Community-based Rural Development and the Politics of Redistribution: The Experience of the Gurage Road Construction Organization in Ethiopia

MAKOTO NISHI

Kyoto University

Since the 1990s, the idea of participation has become a popular norm in implementing development cooperation. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are widely thought to promote local democratic participation effectively in the development process. However, the potential relationship between CBOs and development agencies raises questions about the relationship between a CBO and the people whom it claims to represent. Determining whether the organization benefits only the local elite or provides a discussion forum among groups with different positions is critical.

The Gurage Road Construction Organization (GRCO), which has been operating since 1962, is one of the most successful CBOs in Ethiopia. It was established in Addis Ababa as an association of Gurage migrants from southern Ethiopia to raise funds for the construction of roads and schools in their homeland. GRCO acquired a wide support base through negotiations with members of urban and rural communities. GRCO leaders sought not only to construct massive public works in their villages but also to develop alternative social relationships for the fairer redistribution of development funds.

Key words: community-based organization, development, ethnicity, redistribution

1. INTRODUCTION

In many African societies, in which the state plays only a limited role in organizing public life, the activities of community-based organizations (CBOs, also referred to as indigenous or voluntary associations) constitute an important aspect of people's livelihoods. CBOs reallocate resources, such as money and labor. CBO activities also provide a means for various groups to define and express their collective identities. CBOs play important roles in promoting rural development by constructing roads, bridges, and schools (McNulty and Lawrence 1996). African CBOs, or more generally indigenous social organizations, are often thought to represent the most democratic dimension of African society (Smit 2001; Bahru 2002c).

In this paper, I briefly explore the attempts of one of the most successful CBOs in Ethiopia to engage in the "politics of redistribution." The Gurage Road Construction Organization (GRCO, renamed the Gurage People's Self-Help Development Organization in 1988) was established in 1962 under the leadership of Gurage[1] immigrants to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Their aim was to construct roads in their homeland, the Sebat Bet District (the western part of the present-

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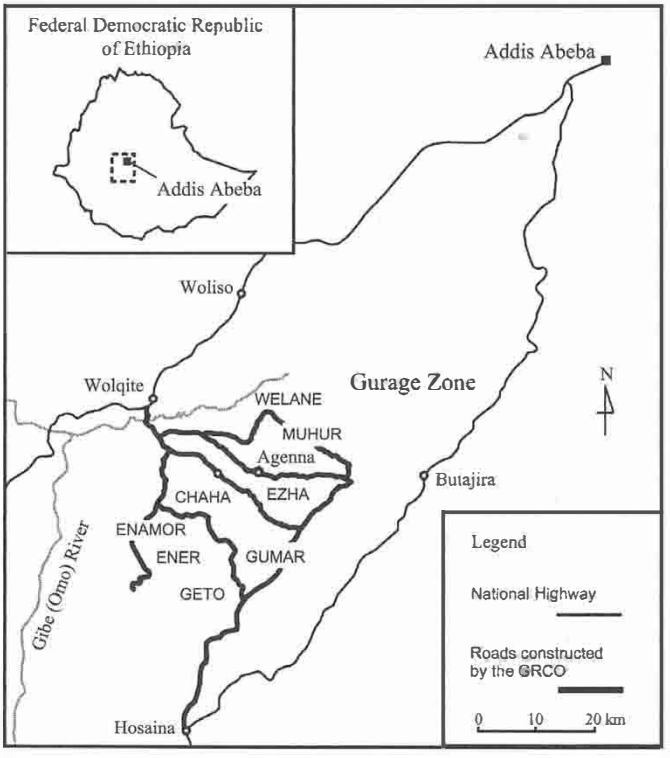
day Gurage Zone in the Southern Region), which is located approximately 150 km south of Addis Ababa (see map). Over the last 40 years, the GRCO has helped to construct more than 450 km of all-weather gravel roads, in addition to dozens of elementary and secondary schools, while also consolidating support from communities and national and international development agencies. In short, the GRCO has successfully reallocated development funds among the Gurage.[2]

The GRCO is best described as an "aggregation" of different social fabrics, rather than a monolithic organization. The executive committee, which comprises "elite" Gurage migrants in Addis Ababa, is the core body of the organization. Tribal committees under the executive committee represent the traditional social organization of the Gurage homeland, which consists of a dozen "tribes," each of which is a highly autonomous political entity. These committees also play key roles in promoting negotiations between "elite" Gurage migrants in Addis Ababa and traditional leaders (local chiefs and elders) in the homeland. In addition, burial associations formed by urban Gurage migrants (including "nonelites") work very closely with the organization. Later in this paper, a case study of the Ezha Committee illustrates how tribal committees develop close relationships with burial associations to raise funds for their activities.

