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## Understanding marginalization in Ethiopia

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## UNDERSTANDING MARGINALISATION IN ETHIOPIA

*Dena Freeman*

‘The only way in which relations of domination can be set up, maintained or restored, is through strategies which, being expressly oriented towards the establishment of relations of personal dependence, must be disguised and transfigured lest they destroy themselves by revealing their true nature.’ – *Pierre Bourdieu (1977:191)*

Much of this book is devoted to presenting new and detailed data about the various minority groups in southern Ethiopia, and it is the task of this chapter to try to draw out the patterns and to develop a theoretical framework for understanding why these groups have been marginalised, and why they have been marginalised in such different ways. Over thirty different minority groups have been discussed and the variation in the forms and degrees of their marginalisation has been staggering. The discontinuities between their experiences seem as important as the continuities, and any blanket theory of why ‘the minorities’ are marginalised will clearly be both inadequate and inaccurate. Thus in this chapter I attempt to develop a theoretical perspective that applies in different ways to the different groups. Rather than treat each group in its uniqueness, I arrange them into categories where their experience seems to be broadly similar. In reorganising the data in this way I seek to find a balance between the over-general and the over-particular, and to keep any theoretical speculations as ethnographically grounded as possible.

As we have seen then, throughout southwest Ethiopia there are a number of marginalised minority groups who work as potters, tanners, smiths, weavers, woodworkers and hunters. All these groups are defined by occupation, or notional occupation (i.e. their hereditary occupation, even if they do not practice it any more). In distinction to the majority among whom they live, they are not farmers. Whilst farming clans may vary in rank and status, no farmers are despised and marginalised in the same way as these occupational groups. However, it is not the case that all craftwork is despised or that all crafts are carried out by despised marginalised groups. In fact it is impossible to neatly map occupation onto group status. Attempts have failed to discover any correlation between most of the obvious variables (e.g. Corlett 1974, Skelton-Smith 1979). It is not possible to correlate craftwork with stigmatisation in general because most farmers carry out some form of craftwork alongside their farming. House-building, thatching and rope-making are just some of the crafts done by farmers. Furthermore, it is not possible simply to distinguish despised crafts from those that are not despised, because this varies enormously throughout the area. In Gurage, for example, woodwork is carried out by a despised minority group, whereas in most other areas woodwork can be done by anyone. Weaving is carried out by a despised group in Kafa, but is a respected occupation for any man in Gamo.

It is also impossible to correlate a type of craft with a particular named marginalised group. Mana, for example, work as tanners in Kafa and as potters in Dawro. Fuga specialise as tanners in Yem, but as woodworkers in Gurage. Neither is it possible to correlate the type or degree of stigmatisation of different artisan groups with the type of craft they practice. Smiths have a relatively high status in some societies, such as Gurage and Shekacho, and yet are the most feared and marginalised in other societies, such as Malo and Oyda. Potters are considered the least polluting type of artisans in Gamo, and yet the most polluting in Yem.

Attempts to correlate the type or degree of stigmatisation of artisan groups with the form of the majority society have also failed. Similar groups are found in kingdoms and in less centralised polities, among agriculturalists and among pastoralists. After an exhaustive survey of the literature of despised occupational groups throughout the whole of Ethiopia one researcher was forced to conclude, ‘the most significant conclusion to emerge from the ethnographical survey is the *lack* of any important relationship between type of society and presence or type of artisan group.... Furthermore the characteristics of artisan groups in these societies vary as far as they do almost independently of the characteristics of the whole societies (Corlett 1974:149-50, emphasis in original).

So how then is the situation to be understood? If it is impossible to make correlations between categories based on either the type of craft or the form of the majority society, then it seems that we are using the wrong categories. We need to think of a different way to categorise these different groups, which will then lead us to a better understanding of why they are all marginalised and stigmatised, and yet in such different ways. The types of analytic categories that have been used before have focussed on *either* the occupational groups (e.g. type of craft) *or* the majority society (e.g. form of that society). No categorisation has been tried that incorporates both sides of the equation; no categorisation has been suggested that deals with the *interaction* between the majority and the marginalised minority. Since marginalisation is a process and not a static feature, I think that such an interactional approach is called for.

In this chapter I will suggest that the marginalised minority groups in southwest Ethiopia can be usefully categorised according to the way that they are stereotyped by the majority farmers. The form of this stereotyping varies significantly for different groups among different majority societies, but certain patterns can be discerned. Furthermore, when the minorities are categorised according to this schema, it emerges that members of these categories share a number of other features in common. The different forms of their origin myths, the existence or lack of their own rituals, and their various roles in farmer rituals, for example, show a good correlation with these categories.

In the first part of this chapter I thus outline four categories of minority groups, based on the form of their stereotyping by the farming majority. For each category I also describe the other features that they share in common, which further distinguish them from the members of the other categories. Having established the validity of these categories, I then proceed to discuss what they represent. Why is it that groups stereotyped by farmers in a similar way tend to have similar types of origin myths and similar roles in farmer rituals? I discuss two examples from northern Ethiopia where the different stereotyping of two different minority groups, the Falasha, now known as Beta Israel, and the Wayto, can be clearly seen to derive from their different origins as a people and the different historical processes that led them to their present-day situation as marginalised minorities on the periphery of Amhara society. From this comparative perspective it is possible to suggest that the categories of minority groups in southwest Ethiopia that I have delineated correspond to groups that have come to their present situation through structurally similar historical processes.

I then go on to consider previous theories about the origins of these groups, and what little is known of the history of southwest Ethiopia. I suggest that the most important historical processes pertinent to the formation and marginalisation of the minorities are migration, conquest and the development of increasing political complexity. I consider the importance of both their origins and the power of their craft products in the shifting political arena of southwest Ethiopia, and then sketch some possible scenarios of how they may have come to their present situation. In the final part of this chapter I extend the arguments developed for Ethiopia to the wider African context, and suggest that they have greater explanatory power than the prevailing symbolist approach, which focuses predominantly on the craftwork process.

#### A NEW CATEGORISATION OF MARGINALISED MINORITIES IN SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA

In what follows I will outline four different categories of marginalised groups, based on the form of their stereotyping by the farming majority. I will illustrate the similar nature of their stereotyping and the other common features that members of one category share in distinction from those of the other categories. All data comes from this study except where an alternative reference is given.

##### *A: Respected non-polluters*

The first category of minorities are those that are the least marginalised. They are unusual in that they all owned land prior to Menilek's conquest, and they are the only groups not to be considered as polluting or impure by the farmers. Groups in this category include the Nefrwe (smiths) and the Shamer (weavers) in Gurage, the Yirfo (smiths) in Yem, the K'emo (smiths) and Shamano (weavers) in Kafa, the Kejo (smiths) in Shekacho and the Wogach'e (smiths) in Dawro.

##### *Stereotyping*

There is currently very little stereotyping of the minorities in this category. They are not seen to be radically different from the majority farmers, and there is little social distance between them. They live among the farmers, and are not forced to the periphery like some of the other groups. Most of them owned land and practised agriculture even before the land reform of the Derg, and in all cases they are the highest ranking of the artisans. The Yem Yirfo say they have always married regular farmer clans, and Kafa K'emo and Shamane have recently been accepted as marriage partners by farming clans. Even in the traditional monarchy they were thought of as 'low clans' rather than 'outcast groups' (Orent 1969:95).

They are not accused of eating impure meat or of committing any polluting acts, and they are considered to be only slightly impure or not impure at all. They are not associated with fertility or thought to be particularly good healers. Contemporary Respected Non-Polluters are not attributed magical powers and are not feared, but there is some suggestion that they were in the past. Kafa K'emo used to be feared by the farming majority, and the Kopu clan of smiths in Yem were considered with a mixture of fear, respect and contempt (Straube 1963:320-1, Bieber 1923:61, both cited in Corlett 1974).

