Everyday conceptions of the state in Ethiopia: corruption discourses, moral idioms and the ideals of *mengist*

Daniel Mulugeta

Postdoctoral researcher

Department of Politics and International Studies

SOAS University of London10 Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which ideas of state are constituted in North Ethiopia by focusing on corruption and development discourses found in local public domains as well as on religious metaphors and idioms which define the roles and obligations involved in governance. Specifically, I highlight the ways in which people draw on experiences of everyday life to formulate the normative basis of state authority and how this contributes to the production of an understanding that the state appears to be both above and separate from local politics and society. The study generates new insights into how local values, expressed through metaphors and idioms, serve to orient asymmetrical power relations between state and local people into a relationship (and mutual recognition) of responsibility and obligation. I argue that state formation can be fruitfully explored from a vantage point that explores specific configurations of divergent discursive practices, a process shaped by the ongoing contingencies of social relations, as well as the actions, expectations and hopes of the people involved in the process.

Keywords: State, *mengist*, corruption, development, Ethiopia, Africa.

Introduction

Recent scholarship on African statehood has provided invaluable description of the ways in which state power is produced through everyday practices of negotiation and contestation between different actors (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Hagmann and Péclard 2010; Lund 2006). Most of these studies focus on modes of governance and power relations within a variety of local institutions, paying close attention to themes such as public education provision (Korling 2010), public health care provision (Jaffre and Olivier de Sardan 2003) and corruption (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Smith 2007; Routley 2016). Importantly this literature on the state in Africa has also shown that the modalities by which the state in Africa emerges as a centre of society are manifested in more than institutional and administrative practices. It is also discursively constructed and imagined (Gallagher 2017; Friedman 2011) through cultural representations. Ethnographers have revealed how discursive and cultural principles, and organising practices such as witchcraft (Geschiere 1997; West 2005; Ashforth 2005), localised notions of tradition and rhetoric of law (Bertelsen 2016; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006), and the making and unmaking of border and borderlands (Dorman, Hammett, and Nugent 2007) inform operations of state power in everyday cultural and social life. In such conceptions, the state is heterogonous and socially embedded, not a singular and unitary centre of power.

This article aims to contribute to this emerging literature by examining the active and ongoing processes by which the Ethiopian state comes to be produced in a rural kebele[1] I shall call Degga in the Amhara regional state of Ethiopia. It analyses the manner in which how ideas of what the state is and how it is meant to function is constituted in people's imaginations in the context of everyday social life. In so doing, I seek to capture the idea of the Ethiopian state in the imagination of the people who inhabit it. By imagination I mean, the multiple ways through which ordinary people 'perceive, and talk about, represent and construct, and experience' (Friedman 2011: 8) the state. Political imagination, although susceptible to

illusions, exaggeration, falsehood and fantasies (Friedman 2011), arises as an effect of local discursive practices[2] (Tsing 1993: 25) and is therefore crucial for the representation of the state as a coherent entity. I seek to show in this article that political imagination in Ethiopia particularly has taken root in development discourses[3] and in their imbrication within a culturally specific normative ideals about the state. I suggest that the specifically local ways in which discourses about development in Ethiopia is articulated elicit the diversity of lived practices, experience and social interactions, which simultaneously relate to contextualised knowledge, moral idioms and cultural values that carry the social and political life of people in contemporary North Ethiopia. The article draws attention to the divergence and multiplicity of discursive practices articulated around the idea of development that offer windows onto contingent understandings of the state in Ethiopia.

The specific local discursive practices under the purview of this article are those related to corruption and religious idioms and metaphors (and their entanglement with the ideology of development). First the article examines corruption discourses found in kebele public domains as a means of understanding the way in which the state comes to be constructed and imagined. By the kebele public domain, I mean the habitual social spaces such as tea and coffee houses, *tella bet* (literally meaning beer house) and the informal roadside gatherings where local inhabitants engage with a variety of issues that shape the idea of state and moral rights and wrongs. In such spaces, the local population (usually male members of the community)[4] as social actors, disparage and gossip about state functionaries, tell each other stories of corruption and the success and failure of local development projects and also exchange information about the distribution of agricultural inputs, weddings, funerals and other local social events. The kebele domain should not, however, be contrasted to a fixed national or global domain. Instead, it is a site where multiple issues of local concern and problems affecting everyday life such as provision of basic needs including agricultural resources, water, and proper management of

land are discussed both on their own terms and in relation to national politics, current affairs and events. Although the local–national distinction is fluid, and as the ethnography below depicts, the national nevertheless was often viewed as an external and official realm or a state sphere which stands over and above the kebele domain. The national domain as such was linked to the state's commitment to development, and popular discussions were mostly positive because of that.

In participating in kebele public domains[5], I found corruption to be a favourite topic of everyday conversation. Men would meet in one of the local public domains – usually during the evening, when the day's work was done, and during religious off-work days – to tell stories of corruption. They share ideas, experiences and obtained new information about, for instance, how much civil servants would likely demand and so on. Within such talk and discourses, the actions of local leaders were argued over and eventually evaluated against local moral norms. Politicians were often described as corrupt, self-serving and unscrupulous. Significantly, they talked about the embezzlement of development resources, about the amount of money the kebele officials had so far diverted from development programmes or were expected to divert, and about the cost of getting things done (*guday masfetsemya*). In such discussions, the word *musena* (the Amharic equivalent of the English term corruption) was explicitly mentioned only in few instances. An often-used phrase was 'eating up' (*meblat*) of state resources. Another term that was often employed to describe the perceived widespread nature of corruption was 'stealing' (*meserek*). These terms were frequently used in situations where people perceive there to be theft and misuse of development resources. This article focuses on examining how such corruption idioms and discourses help people make sense of politics, imagine the state and how they confer on them specific claims of important agricultural resources[6] that are perceived to be controlled and managed by powerful state functionaries.

