).

Through an emphasis on hygiene, northern students cultivated an ethics of modern selfhood, which contrasted with a view of southerners as unclean and obstructing the empire’s modern potential. “Hygiene” is a culturally situated phenomenon, with “dirt” as an offense against order whose elimination represents a creative act (Douglas 2002). In the mid-twentieth century, hygiene was also a highly mobile signifier of “modernity.” From the United States to the Philippines, and from Australia to Mandate Palestine, colonizers and dominant classes promoted hygiene while constructing national, modern selves in contradistinction to racialized “Others” (Anderson 2006; Hirsch 2008; Hoy 1995). Msmaku recalls the centrality of hygiene in his education: “Students were periodically checked for hygiene, to see if they washed properly, if their fingernails were clean or if they had lice in their hair. If they had shoes (very few students had shoes then) they were checked to see if their socks were clean. Every week ... students were taken to *Filwoha* (thermal baths) about three miles south of the school to have free baths. There were yearly eye-exams and most students were treated for trachoma. UNICEF also distributed powdered milk once or twice a week and all students were forced to drink it” (2003: 47). Msmaku and his peers also told “ethnic jokes about the ‘foolishness’ of the Galla,” lumping together people of diverse social and cultural backgrounds in the south and southwest, such as little-known Konso (2003: 61). To northerners, as Donald Donham explains, “Galla” denoted southerners who were assumed to lack agriculture and live in the wilderness, but more important were implications that “Galla were pagans” and “were uncivilized” (2002: 12–13).¹¹

Modernizers, sharing these views, entered rural peripheries like Konso with a range of motivations, including a sense of obligation to Ethiopia and of belonging to a modern era, and a desire to put their knowledge to use and to better their own lives. Some, like Msmaku, came from Addis Ababa. Others, like Tesfaye, belonged to a network of Amhara spread across Ethiopia since the nineteenth-century imperial expansion. Tesfaye was born in the mid-1930s in rural Gamo Gofa province to an Amhara family who had moved south in the 1920s to serve the empire. These children of northerners cultivated Amhara identities while living among imperial subjects they viewed as culturally and linguistically “Other.” They asserted political control over imperial peripheries, assisted by local students and Protestant Christians, men and women who had come to identify with the empire and/or ideals of modernity (e.g., Olmstead 1997).

¹¹ “Galla” generally indicated Oromo and other Eastern Cushitic speakers, like Konso. Since the 1990s, Konso have been among forty-six small ethnic groups in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional State.

Often southern subjects resented northerners as occupiers, fief-holders, and *“neftenya,”* a name for armed northerners during imperial expansion later extended to include more recent northern settlers. Tesfaye explains that his father, Hailu, followed a paternal uncle who had been sent to a southern town “to stabilize and make peace” and to work as an administrator. Hailu was granted land in a nearby town, where he worked as a judge and later met and married a woman whose father was also Amhara. While traveling between two southern towns, Hailu’s uncle was “assassinated” by local Dorze people. “The Dorze,” says Tesfaye, “hated the Amharas,” whom they viewed as occupiers. Other Amhara, with the blessing or at the instigation of government officials, caught and hanged twenty-eight people “to avenge the murder.”

In the 1950s, Tesfaye found work in a district administrative center because he had completed seven years of school, in contrast to the four or five years of his co-applicants.¹² After two years, he was appointed head of a municipality, the first of a rapid series of promotions. With an improved standard of living—his salary increased from 30 to 120 birr¹³—and his status as a young modernizer, he married a woman from a more prominent Amhara family. He attracted attention for implementing projects in piped water, road construction, public health, and education, and in 1959 the governor of Gamo Gofa, Dajjzmach Aymoro Selassie Abebe, praised Tesfaye’s work in a letter to the province’s districts and subdistricts.¹⁴ When Konso’s governor retired in 1959, Aymoro Selassie appointed Tesfaye to replace him.¹⁵ As Tesfaye understands it, the governor was removed under the “pretext” of his age because he had been in Konso for decades and “the people were highly oppressed.” The area was widely viewed as “backward,” Tesfaye recalls, and “there was no development at all.” Government people in Konso initially ignored Tesfaye due to his youth—he was in his twenties—and because of the entrenched patronage system. After a few months of learning the area and establishing connections Tesfaye replaced all existing staff, including the police. “It was my system,” he explains. “They would not cooperate with me. Their mentality was not in line with mine.”

Harmful Customs

Tesfaye set out three programs for Konso’s modernization. The first was a “settlement program” intended to relocate villages away from hilltops and nearer to lowland fields, “where [people] could have modern houses” and

¹² The first four years of school were taught in Amharic language and the last four in English. Tesfaye left school for financial reasons, his father having been killed in 1936.

¹³ In 1945, Ethiopia pegged the birr to the U.S. dollar; at the time of Tesfaye’s promotions, 1 birr was roughly equal to US\$0.40.

¹⁴ Tesfaye retains a copy of the letter.

¹⁵ Tesfaye has a copy of the appointment letter.

efficient access to services. The second was “development,” which included improving infrastructure, water availability, health facilities, and sanitation. He is most proud of his third program, of education, for which he claims Konso people’s greatest appreciation. He built and expanded schools and sought to eliminate what he called “harmful customs.” Tesfaye declared obsolete marriage restrictions tied to generation transfers, and banned abortion, which was used as a punishment for pregnancy outside of these marriage rules.¹⁶ These bans were popularly seen as enabling men and women to have children unhampered by the restrictive dictates of conservative social “elders.”

