

## Review

# Management of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: The case of Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups

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Received 3 June, 2021; Accepted 1 December, 2021

**This paper seeks to examine the causes and management of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia, with a particular reference to the two major ethnic groups, the Amhara and Oromo. Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country where various ethnic groups have lived together for millennia, in relative peace. Over the last few years, intra-ethnic conflicts have intensified. Even though the two major ethnic groups, the Amhara, and the Oromo, have much in common, nowadays conflicts have also redefined their relationships. This paper, drawing on social-psychological theory, argues that the causes for the conflict between the two ethnic groups are: competing narratives; institutionalised negative prejudices; and the ruthless campaign of unbridled ethnic entrepreneurs—politicisation of ethnicity. It further contends that the ethnic federalism, which was ostensibly devised in 1994, to alleviate nationalistic passions and manage inter-ethnic conflicts, has compounded ethnic conflict. Finally, it suggests that some of the tenable solutions are to change narratives, settle past accounts through national reconciliation and revisit ethnic federalism.**

**Key words:** Ethnic conflict, Amhara, Oromo, ethnic federalism, narratives, symbolic politics, ethnic entrepreneurs.

## INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is one of the oldest states in the world which is known for its relatively peaceful co-existence of diverse ethnic and religious groups and a home for more than 80 ethno-linguistic groups. The major ethnic groups, both in terms of their population size and political significance, are Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups. A radical detour in the Ethiopian political history took place in 1991, when the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), a guerilla fighter, after overthrowing the Dergue regime, adopted

*ethnic federalism* to devolve, to use Young's word, deconcentrate power and diffuse tensions to the regions (Young, 1996). This came as a surprise to the Ethiopian people and the rest of the world because this period was a litmus test for the faltering ethnic federalism in the former Yugoslavia and one of the worst human tragedies occurred in Rwanda due to ethnic conflict.

Ethnic identity in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, is a social construction that exists as an "imagined community"

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(Anderson, 2006, 6). These seemingly antagonistic identities are “products of human action and speech, and that as a result they can and do change over time” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 848). As Kasfir succinctly observed, “ethnic identity is fluid and intermittent” (Kasfir, 1979, 365), which is particularly true in the Ethiopian context. A closer look at the contemporary Ethiopian political discourse reveals that, based on an issue at stake, an individual can be an “Ethiopian”<sup>1</sup>, “Amhara” or “Oromo”; which the writer calls it “ethnic forum shopping.”<sup>2</sup> This nature of ethnic identity, “by infusing so many sectors of social life, imparts a pervasive quality to ethnic conflict and raises sharply the stakes for ethnic politics” (Horowitz, 1985, 8). Put differently, “ethnicity is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with its traits believed to be innate” (Ibid, 52). Smith was perfectly right when he noted “... ‘ethnicity’ is in the eye of the beholder, that it is all ‘situational’, a matter of time and context, shifting, fleeting, illusory . . .” (Smith, 1986, 2). Ethnic identity carries with it a ‘Myth-symbol’ complex which is deeply embedded into the fabric of the imagined community and transmitted to future generations. It is argued that “Ethnicity is largely ‘mythic’ and ‘symbolic’ in character, and because myths, symbols, memories, and values are ‘carried’ in and by forms and genres of artifacts and activities which change only very slowly, so ethnies, once formed, tend to be *exceptionally durable*” (Smith, 1986, 2) (emphasis added). This shows what makes ethnicity exceptionally durable are the masses who accept the myth-symbol as their shared experiences and values. However, one has to ask: why do the masses follow the narratives of the elites?