One key focus of this article then concerns how different narratives of corruption held by local people, and of development held by government representatives inform state imagination and compete with each other. These narratives attempt to either represent the state in order to contest the monopoly and misuse of development resources by state functionaries, or – as in the case of the government representatives – to challenge such narratives. However, they all give meaning and resonance to different ideas of the state in the contemporary context.

Second, I seek to show that state imagination in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, is not solely a product of contemporary popular notions about issues such as corruption and development. It is also intimately tied to the cultural world view of the local people. In the view of this study, the latter cannot be divorced from particular contemporary discourses surrounding the state. In my attempt to demonstrate the modalities by which the state comes to be imagined, I therefore pay attention to the religious language and metaphors that make for a particular political culture. By political culture, I mean the system of signs and meaning through which people make sense of politics (Haugerud 1995). My contention is that the political-cultural is not a self-evident repertoire of political common sense or a source of legitimacy for political authority but rather a contingent process that is ceaselessly constructed and reconstructed through processes of contest and acquiescence between different social actors (Hodgson 2017; Haugerud 1995). One site through which power and political culture in North Ethiopia operate and are instituted is the church. Hence, in this article, I demonstrate how religious language and metaphors enable people to imagine the state. I do not, however, address religious discourses directly but instead make reference to the metaphors, expressed through narratives, which denote the cultural understanding and world views relevant to state imagination and the elements of particular principles that underlay relationships.

Together, the two set of discursive practices provide complex, diverse and contingent understandings of the state articulated by rural residents. My purpose is to demonstrate how

local people combine divergent aspects of different types of discourses circulating at a local level to construct a particular image of the Ethiopian state.

The discussions in this article draws specifically upon my doctoral fieldwork for three months, between 2014 and 2015, in West Gojjam zone of Amhara regional state. My method of research included a range of different techniques such as in-depth interviews/conversations, direct and participant observations. Almost all of the informants were asked to reflect on issues that were pertinent mostly to the state. More specifically, in order to bring agency into my research and explore different meaning-making, I framed questions largely in the form of a life-history narrative and biographical approach. In the informal roadside or neighbourhood gatherings, where conversation topics involved corruption and/or development failure, I assumed the role of observer-as-participant. To avoid being perceived as taking sides in such highly contentious local issues, my participation was limited to seeking clarification or to obtaining some idea of the meanings that the participants attributed to their narratives. In total, I met, conversed with and interviewed more than 70 informants including farmers, government agents and representatives of water user association.

The research was particularly based on my embedded experiences of the everyday in local spaces. As an Ethiopian, and also as someone who shares a common language and cultural background with my informants, I was viewed as an 'insider' by the local community. This meant that I was able to establish a good rapport with a broad range of people and, as a result, I was able to secure access to local events, meetings and informal discussions. However, it also brought a challenge to my role as a researcher, meaning that I had to make a conscious effort to manage my insider status through reflexive techniques such as constant disconfirming, deliberately enquiring about details that I would otherwise have taken for granted, blocking and deconstructing my own assumptions and seeking alternative interpretations of narratives, as well as to ensure critical distance was maintained throughout the process.

In the discussion below, I review the different conceptions and understandings of the concept of the state in Ethiopia. Next, I lay out discourses of corruption in a series of ethnographic vignettes to demonstrate the different meaning and function it has not only to the production of state idea but also in the lives of the rural poor. I then explore the responses of local officials to allegations of corruption and how perceive the state development programmes they are part of, and thereby how they imagine the state. In the last section, I highlight how people in Degga imagine the state through their use of language replete with religious metaphors and symbolism. In conclusion I reflect on the implications of normative discourses for contemporary understanding of state-society relations in Ethiopia.

Conceptualising *mengist*

During the first weeks of my fieldwork in Degga, but also afterwards, I went around asking people the question 'what is *mengist' (*roughly meaning state or government*)*? Many of informants could not give a clear answer; many others would mull over my question before saying, 'I never thought about it before'. At first, I was slightly unnerved by the lack of concrete answers. Yet, as I began to spend more time with my informants and following them through their daily activities, I found that all too often the state was constantly referred to in conversations as if it were a living reality, unified and tangible enough to enable anybody to discern its form and meaning. The meaning of the state in popular usage of the term, however, was anything but static. Indeed, the use of the term *mengist* is fraught with difficulty.

While the essence of the concept is intact, there are several idiosyncratic applications. The word, used in everyday conversations is a derivative of the term *neges*, which means the act of becoming a king (Toggia 2008). It signifies extensive notions of power, royal privilege and authority. It does not make a distinction between government and state (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003). Often academic discussions about the state in Ethiopia start with the same conception

of a unified state. Ethiopist scholarship, for example, has for so long been expressly concerned with a historical metanarrative of what Christopher Clapham (2002) aptly termed 'the great tradition' – a belief in the continuity of an ancient and unitary state tradition (Ullendorff 1973; Tadesse 1972; Sergew 1972). Writers working within this tradition invariably use the notion of state to refer to all 'kingdoms and empires in ancient and medieval periods, as well as the modern Ethiopian states' (Toggia 2008: 331). In other words, the modern concept of the state is simply projected onto the historical past, and, as such, the Ethiopian state is represented more as an already well-formed and well-organised trans-historical entity that evolves linearly and steers the course of social life than as a social formation produced at a specific and recent historical juncture and as one which is in a constant process of construction through social struggles and cultural idioms.