Leather clothing had been a common target of reformers in eastern Africa, and was now also deemed a “harmful custom” to be eliminated. Such clothing had long been a marker of difference between northern Amhara and their southern subjects. As early as the seventeenth century, imperial chroniclers—Jesuits in aid to Amhara emperors—noted derisively the “Galla’s” leather clothing that was so different from northerners’ cotton attire (Pankhurst 1997: 307). During the nineteenth-century imperial expansion, people in Gamo Gofa viewed their leather clothing as a marker of identity vis-à-vis cotton-wearing Amhara (e.g., Olmstead 1997: 34–35). “The leather skirts,” Tesfaye recalls of Konso women’s attire in 1960, “they would wear them, and their genitalia would be exposed.” He was astonished that no one wore cotton skirts: farmers grew cotton, and weavers made cloth, but they sold it elsewhere. He saw leather clothes as unclean and as enabling the spread of disease, which was also a widespread idiom among modernizers.¹⁷

Tesfaye ordered three women to don cotton clothes and accompany him to a market, where a Protestant missionary and a local convert photographed

¹⁶ Etenta males are born into “generation grades” that include two or three (depending on where in Konso) hereditary groups (*xrelta*), which in the past implied differences in numerical age within grades, and that sequentially held ritual positions. Generation transfers, occurring at intervals that also varied across Konso from five to eighteen years, also shifted ritual positions from one *xrelta* group to the next. Unlike “age grades,” whose sequential grades with relatively compact age cohorts cut across wide areas, in Konso one’s generation grade is local and necessarily two grades behind one’s father’s. Reasons for the two-grade separation include concerns over health, crop and human fertility, and generational conflict regarding decision-making, marriage, and reproduction. These rules allowed “men,” who had become adults through generation transfers, to prohibit “boys” (who could be older in years than some men) from becoming “adults,” marrying, and assuming leadership roles, sometimes into their mid- to late thirties, and were enforced by the threat of forced abortion should a girl become pregnant (Hallpike 2008: 250–87). Conservatives did not capitulate easily to Tesfaye’s ban: Lutherans in the late 1960s and socialists in the mid-1970s also pursued such changes (*ibid.*: 450–53). Etenta men generally excluded Xauta and women from generation grades and generation transfers.

¹⁷ Derek Peterson (2004: 73) quotes a Kenyan man who abandoned lice-infested leather clothes in 1913 for cotton clothing and Christianity, in what seems to have been a metaphor for his (and society’s) transition. Missionaries at the time encouraged Kenyans to see the relationship between “clean, clothed bodies and Christian salvation” (Mutongi 2007: 47).

them. He then used the photograph “for teaching purposes.”¹⁸ As an Orthodox Christian allied with Protestants, Tesfaye’s efforts resemble Christian attempts to “cleanse” people they viewed as “naked” or as wearing unclean clothes (Masquelier 2005: 2–3). But his lesson was one of enlightened nationalistic modernization—“They are my people. They are my countrymen”—to show people what they might become with appropriate dress. He announced the ban at periodic markets throughout Konso, giving people one month to implement it; after that, “Anybody who continued to wear leather skirts or leather clothing would be punished by a fine of five *birr*.” Tesfaye recalls the ban being quickly accepted. “No one was punished,” he explains. “None. Everybody accepted this. Within three months the people realized the disadvantages of leather products.” In Konso today, all women wear skirts made mostly from locally grown cotton. Tesfaye argues that he contributed a foundation to the area’s development. Women’s memories and acts of resistance complicate this view.

THE GENDERED LIVES OF LEATHER CLOTHING

The politics of gender and identity are enacted in part through clothing, in eastern Africa as elsewhere (e.g., Allman 2004; Hendrickson 1996), and the change from leather to cotton is a case in point. Men often adopted cotton clothes associated with economic and political mobility, Christianity or Islam, and modern “cleanliness,” a process that sometimes shaped women’s choices through extant and emerging gender hegemonies. Kaguru men in 1890s German East Africa adopted cotton clothes that were increasingly available through trade with the coast; Christian missionaries debated these adoptions as possible encroachments on European culture while also barring Kaguru women from, among other things, wearing “only a loincloth” (Beidelman 1982: 134–35). Elder men in early-twentieth-century central Kenya who viewed leather clothes as “their biography,” as conveying “their moral and material accomplishments,” referred to the “unrecognizable” purchased cotton clothes of wageworkers and Christians, who were constructing new identities (Peterson 2004: 78). Other Kenyan men protected “morality” by barring women from wearing “Western” (i.e., cotton) clothes (Hay 2004; Shadle 2006). In southern Ethiopia in the 1950s, cotton-wearing Borana men “vaguely” remembered wearing leather capes, while their wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters became targets of government and missionary campaigns to eliminate leather clothes (Hallpike 2008: 147).

Konso men today sometimes wear short cotton trousers called *komfa*, the same name for the skirt taken from Kalle in 1960. These shorts were previously made from goatskins, yet men do not lament that loss. In the late 1960s men

¹⁸ “During the Derg regime, that picture disappeared,” he explains, using the common name for the socialist government. “I lost so many pictures during the Derg regime.”

told ethnographer Christopher Hallpike that cotton “has always been the prerogative of men” (ibid.), and he thought men were “beginning to adopt the Amhara attitude that nakedness is shameful” (1972: 152). Hallpike once posited a structural/symbolic association of leather with women and cotton with men, “along the lines of a nature/culture opposition,” until learning that once men had also worn leather. Like some other authors, he now sees a “relative conservatism of the women” (2008: 147). Gender essentialisms aside, these oppositions are productive for thinking about clothing and the politics of gender and identity in Konso, for, as Hallpike notes, men weave while women work hides and produce leather clothes. We can add to this that Etenta grow cotton, and, since the 1960s, weave, while Xauta are butchers and (women) leatherworkers.