##### *Other common features*

- Oral histories state that most of these groups came from the north.

- They have no separate rituals of their own, and no role in farmer rituals.

Most of these groups claim some kind of northern descent. Various Wogach'e clans in Dawro say they come from areas of northern Ethiopia notably Agaw, Gojjam and Yifat (North Shewa). One clan claims that it was one of the clans that brought the ark of St. Michael to the oldest Orthodox Church in the area. The Yem Yirfo belong to only two clans, one of which is called Amaru, clearly suggesting an origin from Amhara, and some of the Shamane clans in Kafa have a tradition that they came from the north twelve generations ago, in the middle of the eighteenth century (Lange 1982:262).

There is a reference to a blacksmith king in Kafa during the late seventeenth century, when king Gamma Kejochi ('Long-haired Blacksmith') was the first of three 'dog kings' who ruled during an interlude between two periods of rule by regular Hinnario kings (Lange 1982:29-30). Whether this name is to be taken literally, or whether it simply marks the rule of an unpopular king, or a king who ruled during a time of famine, is unclear, but it does mark an interesting association between smiths and kingship that is otherwise rare in southern Ethiopia.

None of these groups have any separate rituals or religious practices of their own.<sup>1</sup> For the most part they participate in both traditional and Orthodox Church rituals alongside the farmers. Moreover, none of them have special roles to play in farmer rituals (except for the Dawro Wogach'e who circumcise farmer men).

### B: *Sterile polluters*

The second category of minorities are those that are viewed by farmers as being fairly polluting, and also not good for fertility. Groups in this category include the Awacho (tanners) of Sidama, the Ch'inasha (potters) of Wolaita, the Hawuda (weavers, smiths, tanners, potters, butchers) of Konso, the Degala (tanners) of Dawro, Wolaita and Gamo, and the various groups of Mana (tanners, potters), with the exception of the Mana smiths in the communities of the Gofa area.

#### *Stereotyping*

Members of these groups are more strongly stereotyped by the farmers, and only negative qualities are attributed to them. They are considered to be the antipathy of fertility, and are often thought to bring bad luck and death. Kafa farmers, for example, believe they will have bad luck if the first person they meet in the morning is a Mana. They are rarely thought to possess fantastic powers, and are not feared. There is significant social distance between them and the farmers, but they are not as distanced as some of the other groups. Some of them live on the periphery of farmer settlements, but many of them live in clusters scattered among the farmers. Even when they live on the edges they are not strongly associated with the forest or bush in the local symbolism, and the wildness of forest people is rarely attributed to them.

The accusation of eating impure meat, either from wild animals or from animals that have died without being ritually slaughtered, is made against some of these groups. It is rarely the most central theme in their stereotyping, but they are nonetheless considered to be polluting because of it.

#### *Other common features*

- The origin myths of many of the groups in this category claim that their craft occupation was imposed on them by the king, or that they chose it out of their own stupidity.
- They have no rituals of their own that are different from those of the surrounding farmers (with the exception of the Dawro Mana).
- They have polluting roles in farmer rituals
- They are commonly musicians.

Many of the origin myths of the members of this category claim that craft status was imposed on them by the king. Some groups, such as the Degala of Wolaita and Dawro, claim to have been among the people that came with the king. Other groups, such as the Mana of Shekacho, the Ch'inasha of Wolaita, and the Kaisaf of Dime (D. Todd 1978:152), imply that they were already in the area when the king arrived and forced them to be craftworkers. Either way, their becoming craftworkers is associated with the development, or 'arrival', of kingship.

Another set of myths tell that the marginalised groups chose their fate out of their own stupidity. A Sidama myth recounts how the ancestor of the Awacho tanners was a descendant of Bushe, one of the two mythical founders of the Sidama. When Bushe's descendants divided the land among themselves, the ancestor of the Awacho said, "Leave me just enough space for stretching skin, and share all the rest among yourselves." In this way he lost his rights to own and farm land out of his own bad choice. Similarly a Wolaita myth tells that God

offered the ancestor of the ‘outcastes’<sup>ii</sup> two covered cups, one full of grain and the other full of ashes. He chose the second cup, full of ashes, and since then he has been condemned to sit on the ground and work the clay (Chiatti 1984:235).

Another myth portrays the Oto Mana potters of the Oyda as ‘left-overs’. When God created all the people he first made the Mala and then the Ts’oma (the two categories of Oyda farmers). From the left-overs he made the Oto Mana. This myth perhaps highlights most clearly the theme that is common to all these myths, namely the idea that the marginalised groups were originally part of the majority society, but that as that society changed they were left behind, either forcefully or due to their own bad choice.

The Sterile Polluters are unusual among the minorities in that they are often mentioned in the politico-ritual myths of the majority society. They are most commonly found in myths that tell of the development of kingship. Thus a Sheka myth tells that Gochi, the first king, was born when his mother accidentally ingested semen from an unknown man, which was mixed in with *t’ef* bread. Fearing that people would want to kill this child, his mother gave him to a Mana woman to raise. When he grew up his true ancestry was revealed and, after various adventures, he became the first king of Sheka (Lange 1976:5-6). A similar myth relates that the king of Wolaita was brought up by a Ch’inasha woman, before revealing his true ancestry and claiming the position of king (ibid:9-10). A Gofa myth collected in Oyda recounts how the first king was born from a woman impregnated by the sun. He was abandoned and later found and brought up by a Mana woman. Some Gofa myths take the kinship between kings and Mana even further and assert a blood connection. A variant of the above myth claims that the first king was born from the union of a clan leader and a Mana woman during a time of war. The father’s clan won the war, and the boy grew up to become king.

Another feature of the groups in this category is that none of them have any rituals or religious practices of their own which differ from those of the surrounding farmers.<sup>iii</sup>

Instead they are commonly the musicians at farmer rituals, particularly at weddings and funerals.<sup>iv</sup> Gamo Degala play a horn trumpet (*zaha*) at funerals, at the initiation of farmer men to the position of *halak’a*, and during the work time of certain traditional work groups; Malo Oto Mana play a bamboo trumpet (*dinke*) and a horn trumpet (*loko*) at funerals, and beat drums (*darbe*) at weddings; Dawro Mana currently play their traditional flute (*loko*) when announcing orders from the authorities, be it the traditional chief or the leader of the local Peasant Association.

Most of these groups also have roles as removers of pollution in farmer rituals. Oto Mana in Oyda remove the pollution of childbirth and menstruation from farmer women, and Gamo Degala remove the pollution of incest when such cases occur among the farmers. Konso Hawuda, Wolaita Ch’inasha, Gamo Degala, and Dawro Mana and Degala are the circumcisers of farmer men.

### C: Fertile polluters

The third category of minorities are marginalised to a very great extent and are viewed by surrounding farmers as being extremely polluting and yet also associated with fertility. Groups in this category include the Manjo (hunters), the Fuga (woodworkers, tanners, potters) and possibly the Hadicho (potters) of the Sidama.

#### *Stereotyping*

The groups in this category are stereotyped by their farmer neighbours as being lawless, uncivilised people associated with the wild bush rather than the domesticated village. They tend to live on the periphery of settlements, close to the forest, rather than among the farmers. They are considered to be deeply polluting, and are accused of eating impure meat, such as monkey and porcupine, and meat from other animals that have died without being slaughtered. These impure dietary habits, even when they are denied or said to have been abandoned, are used by farmers to explain and justify the impurity of the members of these groups. In many cases they are believed to smell, and are buried separately from the farmers.

However, what distinguishes these groups most markedly from other groups is the belief of the farmers that the supernatural powers of these groups also have a positive side. They are generally thought to be good for fertility. Kafa farmers believe that they will have good luck if they pass a Manjo on the path, and Shekacho farmers think that they will be prosperous if they build a house on a site previously vacated by Manjo. Shekacho babies breast fed by Manjo women are thought to live particularly long and healthy lives.