Categorizing the GRCO as a community-based organization may seem questionable. Given its social-service functions and diverse range of activities, it might better be considered a nongovernmental organization (NGO). However, the GRCO is best described as a CBO for several reasons. In Ethiopia and most parts of Africa, NGO usually refers to an organization that provides professional services for various communities.[3] NGO staffs are paid, and their activities are heavily subsidized by international aid. In contrast, the GRCO is managed by unpaid volunteers from urban and rural Gurage communities. Moreover, it raises most of its revenue from its own people. Unlike most NGOs in Ethiopia, the GRCO also has a strong constituency within the rural and urban Gurage communities. Thus, although the GRCO is not based on a community of people living in a small



Map. Roads constructed by the GRCO [Source: GRCO]

geographical area, it is still community-based in that it is supported by "extended" or "multiple" communities of the Gurage.

The GRCO is one of several CBOs established in southern Ethiopia in the early 1960s for similar purposes. Among them, Alemgena-Walamo Road Construction Organization was established mainly by the Soddo Gurage, who reside in the northern part of the present-day Gurage Zone (northeast of the former Sebat Bet District). The Wolayta Development Association supported construction of feeder roads and primary schools in rural Wolayta Prefecture (now Wolayta Zone). The Mecha-Tuloma Self-help Association was established by Oromo elites to promote education and welfare goals. Thus, all of these CBOs are largely related to the ethnic identities of southern Ethiopian peoples.

Below, I address two interrelated problems regarding the political aspects of CBO activity. My major focus is the relationship between a CBO and the people whom it claims to represent. Thus, does the GRCO, one of the "ethnic-based" CBOs established in the 1960s, promote the fair redistribution of development resources, or does it mainly advance nepotism and the interests of the ethnic elite? The second question concerns the relationship of CBOs with the state. Given state failures in redistributing development resources, can CBOs provide alternative venues for redistribution?

2. DEMOCRACY OR TYRANNY?

Since the 1990s, the idea of "participation" has become a popular norm of development cooperation. CBOs are widely thought to effectively promote local democratic participation in the development process. As a result, CBOs have been given more access to development funds. However, the potential relationship between CBOs and development brings into question the relationship between the CBO and the people whom it claims to represent. Cooke and Kothari (2001) argued that participatory development methods may represent another form of "tyranny" that promotes the interests of local elites and reinforces existing power differentials.

One recurring question is whether an "ethnic-based" organization, such as the GRCO, has the capacity to undertake the fair redistribution of development funds. Ethnicity, which is a crucial factor in African politics, is often thought to represent a "paternalistic" relationship between ethnic elites as patrons and their client members. Such a view inevitably leads to the conclusion that the politics of ethnicity in Africa must give way to other forms of social integration, such as a civil society that consists of "public political activity" (Bratton 1994: 56) and accommodates contesting interests among different groups of people.

However, this is a serious misunderstanding about the nature of ethnicity in Africa. Bratton's view derives from the assumption that ethnicity represents a "private" realm of society essentially defined by "affective ties" and that it occupies the same political space (the private sphere) as that of "family" (Bratton 1989: 411). His discussion is based on the Western concept of a public/private dichotomy. Political philosophers often dispute this idea (Geuss 2001), and its application to African societies is somewhat tenuous.

Moreover, efforts to introduce a strong civil society to Africa during the last decade have little to show, despite extensive talk about the roles of "African civil society" and international community support (Berman et al. 2004). Rather than cling to civil society ideals, we might better focus on the "dense networks of indigenous institutions" and their "historical experiences and socio-cultural landscape" (Berman 2004: 51). This perspective seems particularly apt when considering the "exercise of popular agency" against tyranny (Hickey and Mohan 2004: 3) in the context of modern and contemporary African societies. The process of development and participation can be "tyrannical" if it reflects only the interests of local elites and/or development agencies, whereas "popular agency" may refer to those who resist existing power relationships, based on their own experience and knowledge. Here, I examine the agency of those in the GRCO who worked to redistribute development funds fairly and the importance of the local knowledge they used to organize.