Beyond retaining leather clothing under duress, due to conservatism, or as resistance, women across eastern Africa often viewed such adornment as extensions of their selves that marked and shaped their relationships with others. Among Pokot women in Kenya, leather belts (*lõtökyö*) associated with childbirth carried complex and mutable meanings of agnatic descent; of a woman’s status and agency as mother, wife, co-wife, and in-law; and of a child’s connection to their mother (Bianco 1991).¹⁹ Samburu and Maasai women wore similar belts (ibid.: 771; Straight 2007: 86). These belts were “public versions of the self” whose decorations could represent “a public version of an individual woman’s procreative history” (ibid.: 770, 773). Among Datooga women in Tanzania, leather skirts also have strong associations with marriage and fertility and they assert women’s identities and social positions vis-à-vis men (Blystad 2004: 199). In these examples and others, leather clothing carried a woman’s “essence,” expressing her fertility, social position, and personal history, or even creating links with divinities (e.g., Straight 2007: 62–66).

Women in Konso understood leather skirts as expressions of personal status and experience, and they made them into personalized objects through decoration, such as by sewing on cowry shells and/or glass beads. Knowing about the ban, I was initially surprised that many women still have leather skirts tucked away in their houses. In part they keep them for ceremonial uses such as in dances tied to the agricultural calendar. An ever-diminishing number retain their skirts to be dressed in them for burial, once a common practice.²⁰ Women are also proud of their skirts. They become animated with a

¹⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing Barbara Bianco’s work to my attention.

²⁰ Many people in Konso retain in their homes objects (e.g., drums for certain generation leaders, other ritual paraphernalia) that once had vibrant “social lives” but were banned by past authorities—missionaries, imperial modernizers, socialists—that declared them and related practices anachronistic. Like the keepers of those objects, many women hid their leather skirts from authorities and others who sought to eliminate them. With the passage of years, people would sometimes bring out banned objects for temporary uses such as in sporadic dance performances that were

range of emotions when they recall them, describe what it was like to wear them, and discuss the eradication campaign. Leather skirts signified a woman's individual life achievements and broader acknowledgment of them, and they displayed a woman's unique assertion of herself in her roles. A leather skirt, in this way, became a "biographical object" (Hoskins 1998), imbued with the qualities of the woman who wore it, and as such it became an "inalienable" extension of her self.

Today in Konso, the word *uwa* refers to all skirts and *uwa qolata*—"leather skirts"—refers to those worn before 1960. Women wore at least four different types of leather skirts with different societal meanings and personal associations, and an adult married woman often had more than one kind. The most common was the *komfa*. These three-piece skirts were worn by women and unmarried girls, and a newly married woman would take one when moving to her husband's home. "When I was first married, I only had a *komfa*," explains Kalle, who wore hers to her new husband's household in a different village. While describing her *komfa* and what it was like to wear it, she paused and said, to my surprise, "I have one," and sent her young granddaughter scampering into her house to fetch it. When the girl returned with the skirt, Kalle held it to her waist and paraded with it, and she and the girl laughed.²¹ Women and girls could also wear a two-piece *shoola* before marriage. During another interview, a woman in Purquta overheard me discussing the *shoola* with a leatherworker and invited me to her house where she brought out her skirt, which she had not touched in years. She posed and swayed with it around her waist, and laughed while describing how she used to wear it.

In association with childbirth, women wore a third type of skirt called a *koora*, which was important in a woman's *sokata*—her coming out after post-partum seclusion—and signified her social status (Ellison 2009: 88). "You wore it at the time you gave birth," explains Kallaja, a widow in the village of Dokatu. "You stayed for a month in the house, and when you finished that you could go out but you had to wear the *koora* for three or five days. That indicated that you had finished the time in the house." Some *koora* were plain while others were decorated elaborately with beads and cowry shells. Like Pokot women's *lötökyö* belts, *koora* in Konso are quintessentially women's objects that are also sites of gender tensions. They seem to be the only skirts commonly made by Konso's few male leatherworkers. During one set of male-dominated lineage rituals, one group of agnatically related male

once periodic. Today, in an era defined in part by ethnic federalism and increasing tourism, many once-proscribed objects have gained new acceptance as "artifacts" of essential "tradition." Nonetheless, much ambivalence continues to surround leather skirts.

²¹ The skirt belongs to her husband's *ashumta*—his father's sister's daughter—who plans to be buried in it when she dies.

blacksmiths perform their roles wearing a *koora* whose outer face is covered with cowry shells, a performance loaded with symbolic claims about gender and status, production and reproduction.

Married women who had given birth could wear the three-piece *nuqota*, which was the most popular skirt in Konso. Women often decorated them, including with a much-talked-about slit running up the back. “*Nuqota* was the best,” exclaims Kalle. “It is three pieces and it covers you well around here,” motioning toward her mid-section and thighs. “It covers well during dancing and moving. The big difference is that the *nuqota* has a split here in the back and it has cowry shells around these edges. When you walk, this split place moves like this.” Prancing in a circle, swaying from side-to-side, she smiles while imitating the skirt and beads rustling. Two other women who joined us in her compound break loose with laughter. “It is comfortable!” Kalle demands, “and it looks better,” while all three are laughing. I understand women’s laughter in these conversations as unscripted and almost illicit expressions of pleasure in showing and discussing their skirts, feelings that exist in tension with enduring characterizations of leather clothing as backward and dirty.