This paper argues that “the mass on the ground” can effectively contribute to the project of cascading and internalization of the new narrative(s). Put differently, narratives created through conscious and extensive advocacy of the elites require massive social engineering which should be sustained for long. Fearon and Laitin suggested four possible answers as to why the masses endorse the narratives framed by the elites; namely: discourses that prepare them [the public] to act violently; information asymmetry between leaders and followers; psychological biases of the followers; and followers may not be following at all (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 868). Nevertheless, they argue that if the elites are just doing what their followers want them to do, then it seems inappropriate to blame the elites (Ibid, 854). Thus, it

shows that without the masses that provide formidable support, Ethnic Entrepreneurs cannot cascade their narratives. A rather different perspective has been put forward by Brass in which he pointed out that, in the Indian context, local people engage in “communal violence” for their disparate motives which are interpreted by “ethnic identity constructors” or political elites along ethnic lines and as such, any ethnic violence can be curbed as long as the government takes effective measures against them (Brass, 1997). True that in mob violence common unifying threads may lack. Nonetheless, for such violence to be effectively mobilized from the outset, there must be some form of allegiance from the part of the masses.

It is worth noting that the existence of ethnic diversity<sup>3</sup>, is not a problem for “multiethnicity is the rule” (Williams 1994, 50). Rather, it is when ethnic differences are accompanied by hostilities against outgroups (ethnic divisions), which has become pervasive in Ethiopia, that ethnic conflicts materialize. Horowitz defines ethnic conflict as “a struggle in which the aim is to gain objectives and simultaneously to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals” (Horowitz, 1985, 95). More often than not, without strong feelings of *antipathy* there can be no ethnic conflicts; denoting that negative perceptions of and feelings toward other groups play a crucial role in the process of developing negative prejudices. Hence, ethnic conflict can be defined as a conflict between two ethnic groups with irreconcilable narratives (Kaufman, 2009); manifesting themselves in the form of socially accepted negative prejudices (Uvin, 1997). For example, Prunier, writing about the causes of the Rwandan genocide, reckons that genocide in Rwanda was created not by greed, but by a “social bomb” set by the colonial rulers whereby the hitherto class differences between Hutu and Tutsi were redefined as irreconcilable ethnic differences (Prunier, 1995, 248). This process of redefinition of ethnic identity and ethnic mobilisation is carried out by the ethnic entrepreneurs, or the Cadres, as Roeder noted (Roeder 1995, 84).

Although ethnic conflicts are prevalent among various ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the writer chose the case of Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups because of three interrelated reasons. First of all, “much of the history of Ethiopia can be viewed as a struggle between the Amhara and the Oromo...” (Baxter, 1978, 284). Secondly, symbolic politics is very strong between these two ethnic groups. Lastly, it is not practicable to make an in-depth analysis owing to the limitation of space and time.

<sup>1</sup> Ethiopian, as it is used here, does not refer to citizenship but it indicates one form of supranational ethnic identity for a significant number of people in Ethiopia, including the writer of this piece, prefer to identify themselves as Ethiopians.

<sup>2</sup> Ethnic forum shopping refers to an individual’s choice of a specific ethnic identity under a given circumstance to achieve some self-interest. In some respect, it shares some features with the instrumentalist view of ethnicity. Nonetheless, the underpinning concept of ‘ethnic forum shopping’ is the social construction dimension of ethnicity, not the everchanging nature of ethnicity with interests at stake.

<sup>3</sup> As vast literatures on ethnic conflicts show, ethnic diversity has no causal relationship with ethnic conflict. Indeed, ethnic diversity is the principle in the world politics and Ethiopia is not an exception in this regard. Ethno-linguistic diversity has been there for centuries in the Ethiopian political history but there is no systematic study which found the existence of ethnic conflict to the level we observe today or may be further studies are welcome for it is beyond the scope of this paper.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AMHARA AND THE OROMO: ORIGINS OF NEGATIVE PREJUDICES AND SYMBOLIC POLITICS

### On the origins of the two ethnic groups: the imagined community

To date, the origins of the two ethnic groups are fraught with myths, inconsistent narratives, and contestation on common history, which partly led to the development of *reciprocal* negative prejudices and brought symbolic politics to the fore. Indeed, a contested narrative as to the origin of different nationalism and the formation of the Ethiopian state greatly help to understand the dynamics of contemporary politics in Ethiopia (Sorenson 1992).