Fuga in Yem are requested to bless farmer boys, and are needed to perform rituals to ensure the well-being of farmers after the birth of twins or after lightning has struck. In Gurage and Woliso the Fuga initiate boys and girls into the Mweyet cult, and have a central role in many Gurage rituals. In both areas the Fuga are believed to have knowledge of medicines and possess unusual powers of healing. The Hadicho in Sidama are associated with fertility, and there is a saying ‘Hadicho harishate’, meaning ‘Hadicho are fertilizer/fertility’. This is linked with the mythical birth of the Hadicho in the cattle pen of a house, from the union of a man and a donkey. The cattle pen is where manure is collected for use in the fields, and thus the Hadicho are associated with manure and agricultural fertility.

### *Other common features*

- These groups are also characterised by having myths that claim they fell from grace because of some impure act.
- They have a number of ritual practices which are quite different from those of the farmers among whom they live.
- They carry out polluting roles in farmer rituals.

Myths referring to these groups are characterised by the theme that the ancestor of the marginal group committed some impure act, or was born of an impure act, and was thus rendered impure himself and was banished into the forest. One myth from Kafa tells that the first Manjo was born from the union of the king's daughter and a dog. He was banished to the forest where he was seen to eat the meat of impure animals, thus rendering him even more impure. From then on he was marginalised and avoided (Lange 1982:265). In a similar vein a Sidama myth states that the Hadicho were born when a man impregnated a donkey. A Shekacho myth recounts how one of seven brothers ate a Colobus monkey during a time of hunger, and was then banished to the forest by his disgusted siblings. Another Kafa myth suggests that the Manjo were early inhabitants of the land whose impure dietary habits led to their demise:

Manjo and Matto came out of a hole in the earth near Shada [the royal grave site of Kafa]. They were both naked as they came out of the earth. They had no gold or anything else with them. Matto brought *enset* and a potato, given to him by Yero [god], out of the whole with him. One steer and one cow also came out of the hole with Matto. This was all that came out of the hole. As they came out of this hole they found the tanners, potters and smiths. Manjo came out first and then came Matto. The people on the earth first made Manjo king and then they made Matto king. But then Manjo's behaviour began to bother the people on the earth, since he ate everything. He even ate the meat of the Colobus monkey. The people began to hate Manjo. Manjo saw that they hated him and gave his position as king freely up to Matto. Matto and Manjo never fought with each other, and the people on the earth thought that they were brothers (Lange 1976:14).

Whilst this myth is certainly a rationalisation for discrimination, serving to blame the victims for their own marginalisation, it also has a historical component. It clearly implies that there were autochthonal people who were in the land before the Manjo, the first of many waves of conquerors. Only with the arrival of the Matto, the second group of immigrants, did the Manjo's dietary habits come to be considered impure. As the previous rulers of a conquered community they were marginalised by the new conquerors, dispossessed of land and banished to the forests. Other versions of the myth follow a similar pattern until Minjo, the ancestor of the last ruling dynasty, comes out of the same hole wearing gold jewellery. This adds weight to the historical value of the myth, because it is known that the kings of the Minjo dynasty distinguished themselves from the previous rulers by their possession and monopoly of gold.

Oral histories of the Fuga who now live in Woliso claim that their forefathers owned land in their former homeland which they know by the name of Masmās, and is located in parts of the area of present day Kambata, Hadiya and Gurage. They claim that they fled from this area when it was conquered by another people.

Many of these groups practice some rituals or religious activities which are quite different from those of the surrounding farmers. Manjo in Kafa and Dawro both perform rituals at the end of the harvest, which are separate and distinguishable from farmer rituals (Lange 1976:24, Behailu and Data this volume). These are called *bono* and involve the construction of a small hut (*ballo*), on the roof of which are placed offerings of *t'ef* and water. This is followed by much feasting.

The Manja in Dawro have different burial practices from those of the Dawro farmers. The Manja dig their graves first vertically and then horizontally, burying the dead in an upright sitting position whereas the Dawro favour the lying down position. Unlike the Dawro farmers, the Manja do not eat sheep, chicken or eggs. It is interesting to note that although the taboo on chicken and eggs is shared by many Cushitic- and Omotic-speaking peoples, the only other accounts of a taboo against sheep are limited to groups of people who claim a high status: the chiefs of Chako in Kafa province, the chiefs of Basketo, and the chiefs of Dime (Braukämper 1984:437), and also the Borana group of clans among the Macha Oromo of Wellega (Bartels 1983:154-5). This may add some weight to the possibility that the Manjo are the descendants of the rulers of a formerly autonomous population who were later conquered by other people, as the Kafa myth suggests.

The Fuga in Yem and Gurage also have a number of rituals of their own, as well as a central involvement in the rituals of their farming neighbours. The Fuga in Yem hunt with nets, unlike the other Yem, and have their own agricultural rituals for successful grain cultivation, directed to their god *kititisi*. During the dry season they make individual offerings of barley flour on the top of mountains, and their ritual leader, or *mag*, sacrifices a goat during the rainy season for the benefit of the whole community.<sup>v</sup> The Fuga in Gurage also worship their own god, known as *kusiye*, and all the Fuga throughout Gurageland attend an annual ritual at the end of September. They also have their own kind of bows and arrows, hunting equipment quite different from that of the farmers.

The marginalised groups in this category are often given polluting roles in farmer rituals. Manjo in Kafa used to bury the dead, and were royal guards and executioners. Fuga played a similar role in Yem. In Gurage, Fuga perform circumcisions and act as midwives, and they also perform central roles in many Gurage cults.

#### *D: Dangerous polluters*

The fourth category of minorities are the most marginalised of all. They are thought to be extremely polluting and they are also feared for their alleged dangerous powers. Groups in this category include the blacksmiths of Oyda, Malo, Maale, Ari, Bako and Dime. These societies are all located in the general Gofa area of southwest Ethiopia. The smiths are known as Gitsu or Gito, and often get subsumed in the category of 'Mana' as Gita Mana.

#### *Stereotyping*

The stereotyping of these groups by the farmers is the most extreme in the whole region, and they are considered to be a radically different kind of people. They are believed to be the most polluting of all such groups and contact with them is avoided as far as possible. These smiths are feared and are thought to control fantastic powers. Ari farmers believe that the Gita Mana are responsible for smallpox epidemics and droughts due to their 'diabolic occult powers' (Da Cassoto 1945:153, cited in Corlett 1974:107). Malo Gita Mana are accused of lycanthropy, and Oyda Kotsi Mana are feared as cannibals and as harbourers of evil spirits. Most of these groups live on the periphery of farmer settlements, and some of them are accused of eating impure meat. They are not associated with fertility in any way.

#### *Other common features*

- Little is known about their myths of origin, except when they are incorporated into the general 'Mana' category.
- Some of them have rituals of their own which are quite different from those of the farmers
- None of them have any role in farmer rituals.

Most of these groups claim to be autochthons, or get incorporated into general 'Mana' origin myths. A myth about the Oyda Kotsi Mana takes a similar form to those 'fall from grace' myths that are common among the Fertile Polluters, relating how they were cursed because they ate impure meat from wild animals.

Some of them have rituals and religious beliefs that are quite different from those of their farming neighbours. The Dime Gitsu sacrifice goat and sheep, and not cows as do the other Dime. Furthermore, the Dime Gitsu perform these sacrifices at a stone near their houses, and not on mountain tops where regular Dime sacrifices take place (D. Todd 1977:407). The Gitaman in Bako have their own separate agricultural and harvest ceremonies that are quite different to those of the farmers (Jensen 1959, cited in Corlett 1974:75). The Dangerous Polluters have no roles at all in farmer rituals, and they are considered too powerful even to fulfil polluting roles. An Oyda farmer explained that if a Gita Mana woman were present instead of an Oto Mana woman while a farmer woman gave birth, then both the mother and the baby would die.