Through leather skirts, women of all backgrounds established meaningful relationships with Xauta leatherworkers, despite notions of pollution and sanctions against other Etenta-Xauta interactions, and women today generally recall those who made their skirts. A woman would take goatskins to a leatherworker in her village to commission a skirt, paying her with a combination of grain and money. After relocating for marriage, she would sometimes continue to patronize that leatherworker until she became familiar with some local woman’s work. Leatherworkers would also buy goatskins from butchers and make un-commissioned skirts to sell or exchange. Doing so required capital and confidence in the demand for their work, both of which they had in the 1950s. They scraped the goatskins, which they then softened, treated with butter or oil, dyed, and cut and sewed into the appropriate form. Women say an oiled and cared-for skirt would last for years, much longer than the cotton skirts that replaced them. Leatherworkers I spoke with proudly recalled making skirts, which was hard work but a skill they enjoyed possessing.

Remembering the Ban

The ban on leather clothing included all women, from the poorest Xauta to those in prominent Etenta families. But women’s memories of when the ban was imposed and who initiated it vary, and they mix references to different powerful agents: Protestant missionaries, socialist officials and activists, and imperial authorities. Rather than women’s memories correlating with their positions as Etenta or Xauta, or their lack of precision signaling flawed recall that requires correction, their divergent memories indicate that the event—the ban and ensuing eradication campaign—is only part of what is important to

them. They share a sense of having been subjected to seemingly arbitrary exercises of power in their everyday lives, a characteristic of domestic violence (Das 2008: 292) that, like structural violence, leaves people “feeling ... that all of this has happened to them for reasons they do not comprehend” (Broch-Due 2005: 35). Women commonly recall the people responsible for the ban as “*qaweta*,” a local name for “foreigners,” indicating “Amhara,” “northerners,” and others not from Konso. They also remember that the foreigners were aided by local men—“like you,” Kalle says, nodding to the young man assisting me—and they can usually name them.

Many women recall the ban as a socialist program, and that student activists looked for people wearing leather skirts and hats, bead necklaces, and metal arm bracelets, as well as those practicing divination and sorcery. When the socialists caught people, one woman explains, “they shaved their heads and also broke the coffee pots they used in their ceremonies.” This refers to socialist attacks on “obscurantism,” acts they viewed as superstitious or otherwise obscuring “real” material relations, and they took people to Konso’s administrative center and confiscated their possessions. “The Derg [the socialist government] forbade it,” says Kaaliso in Gera, who would have been in her twenties at the time. It was “near the time when the Derg took over and Haile Selassie’s government collapsed.” The socialist administrator announced the ban in Gardula, she explains, and he sent a letter about it to Konso.

Many women tie the ban not to socialists but rather to Protestant missionaries, who were present in Konso from the 1950s and became more active in the late 1960s (Eide 2000), and women also associate them with forced head shaving (Watson 2009: 155). “It was Christianity,” recalls Qayrana, a leatherworker in Purquta. “Some people came and tried to suppress everything. If our hair was too long, they made us cut our hair, the women. And they made us stop wearing leather skirts.”²² Keetaya, a former leatherworker in her nineties in Teshmalle, says foreign Christian missionaries at the time of Haile Selassie “stood a flag [in the market] and said that nobody should wear the leather skirts.” After that, she explains, “I wore these simple clothes of cotton.” In Dokatu, the widow Kallaja says “foreign people” came and “cut people’s hair, and they took away people’s beads, and they made people leave their leather skirts.” She does not remember whether they were northerners or Europeans, but “there were some Konso people also doing it.” They made no announcement, she says, but they searched the village for violators. “If they caught someone, they did what they wanted, removing her hair, taking her

²² She referred to them as “*qaweta*” but then added that she was not sure they were Christians. When I sought clarification, she said, “They were *banda* who forbade this,” using the name for Ethiopians who collaborated with Italians or worked against the nationalist resistance to the 1930s occupation. Some people later disdainfully referred to the Derg and their allies as “*banda*” (Babile 1997). To clarify, she added, “They were at the same age as my parents. They were the leaders here and they forbade it,” a poignant comment evoking the arbitrariness of power.

beads and the skirts.” Chaacho, a leatherworker in Kaashele, does not know who ordered the ban but resolves, “It must have been the missionaries.” They were “*qaweta*,” she says. “There were also local people from Konso, they were also working with them, and they punished us.”

Other women blame the ban on the empire, often in association with Christians. “I can’t tell you the name of the government,” Kalle explains, but she knows Grazmach Balcha, a local imperial official, was involved.²³ She also associates the eradication efforts with Christian missionaries: “Foreigners came from the Fasha direction and they were baptizing people. During that time it was forbidden to wear [leather clothing]. But I don’t remember their names or their specific ideas.” When I sought more details she said, “They were *qaweta*. They told the people not to wear leather skirts and they baptized some people, and they punished some who did not agree to leave the leather skirts. Grazmach Balcha [at the instigation of foreigners] said that modern ideas call for leaving leather skirts, so leave them. Now you should wear the cotton skirts.”

Many women do not know why the ban was declared, a situation that also evokes the arbitrariness of power. “I don’t know the reasons why they forbade the leather skirts,” Kalle states. “Maybe it was due to a change in government. I don’t know. They just forbade it.” Among those who recall some reason, prominent are the messages regarding hygiene and women’s bodies, and some link these with Christian morality. Asked why those who banned leather clothing did so, Qayrana says flatly, “They were Christians.” As she remembers it, “They said that they would baptize us, and that Sunday was a day we could not work, that it was to be a holiday. They told us to wash our bodies and clean our clothes on Sunday, at least.” Kaaliso observes that those behind the ban “looked at women’s bodies”: missionaries and the government administrator, she explains, contended that leather skirts could lead to indecent exposure when women sat or squatted, and that they were unclean and could cause disease, all of which was “not good for women’s bodies.”