Henry (2004: 140, 147) maintains that "researchers must ground their understanding of participatory development in ... cultures and identities of indigenous agencies of development." Based on his observations of the GRCO, he suggested that participation in GRCO activities, which was not forced, meant that one was "a good Gurage citizen."

However, Henry's (2004) discussion on the moral basis of GRCO activities is far from convincing. The statements of GRCO activists appear tyrannical in Henry's (2004) interpretation of them as a moral imperative for every Gurage. He reports that some GRCO leaders suggested that various communal sanctions (rebukes, fines, and even ostracism) be employed against those who did not contribute (Henry 2004). However, the GRCO probably could not implement such sanctions because it is basically a volunteer association, run by a small number of individuals. Although GRCO leaders are influential figures, including high officials, wealthy merchants, and sons of traditional chiefs, it is unlikely that they could force every "good citizen" of the Gurage to contribute to their organization.

I argue that the GRCO has successfully built a wide base of support not because it represents an existing moral community, but because of its patience in negotiating with potential supporters, who may openly criticize or even reject their proposals. Despite Henry's (2004) communitarian assumption of the GRCO's monolithic moral basis, the focus of the organization is in negotiating with groups of people living in a heterogeneous society.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Gurage were among the societies subsumed within the state of Ethiopia during its southern expansion in the late 19th century. An agrarian culture characterized by intensive cultivation of enset,[4] traditional Gurage society is highly segmented, consisting of a dozen "tribes," each of which is divided into clans and lineages[5] (Shack 1966).

Prior to incorporation into Ethiopia, no single political authority could claim sovereignty over the Gurage; instead, local leaders, such as clan heads and elders, maintained social order. Each tribe was a highly autonomous political unit that claimed its own territory, and tribal members bore collective responsibility for protecting their land from neighboring tribes. The traditional territorial divisions are reflected in the administrative divisions drawn by the state. For example, the Sebat Bet District was formerly divided into subdistricts, each of which represented one or two tribal territories.

The term *sebat bet* means "seven houses," indicating that traditional Gurage society was composed of seven tribes.[6] According to oral tradition, the tribes were in the state of constant warfare with each other. To remedy this, they established (perhaps in the first half of the 19th century) the *yejoka*, an intertribal council of elders who met to solve disputes and institute customary laws (Shack 1966; Bahru 2002c). The Gurage tribes discussed here, such as the Chaha, Ezha, Muhur, Ener, and Enamor, are members of the *yejoka*. Although the GRCO and the *yejoka* are distinct organizations, the existence of the latter and the long experience with intertribal negotiations may have provided important social and cultural background to the establishment and maintenance of the GRCO.

After the Gurage and other groups in southern Ethiopia were incorporated into Ethiopia, members of the Ethiopian aristocracy administered their lands. These aristocrats, often holding important administrative positions, such as prefectural governor or district head, were mostly of Amhara origin and claimed extensive tenure rights over the southern lands. The traditional leaders of the southern societies were appointed as *balabbat* (local chiefs) or *chiqa shum* (village headmen). Thus, the Ethiopian empire established a form of "indirect rule" over the south by absorbing local leaders into the bottom of the administrative ladder.

Soon after state incorporation, the Gurage began to migrate to Addis Ababa in search of job opportunities. The construction of Addis Ababa began in the mid-1880s, and the city formed around two main centers: the Emperor's Palace (*gibbi*) and the Areda open market (*gabaya*), which is approximately 2 km northwest of the palace. The compounds of influential Ethiopian aristocrats and foreign diplomatic missions were built on the hills surrounding the palace. The aristocrats distributed wealth

derived from their rural lands to their clients and soldiers in Addis Ababa (Bahru 2002a: 69), while Gurage migrants generally made their living as petty traders in the marketplace or on the streets as casual labor. Most Gurage lived in the slums surrounding the Areda market.

The political and economic domination by Ethiopian aristocrats and, in particular, their extensive tenure rights over rural lands persisted until Emperor Haile Sillase I was overthrown by the *Derg* (military committee) in the confusion of the popular upheaval of 1974. State ownership of rural land was proclaimed the following year. However, the social structure of Addis Ababa had undergone considerable changes since the 1950s.