### The Amhara

No ethnic group is as contested and controversial as that of Amhara in Ethiopia so much so that Amhara could mean everything or nothing, based on one's definition. Mengistu Hailemariam, President of Ethiopia from 1974-1991, contended that the Amhara is not an ethnic group; rather Amhara refers to the way of life.<sup>4</sup> In support of his assertion, he stated that the name "Amhara" comes from two Hebrew words; "Amma"—meaning people and "Hara"—meaning Mountain. Hence, Amhara means people living around the highlands of Ethiopia. But this claim is not corroborated with shreds of evidence. The closest myth that we can find today is the *Bete-Israeli*, the Ethiopian Jews who lived in the northern part of Ethiopia for Millennia (present-day Amhara Regional State) and who adopted Judaism as their religion.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was in tune with this myth that one of the largest evacuations in history, *Operation Solomon*, was undertaken by the State of Israel in May 1991, to bring more than 15,000 Ethiopian Jews to their promised land of Israel.<sup>6</sup> However, the Irony is that virtually all Amhara who live in the northern part of Ethiopia still claim their Jewish descent through King Solomon of Israel and Queen Sheba of Abyssinia (the present day Ethiopia). Because of this myth-complex, the Oromo and other ethnic groups call the Amhara as "Buda", which means Witchcraft, "Antari", meaning Foundry Men and "Mikegna", meaning Stingy People—all denoting the inferiority of Amhara; of course, from the perspective of the Oromo and other ethnic groups. Admittedly, all these derogatory terms are

used within a specific local community and it has never been used to the Amhara people across the board.

Debates as to the origin of ethnic Amhara had continued wherein on a televised interview of 1991<sup>7</sup>, Mr. Meles Zenawi, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, who led Ethiopia for more than two decades, claimed that the Amhara people is a distinct ethnic group with their own culture, language, and ancestry, but without providing elaborate and convincing analysis. Responding to Zenawi's assertion, Mesfin Woldemariam<sup>8</sup> strongly argued that there is no ethnic group known as Amhara, mostly basing his reasoning on the fact that the Amhara people mostly identify themselves with their locality, as Orthodox Christians or at best, simply Ethiopian. Pausewang similarly observed the complex identity of the Amhara, in which he stated: "the term 'Amhara' changed its meaning depending on local conditions. In many contexts, it just signified a Christian. The practice of conversion to Christianity involved taking a new, Christian (baptismal) name, usually a biblical Ge'ez or Amharic name. Thus, assimilated people could no longer be identified as Gurage or Sidama or Wolaita by their names" (Pausewang, 2005, 277). Furthermore, Levine argues that Amhara is a 'supra-ethnic group' composed of different subgroups (Levine, 1974).

This claim is particularly true for Muslim dominated areas and nowadays, even in other regions where Orthodox Christians are the majority, whereby everyone who is a follower of "Orthodox Christianity" are labeled as Amhara settlers or the "Neftegna"<sup>9</sup>, to mean a group of Amhara Viceroy who invaded Oromia and southern part of Ethiopia under the leadership of King Minilik II. As such, it is not surprising that the extremist Oromo groups have converted themselves to Protestant religion, and waged indiscriminate attacks against Orthodox Christians in Oromia Region on October 23, 2019, where 87 people were slaughtered in broad daylight and the Oromo Nationalist are in the process of establishing Oromo Orthodox Church, where Amhara Priests will no longer be needed. To be more specific, only from October 2019 to October 2020, the Neftegna (Amhara) people were persecuted and murdered in more than five different localities in Ethiopia. To mention just a few of them, the

<sup>4</sup> Mengistu Hailemariam's Speech about the Amhara identity is available here: <https://youtu.be/STXvOpp5VYY>, last accessed on 03/07/2021.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive and excellent historical accounts of *Bete-Israeli*, readers are strongly advised to read Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (1995, New York University Press).

<sup>6</sup> For the brief history of Bete-Israeli and how Operation Solomon was conducted, the readers might refer to this link: <https://youtu.be/DJIQIQsMeUA>, last visited on 15/02/20.