The detailed exposition of this section demonstrates the salience of the groupings suggested. By reorganising the data in this way the chaos we started with has crystallised into a more interesting pattern of continuities and discontinuities. Of course, the groupings suggested are not rigid, and individual persons will no doubt have succeeded in crossing the boundaries through processes of migration, and more rarely, marriage.

What, then, is the significance of this categorisation? It is important to point out straight away that membership of the same category in no way suggests common 'ethnicity'. Rather, as I will go on to show, the principle underlying the different categories is one of formation by analogous historical process. In the rest of this chapter I argue that the different statuses of the minority groups can only be understood by considering the historical processes by which they came to be marginalised. In order to support this hypothesis I will turn first to some examples from northern Ethiopia.

## MARGINALISED MINORITIES IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

The point in introducing examples from northern Ethiopia is that due to the long written tradition in this part of the country, there is considerable historical information about the various minorities and the historical processes that led to their formation as stigmatised groups on the margins of Amhara society. By looking at this information in light of the current different forms of their stigmatisation, some suggestions can be made about the connection between certain historical processes and certain forms of marginalisation.

I will limit my discussion to two very different marginalised minority groups - the Falasha and the Wayto. Both are despised artisan groups within the wider Amhara society. The Falasha worked mainly as blacksmiths, weavers and potters, and the Wayto work mainly as the makers of grinding stones and as boatmen ferrying people across lake Tana. Neither group can own land or intermarry with the farming majority.

Beyond this however, they are considered very differently. The Falasha are stereotyped as being *buda*, the bearers of the evil eye who devour others out of jealousy of Amhara land and wealth. Falasha myths are very similar to Christian Amhara myths and claim descent from Solomon and Sheba. The Wayto on the other hand, are stereotyped as polluting sub-humans who eat disgusting food and live a wild and disordered life. A common myth about the Wayto tells of a 'fall from grace'. It states that their ancestor was one of four brothers who was cursed and excluded by his siblings because he killed and ate a hippopotamus, thus consuming impure meat that was prohibited by God (Rava 1913: 80, 123, cited in Corlett 1974:136-7).

These different forms of stereotyping show obvious similarities to some of the cases reported from southern Ethiopia, particularly to the Sterile Polluters and the Fertile Polluters in the case of the Falasha and Wayto respectively. By looking at the histories of these northern groups we can see how different forms of stereotyping relate to the different historical processes by which they came to be marginalised.

### *The Falasha*

The social processes that led to the formation of the Falasha as a caste-like group on the periphery of Amhara society in northern Ethiopia have been well-documented (e.g. Quirin 1992, 1997). In 1270 the Semitic Solomonic dynasty overthrew the Agaw Zagwe dynasty and set about trying to convert the population to Orthodox Christianity. Small groups of Ayhud (Agaw 'Jews') in the north-western region resisted conversion and sporadically rebelled. Amid ongoing theological controversies anti-Trinitarian Christians joined Ayhud communities, and many Ayhud were assimilated into Orthodoxy.

Despite the controversies the Ayhud continued to live as peasant farmers until the reign of Emperor Yeshak' (1413-30). At this time the refusal of one of their leaders to pay tribute to the king led to armed battles with the Amhara, who succeeded in defeating them. It was decreed that all those that were not baptised into Orthodox Christianity could not own land. Many Ayhud refused conversion, and at this time the term 'Falasha', with its connotation of 'exile', is thought to have come into use. Ayhud-Falasha lost their land, and, as Amhara Christians built churches and moved into the area, many of them dispersed into more marginal areas and took up craftwork. Predominantly they became blacksmiths, and potters, although they practised many other crafts as well.

In the early seventeenth century the ruling Amhara dynasty founded a permanent urban centre at Gondar. Many landless craftsmen, including the Falasha, migrated to the area in search of work. During the period of Gondar's ascendancy the Falasha craftsmen succeeded in improving their livelihood and status. They worked mainly in construction, as masons and carpenters, although some continued in their former occupations as blacksmiths, weavers and potters. Successful Falasha were rewarded with titles and land rights. As they were incorporated into the Gondarine politico-economic institutions they were increasingly defined by their occupational roles within the larger society as 'low clans', rather than as an independent minority group.

Their relatively secure position was dependent on their close relationship with a strong monarch. So when imperial power declined in the early nineteenth century, during the so-called 'Era of the Princes', their position was adversely affected. Gondar's population decreased and the construction industry waned. The Falasha reverted to their former occupations as blacksmiths, weavers and potters. Their status fell dramatically, and much of the land they had been granted previously was now confiscated. During this time they were appointed to perform polluting tasks, such as amputating the limbs of convicted criminals, burning out infectious wounds and treating skin diseases (Abbink 1987:150), and they became increasingly stereotyped as *buda*, possessors of the evil-eye who turn into hyenas at night and dig up corpses to eat. From being a low-ranking class within the general society they now evolved into an occupational caste-like group by the beginning of the twentieth century (Quirin 1992).

The trajectory of the Falasha through history is thus a complicated one. From being a farming community they were forced into taking up crafts by processes of politico-military defeat and the exclusion from land ownership, so that they became an occupational group on the margins of society. For a period of some two hundred years they were able to improve their position by working as masons under the protection of the

emperor in Gondar. When imperial power went into decline their status also fell. They again lost any land that they had been given, and reverted to being a caste-like group among the majority Amhara farmers, who increasingly stereotyped them as the bearers of fearful supernatural powers.

### *The Wayto*

Another case study from northern Ethiopia provides a different model for the formation of despised occupational groups. The Wayto of northern Ethiopia were a formerly autonomous hunting group who during the twentieth century turned into a marginalised caste-like artisan group on the periphery of Amhara society (Gamst 1979).

In the nineteenth century the Wayto were hippopotamus hunters on the shores of lake Tana. They were an autonomous, egalitarian group with strong rules about the sharing of hunted meat typical of most hunter-gatherers. However, by the 1930s the number of hippopotamus in lake Tana had decreased drastically with the introduction of rifles and the development of a steady trade in ivory hippo tusks with the outside world. At that time most Wayto subsisted on fish and some began to take up agriculture. By the 1960s there were less fish to support the Wayto population, and the majority of the Wayto took up craftwork, mainly the mining of lava stone and the manufacture of grinding stones. In addition they made reed boats to ferry people to the islands and transport wood back to the mainland. Some of them also rented land and agricultural equipment from the Amhara and engaged in cultivation. Because they ate hippopotamus meat, which their Amhara neighbours consider to be impure, the Wayto themselves were considered to be fundamentally impure. Despite close economic ties the Amhara maintain a great social distance from the Wayto and consider them to be a different kind of people. From once being an autonomous group of hippo hunters they have become 'a landless, caste-like, ritually polluted people in their new society' (Gamst 1979:236).

### *Historical processes and forms of marginalisation*

The historical processes that led the Wayto to become marginalised artisans among the Amhara farmers are thus quite different from those that led the Falasha to a similar position. Despite both being despised artisan groups within one larger society the differences in the origin of these groups is still clear in their myths and in the way that the farmers stereotype them.