Shortly after the period of Italian occupation (1936–1941), the emperor issued a proclamation defining the powers of the ministries.[7] Although 11 ministries existed before the occupation, they were more nominal authorities than administrative bodies (Howard 1956). The Emperor sought to introduce a "modern" administrative system while maintaining the old aristocracy, which was his own source of power (Bahru 2002a). For the Gurage migrants who had received a modern education in Addis Ababa, the new administrative system opened an alternative pathway to accessing state privileges.

Another important change prior to the establishment of the GRCO was the formation of a national economy, which was encouraged by the growing number of Addis Ababa residents (Marcus 1995: 98–99). By the 1950s, Gurage migrants accounted for a considerable part of the trade activities conducted in Mercato, the new commercial center of the city (Bahru 2002a: 197). The GRCO was established by Gurage migrants who found their way into the state bureaucracy or the national economy. Of the 55 founding members of the GRCO, at least 46 lived in Addis Ababa, with 26 of these public officials and 9 others wealthy merchants.

4. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GRCO

According to Abebe Hailu, a Ministry of Education official and early leader of the GRCO, discussions about establishing the GRCO were held in a series of secret meetings at the Catholic Church in Addis Ababa. The meetings were secret because the Public Security Office of the Ministry of the Interior could have interpreted them as "antistate." By 1960, tension between "reformers" and the "old guard" within the Ethiopian political establishment was increasing (Bahru 2002b). The old guard wanted to preserve the political and economic interests of the traditional aristocracy, whereas the reformers represented the emerging class of bureaucrats and some "progressive" aristocrats who advocated the modernization of the state polity. Sayfu Dubabe, an elite public official of Gurage origin and a key figure in the early days of GRCO, was placed under house arrest in his rural home between 1951 and 1959 because of suspected involvement in an alleged plot led by *Bitwaddad* Negashi Bazaneh, the senate president at the time, to assassinate the emperor and proclaim a republic.

Sayfu was appointed department head of the Ministry of Public Works when he returned to Addis Ababa. He soon started lobbying the Imperial Highway Authority (IHA), which was mandated to develop the national road network. The IHA was established in 1951, after the Ethiopian government and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) agreed on a project to rehabilitate the major trunk roads in the country. Through 1957, 20 million USD in project loans were provided, and the U.S. Bureau of Roads provided technical assistance. The United States, largely motivated by its geopolitical interests in the Middle East, was a prominent donor of economic and military assistance to Ethiopia during the 1950s and 1960s (Marcus 1995: 79–114).

On May 10, 1962, Sayfu told the GRCO preparatory committee that the IHA had agreed to support road construction in the Sebat Bet District (Weldesillase 1979EC). The IHA proposed to provide engineers and bulldozers if the GRCO covered all remaining costs (including fuel for the bulldozers). In addition to Sayfu's skills of persuasion and his position in the government, the abundant supply of funds from an external institution appears to have been an important factor in the IHA's generous offer to the GRCO.

However, the GRCO could not launch an open fundraising campaign without alerting the Ministry of the Interior. On July 1, 1962, the GRCO submitted a registration application to the Public Security Office. The application was accepted only on the condition that all GRCO meetings take place in the presence of a security officer (Weldesillase 1979EC: 34–35).

Although the GRCO was successful in obtaining recognition from the Public Security Office, the sustainability of its activities was far from guaranteed, given the volatility of the political environment in Ethiopia. Among the many contemporary CBOs, the Mecha-Tuloma Self-Help Association was very popular among the Oromo, the most populous ethnic group but a political minority. The Mecha-Tuloma Self-Help Association was registered in 1963 and started raising funds for development activities in areas such as education. The Oromo population supported the group so enthusiastically that the Ministry of the Interior considered the CBO to have gone "beyond the acceptable limits" (Markakis 1974: 178). The association leaders were suspected of covert political motives and charged with "subversive activities against the state." Two were sentenced to death (Markakis 1974: 179).

The activities of the GRCO were no less political than those of the Mecha-Tuloma Association leaders who sought to change the Ethiopian polity by empowering the marginalized. In Ethiopia in the 1960s, the GRCO leaders had to appear to be working on apolitical development projects to avoid direct collision with the political establishment.