For modernist political writers and historians, the key question is whether the Ethiopian state fits in the international system of states, especially in light of what is generally called the modernisation project: practices related to the creation of bureaucratic machinery, the adoption of modern European law, and commercialisation of the economy (Clapham 1988; Bahru 1991; Keller1991; Teshale 1995). Here, the notion of the state is explicitly tied up with classic Weberian conception of the state as a single and monolithic territorial semi-bureaucratic machine with a monopoly of power. Scholars of spatial thinking, on the other hand, generally adopt a simple binary of centre and periphery approach to Ethiopian statehood (Donham 1986; Markakis 2011). These studies define the Ethiopian centre as the foci of state power which are constituted through the cultural idioms of the Amharic- and Tigrinya -speaking groups of highland Ethiopia. The periphery, on the other hand, is seen to be non-Abyssinian groups who were identified in terms of their physical proximity to the capital, Addis Ababa, as a nodal point of communication, their level of incorporation to the state structure and their degree of self-identification with the 'Greater Ethiopia' myth (see Clapham 2002).

However, turning the lens on to state-society relations and the normative foundations of state power, several anthropological and sociological studies explored the internal dynamics and workings of the Ethiopian state (see, e.g., Levine 1965; Hoben 1970; Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003; Abbink 1997; Lefort 2007). These studies provide rich accounts of the complex overlap and interface between traditional values and formal institutions, and complex of beliefs, symbols and values regarding authority and hierarchical relations that frame political life in North Ethiopia. From these studies emerges a more complex a conceptual picture *mengist* as culturally embedded. However, the supposition of a reified understanding of the concept of *mengist* as a self-contained actor persists in writings on the state in Ethiopia (Teferi 2004). Lefort's (2007) work has been particularly influential in this respect. In a rich analysis of peasant-state relations in rural Ethiopia, Lefort depicts a picture of a hierarchical society in which *mengist* is viewed as an all-powerful Leviathan. Here, at the same time as I recognise the importance of the hierarchical conception of authority in North Ethiopia, I argue that our theoretical frameworks for studying the state in Ethiopia need to take more account of the relational principles which are embedded in the cultural conception of hierarchy. Significantly, a more nuanced analysis of these processes is crucial to understanding the way through which the state comes to be understood.

In my view, the vernacular Amharic word *mengist* doesn't tells us much about the Ethiopian state itself – in terms of what it actually means to the people. To take such a conception as the starting point of analysis of the Ethiopian state, therefore, as Fuller and Harris argue, risks turning the state into a master concept which 'purportedly explains more than it possibly can' (2001: 10). Indeed, the fact of everyday references to certain activities as *mengist* make its use a 'social fact.' Nevertheless, in the view of this study, the concept of *mengist* cannot singularly capture and explain what all Ethiopians – who are positioned differently – actually think, imagine and do. Rather, this article argues that the concept of state has to be explained by

exploring the ways in which it is invoked in everyday conversations and by investigating what it variously means and does for the people. From this vantage point, in what follows I draw attention to local narratives about corruption to show multiple ways in which the state is differently constructed by differently positioned actors.

Ideals of a Sublime State: Corruption and livelihood talk

Many of the people with whom I spoke in Degga drew attention to the difficulties of securing a livelihood in times when corruption is perceived to be a pervasive and widespread practice. Most people complained about local officials diverting development resources such as chemical fertilisers and improved varieties of seeds and about the unfair access of the rich to irrigation water, credit services and state procurement prices for wheat. However, many absolved *mengist* of blame and instead blamed local politicians for abusing and diverting development resources from the poor for private use.

One day, for instance, during a fairly ordinary conversation with a group of kebele residents at a local coffee house, the topic abruptly turned to agricultural resources distribution. As usual, there was speculation as to whether the government would provide adequate fertiliser in time for the spring growing period. 'The government is not at fault. It is the people [cooperatives] who distribute inputs who are to blame. They divert fertilisers to merchants and deliberately hold back distribution from us. I know this because there are always fertilisers on the black market,' said one middle-aged farmer, distinguishing between the distant state and its local representatives. Everybody agreed. The general feeling among my interlocutors was that it was locally powerful individuals who were to blame for them being left bereft of state-sanctioned agricultural resources. When I asked them to describe the processes by which agricultural resources were distributed in the kebele, another middle-aged man replied, 'Agricultural inputs are never distributed equitably in our kebele. We are normally supposed to share them equally

according to our needs. But the poor never get adequate amounts of what the government sends us ... the kebele officials and cooperative managers eat up the development resources.' Similarly, the third interlocutor commented, 'there is no equal sharing of resources … woreda[7] and kebele officials eat up all the resources'. When I enquired as to why he thought the local officials 'eat up' agricultural resources, he replied sounding surprised, possibly by the naiveté of my question, 'If you come back early in January, you can see a pile of fertiliser bags stacked at the front veranda of the chairman's house'. In support of his friend and as evidence of rampant local-level state corruption, the first speaker gave the following anecdote from his own experience: 'last summer I stood in line for three days to get one bag of fertiliser from the cooperative … when I received it, it looked to me as if the bag had been opened and repackaged. I then went straight to the mill house to find a scale … I discovered that it was 3 kg underweight.' 'So why are you not bothered about going to the woreda administrator and complaining?' I asked. He replied that it would be of no use. 'I know it is our right. The government gave us the right … they are bound by the government to respect our right. But there is no point in complaining to the woreda administration. They are all in this together – even the woreda administrator is part of this. He would not do anything.' These comments highlight the widespread belief that state functionaries indulge in corruption and, hence, they subvert the purported impartiality and benevolence of the state.