Force and Punishment

In the eradication campaign that followed the ban, a range of men confronted women, chased them, and ordered them to remove their leather clothing. They sometimes beat them, forced them to return home or brought them to government facilities for punishment and demanded fines.²⁴ These were local men, some in various levels of local government and others who assisted by keeping watch for violators in villages. Still other men sought to profit from the campaign by exploiting women’s fears and their violations of the edict.

²³ “Grazmach” was an imperial title involving non-hereditary rights to collect tribute.

²⁴ A leather clothing ban among Maasai in Arusha, Tanzania was enforced by excluding those wearing banned items from public transportation, shops, dispensaries, and government offices (Hodgson 2001: 149).

In Konso's small communities, these men were their neighbors; some were friends and others were probably relatives. The women quickly learned that they had to be careful.

Chaacho recalls immediate punishments in Kaashele: "We would be hit if we were caught. When they came and saw you and caught you, they would hit you. And sometimes they would take people to jail." She also recounts acts of resistance. "Sometimes the officials would come, the *neftenya* or Amhara would come, and we would immediately take off the leather skirts and put on cotton cloth. When they left, we would put [the leather skirts] back on." In Dokatu, Kallaja remembers that she and other women hid their leather skirts in the roofs of their houses. They also stayed in their fields or the bush during the day, returning home at night to avoid men enforcing the ban, whom she feared and remembers as perpetrating sexual assaults.²⁵

Kalle's daughter Katana, who was about four-years old during the eradication campaign, joined us in Kalle's compound while we spoke. Motioning to her, Kalle says, "Grazmach Balcha took her skirt at that time." Katana had been playing outside the compound when "the Grazmach by himself met her and he tore off her leather skirt and threw it down." This was before Kalle had been caught. Katana recalls that she was "smaller than that," pointing to a young girl of about six, "probably about four." "Do you remember it?" I ask her, newly disquieted by such aggression toward a child. "Yes," she says, smiling but looking possibly embarrassed, "I remember it."

Women feared the immediate violence but they were also unable to pay the fines, which drove many to stop wearing leather skirts. Kaaliso explains, "If you were caught, you would be taken to the Fasha police station and you could be fined. That is what made us leave behind wearing them. There was the punishment and the fine for wearing them, but we had no money." Kalle lays out the same scenario: "The women who wore [leather skirts] were fined. If you were punished by fine and paid, you would not want to wear it again, because you could not afford to pay the fine." When she paid the man who caught her, she was told not to wear the skirt again and then left alone. "I stopped wearing it from that time on." She explains that when a woman was caught no one would come to her aid, and her captors would not leave until she removed the banned clothing and paid. Whether or not a woman had heard the ban announced was irrelevant. "It was your problem if you wore it and went out and they met you. If there was any punishment, you could not do anything to contest it," Kalle explains. She heard no proclamation,

²⁵ Kallaja blames the ban on "*banda*," evangelical Protestants, and the former governor, and her description of sexual assaults points more to violence during the Italian occupation. Her depiction of subjection to arbitrary power after the ban is nonetheless clear and consistent. She was taken to the administrative center, "given something to drink," her head was forcibly shaved, and her necklaces and leather skirt were confiscated, all common experiences in the eradication campaign.

but nonetheless, “We were responsible to meet the law, face the punishment.” And so she did.

The need to quickly improvise cotton clothing led women to don cloth that had been used as blankets. Kalle wore a “simple” blanket she describes as “rough and cheap to buy.” As she explains it, “We didn’t know about cotton skirts, and so we wore what we had.” She recalls being uncomfortable because she was not used to wearing cotton. Weavers were numerous at the time, most of them Xauta men. “The weavers knew before that how to make blankets, cotton cloth,” says Tiita, an octogenarian Etenta in western Konso, so it was easy for them to learn to make skirts to meet the new demand.

EMERGENT HEGEMONIES

The intimate violence of modernization contributed to emerging hegemonies, some of which became apparent in the months after the eradication campaign, while others took shape over years or even decades. The increased demand for cotton clothing, associated with modernity and the state, led some Etenta men to take up weaving for its new profitability. Tesfaye, trying to improve people’s lives, helped establish government programs to teach modern weaving methods, and he recruited Etenta men from Konso to learn the new techniques. His efforts foreshadowed socialist training programs in craft production that similarly did not recognize weaving as a Xauta occupation. In both cases, the programs helped Etenta partially displace Xauta from this work. It is now common to meet Etenta who weave, and many of them no longer view the occupation as polluted or acknowledge any contradiction with their past beliefs.²⁶ This shift is but one aspect of the emergent hegemonies connected with the intimate violence of modernization.

Ethiopia’s modernization further enmeshed Konso’s gender hierarchies in a masculine nationalist imaginary, which included Konso men in part by relegating them to a feminized status of uncivilized southerners.²⁷ Tesfaye did not plan to subjugate women and feminize men to impose a masculine imperial domination; he sought to “modernize” Konso and thereby improve the empire and his own standing. But his ban on leather clothes was inseparable

²⁶ Richard Roberts (1984) describes an analogous influence of political economy on divisions of labor in nineteenth-century Mali, when a growing market value of indigo-dyed cloth, whose production was controlled by women, led male household-heads to “invade” indigo production using male-owned slaves, thereby altering gendered divisions of labor and domestic production. As slaves fled servitude in 1905, they further reorganized indigo-dyed textile production. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this work to my attention.