5. NEGOTIATIONS OF THE GRCO WITH RURAL COMMUNITIES

On July 5, 1962, the GRCO launched its fundraising campaign by organizing an open conference at the National Stadium in Addis Ababa. Thousands of Gurage attended and enthusiastically endorsed the GRCO's proposals. GRCO leaders suggested that tribes raising the greatest amount of funds should receive priority in road construction, and donations pledged that day exceeded 85,000 birr.[8]

This "competition of tribes" proved very successful. Committees representing tribal identities, such as the Chaha, Ezha, and Muhur, were formed to facilitate fundraising. Seventeen committees operating in Addis Ababa and the homeland pledged 1.5 million birr, of which nearly 95 percent had been paid to the GRCO by 1987 (Weldesillase 1979EC; GRCO 1980EC; GPSDO 1985EC). With IHA assistance, the GRCO constructed about 400 km of roads connecting homeland villages in less than three decades.

However, this was not achieved without argument or opposition. According to Abebe Hailu, the GRCO leaders faced severe opposition from the Muhur tribal committee. Despite the tribal competition idea, road construction was planned to start in Chaha territory. An alternative plan presented by the Muhur Committee was rejected by the GRCO, whose active leaders were mostly of Chahan origin. The Muhur Committee responded by virtually halting fundraising for more than a decade, until the GRCO decided to begin road construction in Muhur territory. This case indicates that the GRCO's achievement did not result from simple collective action, but from patient negotiation among rival political units.

Another witness to this process was Weldesillase Bereka, the founding chairman of the GRCO, who published a memoir titled *The Outcome of Cooperative Activities* (Weldesillase 1979EC). Although the primary purpose of the work was to honor the contributions of the GRCO, Weldesillase devoted 74 pages of the total 195 pages to discussing problems he encountered mainly from the *balabbat* (local chiefs) of his homeland.

For example, in 1962 the *balabbat* of Ener attended a GRCO fundraising conference and approved a tribal committee pledge of 310,000 birr for road construction. However, when the committee started collecting money from the Ener, the *balabbat* appealed to the Provincial Office of Shewa, saying, "*hizib tebaddiroal*," which means "my people are maltreated" (Weldesillase 1979EC: 109). At that time, the Sebat Bet District was part of Shewa, one of the 14 provinces of Ethiopia. "*Hizib tebaddiroal*" is an Amharic phrase used to accuse an oppressive ruler who abuses his people. Politicians often use the phrase to condemn their political enemies. In his appeal, the *balabbat* of Ener accused

GRCO leaders of "forcing" people to make "unlawful" contributions.

According to Weldesillase, the Provincial Office credited the appeal "without investigation" and ordered the GRCO to terminate its fundraising activities (Weldesillase 1979EC: 110). This incident can be best understood in the context of the discord existing between GRCO leaders and the influential aristocrat who controlled the provincial administration. A member of the Ethiopian nobility, *Ras* Mesfin Silasi made his fortune between 1945 and 1955 while governor of Kaffa, a coffee-producing province.[9] He acquired thousands of hectares of coffee farms, often illegally and almost always in violation of traditional tenure rules (Marcus 1995: 118). He later became vice-governor of Shewa and harassed the GRCO in various ways.

Weldesillase used the case of the *Blabbat* of Ener to illustrate how conspiracies of the Ethiopian nobility hindered GRCO activities and to show how local chiefs were often obliged to demonstrate loyalty to their superiors in the state administration. Although *Ras* Mesfin was executed during the 1974 revolution, GRCO leaders still remember him as among the most "ignorant" of the Ethiopian nobility. One of my informants explained that he was "jealous" of Weldesillase, the chairman of the GRCO, who was becoming increasingly popular among the Gurage.

As a noble, *Ras* Mesfin acquired his position without the necessity of formal education. Despite his "ignorance", he was highly skilled in political posturing, and he must have understood how the GRCO's activities could influence the local polity.

In the 1960s, rural Ethiopian societies were dominated by nobles such as *Ras* Mesfin, who used local chiefs as their agents. The GRCO leaders pitted themselves against these aristocrats by bypassing the administrative ladder and negotiating directly with local chiefs, a process largely facilitated through the mediation of the GRCO tribal committees. Thus, the GRCO's relationship with the homeland became a political asset, as did the support of the IHA and Gurage migrants in Addis Ababa. These relationships were valuable not only in supporting road construction projects but also in countering the local polity of rural Gurage society in the 1960s.