I followed my interlocutors' lead and began asking other people how they felt about the distribution of agricultural resources. Time and again I heard similar stories and complaints about the corruption of government officials. On another occasion, for instance, I was sitting chatting with four local farmers when one, whom I shall call Kebede, recounted the hardships he faced after half of his crop was destroyed by insects and pests. He said he struggled to support his family by working as a daily-wage labourer. He also noted that one of his four children dropped out of school to work for wealthy farmers by tending their cattle and

supporting his parents. In the meantime, Kebede said a deputy of the local primary cooperative offered to help him obtain pesticides for the coming harvesting season, which he accepted. However, as he was about to receive the pesticides from the cooperative, the deputy began hounding him. 'He wanted to keep some bottles of the pesticides for himself,' explained Kebede. But instead of conceding, Kebede confronted the cooperative deputy, which angered him more and led to him threatening to take away all the pesticides. He reprimanded Kebede for being unwilling to reciprocate in the expected manner – that is, by showing due respect and ceding half of the pesticides. Kebede explained, 'I thought he was sincere and wanted to help me. But, I was naive … that was not his motive … he wanted me to feel grateful and concede half of the pesticides as a dollop of gratitude to his favour. He had not given me anything from his own pocket. This was mine in the first place … this came from the government.' Kebede felt that he should not give any material gift or pay a debt of gratitude through sentimental expression, that is, through submission or cowering, because he considered the pesticides to be from *mengist* and originally intended to reach him. In the end, however, Kebede conceded to the deputy's demand because, he said, his family relied heavily on access to such inputs for their survival.

The three other men present endorsed Kebede's view in saying that the government 'sends resources to the kebele population'[8] and that it is 'our right to get access to pesticides'.[9] Clearly, my interlocutors viewed themselves as agents who were rightfully able to lay claim to the development resources provided by the state. But they also expressed that mere awareness did not amount to much; hence, they criticised Kebede for failing to strategically negotiate with the cooperative head at an early stage. One of them commented, 'they do not act out of altruism; they are interested only in their own benefits … you should have known that he wanted to help you to steal more resources for himself … you could have negotiated to concede only a quarter of the bottles'. From their experiences, my interlocutors were aware that access to development

resources and a successful livelihood were arrived at not by laying claim to resources but by mastering the technique of negotiating with corrupt officials. Clearly, their social position and poverty prevented them from fully asserting claims to resources they considered to be passed down to them by a benevolent state.

On another day, my acquaintance, whom I shall call Ayele, in emphasising the importance of negotiating with locally powerful people, provided me with evidence of his successful negotiation with a cooperative manager. In 2006, he was invited to join a new micro-credit cooperative that was in the process of being established. Ayele, however, rejected multiple invitations because he considered the cooperative to offer no benefit. Once the lending programme began, however, he saw members of the cooperative benefitting from it and wanted to join. At that point, however, the cooperative had many members and Ayele's application was rejected on the grounds that he was 'poor and incapable of paying back loans'. Ayele confided to me that he was aware that joining the cooperative at any time was his state-conferred right as a poor farmer. However, he opted to seek the assistance of a local elder, arguing that laying claim to his state-given right 'would only be seen as confrontational' and that 'it would antagonise' the head of the cooperative. The mediation was successful and Ayele, after months of waiting, was admitted to the cooperative.

Within seven months of his admission, he received loans from the cooperative and was involved in the breeding of cattle. Since that time, he has successfully increased the number of his cattle from one to three. Yet Ayele refused to view his success as an outcome of the benevolence of the local elder and the head of the cooperative. 'Mengist is like a father to us the poor people. We have its support in all things … but the greedy people always create obstacles. They want to eat up everything alone,' he concluded.

Here, we can see that Ayele positioned himself as a knowledgeable and right-bearing individual. His passive supplication to the locally powerful actors only highlights his strategy for securing a livelihood. This reality contrasts sharply with the views of officials, who caricature the poor as ignorant and lazy farmers. My informant, on the other hand, formed an image of a right-giver and resource provider idea of state. Clearly, Ayele's attempt to differentiate between a benevolent state idea and corrupt local officials and his use of this distinction to construct himself as right-bearing individual echoes the similar accounts provided by his friends and many of my other informants.

From the discussion above, a complex picture emerges in which state is perceived and imagined in a dual way. In other words, the discourse of corruption has helped to create a clear division between an idea of a distant and transcendental state which is imagined as a moral repertoire of social justice and a neutral dispenser of the development resources vital to the livelihood needs and survival of the poor and those local institutions that are dominated by corrupt individuals. In abstract terms, following Hansen (2001: 226), state imagination in Degga can be understood as consisting of 'sublime' (abstract) and 'profane' dimensions. The sublime dimension refers to the qualities of providence, benevolence and impartiality that people see as imbuing the trans-local state. Here, the state figures as a site of power far removed from kebele life and suspended above local partial and vested class interests. Such a conception of the state has a great deal to do with anti-corruption rhetoric and discourses of development that are periodically mobilised by the state for political purposes and the legitimisation of development projects. The 'profane' dimension, on the other hand, encompasses the bureaucracy and local politicians with whom the people interact on a daily basis. The everyday administration, as we have seen, is perceived to be imbued with corruption, partiality and abuses of power. In short, the 'sublime' dimension is constructed and imagined as the antithesis of the 'profane' aspect of everyday administrative problems and venality of the bureaucracy.

The discrepancy between the discourses of development and the realities of corruption bolster the legitimacy of the state and the party. They therefore help to construct what O'Brien and Li (2006) call 'boundary-spanning claims' – claims that do not challenge the state system but rather stress loyalty and submission to the state and the party.

The ideal of a developmental state: Responses of local officials

In contrast to the local inhabitants' narratives about corruption stand the state functionaries, who rely on strategic discourses of development to defend their positions. In response to my enquiries as to why there were numerous complaints about the ways in which agricultural and irrigation water resources were distributed, community leaders, kebele and woreda officials and development practitioners all alike had ready answers. In every instance, they referred to the concepts of productivity, developmentalism, modernity and progress, useful for the state's promotion of national development and the creation of an antagonistic political field, in justifying the monopoly of agricultural inputs, land and water resources.