²⁷ Scholars who interpret colonialism as feminizing sometimes cite Ashis Nandy’s argument that European colonialism aligned with Western cultural knowledge and sexual stereotypes, through which “political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity” (1983: 4). See also Hunt (1997: 9–10), Masquelier (2005), and Merry (2009b). Kate Bedford and Shirin Rai (2010) summarize current feminist approaches to neoliberalism and political economy.

from the gendered subjugation of the south that began with imperial expansion and continues in new forms today. Konso became an object of the modernizing project; women stood in for “culture” and practiced, in Tesfaye’s words, “harmful customs” that blocked modern (masculine) progress.²⁸ Women were the focus of the pursuit of change and their bodies the sites of efforts at eradication, of everything from abortion to their everyday clothing. Konso men faced possible humiliation by the targeting of their wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers in a system of agnatic descent and “exaggerated” masculinity (Hallpike 2008: 229). But men also benefited by complicity as their importance relative to women was asserted and the male work of farming cotton and weaving were officially contraposed to Xauta women’s leatherworking.

Konso women did not always respond to such patriarchal forces with passive submission, and many resisted by avoiding men who were enforcing the ban and by hiding their leather skirts. Their subsequent actions also resonate with scholarship on gender and clothing that emphasizes women’s agency even in oppressive circumstances. Like Nigérien women who refashion *hijabi* head coverings to suit individual tastes and convey meanings beyond piety (Masquelier 2009: 218)—their bodies “sites of individual agency and instruments of social control” (278)—Konso women, though they in 1960 donned “simple” cotton blankets, soon found new ways to craft selves through cotton clothes. Women photographed in the late 1960s wore cotton skirts shaped like *komfa* or *shoola* (Hallpike 2008: 35, 43). Today they wear white cotton skirts that incorporate dyed yarns, often imported, and added in multiple colors and patterns. But in the 1950s Xauta women were at the center of exchange relationships that involved the leather skirts, through which all women constituted and expressed aspects of their identities. Today it is men, often Etenta, who weave women’s skirts. Through agency people reshape rather than escape their entanglements in social relationships.

When women today discuss the leather clothes they once wore, many laugh at past practices that, they say, appear funny through the lens of the present. This “modern” embarrassment about older “backward” practices became instilled through the intimate violence described in this article, as women’s “traditional” clothing accrued new meanings in transformed interpersonal relationships and political-economic contexts. Women’s ambivalence recalls Michael Herzfeld’s concept of “cultural intimacy,” the recognition that certain practices and beliefs that have intimate meanings are also a source of embarrassment in interactions with others, particularly with dominant

²⁸ Sally Engle Merry (2009a) discusses equations of women and their practices with “culture” and “needing” rescue by the masculine state or “muscular” human rights campaigns. As Hodgson argues about NGOs concerned with female genital cutting in Tanzania, “The problem of culture is really a problem of power” (2009).

groups and the state (2005: 3). Women in Konso today have come to accept the deeply gendered view that they engaged in “backward” practices, even though that knowledge runs counter to their own memories and experiences.²⁹

While all women were targets of these modernization efforts, Xauta women, and particularly the leatherworkers, experienced the greatest change of status. The embarrassment women today express about past practices invokes Xauta directly, if enigmatically. The men who butcher animals and produce hides and the women who processed hides to make clothing are Xauta. Following the ban, leatherworkers and butchers were increasingly looked on as performing unclean occupations—handling dead animals and making premodern and unhygienic articles. Butchers remain in demand, although their work has been increasingly regulated and restricted to specific locations, to control putrefaction. The eradication efforts destroyed demand for leather skirts in all but infrequent ritual uses and thereby reduced the number of women leatherworkers (Arthur 2010: 229), which is now the most disparaged minority occupation. Some women today are buried in tanned hides and others in cloth, in part because leather skirts are unavailable and also because the skirts have very different meanings than they did in the 1950s. Etenta and Xauta women no longer come together through the exchange of these meaningful objects, separated as they are by revised notions of pollution. Today, rather than creating items that become extensions of individual women’s selves, leatherworkers make utilitarian mats and bags. Leatherworkers, and to a lesser extent butchers, have become metonyms for despised minorities, whose overall status has declined.³⁰

These changes fed into and expanded the gendered slurs Etenta use to degrade Xauta and justify their maltreatment. Farmers had long disparaged Xauta in numerous ways, from restricting their burials to areas of bush

²⁹ Ambivalence about past “unclean” clothing is common. Hodgson, for example, quotes a Maasai woman in Tanzania who explains, “We used to wear leather, now we wear cloth. We didn’t know that leather was dirty.... These days people are clean. Look at these clothes that get washed every day, and people are clean” (2001: 45–46). Age differences also shape these memories. Kalle and her daughter had different experiences with, and thus memories of, leather clothing: women born after 1960 have even less concern with leather skirts, although their lives are also influenced by the intimate violence of modernization.

³⁰ I previously referred to leatherworkers as “hideworkers” who made “hide skirts,” terminology that assumes a lack of chemical tanning, but my thinking on this usage changed while writing this article. Konso leatherworkers softened and tanned hides using various practices and substances, making durable and water resistant leather clothing that women would wear for years. The process differed from that of chemical tanning in Europe and North America since the nineteenth century, but a broad continuum of practices comprises “tanning” and can include Konso women’s work. “Leather,” like “metal,” does not refer to a single, naturally occurring entity but rather encompasses a wide range of produced items; leather making has varied tremendously over time and depends on the skins used, local environments, available materials, technologies employed, traditions of production, and the expected results (Thomson 2006a; 2006b). Referring to “hide skirts” portrays women leatherworkers as practicing an inferior and premodern occupation, and it is therefore another sign of the intimate violence of modernization.

where garbage was thrown, to claiming that their “junior” status was established at creation. By the late 1960s, it was common for Etenta to equate the term “*xauta*” with feminine categories in derogatory ways. Etenta whose male children had died, for example, would call subsequent newborn sons by female names or “*xautayta*” [minority] “to deceive the evil spirits into thinking that the child is a girl or a *xautayta* and so not worth bothering with” (Hallpike 2008: 502). At the same time, an “effeminate” male leatherworker was the object of “bullying”: “He won’t hit you back,” Hallpike was told, “if you take his meat away, or knock him down” (ibid.: 233). During the socialist revolution, Xauta became objects of violence initiated by farmers; when they were attacked and their property taken they had no recourse. Similar violence followed the fall of the socialist regime in 1991 when some Xauta men who had gained land under reforms were again forced, like Etenta women, into a non-landholding status.