6. SUPPORT FOR THE GRCO BY URBAN GURAGE COMMUNITIES

In this section, I examine the current activities of the GRCO and the support of the urban Gurage community. In 1988, after the major homeland road networks were completed, the GRCO was renamed the Gurage People's Self-Help Development Organization (GPSDO). The focus of the organization shifted to other development priorities, such as education. For example, in 1995, the Ezha Committee, one of the most active GPSDO tribal committees, launched a project to construct a high school in the rural town of Agenna.[10]

The sociopolitical changes that have surrounded the GPSDO since its establishment are notable. First, the Ethiopian aristocracy was abolished as a result of the 1974 socialist revolution. Ethiopia's centralized administrative structure also went through radical reforms beginning in 1995, when a new constitution established an "ethnic federalism."[11] Administrative boundaries were redrawn along ethnic lines, so that local governments represented ethnic groups. Thus, the government of the Gurage Zone is supposed to represent the interests of the Gurage (Nishi 2005).

However, the fragmentation of farmland, which resulted from population increases in the homeland, and the relative economic progress of Addis Ababa residents led to increasing economic disparity between Gurage rural and urban societies. As a result, economic redistribution to the rural communities became more important for the GPSDO.

Of the 2.4 million birr[12] raised by the Ezha Committee to construct Agenna High School, 1.0 million birr (43 percent) came from urban Gurage, and 1.3 million birr (54 percent) was covered by economic assistance from the Japanese government. The rural community raised the remaining 3 percent (EDC 1996EC). Fundraising for Agenna High School took place at the annual general assembly of the Ezha Committee. For the wealthy merchants in Addis Ababa, this event was an opportunity to demonstrate their generosity. In 1995, 12 wealthy merchants of Ezha origin pledged

50,000 birr each.

Burial associations organized by Ezha migrants in Addis Ababa are also important contributors to the Ezha Committee. The involvement of burial associations in development projects may seem odd, but the Ezha Committee depends greatly on their contributions. Except for an executive committee of no more than 20 members, the Ezha Committee does not have a fixed membership. Except for a few dozen merchants who contributed regularly to its projects, the committee had no concrete constituency until it formed collaborations with the burial associations.

Burial associations are the most popular form of CBO in Addis Ababa, and each keeps a membership roster. Members make monthly contributions (usually 10–20 birr) toward their burial expenses. A burial association can remove a member for not attending meetings or making monthly contributions. In Addis Ababa, most burial associations remove members who fail to attend the monthly meetings three times in a row.

Various types of burial associations exist in Addis Ababa, including those for neighborhoods, women, and clans. Most Addis Ababa residents belong to several different burial associations to maximize their social network.[13] Often, these associations take on functions beyond funeral coverage: the collaboration of the Ezha Committee with burial associations is one example.

This collaboration dates back to at least 1989, when two burial associations, Ezha Iddir No. 1 and Ezha Iddir No. 2, contributed 50,000 birr and 30,000 birr, respectively, to an ongoing project of the Ezha Committee. The Ezha iddir burial associations were organized by Ezha migrants to Addis Ababa (*iddir* is Amharic for a burial or mutual help association). Each iddir has its own ledger sheet, accountant, and bank account. The organizations are numbered in order of their establishment, and thus a larger number indicates that the association belongs to a younger generation.

For the Ezha Committee, cooperation with burial associations has many advantages. About 40–60 percent of all the Ezha who reside in Addis Ababa are thought to be members of one of the eight Ezha iddirs, with a total membership of nearly 3,900 households (see Table 1). The Ezha Committee invites the Ezha iddirs to participate in its general assemblies. Each iddir is expected to check the attendance of its members, just as it does at its own meetings. During their monthly meetings, the iddirs collect contributions for the Ezha Committee, as well as their own monthly dues.

Although the Ezha Committee has found the iddirs to be very "useful" in achieving its goals, the committee cannot dictate iddir decisions. Instead, decisions are made through prolonged negotiations between the committee and iddir members.

In 1995, 12 burial associations (Ezha Iddirs No. 1–8 and four others) pledged funds toward the construction of Agenna High School. The iddirs then asked their members to contribute a certain sum (100 birr each in most cases). However, the payment terms were largely left up to the individual members. The contribution could be paid over many years, and no concrete time frame was imposed. As a result, few members had met their "obligation" 6 years after the pledge was made.