When I asked the woreda administrator to respond to the widespread perception among the local population that agricultural resources were misappropriated, he said, 'I interact with the farmers quite a lot, many of them are diligent … but there are also lazy, anti-development farmers who spread such false rumours and allegations of corruption. We hear people gossiping that we have fertilisers and pesticides piled up in warehouses.' He continued, 'it is impossible to convince most people that we distribute resources equitably because they don't understand the mechanisms involved in the import and distribution of agricultural resources'.[10] These types of attitudes of the state functionaries about themselves and the farmers were pervasive. The woreda Agriculture Bureau head, for instance, explained how the entire woreda administration could not afford to ignore the issue of agricultural resource distribution because

it was central to achieving the government's rural development and agricultural productivity agenda:

> We provide agricultural resources, credit services and irrigation facilities with the aim of increasing agricultural productivity. It is crucial for the government that farmers become successful. It is also in the interests of woreda and kebele leaders to demonstrate that government investments increase smallholders' productivity.[11]

He went on to attribute allegations of corruption to false rumours concocted by 'work-shy and anti-developmental farmers':

> There are farmers who are work-shy and anti-developmental. They spread false rumours of corruption to confuse people and create tension between the people and the government. What they ask is only this or that resources … when we ask them to meetings and field demonstrations, they grumble and fail to show up.[12]

Similarly, when I asked a notable model farmer whether some poor people are systematically made to enter into sharecropping arrangements with wealthy farmers, he responded by saying that 'there is no such manipulation'. He then added, 'it is better for lazy farmers to enter into sharecropping than lay their land in fallow or plant [unprofitable] vegetables'.[13] This comment reveals the discourses used by the wealthy farmers to explain local relations of exploitation.

The Degga Water Users Association (WUA)[14] head, on the other hand, drew on national discourses of modernity that validate 'hard work' and 'technology adaptation', which he believed allows some farmers to become more successful and wealthy than others. In so doing, he took aim at the poor:

> Most people speaking badly about the successful individuals [the rich] are lazy and recalcitrant farmers. They blame *teramaj* [the progressive] model farmers for their own

problems. They are not trying to do their own things. When we ask them to use modern technologies and seeds, they refuse. Yet, by the end of the day, while the progressive becomes successful, they complain about land, water shortage, the kebele.[15]

In the above quote, the WUA head positions the rich as productive, innovative and knowledgeable and the poor as unproductive and dependants. In taking stock of the circumstances of the poor, the officials and wealthy farmers I spoke with rarely considered the asymmetrical nature of local power distribution and other explanations for the marginalisation of the poor. Instead, they ascribed the problem of the poor to their particular ignorance and illiteracy. The woreda administrator, for instance, said:

People in Degga need to be taught about and exposed more to their rights. They have a long way to go in order to secure their rights. We acknowledge that more capacity building work is needed to mitigate people's lack of knowledge.[16]

The kebele chairman remarked in similar terms: 'We have not overcome the problem of the dependency mentality. These are the people who still look for the government to do everything for them.' Here, the chairman, in stark contrast to the popular imagination of the state as a provider and caregiver, saw the responsibility of the state in terms of 'facilitating the development of the kebele and the people'. He claims the government was working towards 'enabling every household to be self-sufficient, developmental and productive'; hence, 'we need determined and hardworking farmers who fight poverty with vigour'.[17]

Taken together, this 'elitist' view of the local people's problems might be best captured by a local development agent's comment:

Let me tell you. Our people are very backwards. Mind you, they well know that the project belongs to them and their children and yet they steal metal from distribution

canals: we caught local women washing clothes in the canal water … they lack commitment; they don't come to meetings unless mobilised: if they come, they arrive late. They are unwilling to work in conservation works. They want everything provided for them. … I am not saying they are not being unfairly treated by community and kebele leaders. They are. But, they have to fulfil their duties and change their mindset before they ask for their rights to be respected.[18]

Overall, these comments from different officials reveal an underlying belief that the state is a catalyst for development, not a feeder. The last quote speaks to this and the construction of the state as a facilitator of development is at odds with the notion of a benevolent state that is constructed by the people. Whereas most people I interacted with used corruption discourses to lay claim to development resources as a right conferred by a benevolent state, state officials referred to the difference in mindset, knowledge and attitude between themselves and the people and used this to explain corruption as a product of false rumour, illiteracy and dependency syndrome, thereby positioning themselves as knowledgeable individuals and representatives of the state.

The comments of my interlocutors further highlight how the poor are discursively produced in everyday life such that their poverty, lack of development mentality and understanding and sophistication defines their life chances and their entire range of possibilities. The discussion also demonstrates how the identification of a segment of the local population as anti-developmental by local leaders neatly converges with the wider EPRDF's antagonistic political discourse of developmental forces against anti-development elements. It is important to note, however, that this concurrence does not reflect the entrenchment of party hegemony at the kebele level; rather, it shows how local officials forcefully employ Manichean discourses (developmental vs anti-developmental) to justify the monopolisation of resources, negate corruption complaints and consolidate local class domination.