Further transformations of relations between Xauta and Etenta, enmeshed with the intimate violence of modernization, are evident in a recent rethinking of “harmful customs” by one conservative Etenta faction.³¹ These men are not concerned with women’s leather clothing but rather have come to resent the loss of generation-based marriage restrictions. Whereas Tesfaye’s ban resonated with complaints that conservative elders enforced marriage rules through the threat of forced abortion, these men now claim the changes capitulated to the uncontrolled and uncivilized sexuality of Xauta occurring outside of generational restrictions, which they see as the real cause of unsafe abortions. The diminished significance of generation changes has weakened Etenta-controlled hierarchies and elevated the standing of Xauta, these men say, and they blame this for many current woes. Whereas in the past Xauta were “properly” feminized in their exclusion from generation grades, weakening these practices permitted new ambiguities in status and group endogamy. These men wish to reignite generation-change rituals and marriage restrictions under male Etenta control, citing both the “freedoms” of liberalization and the respect for “culture” that is a foundation of Ethiopia’s postsocialist ethnic federalism.

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Tesfaye insists he did not try to abolish Konso culture but merely to end harmful customs. “He could be my son, he could be my brother,” Tesfaye says, evoking a generic Konso man to explain his actions. Referring to a bridge he had constructed in Konso, he contends, “I had limited knowledge, but I tried to use my limited knowledge to help that area. This is the story that I want to tell you.” His story is profound. The biopolitical management of people’s lives is based on situated knowledge of their worlds and experiences. The

³¹ See Elizabeth Watson’s discussion of similar recent “revivals” (2009: 207–14).

violence it creates becomes justified by idealized goals and because its targets exist as “exceptions.” Yet those designing the change may not even recognize the violence their work helps to generate. Tesfaye continues, evoking his interlocutor, “The present people who earn degrees, doctorates, or who are professors, they are fortunate,” as if such positioning might enable one to impose change without risks. “We didn’t have that chance,” he adds. “But I did all these things with limited knowledge.”

By the time of the revolution in 1974, students and activists had become hostile to the imperial “governing elite,” whose education and standard of living they felt came at the expense of the country’s development. That hostility was not entirely new. Msmaku (2003: 80), for example, recalls resentment toward himself and the few other university-educated workers in the Ministry of Information’s English department in the 1950s. The failed coup in 1960 expanded awareness among students and intellectuals about the emperor’s centralization of control and his failure to modernize the country. Despite minor successes, overall development seemed elusive while impoverishment grew. The governing elite did well for themselves, while people in rural areas suffered famine.

Beyond biopolitics, Tesfaye’s experiences with the revolution further illustrate the effects of the intimate violence of political and economic change on people’s identities and personal relationships. He had begun serving in parliament in Addis Ababa, “presenting the people’s questions” about development and receiving a salary five times that which he had earned in the south. In the summer of 1974, however, as the government fell apart and ministers and other officials went into exile, Tesfaye fled to his family in the south. There he ran into a friend with whom he had grown up. That man, in the meantime, had become a key organizer of Echaat, the Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples’ Struggle, a small, non-ethnic political party with roots in the 1960s student movement angered by the empire’s failures in development (Andargachew 1993: 131–32).³² The friend had Tesfaye imprisoned, and he was beaten and tortured. Over the next three years, he tried in various ways to negotiate his release, including by praising and cajoling different officers and administrators. When he tried these tactics during a chance encounter with Ali Mussa, then governor of Gamo Gofa, he was pistol-whipped.³³

³² Andargachew (1993: 123ff) and Gebru Tareke (2009) discuss Echaat (sometimes “Ichaat”) and other political parties that proliferated at the time. In 1977, the organization became a focus of “Red Terror” purges; by 1978, it was “extinguished” and its leaders went underground or were killed (Eide 2000: 101–2).

³³ Ali Mussa helped Mengistu Hailemariam establish military dictatorship (Gebru 2009: 43–44). The Derg sent Ali Mussa, one of “the most psychopathic and feared majors,” to the south where he asserted the Derg’s power through arbitrary violence (Babile 1997: 42). He zealously persecuted evangelical Christians, among others. In 1980, he was himself removed from the government and imprisoned (Eide 2000: 155, 196; Tibebe 2009: 247).

Because of his imprisonment and utterly changed social standing, Tesfaye's wife, from a higher-status family than his, left him. "We couldn't compromise with each other, after we had lost all the things that we had," he explains. For Tesfaye, as for many others incarcerated by the Derg (e.g., Abera 2002), his long-term personal losses are inseparable from the political change. "All the things we had were nationalized by the Derg. It happened all over Ethiopia." As a result, "I didn't have anything to give her," he says. It is a connection he repeatedly conveys. "I lost my job, I had no salary. Even now I have no pension. Nothing. Because of the political situation, they arrested me. Whatever she asked of me, I did not have it to give her."