With the benefit of these historical studies the ethnographic data from communities in southern Ethiopia can be re-analysed and some tentative historical inferences can be made. Just as it is the Waytos' former hunting way of life and their particular dietary habits, rather than their present occupation as makers of grinding stones and reed boats, that largely accounts for their present position in the wider Amhara society, so the present-day craft occupation of marginalised groups in southern Ethiopia is generally unimportant in understanding their low position in society. What is important is an understanding of the social processes that have led to their formation as marginalised groups. It is thus necessary to consider the history of these groups. In the next section I will briefly review some of the theories about the origins of the marginalised groups in southwest Ethiopia from this perspective, and suggest why they are unsatisfactory. (Pankhurst provides a fuller account and critique in the introduction to this volume). I will then consider what is known of the history of southern Ethiopia in an attempt to provide a backdrop for a political-historical analysis of the ethnographic data presented in the first section.

## HISTORICAL PROCESS IN SOUTH-WEST ETHIOPIA

### *Previous theories about the origins of the marginalised minorities*

Of the many theories put forward to explain the origins of the marginalised groups in south-west Ethiopia there are two general perspectives which consider the historical mixing of peoples through processes of conquest, migration or political expansion. The first theory, exemplified in various ways by Cerulli, Jensen and Straube, suggested that the marginal groups were the remnants of former autochthonal groups who were 'submerged' by invading populations. The second theory, exemplified particularly by Haberland, argued that some of these groups may have come with the conquering northern invaders. Both theories have been rightly criticized for their simple diffusionist model of cultural and technological change, and the racist undercurrents implying that anything innovative must have come from the Semitic northerners. Because of these serious shortcomings it has become fashionable to write off these ideas in their totality, and researchers from the 1970s onwards (e.g. Levine 1974, D. Todd 1978, Amborn 1990) have gone to great lengths to propose models based on ecological niches, internal specialisation and economic stratification, suggesting that such specialisation could be explained entirely by factors internal to these societies.

Since these hypotheses were proposed as enlightened academic theories in opposition to the 'old fashioned' and 'racist' views that preceded them, the deficiencies in the assumptions that underlie these models have yet to be pointed out. What all of them share is the reification of the society or ethnic group as a bounded whole that has existed since time immemorial. By eschewing the validity of considering the movement of peoples in any explanatory theory of origins, one gives an infinite historical depth to the society or ethnic group currently existing. On the contrary, movements, migrations and conquests have played an important part in Ethiopia's history and, as the northern Ethiopian examples show, must be taken into account in any consideration of marginalisation. The problem with the earlier theories is with their models of 'tribe' and 'conquest', and not with the idea that there have been movements of people. In fact, there have been massive population movements in southwest Ethiopia in the past several hundred years, and it is unthinkable that the historical processes involved would not bear some relation to the marginalised groups found throughout the area.

Furthermore, we must remember that migrations and conquests were frequently accompanied by political change, as rulers were replaced and polities expanded and declined. In this shifting political context it is also important to consider the changing political, ritual and economic significance of the craft items that the minorities produced, and thus bring in, and take further, some of the insights of the later theories as well.

### *Population movements and ethnogenesis of societies of south-west Ethiopia*

There have been a great many migrations of different people in different directions in the area that is now southwest Ethiopia. In the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century northerners moved southwards and traded with the southern kingdoms, and at times succeeded in incorporating them into the expanding Abyssinian empire. Many of the kingdoms in the southwest, such as Hinnario, Kafa and Wolaita believe that their ruling families came from the north (e.g. Lange 1982).

In the early sixteenth century, this period of contact with the north came to an end, and in the aftermath of the battles between the northern Christian Empire and Ahmed Gragn's Muslim forces from the eastern Harar region, the Oromo pastoralists spread east-west across the country, thus severing the links between north and south. Historian Bahru Zewde has called this 'the most significant population movement in the country's recent history' (Bahru 1991:9). A general period of flux set in both in the south and west as people were either incorporated into Oromo groups or fled to new territories.

It seems likely that it was during this time of large scale movement that different clans came together to form the present day societies of southwest Ethiopia. Many of the peoples of this area believe that most of their clans came from elsewhere. Some claim to be autochthonous, others claim to have come from the north, others from the south, others from the east and so on. Contrary to some opinions (e.g. Huntingford 1955) these societies are not 'ancient', but are more likely to have come into existence some time around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Sidama, for example, say that their clans are divided into two major factions; the descendants of Bushe who came from the east and was a dark-skinned agriculturalist, and the descendants of Maldea who came from the north and was a fair-skinned herdsman (Braukämper 1978, Hamer 1978). When they arrived in the present-day land of Sidama they encountered the Hofa people, who were ruling over other subject groups such as the Kusai and Fardona. Folklore has it that, after a series of battles followed by a period of co-existence, the descendants of Bushe and Maldea succeeded in tricking the Hofa and finally in slaughtering them. Through genealogical reckoning Hamer estimates the demise of the Hofa to have happened during the first half of the seventeenth century (Hamer 1978:132-4). Kusai and Fardona are found today as sub-clans of the Sidama Yemericho and Aleta, and there is a sub-clan of the Bargago-Hadiya in the Bilate region called Hofa, who say they come from the Sidamo area (Braukämper 1978:125-6). The present day marginalised minorities in Sidamo are referred to as 'Hofa talaticho' (*talaticho* means 'client'), suggesting that they had some connection with the conquered Hofa. We must now take our analysis further in order to consider what the nature of this connection may have been.

### MARGINALISATION IN POLITICO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The political historical approach that I propose here seeks to use the ethnographic data presented in the first section of this chapter, and the comparison with the northern Ethiopian cases discussed in the second section, against the backdrop of the historical events described in the third section, in order to make some suggestions about the historical processes that led to the formation of marginalised groups in southwest Ethiopia. The ideas presented in this section are thus more speculative, and I offer them as suggestions which I hope will stimulate further research.

## A: *Respected non-polluters*

Most of the groups in this category have traditions that they came from the north, and there is good reason to take these claims seriously. However, the context in which they came from the north is less clear, and most likely varies among different clans and different groups. One possibility is that when the Amhara northerners moved southwards in the sixteenth century they brought with them smiths and weavers. This seems likely, but makes their relatively high status even more paradoxical because smiths and weavers were stigmatised and marginalised to a great extent in northern Ethiopia (R. Pankhurst 1992). The solution to this paradox lies perhaps in the fact that in the new and foreign context of what is now southern Ethiopia, and what was then the 'primitive' area beyond the borders of the Abyssinian Empire, the 'northernness' of the artisans became increasingly salient in defining their identity. Whereas they had been 'minorities' in the north, they were now 'northerners' in the south. Another possibility is that they came from the north as commoners and then took up craftwork in the south. A third possibility is that local southerners learnt new craftworking skills from the northerners.

The common theme behind all these possible historical scenarios is that there is little 'ethnic' distance between the Respected Non-Polluters and the farmers. This links in with the fact that there is no 'ethnic' term for any of these groups. In contrast to the groups in the other three categories, the Respected Non-Polluters are known simply by occupational terms - as 'smith' or 'weaver'. This leads me to think that they were marginalised *because* of their craft, and not because of who they were.

Weaving was important in many of these southern polities, as cotton cloth was a mark of status compared to leather skins (e.g. Chiatti 1984:240). However, it was metalwork that was most crucial to these traditional polities. Smiths produced not only plough shares and other instruments for agricultural production, but also weapons for use in war, iron bars that were used as currency, and metal jewellery that was used as insignia of political power. Kings in Kafa, Sheka and Hinnario wore gold rings, bracelets or necklaces (Lange 1976:19, 1982:39; Orent 1969:73) and political leaders in the smaller polities further south wore rings and bracelets made from silver or iron. As the producers of both economic and symbolic currency the smiths were thus in a potentially very powerful position. This power of the smith is recognised in a number of myths and stories throughout the area. Reference has already been made to the blacksmith kings in Kafa, and in Oyda there is a saying that the real king of the people is the smith. In the Gamo highlands smiths used to be referred to as *tora kawo*, or 'king of the spear'.