Table 1. Ezha iddirs

	Year of establishment	Number of members
Ezha No. 1	1973	312
Ezha No. 2	1985	520
Ezha No. 3	1989	500
Ezha No. 4	1989	525
Ezha No. 5	1992	402
Ezha No. 6	1992	647
Ezha No. 7	1994	537
Ezha No. 8	1994	425
	total	3,868

Source: Ezha Committee

Table 2. Funds raised for the Ezha Committee through Ezha iddirs

	Project (Year)				Total (Ethiopian birr)
	County Hall Construction (1989)	Health Post Construction (1993)	High School Construction (1995)	Training for High School Graduates (2002)	
Ezha No. 1	50,000	25,000	49,253	15,600	139,853
Ezha No. 2	30,000	4,000	43,958	3,000	80,958
Ezha No. 3	—	3,000	56,095	7,000	66,095
Ezha No. 4	—	3,000	71,139	5,000	79,139
Ezha No. 5	—	3,000	31,530	—	34,530
Ezha No. 6	—	3,000	58,352	—	61,352
Ezha No. 7	—	—	57,962	—	57,962
Ezha No. 8	—	—	42,742	—	42,742
Total	80,000	41,000	411,031	30,600	562,631

Source: Ezha Committee

This frustrated the Ezha Committee leaders. At its general assembly[14] in June 2001, the committee proposed the introduction of a regular "development fee" to support its rural development activities. A fee of 2 birr (less than 0.2 USD) per month, which was about the price of two cups of coffee in town, would be collected equally from all burial association members. However, assembly attendees from the Ezha iddirs opposed the proposal, saying that "life in town is even more unstable than life in the villages." The committee finally got the proposal accepted by reducing the fee to 1 birr per month.

The negotiations between the Ezha Committee and Ezha iddirs were notable in many respects. The committee is primarily composed of urban elites, such as bankers, lawyers, and wealthy merchants, whereas the burial associations include "many others," such as petty traders and the unemployed. Despite this power asymmetry, the Ezha Committee is greatly dependent on the iddirs because of their large membership. Thus, the decisions of the committee's general assembly are largely controlled by the burial associations.

This arduous bargaining over less than 0.1 USD a month may seem inconsequential, but it was important for assembly participants to express their disapproval of the idea of "equal liability" for rural development, in light of the economic disparity among urban dwellers. The committee also profited because participants finally endorsed its proposal (and perhaps its activities in general) by pledging to pay 1 birr per month.

The results of such negotiations among the urban Ezha community can be seen in Table 2, which shows the amounts contributed by Ezha iddirs to the major projects of the Ezha Committee. The older iddirs (with more established members) tended to contribute more than younger iddirs. The Ezha Committee has not only favored rural communities in allocating development resources (the rural Ezha community bore only 3 percent of the Agenna high school construction cost), but has also recognized the economic discrepancy among the urban Ezha community.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In the early 20th century, the Gurage were caught in the politico-economic system of imperial Ethiopia, during which northern, urban aristocrats established exploitative latifundism over the south. This resulted in widening economic disparity between urban and rural Ethiopia, including traditional Gurage society.

By the 1950s, some Gurage migrants in Addis Ababa had achieved social and economic success.

However, they were aware that their success played into the state system of the time. This was the social background to the decision by the Addis Ababa Gurage to start developing the infrastructure of their homeland. This was one of the first attempts at economic and social redistribution from urban to rural Ethiopia. To the imperial regime, the development of the road network was a way to maintain itself. However, the GRCO used resources and technology for its own purposes in countering the existing, inequitable sociopolitical order and demonstrating the "popular agency" of the Gurage people.

The GRCO was founded by several dozen individuals and soon gained wide support from both rural and urban Gurage communities. By 1988, the total amount invested in road construction was estimated at $5.7 million USD, of which 65 percent was raised from urban and rural Gurage communities (IHA covered the other 35 percent). The sense of "ethnic solidarity" among the Gurage was the most salient factor in this achievement.

However, not all Gurage shared the norm that "good" Gurage citizens contribute to the GRCO. As I have demonstrated, GRCO/GPSDO activities have been characterized by controversies, such as those between competing tribes and between elite and nonelite migrants in Addis Ababa. Gurage who support the organization do so as the result of patient negotiations.