Mirroring the divine: religious symbolism and metaphors

In addition to corruption discourses, my ethnography in Degga revealed that religious metaphors and symbolism are central to the meaning and construction of state idea. In my conversations with a broad cross-section of individuals in Degga wherein state was referred to, my informants invariably used religious metaphors and idioms that evoked a pathos of divinely oriented relations of power and obligation. The local people live under the sway of Orthodox Christianity which provides them with the conceptual tropes, idioms and metaphors through which they imagine the state. For example, when I asked a middle-aged acquaintance about the role of the state in the management of development resources, he explained that the government was responsible only for obtaining and sending agricultural inputs to the people. He used the following analogy to illustrate his point: 'God sends rain on all the people to enable us to provide food to our families. He does not make it fall only on the fields of some people. Instead, He makes it fall equally on all our fields. The good farmer would make use of the rain and feed his family. But, who do the family of a lazy farmer have to blame for their lack of access to food? Is it God who sends the rain or their head of household that failed to make optimal use of the rain?' [19] In this analogy, my informant distinguished between *mengist* and the bureaucracy and considered *mengist*'s responsibility – like that of God – to be the provision of the resources needed for a livelihood, with the bureaucracy's responsibility – like that of the household head – to make efficient use of those resources, i.e. distributing them to the people. In my informant's account, agricultural resources are always provided by the state but they remain inaccessible to the poor because of the corruption of local politicians. Here, the state is idealised as a paternalist provider and benefactor and the lower-level state functionaries are pathologised. The local people then establish their claim of entitlement to agricultural resources by invoking the notion of a benevolent, impartial and disinterested state that always fulfils its responsibility of providence to the people.

In the analogy, the state, like God, as noted above, is represented as a provider and benefactor, but it is important to point out that this does not mean my informant held the view that the state and God are the same or should be afforded the same weight. Rather, my informant was obviously drawing, to use Levi-Strauss's (1966) concept, 'homologous opposition' between the state and the people on one side and God and the people on the other. That is, the relationship between the state and society metaphorically resembles the relationship between God and the people. In other words, the metaphor should be interpreted as a way of establishing ideal relationships within the temporal world (between state and society) by way of analogy with perceived relationships in the spiritual world (between God and the Christian population).

The fact that the above metaphorical analogy is not an idiosyncratic view of my interlocutor's view is evident from the comments made to me by other local inhabitants. A middle-aged farmer, in the context of discussing the state's providence in relation to agricultural resources, said: 'God is the one who can give us rain. This is the same with the government.'[20] In my informant's comment, the quality of being a state involves providence to the people. This means the invocation of religious analogy functions to constitute the relationship between state and society which is embedded in the local moral imaginary that entails specific rights and responsibilities on both sides.

Compare this metaphor with the regular account of Amhara farmers conceiving of state power as absolute. For example, Lefort (2007: 258) quotes Shoa peasants as saying, 'God and the mengist are the same'. In Lefort's account, the mandate of the Derg and EPRDF is 'perceived as coming from heaven', and therefore, 'to submit to the absolutism of the *mengist* is simply to respect divine will'. When Degga farmers, in contrast, use religious symbolism and metaphors, they do not describe relations of hierarchy but also refer to their expectations of how the state should act. Instead of submitting themselves to the 'absolutism of state power',

they imagine a God–state–people relationship as a model of stateness and method for good governance.

The majority of my informants drew a homologous analogy between the state and society and expressed an understanding that the state, like God, is expected to show benevolence and providence towards the people and should generally act as a proxy God. In doing so, they clearly distinguish between good *mengist* and bad *mengist*. A good mengist would 'like God … look after the well-being of the poor' and 'as God … support and protect the poor'.[21] Most commonly, the Derg regime constituted the central point of reference of bad and illegitimate *mengist*. One senior man, for instance, remarked:

> … the Derg redistributed land at first but later it confiscated more than half of it [and also] it took away our oxen to use for producers' cooperative. [In doing so] it prevented us from working our land and forced us to join the producers' cooperatives. The Derg did not work for the poor people; it had no helping nature … a government should [rather] be like God in protecting and providing to the people and to the poor who have no allies … [but]the Derg acted like a father who doesn't look after his children but punishes them.[22]

Others questioned the legitimacy of the authority of the Derg as not emanating from God because it did not act as a proper *mengist*. My acquaintance Ayele, for instance, said:

> The Derg was not from God. It never looked after the people. Instead, it took away our oxen and made us work from sunrise to sunset in the producers' cooperative. In return, they would give us 1 quintal of *teff*, 5 quintals of corn and 2 quintals of sorghum. It never sent us development … it conscripted children into the army.[23]

Unlike Ayele, an elderly man saw the Derg as 'the worst mengist'. He said, 'It was against us. It never took responsibility for the needs of the people', because 'it was imposed upon us by God as a result of our sin'.[24] It is clear that while my two informants provided two different explanations as to what gave rise to the Derg government, they nevertheless held a strong patrimonial view of the state and expected it to be acting much as God would treat the people, as a father to His children. Both characterised the Derg by its lacks of paternal care which was revealed by its cruel policies of collective farms, lack of development and military conscription.

In addition, some of the local inhabitants described former president Mengistu Hailemariam as *mengist* and criticised him for failing to demonstrate care to the local people. One man explained: 'Mengistu Hailemariam was a bad *mengist*. He had no religion; no moral character; he did not bring us development … but misery; he has besmirched the holy country.'[25] Another said, 'we don't regard Mengistu as worthy of being mengist'.[26] The conception that Mengistu was 'cruel' and 'uncaring' was often expressed, and, to some of my informants, his lack of benevolence was seen as the main cause of his downfall. The common sentiment among my informants was that Mengistu lacked the legitimacy to rule because he did not embrace the locally cherished Christian values of offering help, protection and support to the downtrodden in a way similar to God. Mengistu rather demanded a commitment to his programmes without showing munificence to the poor. In this sense, the attribute of stateness, for my informants, entailed the moral duty to fulfil the needs and ensure the safety of the people.