The potential power of these smiths, however, was strictly controlled by the king. More so than any of the other groups, the Respected Non-Polluters came under the charge of kings and chiefs and produced items for them on demand. The power of the smiths' products was crucial to the maintenance of the kingdom, and thus to control this power the king had to control the smiths. The importance of the monopoly of gold for the ruling Minjo dynasty in Kafa, for example, has already been alluded to. The reason the smiths were marginalised, I suggest, was in order to distance them from political power. This links with the way in which they were marginalised, as powerful and dangerous people, rather than as impure and polluting pariahs.

In the less centralised polities further south, where kingship was not strongly developed, the power of the smith was respected and considered with awe rather than marginalised and controlled. Cerulli reported some forty years ago that iron work was carried out by farmers and was not despised in Konso, and he explicitly points out that the smiths in Darasa did not belong to a 'submerged class' (Cerulli 1956:55,125). During my own fieldwork in the Gamo highlands I came across non-marginalised smiths still working in Dorze, Doko and Ezzo. Farmers say that three or four generations ago all the smiths were part of the majority society and were not despised, and could marry with any other farmer clan. So it seems that where the smiths' products were not crucial for the maintenance of centralised political power, smiths were not marginalised.

If this historical speculation about the Respected Non-Polluters has any validity then it goes some way towards explaining why this category of marginals has experienced such a change during the twentieth century. Incorporation into the new Ethiopian state and increasing international trade have led to a radical decline in the importance of local metalwork. Traditional polities were dismantled as these areas were brought under national rule, and thus the power of the smiths suddenly became irrelevant as the new rulers did not rely on their technology. The production of gold and silver insignia was no longer necessary, and spears were useless in the presence of modern firearms. As Maria Theresa thalers were introduced the iron bar currencies faded away, and the influx of scrap metal from motor vehicles and other international imports soon led to the end of smelting and the smiths' monopoly of iron. The potential power of smiths was thus severely diminished. They were still needed to produce ploughs, knives and other domestic and agricultural tools, but their economic and symbolic importance in the political sphere was effectively ended.

In such a situation there would seem to have been two major options for the smiths: they could continue doing metalwork in this new context, or they could give it up. There is a fair amount of evidence that the non-marginalised smiths in the less centralised polities in the south chose to give up their craft. Farmer smiths in the Gamo highlands have now been replaced by Degala smiths in most areas, metalwork is now carried out by

Hawuda in Konso, and in Sidamo it is now Awacho (traditionally tanners) who work as smiths. The former smiths seem to have disappeared, probably because they have been absorbed as farmers. Since they were not marginalised before, this would not have been any great problem. But even in the more centralised kingdom of Wolaita, where smiths were marginalised before, ironwork is now carried out by Degala and the former smiths appear to have assimilated without any great difficulty.

In the more northerly areas many smiths appear to have continued with their craft, often at the behest of the farmers. Like the Gamo smiths, many of them owned land, particularly since incorporation into the Ethiopia state, and it seems that regular farmers had to persuade them to continue with their metalwork by ploughing their land in return for this work. Mengistu, for example, reports that in Sheka 'if a farmer asks a Kejo to repair his farm implements while the Kejo is working in his fields, then the farmer must work the Kejo's field while he stops to do the metalwork.' It is these smiths, more marginalised in the past and still practising their craft in the present, that are the contemporary Respected Non-Polluters and are now slowly assimilating with the farmers. The *reason* for their marginalisation has now disappeared as they are no longer potentially powerful in the political sphere, and thus, like their cousins in the south, they can now assimilate with the farming majority.

### B: *Sterile polluters*

The groups in this category seem to have much in common with the Falasha of northern Ethiopia. They are considered to be polluting, but not nearly as polluting as either the Fertile or Dangerous Polluters, and it seems likely that, as with the Falasha, their origins are from among the same or similar peoples as the farming majority. This is further supported by the fact that they do not have their own separate rituals, or any other distinguishing features which might suggest separate origins.

Rather than losing their land through religious controversy, it seems that the Sterile Polluters could have lost their land through the processes of stratification and specialisation that accompanied the development of kingship. Many of them have myths suggesting that their status and craft was imposed on them by the king, and other myths that they chose their craft out of their own stupidity, or that they were the 'left-overs' from the commoners. The emerging picture is of people left behind as their neighbours took part in a new social order.

Not enough is known about the political history of this part of Ethiopia for the dynamics of this process to be discussed with any certainty, but it seems that there are many possible scenarios. They could be people that protested against the new order, but were finally subordinated; or they could be people chosen by the king to perform polluting tasks as the concept of purity became crucial in separating the king from commoners and in constructing social strata generally. It is also possible that they may have been the former rulers or chiefs whose power was usurped as a more powerful dynasty came to rule. This last scenario is perhaps supported by the myths that say that the first king was born from, or brought up by, a Sterile Polluter woman, thus legitimising the current rulers by associating them with the former ones. There are no doubt many other possible scenarios, and it is likely that many different processes took place at the same time. It is also very likely that the initial Sterile Polluters were later joined by poor people who lost their land and by unfortunate subjects who fell foul of the king. Having lost their land, for whatever reason, these people then took to craftwork as the only means of survival.

### C: *Fertile polluters*

The groups in this category seem to share much in common with the Wayto of northern Ethiopia. They are viewed by farmers as being terribly polluting, largely due to their diet of wild meat. Like the Wayto, they remember their hunting past, and their origin myths are structured similarly, telling of a fall from grace due to impure acts.

They are also thought to be good for fertility. Such bi-polar stereotyping, where groups are attributed both positive and negative characteristics simultaneously, is a common feature of the stereotyping of hunter-gatherers by their neighbours throughout Africa (Woodburn 1997). Hunter-gatherers, such as the Twa, Okiek and Akie, are widely considered to be dirty, polluting and stupid, and yet frequently have important roles in the rituals of their neighbours and are associated with fertility and the power to heal (ibid:349-55). It should be noted that many of these groups also do craftwork, and currently gain much of their livelihood by selling their products to neighbouring farmers. Okiek men, for example, do various kinds of hidework, and their women work as potters (Blackburn 1973, 1982). Twa men and women are commonly potters, and in some areas Twa men work as smiths (Celis 1989). The similarity in the form of stereotyping reinforces the view that at least some of the Manjo, Fuga and Hadicho are former hunter-gatherers, although the presence of agricultural rituals among the Manjo suggests that they also practised at least some agriculture at some point in the past.

Kopytoff (1987) has argued that it is their status as autochthons that is most important in this kind of stereotyping. He suggests that throughout Africa firstcomers to the land are believed to have a special ritual

association with the land and fertility, so that conquering groups have to legitimise their rule through these autochthonal people. He suggests several ways that this can be done, largely depending on the size and power of the autochthonal population. Earlier groups can be claimed to have fled, or their earlier presence can be redefined as an animal existence so that they are denied the status of 'the first people'. If there are too many of them to make this a feasible option then the earlier peoples may be 'structurally tamed'. This can involve, he suggests, placing them on the margins of society as the providers of specialised services, or alternatively, marginalising them politically but incorporating them into the ritual order as legitimisers and bringers of fertility. If the population is too big to marginalise then another option is to recognise their ritual power as 'owners of the land', but to keep them distanced from political power. And a final option is to incorporate them into the political position of junior chiefs below the conquering kings (ibid:55).

Kopytoff cites a number of examples of each of these different cases, and suggests that 'outcast groups of blacksmiths in northern East Africa and in the Sudanic belt' are prior populations who have been conquered and forced to the margins of society as providers of specialised services.

As argued above, I do not think he is right with regard to those smiths that I have categorised as Respected Non-Polluters in Ethiopia, and the situation of the smith groups in the Sudanic belt is different yet again, as I shall discuss below. His approach does help us to understand the position of the Fertile Polluters and of hunter-gatherers, such as the Twa, Okiek and Akie, who are politically marginalised and yet ritually central as bringers of fertility.