Tesfaye was released from prison after three years, into the dangerous "Red Terror," the Derg's purge of threats to its control that killed tens of thousands.³⁴ Ali Mussa was still governor in Gamo Gofa, and Tesfaye went to him to seek work. Ali Mussa had a reputation as a "cruel man," explains the man assisting me; "a bastard," says Tesfaye, "known because of his assassination of so many people." Tesfaye recalls that when he asked for work, Ali Mussa, "in front of other intellectuals," replied: "Go and ask your emperor."³⁵ After many years, Tesfaye was again elected to a local government office, this time "in charge of bringing in goods for the town shop." When we spoke he had left that position after he quarreled with the town chairman. He is obviously wary of political fights.

CONCLUSIONS: INTIMATE VIOLENCE

"So what is intimate violence?" asks Das in a review article on violence, referring to a diversity of uses of the concept (2008: 292). Her proximate response is to seek the answer in "the home," a space of multiple domesticities experienced differently by the various people it involves, comprising relationships steeped in violence. But Das also situates the domestic within broader contexts of gendered violence, and shows that interpersonal relationships are inseparable from forces of political economy (2007; Das et al. 2000). There is wide consensus that people's national belonging involves gendered connections and a range of intimate violence, but, as many scholars have noted, the linkages are complex and poorly understood (Broch-Due 2005: 17; Das 2008: 285; Stoler 2006: 4). By working with the concepts of intimate violence and emergent hegemonies to examine otherwise distinct events, I have offered here an

³⁴ Estimates of the numbers killed during this period range from 150 thousand to half-a-million people (Tronvoll, Schaefer, and Girmachew 2009: 4); there is no set figure (Bahru 2009: 29–30).

³⁵ "But, by the way," adds Tesfaye, showing mild satisfaction, "that person committed suicide when the EPRDF entered here [in 1991]. All the people who had done wrong in the past either committed suicide or they were killed when they tried to flee. Ali Mussa committed suicide. He was a bastard, that man."

ethnographic perspective to elucidate the forces of political and economic change in people's lives.

The intimate violence I have described is long-term and transformational. My findings concern ongoing changes in people's understandings of themselves and their relationships with others, and in their social and cultural categories of belonging and difference that articulate with governing forces by chance and in complicated and unanticipated ways. Through moments of pronounced aggression and their echoes in everyday interactions and in the lasting aftermath of overt violence, people change social and cultural categories and reshape relations of inequality, thereby altering the categories used to build structural models. This perspective puts into motion models of structural violence, which depend on an interlinking of hierarchically arrayed social categories through which the forces of violence are both directly and indirectly conveyed. My focus on these intimate interactions does not "turn away from structures of dominance" (Stoler 2006: 13), but rather brings attention to the relationships and meanings that make such structures possible and in which they have their least-acknowledged force.

The fortuitous convergences of the violence of political and economic change and people's intimate realms contribute to "emergent hegemonies." People generate these relations of inequality by using new perspectives and new practical and discursive possibilities to rework older, shared understandings of "proper" behaviors and "normal" social hierarchies. People's varied memories of the violence of modernization in Ethiopia and of the revolution expose emergent hegemonies. Rather than being reducible to "perspectives" on "events," these memories also articulate people's changing understandings of themselves and others. They provide windows into people's experiences with seemingly arbitrary exercises of power and their changing subject-positions, and reveal how forces of political economy become insinuated in shifting gender relations within communities, domestic relations within households, and the complex interactions of individuals and communities with the state. Relations between Xauta and Etenta are quintessential emergent hegemonies. Although people in Konso and scholars alike portray these social categories as largely unchanged from time immemorial, they have in fact been continuously reworked, in part through intimate violence such as that initiated during imperial modernization. The ban on harmful customs did not result in Xauta and Etenta realizing modernity's promise of equal citizenship; it took form through the reworking of extant and changing social relationships, and generated new forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Just as the promotion of "hygiene" and "development" contributed to a reshaping of gender and status hierarchies, "freedom" in twenty-first-century contexts of liberalization permeates new discourses of hierarchy, and emphases on personal choice and responsibility articulate with new forms of subjection. Today, people tend to view older relations of inequality as "the past,"

disconnected from the present, and to attribute social troubles to individual responsibility. This is so even when those troubles seem related to extant status differences, shifting social networks, political-economic changes, and remembered violence. The concept of “intimate violence” offers a way for us to untangle people’s diverse experiences with such forces, and the comparative frame used here to examine memories of violence during imperial modernization and Ethiopia’s socialist revolution demonstrates the concept’s mobility. Moments of marked aggression in personal realms have their longest and most insidious effects in how people remember the violence, and how they reshape their personal lives and relationships. These deeper experiences find form in everyday interactions, in language, and in objects that link today with the past and testify to the entanglement of social relationships and identities with forces of political and economic change.

....

“The Lion of Judah, Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, appointed by God” awarded a national service medal to his “Loyal servant” Tesfaye Hailu for his work in development and modernization.³⁶ Tesfaye once had a photograph of himself receiving the award, but it was lost in his tribulations under socialism. He still has the gold medal, though, with its green, gold, and red ribbon. It is one of the few objects he possesses from before the revolution. “Would you like to see it?” he asks, newly animated. When he leaves us to find the medal in an interior room, I think of the women in Konso excitedly going to retrieve their leather skirts, those biographical objects hidden in the recesses of their houses, eager to display them and explain how they felt and what they meant. “I have this medal, and only this, from my government, for my service in Konso,” Tesfaye says when he returns. “I don’t have a pension or other things. My reward is this. And I am proud of having this.” And he pins his medal to his coat for us to see.

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³⁶ Tesfaye retains the letter of commendation.

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