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### Dissertation Abstract

*From “Subject to Citizen”? History, Identity and Minority Citizenship: The  
Case of the Mao and Komo of Western Ethiopia*

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## Dissertation Abstracts

ALEXANDER MECKELBURG, *From “Subject to Citizen”?: History, Identity and Minority Citizenship: The Case of the Mao and Komo of Western Ethiopia*, PhD Dissertation in Ethiopian Studies, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Hamburg, defended on 1 March 2017.

In the 1880s, the Dutch traveller Juan Maria Schuver visited the Bela Šangul region west of the Ethiopian highland escarpment, south of the Blue Nile. He travelled towards Fadasi, an independent sheikhdom which, at that time, was a bridge between the Arab-Sudanese country to the west and the Oromo countries to the south. Bela Šangul was divided among several such sheikhdoms, under the so-called Waṭāwīt—dynasties of Arabic-Sudanese descent—who controlled trade, taxed passing caravans and ruled over the local population. One of these groups, the Amam, ancestors of present-day Koman- and Omotic-speaking Mao groups, had a fierce reputation for their attacks on the trade caravans. South of the Amam Schuver mentions meeting the Koma or Goma (for the first time in the European travel accounts) where he collected a wordlist of what today is known as *twaaw gwama*, the Gwama language. Schuver uses the term Koma for groups living in relative isolation from the surrounding hierarchical political structures. In a few cases Arab traders visited this group to exchange orphaned children, honey, and salt. To the south, the Oromo kingdom of Leeqaa Qälləm, which soon became an important regional competitor, had developed hierarchical political structures based on territorial control. King Bula (as Ğote Tullu, the prominent leader of Leeqaa, was known to Schuver) expanded his realm of influence, subjecting neighbouring groups and principalities. Some Koma would soon be his vassals and, by the time of Schuver’s visit, some Amam were already part of his slave armies.

Such observations opened up a political space that, as a frontier region between Sudan and Ethiopia, was dominated by highly dynamic processes of inter-ethnic relations, migration, and cultural changes. Power relations in this frontier zone were altered dramatically with the expansion of the Ethiopian empire and the territorial conquest of western Ethiopia, which ended approximately in 1898. The region was annexed as an economic reservoir to the developing Ethiopian state. The independence of the Amam and Koma shrunk; both groups were increasingly reduced to subservient peoples in the regional hierarchies. The peripheries forcibly supplied the centre with all

kinds of goods, such as gold, slaves, and honey. In response to these economic demands, local authorities, such as *al-Šayb* Ḥ<sup>w</sup> aḡalī al-Ḥasan or Ğote Tullu rose to power and delivered the tribute in exchange for relative political independence. Driven by such economic and political pressure from the centre, the periphery was gradually integrated, and this integration marked the beginning of central control in previously remote regions. Even the farthest groups were successively subjected to the same economic demands, while more fragile groups and smaller chieftaincies were integrated. The leaders of these groups became collaborators in the local power structure and thus helped the Ethiopian central government to expand its influence. As examples of this process the thesis portrays the political developments in the periphery against the background of the history of the Mao king Kutu Golḡa.

With the gradual integration of the region, blanket designations, such as Amam and Goma, were gradually lost and were replaced by other blanket terms. From the perspective of the Ethiopian centre the non-Arab or non-Oromo ethnic groups living in western Ethiopia were Šanqəlla—a racist term for the enslavable or tribute-paying lowland population which completely ignored the identity of such groups. At the same time, the term ‘Mao’ spread locally and came to include all those groups that submitted to the encroaching Oromo, and later Ethiopian, political culture and who eventually became tributary peasants in feudal western Ethiopia. Further away from the catchment area, the Komo (also called Koma, mostly ethnic and linguistic Komo and Gwama groups who had largely escaped slavery and the state) continued to live independently.

Despite modernization of the bureaucracy under Ḥaylā Šəllase, slavery continued to exist and survived in local feudal patterns of production until the 1950s. Oral testimonies reveal that the Mao and Komo of western Ethiopia were victims of this exploitative chain of extraction. Both the Italian interlude and bureaucratization after World War II had mixed effects on peripheral ethnic groups. The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 and the subsequent civil war (until 1991) led to continued displacement and migration. The minority groups joined forces with the larger neighbours (e.g. the Oromo Liberation Front) and fought together against the Ethiopian government. The war led to further fragmentation of the groups. At the end of the war, an alliance of regional liberation movements had prevailed against the Ethiopian military. This was followed by the consolidation of post-war Ethiopia based on an ethno-federal arrangement after 1991.

Based on ethnographic and biographical interviews, travellers’ accounts, and historical documentation (both Ethiopian and British-colonial), the thesis provides a glimpse of the historical experience of confronting the

state from the perspective of the Mao and Komo. This forms the background of the final part of the thesis which deals with the expansion of citizenship under current federal policies.

In the current federal system, territories were created, along ethno-linguistic lines, to serve the political decentralization of national politics. The Mao and Komo were incorporated as titular groups into both the federal states of Beni Šangul-Gumuz and Gambella. Due to the long period of marginalization and expulsion, members of these groups also live in other regions, notably Oromia, although they have no political representation. In addition, other Omotic Mao groups also live scattered in the same territory. Against this ethno-linguistic background, the present work discusses the scope and limits of citizenship and of cultural and political integration in a multi-ethnic state.

A description of the facts concerning minority citizenship can illuminate both the historical manifestation of state encroachment as well as the inter-ethnic history of the Mao and Komo. The multi-ethnic state of Ethiopia and its multicultural policy is thereby viewed from the perspective of the minorities. Their sense of history, their experience of marginalization, and their experiences of the state on the margins are at the centre of this thesis. Conceived as a chronology of the encounters between state and minority, this text offers a synchronic and diachronic perspective of the experiences of the Mao and Komo in the context of state intervention, which directly or indirectly influenced inter-ethnic relations in the the region. Based on observations and interviews collected during repeated field research, the final chapter describes how the Mao and Komo remember the history of marginalization and especially how the history of slavery affects their experience of contemporary society. Moreover, the analysis of the political system looks at the possibilities and difficulties that arise for such scattered minorities who are still marginalized on the regional level. Examples discussed in the thesis concern the effects of land policy, and the ways in which the federal system limits the political rights of scattered minorities.

This thesis concludes that the concept of citizenship can satisfactorily describe the interaction between the state and the minorities; the concept is very useful for highlighting the limits of such interaction. The Conclusion shows that political participation is not met by an ethnicity–identity–territory approach to citizenship as proposed by the Ethiopian political system. Hence approaching ethno-politics through the perspective of minority citizenship shows a significant divide between regional and national identity.