The previous autonomous situation of the Fertile Polluters is further evidenced by the presence of their own rituals, different burial practices and different hunting equipment. Their later subjugation is hinted at in their polluting roles in farmer rituals. Thus it seems that the groups in this category may have been formerly autonomous peoples who were then either conquered by, or fled from, conquering populations. Some of them may have been former hunter-gatherers, while others may have practised a mixed subsistence and only become full-time hunters when they lost access to farmland. With the later decrease in land, forest and lake resources these groups seem to have begun to take up craftwork as hunting became no longer viable.

#### D: *Dangerous polluters*

The groups in this category all share the same craft, thus suggesting that the craft itself is an important factor in their marginalisation. As we have seen with the Respected Non-Polluters, metalwork was very important in traditional kingdoms, and smiths were potentially powerful people because they produced both economic and symbolic currency. In these smaller chiefdoms far to the southwest there would have been many similarities. Iron was an important emblem of political power, especially in the form of the *Kalacha*, an iron phallus worn on the forehead. In the highland areas where there were few cattle, iron bars were used as currency. Traditional chiefdoms were not dismantled after incorporation into the modern nation state and survived more or less intact until the Revolution of 1974, and in Dime smelting has continued well into the twentieth century. Thus the importance of iron, and the smiths' monopoly of it, is only now beginning to be eroded by the state and the availability of scrap metal from urban centres.

All these factors would lead these smiths to be marginalised as dangerous, fear-inspiring beings, similar to the Respected Non-Polluters in the more distant past, but they do not explain why they should be considered polluting. To understand this we need to observe some of the differences between them and the Respected Non-Polluters. Although they share the same craft, they clearly do not share the same origins. None of the Dangerous Polluters have traditions that they came from the north, and indeed the Gofa highlands where they are found was beyond the range of the sixteenth century northerners. Instead the origins of the Dangerous Polluters seem more similar to those of the Fertile Polluters. Many of them claim to be autochthonous, and some of them have their own rituals, which suggests that they may have been formerly autonomous peoples that were conquered in the past. Similar groups of smiths are found in Sudan, and some, like the Der and the Ajuong who live among the Dinka, still practice hunting, suggesting a former hunting and gathering lifestyle (Whitehead 1953:275-6). Some of the other Mana groups in this area are known to have been hunters that turned to craftwork. The Donger Mana in Ari, for example, were elephant hunters ('donger' means 'elephant') who turned to tanning and then took up pottery (Jensen 1959, cited in Corlett 1974:108, Gebre 1995:35). Where the Dangerous Polluters differ from the Fertile Polluters, however, is that they took up the most important of all crafts, metalwork.

I have argued that the reason these minority groups came to be marginalised is to be found in the historical processes by which they came to be craftworkers, and I have suggested some possible historical scenarios. For the smiths alone, this was further complicated by the importance of their products in maintaining the power structure of the traditional polities in which they lived. For the other craftworkers, the nature of their craft was not a causal factor in their marginalisation.

## CRAFTWORK AND MARGINALISATION IN AFRICA

Ethiopian studies has often been separated from broader African scholarship, and this has been to the detriment of them both. There is extensive literature about craftworkers throughout Africa, and it is interesting and important to see how the Ethiopian cases relate to the wider African context. Are similar patterns to be found throughout the continent and can they be explained by analogous processes? Can the insights from this detailed study in southwest Ethiopia be applied further afield?

Unsurprisingly, there is a huge amount of variation throughout Africa in the types of crafts, in their style and sophistication, and in the status of the craftworkers. The vast majority of studies have focussed solely on smiths, rather than on craftworkers in general. Most of them have concentrated on either the technology of ironworking (e.g. Cline 1937, Sassoon 1964, Haaland 1985, Celis 1989) or on its symbolism (e.g. Eliade 1962, Maret 1980, Herbert 1993).

Very few studies have focussed on either historical origins or on the importance of craft products for political power structures.<sup>vi</sup> There has been an overwhelming preoccupation with technological process – of smelting and forging in particular – almost to the exclusion of all else. I am not qualified to comment on discussions of metalworking techniques, but much of this argument about smiths has been an implicit critique of the symbolist literature. In what follows I would like to make this critique explicit.

Much has been written about the symbolism of African ironworking and it is not hard to understand the widespread fascination with gynecomorphic furnaces decorated with breasts, with rules against sexual intercourse during production, and with hammers and anvils referred to as ‘father’ and ‘mother’ that are found across the continent.

Examples of the ritualisation and the sexualisation of the smelting and forging processes are common throughout much of Africa, and the most wide-ranging attempt to synthesise this material is that of Eugenia Herbert in her book *Iron, Gender and Power*. In this book she amasses a phenomenal amount of data to support her contention that African ironworking is seen according to a ‘procreative paradigm’. What she means by this is that smelting/forging is seen as a transformative process modelled on human sex, birth and reproduction. The form of symbolic comparison varies across different areas, with the most overt cases being found in the savannah areas of south central Africa. Furnaces adorned with breasts and referred to as ‘wives’ are common throughout this area (e.g. in Chokwe, Luchazi, Luba). While the furnace is considered to be a woman, the action of the tuyeres, penetrating into the furnace, is generally thought of as the male sexual action (e.g. in Shona). The running of the slag is likened to the breaking of the waters, and the formation of iron bloom to the birth of a child. It is very common (e.g. in Ankole, Kaonde, Luchazi, Lamba, Chisinga, Ushi) for smelters to observe a period of sexual abstinence before and during the smelt, and some smelters explicitly say this is because at this time the furnace is the smelters’ wife and any other sexual relation would be adultery (Herbert 1993).

Although Herbert could enhance her argument by considering the variations in this symbolism in more detail, her procreative paradigm for African ironworking is, on the whole, convincing. Where more attention to the details of variation would help is in the *explanation* she gives for the sexualisation of this process. She argues that it is the transformative nature of the smelting/forging process - the fact that it turns ore into metal, or metal into tools - that accounts for its association with the supreme transformative process of human procreation. I believe that she is wrong here, and I think the Ethiopian data shows why.

Until recently there was no evidence that smelting or forging may have been sexualised in Ethiopia. Cases from Ethiopia are conspicuously lacking in Herbert’s book, and she suggests only that Gurage smiths are exceptional in that they are “totally dissociated from the procreative paradigm” (ibid:160). If her general argument is to stand, then the case of the exceptions must be explained. Why is it that Gurage smiths are dissociated from the procreative paradigm?

As I have suggested above, contemporary Gurage smiths, like the other Respected Non-Polluters, have been through radical changes this century as the importance of their products for the maintenance of traditional power structures has come to an end. Disempowered by the politics and economics of the Ethiopian state, their products are no longer important beyond the mundane affairs of everyday life. This would affect the ritualisation of the craft only if it is not the *process* of metalwork that accounts for its procreative symbolism, but rather the power of its *products*. From this perspective it is clear why metalwork is not ritualised in the present, but there would be every reason to suspect that it may have been in the past.