<sup>7</sup> The full interview is available here: <https://youtu.be/CmdgqTwSkQY>, Accessed on 26 January 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Mesfin Woldemariam is a prolific writer, human rights pioneer and veteran politician of Ethiopia.

<sup>9</sup> The term *Neftegna* literally and originally, meant Gun Men or Soldiers of the Monarchy, which used to have no negative connotations whatsoever. More generally, its equivalent would be 'Viceroy' sent to the southern and western part of the country by the Kings of Abyssinia to effectively rule the Empire. But with the passage of time and as animosity between the Amhara and the Oromo grew, mostly owing to the institutionalised negative prejudice against Amhara over the last three decades, it got its current meaning-interchangeably used to refer to the Amhara, Orthodox Christians and people with pro-Ethiopian ideology inclinations. By historical coincidence, the Amhara people fulfil virtually all the manifestations of Neftegna, which makes their plights unparalleled. An Anthropological study of the 'Neftegna' and its socio-political dimension has been discussed in John Sorenson, "History and Identity in the Horn of Africa", *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.17, No.3, (1992), pp.227-252.

ethnic cleansing in some areas of Oromia Region in June 2020, the organized murders in Metekel Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region in October and the mass killing in Gura-Ferda Zone of Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples Region in October 2020; ethnic cleansing in Guliso area in the Wollega Zone; the gruesome massacres of majority ethnic Amhara in the Mai-Kadra area<sup>10</sup>, are the clear indications of the extreme hatred towards the Amhara people.

Until most recently, the Amhara people have mostly been identifying themselves as Ethiopian and showed strong distaste to ethnic stratification and the baggage that comes with it, notably ethnic federalism. In his empirical study, Michael noted that “today, most people labeled by outsiders as Amhara, refer to themselves simply as Ethiopian, or to their province (such as Gojjame from the province Gojjam)” (Michael, 2008, 396). Nonetheless, with the introduction of Identity Card which provided for ethnic identification a mandatory requirement, the Amhara people were forced to accept the reality. This, in turn, has further institutionalized ethnic divisions and paved the way for negative prejudices.

This study contends that the Amhara people have been specifically targeted over the last three decades due to institutionalized negative prejudices, which have been sponsored and orchestrated by the government.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the preamble of the Constitution of Ethiopia which clearly stipulates historical injustice; the TPLF Political Manifesto which had been taught to students in schools about the oppressive history of Amhara; the mass killings, displacements, the alleged forced sterilizations of Amhara Women, and government acquiescence to all these crimes, are only some of the manifestations of the institutionalized negative prejudices and ethnic-based attacks against the Amhara people.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, being an Amhara, had been considered as a privilege, in the sense that Amhara people are educated, civilized and politically well-organized, in the same ways the Tutsis in Rwanda were treated before the onset of the genocide. As Michael noted, “becoming Amhara signifies elevation to a superior status and while becoming Oromo, on the other hand simply means

joining a new community at the expense of giving up elite privileges” (Michael, 2008, 278). The Amhara are known for their culture of adoption and assimilation in which those who are baptized, became Orthodox Christian and the Amharic language would be treated as a full member of the community. In this regard, Chernestove alluded that Amhara’s identity is primarily defined by the culture of assimilation and the consciousness of superiority to other ethnic groups (Sevier, 1993).

Thus, based on the foregoing discussions, the Amhara people are targeted for their perceived historical superiority on the one hand, whereas they are treated as evil and inferior people with Jewish, Semitic descent or on the ground of the socially constructed narratives of historical domination in the Ethiopian politics, on the other hand.

