In the past few years, Sidama and Wolayta have been caught up in three major controversies linked to the issue of national self-determination and implementation of the institutional arrangements of ethnic federalism. These are the Sidama’s struggle for control of the regional capital, Awassa, and the quest for a separate Sidama region; the Wolayta’s resistance to an amalgamated North Omo language (Wogagoda) and the demand for a separate Wolayta zone; and, finally, the conflict between Sidama and Wolayta in the border areas around Lake Abaya. With the constructivist approach to ethnicity as an analytical frame, I will discuss how ethnic identities, constructed upon historical and cultural experiences selected from the repertoire of each group, become relevant in the interaction between ethnic groups and the state, as well as how the EPRDF’s politics of ethnicity and power in such a context is itself conflict producing. This again points to the need to identify complex and contextually based explanations for ethnic political mobilisation as a step towards finding contextually sensitive solutions to the challenge of managing diversity in multiethnic states.

The conflicts explored in this chapter concern three key aspects of governance in multiethnic states: self-rule, territory, and identity. The Sidama’s quest for a separate region and control of the regional capital is first of all a claim to territory and self-rule, but it is also linked to assertion of the Sidama identity, as the loss of regional status and control of Awassa was seen as an attack on and humiliation of the ‘Sidama nation’. The controversy over the unified North Omo language of Wogagoda in Wolayta appears as a clear case of identity conflict, but it is also linked to the issue of Wolayta self-rule. Initial resistance to the language was a result of mobilisation to defend the ‘Wolayta identity’, while the continued struggle for a Wolayta zone reflected the Wolayta’s aspiration to control their own administration. The conflict between the Sidama and the Wolayta in the border areas around Lake Abaya began as a clear territorial conflict over control of land but later evolved into a matter of ethnicity and identity.
The Sidama’s quest for regional status and control of the regional capital, Awassa

Although the Sidama managed to keep a separate ethnic administration after the merger of the southern regions in 1992, the step down from region to zone status provoked political mobilisation for reestablishment of the Sidama region. Linked to this was the status of the SNNPRS capital, Awassa, which is located on historical Sidama land. Awassa today is a multiethnic town in which the Sidama are a minority. It was founded by Haile Selassie in 1951, replacing Yirgalem as the capital of Sidamo province (Ababu Aligaz Ali 1995). The establishment of Awassa led to the eviction of Sidama semi-pastoralists, members of the Havella clan, who used the savannah land for grazing their cattle. In addition to allocating land for city development, the emperor also gave plots to soldiers who had fought the Italians. In 1966, the founding of a commercial state farm on the outskirts of Awassa led to further eviction of the Sidama, and daily labourers from neighbouring ethnic groups, particularly the Wolayta and the Kambata, swelled the town. There was also an influx of Amhara, who were business owners and made up the majority of employees in the provincial administration.

The Sidama, meanwhile, were directly or indirectly prevented from settling in urban areas. The Havella who had lived on the land were treated badly by city administrators and developers, and this created hostility between the original settlers and the newcomers from other ethnic groups. As justification for pushing the Sidama out of town, the city dwellers promoted stereotypes of the Sidama as backward and uncivilised rather than urban and sophisticated like the newly arrived groups. A Havella elder recalled:

They moved us by force from the land and we fled to the outskirts of the town. They burned our houses and ploughed the soil with tractors, ruining our grain stores and the graves of our ancestors. There was no compensation for the land they took. [...] The Wolayta and Kambata did many bad things to us. They assumed that we were illiterate, even if our people also can read and write. They thought we were not able to take part in administration, so in alliance with the Amhara they blocked our access to positions. (Interview with Havella elder, Awassa, August 2006, nb 8:98–100)