Further support for this idea is provided by some of the new data in this volume. Behailu and Data’s paper offers the first evidence of the former ritualisation of metalwork in Ethiopia. In Dawro any person entering the smith’s workshop had to utter a blessing for the fertility of cattle, and the Wogach’e themselves used to pray to their deity during the production process. The work of the goldsmiths was surrounded by even more elaborate taboos. On the day of production they had to avoid any person who had had sexual relations the night before, and they had to ensure that their work was carried out in a peaceful environment with no arguments or quarrels. It is unlikely that Dawro was alone in its ritualisation and sexualisation of metalwork, and I would hazard the guess that in pre-conquest Ethiopia, when metal was crucial to the maintenance of political power structures,

such ritualisation was more common. The fact that in Dawro it was goldsmithing, rather than blacksmithing, that appears most linked to sexual reproduction and thus to the procreative paradigm, adds yet more support for this hypothesis because it was gold, not iron, that was used as the insignia of political power in this area. If, as Herbert argues, it is simply the transformative process that is sexualised then we would not expect the type of metal to influence the symbolism, and we would not expect the symbolism to fade just because the political context has changed.<sup>vii</sup>

The Ethiopian data has thus shown that Herbert's arguments, and those of the other symbolists, are mistaken in their explanation of the procreative symbolism that often surrounds metalwork, and has allowed us to see that it is the political importance of the products, and not the craft process itself, that is symbolically elaborated. A further shortcoming is that, in focussing on the craft process itself, the symbolist argument applies equally to all smiths and is able to tell us very little about their differences. In particular, it does not tell us why some smiths are marginalised while others are not.

The social status of the smith varies tremendously throughout Africa, and has been the subject of much debate. In the Sudanic belt of West Africa and in the Mandara Mountain area of north Cameroon and northeast Nigeria metalwork is carried out by marginalised minority groups who, as Kopytoff has pointed out, seem superficially similar to some of the minority groups in Ethiopia.<sup>viii</sup> However in equatorial Africa and the interlacustrine area of Rwanda, Burundi and northwest Tanzania metalwork is carried out by certain smithing clans who marry freely with other farming clans, and further south in the savannah areas of Zambia, Zimbabwe and northern Angola, metalwork can be learnt by any man and it is often said that the king himself is a smith. The symbolist argument, based on the *process* of ironworking, tells us little about why there should be such differences.

It is true that Herbert does not directly address this issue, but others using the symbolist approach have sought to explain the marginalisation of West African smiths by reference to beliefs about the magical powers inherent in their transformative craft. McNaughton, for example, in an insightful study of Mande smiths in Mali, writes that 'other citizens' interpretations of the smiths' technology lie at the core of the Mande characterisation of the blacksmiths' (McNaughton 1993:21). The smiths' power, he argues, derives from 'their ability to shape things in both physical and conceptual realms' (ibid:156), and he suggests that the reason for their caste-like status is because 'the[ir] power...is in some measure mitigated, or at least rationalised, by rendering it unsavoury' (ibid:160).

However, similar powers are attributed to smiths in parts of Africa where they are not marginalised or organised into caste-like groups. Kongo smiths, for example, are attributed great powers and they are thought to 'mediate between the two divisions of Kongo cosmology, on the one hand intimately joined to the world of ... women's activities, river waters, healing and fertility ... [and on the other hand to] men's affairs, fire and destruction' (MacGaffey 1986:178-9). And yet this power is not rendered 'unsavoury' and they are not marginalised into caste-like groups.

In order to understand the marginalisation of smiths in some parts of Africa, then, a focus on technology and symbolism is of little use, because similar symbolic elaborations are found in cases where the social organisation is dramatically different. A more helpful place to look, as I have argued for Ethiopia, is in historical process. Just as the radical difference in the status of the Respected Non-Polluters and the Dangerous Polluters can be explained only by the different historical processes by which they came to be smiths, and not by their craft, so, I believe, the different statuses of smiths elsewhere in Africa ultimately can only be explained by a consideration of historical process.

Culturally sensitive historical studies of smiths are rare, but the work of Tal Tamari and Peter Schmidt are excellent examples. Tamari has used historical evidence to link the development of marginalised smith groups in parts of West Africa to the period after the Malinke-Sosso war, and suggests that they are the descendants of the former smith-king rulers of the conquered Sosso empire (Tamari 1991:236-41). Such a scenario would help explain why these groups are marginalised and distanced from political power, and would also offer insight into the radical differences between these marginalised groups and any of the smith groups in southern Ethiopia (see note 8), who came to their present situation through rather different historical processes. Schmidt's more detailed ethno-archaeological account of the Haya kingdom in northwest Tanzania shows how successions of different rulers, both indigenous and conquering, sought to control iron and ironworkers as they developed more complex forms of political organisation, and how the status of the smiths and the symbolism surrounding ironwork changed throughout this time.

(Schmidt 1978, 1997). Both these cases support my contention that it is in the complex arena of African political history that the reasons for the varying statuses of smiths and their different roles in society are to be found.

The same argument applies to other craftworkers. It is no use looking at the symbolism of craftwork to explain the status of the craftworker.<sup>ix</sup> Instead it is necessary to consider the politico-ritual importance of the craft products they produce, and the historical processes by which these people came to be potters, tanners or whatever. The particular importance of iron is likely to make the stories of the smiths rather different from those

of the other craftworkers, as shown in some detail in the Ethiopian cases, but it is in the realm of political history, in processes such as the overwhelming of hunter-gatherers by agriculturalists, in the conquering of autochthonal populations by foreign migrants, and in the development of kingship, rather than in esoteric symbolism, that the continuities and discontinuities between their experiences are to be found.

This chapter has attempted to synthesize the data about marginalised minorities in southwest Ethiopia and to use this detailed ethnography to develop a theoretical approach to explain marginalisation in Ethiopia, and in Africa more generally. It argues for a political historical perspective and a careful comparative methodology and suggests that it is the historical processes by which people came to be craftworkers and the politico-ritual importance of their products that, when combined, explain their marginalisation. It has also been shown that the status of the Ethiopian minorities is not a static structural feature, but a process contingent on broader political and economic factors.

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#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> There was however some ritualisation of the production process by the Dawro Wogach'e, and possibly among other groups as well.

<sup>ii</sup> Chiatti does not specify which group.

<sup>iii</sup> Except for the Dawro Mana who have a special ritual after harvest.

<sup>iv</sup> Some Fertile Polluters also perform this role.

<sup>v</sup> It is relevant to note here that it is quite rare for farmers in southern Ethiopia to sacrifice goats. Cattle and sheep are generally used for sacrifices, and are considered to be quite different from goats. When goats are used in farmer rituals it is generally for sacrifices to appease evil spirits (Braukämper 1984:433).

<sup>vi</sup> Tamari 1991 and Schmidt 1978, 1997 are useful exceptions.

<sup>vii</sup> There are other reasons to disagree with Herbert. The logic of her argument that metalwork is ritualised because it is a transformative process implies that other transformative processes will be similarly ritualised. She is explicit about this point and says, 'I focus...first and foremost...[on] ironworking, and then move to technologies viewed as analogous in order to posit similar structures and underlying patterns' (Herbert 1993:3). In this vein she considers pottery and hunting, and presumably her arguments would also apply to leatherwork, weaving and any other craftwork. Although these crafts are ritualised in a few parts of Africa, the cases are not frequent enough to support her argument. Rather, it is when the products have an important politico-ritual function, such as pottery figures that are used in the worship of ancestral spirits in parts of West Africa (e.g. *ibid*: 211), that their production processes are ritualised and sexualised. One has to look at the politico-ritual function of the *product*, and not at the production *process*, to understand which crafts are ritualised in which contexts.

<sup>viii</sup> There are however numerous differences. Most marginalised smith groups in the Sudanic belt own land and the women engage in agriculture while the men carry out their metalwork. They are feared and respected, rather than despised or thought to be polluting, and many of them have important social roles as go-betweens in disputes and marriage transactions. They also commonly have leadership roles in the *komo* or *poro* initiation societies, and are central in the local cosmologies as civilising culture heroes. Many are valued as artists and magicians, and it has been suggested that they consciously surround themselves with an aura of mystery and fear in order to retain monopoly over their craft (Richter 1980, Tamari 1991, McNaughton 1993).

<sup>ix</sup> Herbert, indeed, extends her argument to 'technologies viewed as analogous' (1993:3), such as pottery and hunting. See note 7.