### **The Oromo**

There is a dearth of literature on the origin and history of the Oromo people mainly owing to the oral tradition that characterized the culture of the Oromo people<sup>13</sup> and/ or due to the lopsided approach to Ethiopian history. In other words, the written history of Ethiopia is preoccupied with the northern part of the country, which had ruled the country until the downfall of the Solomonic Dynasty in 1974. There are divergent claims about the origin of the Oromo people as they have little written historiography, which remained unexplored before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Lewis, who has made extensive research in this area asserts that “there is no known reference to the *Galla* before the middle of the sixteenth century” (Lewis, 1966, 32). Some Oromos believe that their ancestors had migrated from Madagascar to Ethiopia (Jaenen, 1956, 176). Nevertheless, the prevailing view on the origin of the Oromo people is that the Oromo lived around *Meda Welabu*, part of Southwestern highland of Ethiopia and massively migrated to northern and eastern parts of the country during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> C. (Hassen, 2012; Gidada, 2001). Before the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Oromo people were called *Galla*, which signifies pagans, savages or uncivilized people (Jalata, 1995, 171), the term which is nowadays generally accepted as a derogatory and a social taboo. The Oromo were predominantly nomadic pastoralists and their major expansion of the 16<sup>th</sup> C. was mainly driven by a search for vast areas of lands to accommodate a rapidly growing population (Levine, 1974, 80). Even though Hassen (Hassen, 1990) has attempted to show that the Oromo used to live in the southern part of Ethiopia long before the 16<sup>th</sup> C., his claims are bedeviled by lack of strong historical evidence. To be fair, there are growing literatures on the Oromo

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth account of the ethnic cleansings and mass murders, readers may refer to the following the following sources: <https://minorityrights.org/2020/07/22/ethnic-cleansing-romia/>, <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-united-nations-abiy-ahmed-ethiopia-war-crimes-b33880834d7cb67b9de3c4f460cb2b9c>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-over-50-ethnic-amhara-killed-in-attack-on-village-by-armed-group/>.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the above cited violence against the Amhara people, some of the documented ethnic based attacks against the Amhara during the last ten years can be accessed at: <https://addisstandard.com/commentary-increasing-accounts-displacement-violence-ethnic-amharas-solving-priority/>; <https://ecadforum.com/blog/ethiopia-gura-ferda-and-crimes-against-humanity/>; <https://theconversation.com/persecution-of-ethnic-amharas-will-harm-ethiopias-reform-agenda-98201>.

<sup>12</sup> This by no means entails that other ethnic groups have not been stigmatized in Ethiopia; rather, the thrust of this research is on systematic, persistent and institutionalised prejudices.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that until very recently, the Oromo people, like many other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, had no well-developed literatures and as such, scholarly works are very limited.

people's folklore, language, and culture over the last two decades, both in local and international languages. However, there are dearths of research works that may strengthen Hassan's thesis as to the origin of the Oromo people.

The Oromo constitutes more than one-third of the Ethiopian population, based on the latest census conducted a decade ago, and most fertile lands and natural resources of the country are found in Oromia Regional State. The Oromo people have an indigenous 'democratic system' of governance or social organization known as the *Gada* system, whereby responsibilities are distributed across social stratum and power passes from one generation to succeeding generations. The *Gada* system is one of the cultural assets which are highly revered by the Oromo people (Legesse, 2001). The "original Oromo" were neither Christian nor Muslim, rather they worship *Waaqa*<sup>14</sup>, a traditional belief system that is more cultural than religious. Through *Irreechaa*, a thanksgiving ceremony, homage is paid to *Waaqa* Oromo once in a year. Jaenen has succinctly pointed out this traditional way of life as: "[t]he pagan Galla avoid the arduous fasts of the Orthodox Church and generally enjoy a better diet than their Christian or Muslim fellows" (Jaenen, 1956, 175).

It has to be noted that, ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> C. the Amhara ruling elites had been deeply concerned about the aggressive expansion of the Oromo and Islam (Baxter, 1978, 285). Furthermore, the Amhara believe, Baxter notes, the Oromo were, by and large, uncivilized people due to their passionate rejection of Christianity (Ibid, 286). As Jalata observed, although the Oromo are a numerical majority, they have been political minorities (Jalata, 1995, 166). He regards this scenario as the colonization of the Oromo people by Ethiopians. Nowadays, this narrative is widely shared by the "extremist" Oromo elites and Political Parties, currently represented by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and the vast majority of the young generation. To be fair, the contemporary Oromo politics cannot and should not be understood as being represented by extremist groups. In fact, as Tronvoll and Østebø have argued, the contemporary Oromo politics could be interpreted as constituting three positions: unitarist, federalist and secessionist (Tronvoll 2020), the unitarist group being quite insignificant.