Thus, the GRCO experience cannot be understood through the conventional view of a moral community in which everyone obeys "shared" rules. It is better understood through the idea of rules as the basis of democratic consensus. According to Mouffe (2000: 72), the view that rules and the interpretation of rules determines the meaning of a practice should be abandoned. Quoting Wittgenstein, she argues that rules are always abridgements of practices and are inseparable from specific ways of life (Mouffe 2000: 68).

The GRCO's existence as an "ethnic-based" association does not permit ethnic elites to compel people to participate. Its decisions have not been based on an *a priori* assumption that every Gurage shares the same interests and sense of morality. The GRCO has survived for more than half a century because of its continuous effort to set rules for fair redistribution of development resources through patient negotiations between GRCO leaders and the people it claims to represent.

The GRCO has tried to shape "fairness" at two different levels of social relationships. The first is the relationship between the GRCO and the state. The GRCO intervened in the national distribution system by establishing its own economic and social redistribution system from urban to rural Ethiopia. This can be understood as a countermovement against the national establishment (the aristocracy) of 1960s Ethiopia.

The GRCO has also expended considerable effort in establishing fair redistribution among different Gurage groups and tribal affiliations and between the urban elites and nonelites. The negotiations between the Ezha Committee and the burial associations demonstrate this effort. Such negotiations are essential to the decision-making process, since the GRCO is not a monolithic organization, but rather an intricate conjunction of social fabrics including tribal committees and burial associations that reflect the indigenous social relationships of the Gurage.

These indigenous social fabrics serve as a sustainable constituency for GRCO activities and a funding source through tribal committees. Similarly, the Ezha Committee benefited greatly from working with burial associations. However, these indigenous networks can also generate controversy, since they represent different groups with different interests. The GRCO's pursuit of fair redistribution and its commitment to patient negotiation are the keys to explaining its success.

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NOTES

(1) GRCO was organized primarily by the Sebat Bet Gurage, one of many groups who share Gurage identity.
(2) My accounts of GRCO activities are based on interviews with active members (including a founding member), published and unpublished documents provided by the GRCO secretariat, and the published memoir written in Amharic by the founding chairman (Weldesillase 1979EC). I conducted fieldwork during October–December 2004, August 2005–February 2006, and August 2007.
(3) See Smit (2001: 237–238) for a South African case.
(4) Enset (*Ensete ventricosum*), a perennial crop, is the main crop of millions of people in southwestern Ethiopia, including the Gurage. It resembles the banana plant and is grown primarily for the large quantity of carbohydrate-rich food found in the false stem (pseudostem) and underground bulb (corm) (Brandt et al. 1997).
(5) I use Shack's terminology to explain the traditional social stratification of the Gurage (Shack 1966).
(6) More than seven tribes claim to be part of the "seven houses." Today, the Sebat Bet Gurage are considered to be a conglomerate of at least 11 different subgroups (Dinberu et al. 1987EC).
(7) "Ministers Definition of Powers Order," *Negarit Gazeta*, 2/5 (1943), Order No. 1, January 29, 1943.
(8) The birr is the Ethiopian currency. In the mid-1960s, 1 birr was equivalent to 0.4 USD.
(9) Marcus notes that *Ras* Mesfin was the "archetypal exploiter." *Ras* Mesfin made considerable contributions to the Emperor (Marcus 1995: 118).
(10) Agenna is located in the Ezha District of the Gurage Zone. The former Sebat Bet District is now divided into several districts, each of which represents one or more of the tribal territories of traditional Gurage society.
(11) "The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia," *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, 1/1 (1995), Proclamation No. 1, August 21, 1995. Article 39 of the constitution ensures the "unconditional right of self determination" for all of the nationalities (ethnic groups) of Ethiopia. The paradoxical nature of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and its consequences for Gurage society are discussed in Nishi (2005).
(12) 1 birr was equivalent to 0.18 USD in 1995.
(13) See Dejene (1993) and Pankhurst (2003) for more information about social functions and the historical background of the burial associations in Ethiopia.
(14) I attended this assembly.

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MAKOTO NISHI: *Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 46 Shimoadachi-cho, Yoshida, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-8501, Japan.*