CHAPTER SIX
DEALING WITH LOCAL MINORITIES: 
THE PERSISTENCE OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES 
UNDER ETHNIC FEDERALISM

One of the challenges facing the ethnic-based federal system of Ethiopia, as pointed out in chapter 3, is that the politics of ethnicity takes for granted that every ethnic group is homogeneous and unified and speaks with one voice. Although the Ethiopian Constitution includes a wide range of rights, subgroups within the ethnic groups have not received any particular consideration in the constitutional framework. Consequently, historically marginalised minorities within the various ethno-linguistic units of Ethiopia still do not have rights to special representation under the ethnic federal system introduced by the EPRDF. The analysis of party development in Wolayta and Sidama has also shown that the ruling party, in crafting ethnic politics, has approached the nationalities as uniform groups, largely disregarding subethnic varieties, with the exception of the hadicho organisation in Sidama.

The constructivist approach to ethnicity, however, underlines that we should not take for granted that ethnic groups are cohesive and that members or subgroups of the ethnic group always act in the same way. Every ethnic group is a collection of different subgroups with different opinions and allegiances. Moreover, identities other than ethnic, notably class, gender, and generation, shape the political mobilisation in a given community. In Wolayta and Sidama, as in southern Ethiopia in general, it is the traditional marginalisation of artisans and the division between clans which do most to create internal friction. Another source of subethnic contestation is the division between genders. Since the introduction of the ethnic federal system, ethnic markers have been sharpened, and this has led in many instances to a revival of traditional cultural practices which have proved harmful or disempowering for women (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003). This chapter analyses the internal contestations within Sidama and Wolayta by delving into the social and political conditions of marginalised groups, including the stigmatised artisans, former slaves, and women, under the order of ethnic federalism.
Prejudice and discrimination in social life

As we have seen, both the Sidama and the Wolayta have a hierarchical clan system and a stratification of society between free commoners and artisans (and slave descendants in Wolayta). Although the protagonists of Protestantism and the socialist revolution spoke against the traditional divisions, these divisions continued to be a central aspect of social, political, and economic life during the previous regimes. Many of the practices that discriminate against the marginalised groups are still alive in Wolayta and Sidama today. These include, among others, the taboo against marriages between members of artisan groups or slave descendants and members of the common clan system, and the continued discrimination against the marginalised groups in day-to-day social interaction.

Marriage restrictions

A large majority of the informants during my fieldwork in Wolayta and Sidama in 2005 and 2006, independent of age, gender, education level, religious orientation, and social status, stated that the most important social function of the clans today is to impose restrictions on marriages. In addition to the prohibition against marrying within one’s own clan, the rank of the clans is also seen as important in the choice of spouse. A person from what is perceived as a higher clan would not marry a person from a clan at the bottom of the hierarchy. Marriages between members of the clans and members of the artisan or slave descendant groups are likely to lead to social isolation and exclusion from the community. An elder in Wolayta Soddo told of his personal experience:

I belong to one of the higher clans, while my wife is a kawona, a relative of the last Wolayta king, Tona. Still, I gave my daughter to an ayle. I want to interlink with them since I believe in human equality. For my daughter’s wedding ceremony, I distributed many invitation cards, but people refused to come, even my relatives. (Interview with elder, Soddo, March 2006, nb 3:140)

Reluctance to break the marriage taboo goes both ways: representatives of the chinasha argued that they would not give away their children to members of the higher clans. “If I gave my daughter to a kawona, they would degrade her and undermine her dignity, so I would never accept this kind of marriage” (interview with member of the chinasha