In sum, the main negative prejudice against the Oromo emanates from the fact that they cannot trace their history back longer than 16<sup>th</sup> C., their traditional belief

system [in the past], lack of literacy and insignificant roles they played in the long history of Ethiopian politics. To these, one may also add the Neftegna discourse, mainly advocated by the Oromo extremists, against the outer group (the Amhara) which produced a reciprocal prejudice.

### **Symbolic politics: myth-symbol complex and competing narratives**

Symbolism is powerful in ethnic conflict, according to Horowitz, because it masks ethnic claims in ideas and associations; thereby appealing to strongly shared moral symbols (Horowitz, 1985, 218). Most importantly, it is so powerful in highly divided societies that issues such as national language, the design, and color of the flag, name of places, national hero, etc., which appear to have trivial par values, at times lead to devastating ethnic conflicts. This is no less true in Ethiopia where the Amhara and the Oromo ethnic groups (of course, only as represented through their political parties and elites) incessantly fight over the symbols. Gudina, who has been in the Ethiopian politics for more than four decades and still the Chairman of the OFC Party, warned that "competing ethnic nationalisms tend to create the problem of majorities and minorities concerning basic rights in the ethnically reconstituted regions" (Gudina, 2004, 40). He made this observation at the time when Amhara nationalism was fledging. Now, with the advent of a strong Amhara nationalism, which took many by surprise, Gudina's observation is as relevant today as it was decades ago. Although the elites, Statesmen and Youth Protestors from the two ethnic groups have tactically cooperated to bring the TPLF dominated regime to an end in April 2018, the relationship between the two ethnic groups has reverted to its old days of animosity and incompatible narratives shortly after.

These competing narratives and their attendant symbolic politics will be discussed by taking some selected examples. To begin with, the derogative term *Galla*, as discussed above, represents a symbol of inferiority and as such, has never been welcomed by the Oromo. As Jalata puts it, while the name *Galla* characterized defeat, inferiority, and subordination because it was bestowed by the Ethiopian colonizers, Oromo nationalists perceive the name Oromo as *symbolizing* a glorious past, democracy, egalitarianism, bravery, pride, and victory (Jalata, 1995, 171). On the contrary, for the Amhara elites, *Galla* is simply an everyday language used to describe the non-Christians (pagans) as it was originally used, but not anymore.

Taking the example of a national hero, for the Amhara and many others, Emperor *Minilik II* is the national hero, modernizer, the founder of modern Ethiopian State and above all, the symbol of independence; whereas the same leader is portrayed as the oppressor, killer and even a "wild beast" by the Oromo elites. The Oromo

<sup>14</sup> *Waaqa* is a traditional belief system which is still practiced by the Borana tribe of Oromo and collectively celebrated once in a year in the form of *Irreechaa annual festivity*. It is considered as primitive belief system because of its mode of celebration; large group of people gathered from all over the country marches to Hora (river); throw some fresh grasses into the river, get blessings from the Abba Geda (Leader of Geda system) and at times, anoint the nearby trees with butter.

elites<sup>15</sup> constructed these narratives about Minilik II and employed it as a potent tool to mobilise the people and most recently, radicalize the group called *Qeerroo*.<sup>16</sup> The narrative can be summarized as follows: before Emperor Minilik II made southward expansion and colonized the Oromo land, the Oromos were independent people with their own homeland and political organisation. Then Minilik came, killed many Oromo People, subjugated them, exploited their resources, and brought the Neftegna with him to the Oromo land. However, except for the fact that Ethiopia took a modern shape around the dawn of the 20th century, there is no evidence which point to the alleged massive crimes committed against the Oromo. Yet, what really matters most is the acceptance of the narrative by the young generation, which has proven to be quite successful if seen from the vantage point of the ethnic entrepreneurs.<sup>17</sup>