Conversely, when I asked my interlocutors to elaborate on the current government, most of them praised it for having brought development and peace. One said, 'the old *mengist* was not the people's *mengist* ... the present *mengist* is a good *mengist*. It sends us development. We have the chance to send our children to school. We have a health post on our doorstep [kebele]. It allowed us to work on our land. There is no military conscription; there is no producers' cooperative. We can sell our grains … it is peaceful.'[27] Similarly, another man said, 'This

government is working for the poor …. it worries about everything. In the past women died while giving birth. Now, they are taken to hospital in ambulances. It worries about the school of our children; even about our habits of toilet use, stove use. It looks after us well and we see that it is sent to us from God'[28]

While my informants conceived of the state as fulfilling its obligations of care and sending development to the local population, they also alleged, as described in previous sections, that they were not benefitting from state resources because of the corruption of the local state functionaries. The following comment by a middle-aged man is fairly representative of this sentiment, 'Mengist is taking responsibility so that our kebele develops and every one of us can have everything we want. But, when resources are sent from *mengist*, they are eaten up by the woreda and kebele officials along the way before they reach us. [As a result,] we continue to live in poverty.'[29]

To sum up, the preceding discussion provides a valuable corrective to the problematic nature of the assumptions scholars make about the farmers' relationship with the state and their attitude towards authority and hierarchy. To be sure, my informants' accounts underscore the hierarchical logic of everyday state formation that permeates Amhara society, whereby the divine authority is imagined to encompass the temporal one and then the temporal (state) in turn comprises the various layers of state authority (bureaucracy) and society. But the use of religious metaphor also indicates the view that power and hierarchy are oriented and encompassed by fundamental religious values such as providence, protection, reciprocity and benevolence. In this sense, when the farmers relate governance practices and hierarchies to the realm of the divine, they not only construct relations of authority but also implicitly invoke notions of paternal and divine care to emphasise the state's responsibilities and obligations.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the diverse and complex everyday articulation of the idea of *mengist.* My intention was to bring to the fore the broad range of ways through which the state comes to be constituted by people who are positioned differently. I have argued that the state in Ethiopia is culturally constructed as an effect of different discursive practices. The discourse of corruption is one of the ways in which local people construct an idea of a good state that lies beyond the venality of local politics. Their sublime ideas of statehood, imagined through its perceived impartiality, is juxtaposed against the failure of equitable distribution of development resources, attributed to the corrupt practices of local officials.

My ethnography also reveals the complex process by which hierarchical conception of authority and normative values that contain relational principles intersect. While popular conception of state-society relations entails an asymmetry of status, it does not necessarily prescribe an imbalance of power. Each party depended on the other, economically and politically. Given the reciprocal nature of paternalism, popular imaginings moralise the state by engendering a set of concomitant expectations. Thus the Ethiopian state ought to be nurturing, paternal and benevolent. In this sense, normative religious values form the backbone of political responsibility that they tie state actors into relations of fundamental, divinely oriented relations obligation, requiring them to deliver what people need and want. This is why common characterizations of Ethiopian culture as authoritarian miss the point. I would argue that, in studying the state in Ethiopia, it is essential to dispense with rigid definitions of the concept of mengist and investigations that focus on the absence or presence of distinctions (such as mengist vs party, mengist vs government) and to instead focus on the social and political processes in which meaning is embedded.

The points of reference of my informants' understandings of the state is multiple and divergent. If discursive practices in Africa today are a complex mixture of the cultural, the normative and the ideological (such as development), then we can no longer easily capture the state in a framework of a single theme. The complex conjectures of the livelihood activities pursued by local people, and the ways that these are guided by, re/articulated and imbibed in the context of shifts in the economy, technologies of rule and development projects such as agricultural and cooperative schemes, industrial strategies and programmes of poverty reduction shape the working of the state and the way people interact with them on a daily basis. In studying state-society relations in Africa, we may then need to rethink and move beyond the materialist perspective and employ symbolic-cultural approach and within this approach we may need to ask whether the story we tell is consistent with the evidence about the meanings the local actors themselves attribute to their actions.

References

Abbink, J. 1997. Ethnicity and Constitutionalism in Contemporary Ethiopia. *Journal of African Law*, 41, no. 2: 159–174.

Ashforth, A. 2005. *Witchcraft*, *Violence and Democracy in South Africa*. *Chicago*: University of Chicago Press.

Bahru Z. 1991. *A history of modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*, London: James Currey.

Bertelsen, B. 2016. *Violent Becomings: State Formation, Sociality, and Power in Mozambique*. New York: Berghahn. Bolton, Paul.

Bierschenk, T. & Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. 2014. *States at work: dynamics of African bureaucracies*, Leiden; Boston: Brill.

Blundo, G., and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan (ed.) 2006. *Everyday Corruption and the State: Citizens and Public Officials in Africa,* London: Zed Books.

Clapham, C. 1988. *Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia*, Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Clapham, C. 2002. Rewriting Ethiopian History. *Annales d'Ethiopie,* 18, no.3:37-54.

Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. 2016. *The Truth about Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

de Waal, A. 2015. *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: money, war and the business of power*, Cambridge; Polity.

Donham, D.L. 1986. Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history. In *The Southern marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in history and social anthropology,* edited by D. Donham & W. James. 3-48. Oxford: James Currey.

Dorman, S. Hammett, D. and Nugent, P (eds.) 2007. *Making nations, creating strangers.* Leiden: Brill.

Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock.

Friedman, J. T. 2011. *Imagining the post-apartheid state: An ethnographic account of Namibia*, New York: Berghahn Books.

Fuller, C. J. & Harris, J. 2001. For an Anthropology of the Modern Indian State. In *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, edited by C. J. Fuller & V. Benei. New Delhi: Social Science Press.

Gallagher, J. 2017. *Zimbabwe's International Relations*: *fantasy*, *reality* and the *making* of the *state*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Geschiere, P. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft*: *Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Hagmann, T. & Péclard, D. (eds). 2011. *Negotiating statehood: dynamics of power and domination in Africa*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hansen, T. B. 2001. Governance and State Mythologies in Mumbai. In *States of Imagination:*

Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State, edited by T.B. Hansen and F. Stepputat, 221–254. Durham: Duke University Press.