Related to the above narrative is the controversy over the capital city, *Addis Ababa*. For most people and the residents of the city, the name of the capital city has never been in doubt. To the contrary, the Oromo elites (and the majority of the 'Qubee generation'<sup>18</sup>) believe that the original name of Addis Ababa was "Finfinne." Despite the absence of compelling historical records that support this "imaginary city", in the world of Oromo Activists and their followers, Finfinne has always been the rightful name of the capital city and accordingly, the ownership of the city belongs to the Oromo people. Recently, with a view to counter this claim, the Amhara elites<sup>19</sup> came up with new and controversial counter-narrative. This narrative claim that before the city was renamed by Impress Taitu, Addis Ababa used to be known as

"Berara" (Tegegne, 2020). These competing narratives have played their roles in the growing animosities and sporadic ethnic conflicts over the last few years.

Regarding the national language, the Oromos demand for recognition of *Afaan Oromoo* as an additional official language of the federal government. It should be noted that *Amharic* was chosen as the official language of the federal government because it is widely spoken in virtually all parts of the country while *Afaan Oromo* is *mainly* confined to the present-day Oromia Region but second only to Amharic in terms of the number of people who speak it. Undoubtedly, the demand is legitimate (Bulcha, 1997) from historical, legal, and factual point of view. But the problem lies in using hatred towards the Amharic language as a means to justify the legitimate claim. In so doing, a hitherto legitimate claim has brought the Oromo nationalists in conflict with the Amhara elites due to its symbolic implication; the Oromo nationalists perceive Amharic language as an instrument of Amhara domination of the other ethnic groups including the Oromo.

The last, by no means least, an example of symbolic politics is signified in the issue surrounding the national flag. As recently as on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, the symbolic value of a flag led to an ethnic clash between the Muslim Oromo and the Orthodox Christian followers (who were celebrating epiphany festive in Harar and Dire Dawa towns) that resulted in few casualties from both sides. The bone of contention was about the legitimacy of the flag used during the celebration. The current flag has been practically rejected by the Amhara people and other pro-unity groups and the Orthodox Church has always been using the 'original Ethiopian flag' (green-yellow-red colors without any other symbols or marks on it). It is customary to decorate the streets with the (original) flag on major Orthodox Christian holidays, such as epiphany. Consequently, as the decorations were underway, the *Qeerroo* started removing the flags, followed by a burning ceremony. As they were burning the enemy's flag to ashes, they passionately chanted; "we are burning the symbol of Neftegna, of oppression and ancient regime."<sup>20</sup> To which, expectedly, the "Neftegna" had retaliated in kind.

In a nutshell, as shown above, disagreements on the origin of the two ethnic groups and political history of the country led to negative prejudices. These, in turn, resulted in incompatible narratives and counter-narratives, carefully exploited by ethnic conflict Entrepreneurs by making use of polarized media platforms<sup>21</sup> and political mobilization, culminated in sporadic ethnic conflicts

<sup>15</sup> Among others, a famous Oromo Singer, Kemer Yusuf, released a song entitled "Minilik Bineensa", which portrays Emperor Minilik II, the national hero who routed Italian invaders at the battle of Adwa, as a Wild Beast who committed a genocide against the Oromo People and calls up on all Oromo to fight against any sympathizers of Minilik (indirectly referring to the Amhara). The song is available here: [https://youtu.be/Ajqj\\_3l2Psk](https://youtu.be/Ajqj_3l2Psk).

<sup>16</sup> *Qeerroo* is an informal youth network created during the Oromo Protest against the previous regime. The group was responsible for the October massacre (on October 23, 2019) against the Neftegna in the Oromia Regional State. It carried out the slaughter under the direct order of the well-known Oromo Activist called Jawar Mohammed, who was planning to run for the upcoming election and currently in jail for alleged incitement of violence and other criminal charges on June 29, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> The massive violence that erupted in the Oromia Region following the murder of Artist Hacaalu Hundessa on 29 June 2020, is a clear testament. The youth group carried out the mass murder and looting by targeting the 'Neftegna', based on the feeling that their hero was murdered by the Neftegna people. The investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission clearly pointed out the systematic nature of the conflict. The executive summary of the report is available here: <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-123-people-killed-in-june-july-unrest-76-by-security-forces-attacks-constitute-elements-of-crime-against-humanity-ethiopia-rights-commission/>.