Haugerud, A. 1995. The *Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoben, A. 1970. Social stratification in traditional Amhara society. In *Social Stratification in Africa,* edited by Arthur Tuden and Leonard Plotnicov, 187-224. New York: Free Press.

Hodgson, D. 2017. *Gender, Justice, and the Problem of Culture: From Customary Law to Human Rights in Tanzania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jaffre, Y. and Olivier de Sardan, J.P. (eds.) 2003. *Inhospitable Medicine*, Karthala, Paris.

Keller, E. J. 1991. *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Korling, G. 2010. The mobilization of the local in a public primary school in peri-urban Niamey, Niger. *Bulletin of APAD*, 31–32, 137–159.

Lefort, R. 2007. Powers—Mengist—and Peasants in Rural Ethiopia: The May 2005 Elections. *Journal of Modern African Studies,* 45(02)**,** pp 253-273.

Lefort, R., 2015. The Ethiopian Economy: The Developmental State vs the Free Market. In *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi,* edited by Prunier, G. & Ficquet, E., 357-394. London: Hurst Publishers.

Levine, D. N. 1965. *Wax & gold: tradition and innovation in Ethiopian culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966*. The Savage* Mind (La pensée sauvage). London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Lund, C. 2006. Twilight Institutions. Public Authority and Local Politics in Africa. *Development and change,* 37(4)**,** pp 685-705.

Markakis, J. 2011. *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, New York: James Currey.

Routley, L. 2016. *Negotiating Corruption: NGOs, Governance and Hybridity in West Africa*, London: Routledge.

Sergew H.S. 1972. *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270.* Addis Ababa: United Printers.

Smith, D. J. 2007. *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Spielman, D. J. 2008. *Encouraging economic growth in Ethiopia: Perspectives on agricultural input markets, agricultural extension and advisory services, and agricultural education and training*, Briefing note. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.

Tadesse T. 1972. *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270–1527*. Oxford University Press.

Teferi A. A. 2004. Decentralised There, Centralised Here: Local Governance and Paradoxes of Household Autonomy and Control in North-East Ethiopia, 1991–2001. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute,* 74, 611–32

Teshale T. 1995. *The Making of Modern Ethiopia, 1896 - 1974: 1896-1974*, Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.

Toggia, P. 2008. History writing as a state ideological project in Ethiopia. *African Identities,* 6(4)**,** pp 319-343.

Tsing, A. 1993. *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-way Place*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

O'Brien, K.J. & Li, L., 2006. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ullendorff, E. 1973. *The Ethiopians. An Introduction to Country and People*, 3d, London: Oxford University Press.

Vaughan, S. and K. Tronvoll. 2003. *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*. Stockholm: Sida, No, 10.

Vaughan, S. 2015. Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental State, 1991-2012. In *Understanding contemporary Ethiopia,* edited by Prunier, G. & Ficquet, E., 283-311. London: Hurst Publishers.

West, H. 2005. *Kupilikula. Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Notes

---

[1] Kebele is the lowest administrative unit in Ethiopia and typically has a population of between 5,000 and 10,000 people.

[2] The concept of discourse as developed by Foucault is more than just language. Discourses, Foucault (1972: 49) maintains, are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. In this article, I use the concept of discourse to draw attention to the contingent mode of action and set of social practices that arise from situated agents, their experience and their beliefs and which are expressed in language.

[3] The ideology of developmental state is part of the Ethiopian state's identity and instrument of legitimation (de Waal 2015).Thus, development is a central theme in which narratives about the state are produced and contested. My purpose here is not to examine or offer a definitive account of developmental state, but to tease out aspects of the current obsession with development (and its entanglement with corruption and cultural idioms) as a lens to understand the production of state ideas. For discussions of developmental state in Ethiopia, see de Waal 2015, Lefort 2015 and, Vaughan 2015.

[4] The kebele domain is highly gendered sphere, reflecting the traditional patriarchal division of spheres in which women are associated with the private/household and men are associated with the public. A result women's views are not well represented in this article.

[5] The fact that I am was a male native speaker of Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, which is also the language of the local community, combined with my knowledge of local customs granted me access to such male environments.

[6] In Ethiopia, cooperative unions import agricultural inputs, mainly fertilisers, pesticides and different kinds of seeds, through a government agency called Agricultural Inputs Supplies Enterprise (AISE) and distribute them to smallholder farmers via local primary cooperatives that are explicitly controlled by *kebele* politicians (Spielman 2008).

[7] Woreda (roughly meaning district) is the most central local administration unit in the bureaucratic hierarchy in Ethiopia. Each woreda is composed of several kebeles (roughly meaning neighbourhood).

[8] Conversation, the first interlocutor, November 2014.

[9] Conversation, the second interlocutor, November 2014.

[10] Interview, woreda administrator, woreda town, November 2014.

[11] Interview, woreda Agriculture Bureau head, woreda town, November 2014.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Interview, model farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[14] The Degga Water Users Association (WUA) is a cooperative entity established to represent the interests of the farmers'/water users in management of local irrigation unit in the Koga irrigation system.

[15] Interview, Degga WUA head-cum-party chairman, Degga, November 2014.

[16] Interview, woreda administrator, woreda town, November 2014.

[17] Interview, kebele chairman, Degga, November 2014.

[18] Interview, DA, Degga, November 2014.

[19] Conversation, middle-aged farmer, Degga, October 2014.

[20] Conversation, middle-aged farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[21] Conversations with two middle-aged farmers, Degga, November 2014.

[22] Interview, elderly farmer, Degga, October 2014.

[23] Conversations with my acquaintance Ayele, Degga, November 2014.

[24] Interview, elderly farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[25] Interview, middle-aged farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[26] Interview, elderly farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[27] Interview, elderly farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[28] Interview, middle-aged farmer, Degga, November 2014.

[29] Interview, middle-aged farmer, Degga, November 2014.