<sup>18</sup> The Qubee generation refers to the young generation who was born during the current regime (since 1991) or studied in their mother tongue, which is *Afaan Oromo*.

<sup>19</sup> With the establishment of the nationalist Amhara political party called National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), the Amhara nationalism, which hitherto had been passive, took a new form and nature mainly designed to counter Oromo ultra-nationalism and to fight against ever growing ethnic violence against the Amhara (Neftegna) people.

<sup>20</sup> These are the words (in *Afaan Oromoo*) the protestors used as they were burning the flag on the same day (translation is mine).

<sup>21</sup> Both the Oromo and Amhara have had mass media used to propagate their narratives and mobilise their followers through Oromia Media Network and Asrat Media, respectively, until they were shut down the government in July 2020. In addition, social media has been serving as the easiest and cheapest platforms to do mass mobilisation, though it has shown a decreasing trend.

between the Amhara and the Oromo ethnic groups.

## MANAGEMENT OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS THROUGH ETHNIC FEDERALISM

To contain ethnic wars and avoid the risk of disintegration of the country, it was originally claimed, ethnic federalism had been adopted. Accordingly, nine regional states (10 states as of July, 2020) and two city administrations were created. In the constitution, the right to unconditional self-determination up to *secession* was recognized.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that no country in the world has guaranteed the right to unconditional self-determination, nor does such right has been envisaged in any of the international human rights instruments. This fact—the fact that Ethiopia has envisioned its own self-destruction—has been neglected by many analysts of the Ethiopian politics. If anything, this strange arrangement federal arrangement, as will be further elaborated below, has institutionalized the prejudices and laid down the foundation for competitive ethnic interactions. Besides, the federal structure has created ethnic homelands and notwithstanding Henry Hale's (Hale, 2004, 179) classification of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism as lacking core ethnic groups, almost all of the regional constitutions reserve the rights of self-administration, including political participation only to the 'owners of the region'. Moreover, the Amhara and Oromia Regional States alone constitute close to 70 percent of the population and hence, parliamentary seats. Thus, in effect, the majority-minority problem has been created and strong incentives to vying for an 'imagined ethnic homeland' is in place.

That being the case, shortly after its adoption, some have hailed the ethnic federal structure as the ingenious move whilst most experts of comparative constitutional law and politics had rung the alarm bells early on. In this regard, it did not take more than a year for Lorch to observe that "...in recognizing ethnicity for what it is; a very powerful issue...They [the Ethiopian people] are sitting on an ethnic *time bomb*. They have come up with a possible solution, which is to tackle it pre-emptively. It is a frightening experiment. Will it work? I do not think anybody knows." (Lorch, 1995, 3, emphasis added). In a similar vein, Cohen opined that 'devolution of power to *large regions reinforces* the demands of some ethnic groups for regional secession or partition (Cohen, 1995, 168). Cohen's concern seems to have been confirmed by Oromo Nationalists' usual rhetoric of secession and the recent surge of statehood quests by various ethnic groups.<sup>23</sup> Writing about the danger of ethnic federalism,

Kefale pointed out that "the adoption of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, unfortunately contributes to the accentuation of ethnic otherness and causes mistrust and at times violent conflicts tearing apart common ties that took several generations to develop" (Kefale, 2009, 5).

The Amhara elites have rejected the ethnic federalism from its inception and still do, but as there were no genuine deliberations during the adoption of the Constitution, the Amhara People feel they were not represented in the process. One of the scholars who closely observed the adoption process of the Constitution succinctly stated the following:

*Many Amhara rejects ethnic federalism and argue for the "historic unity of Ethiopia and for the Amharas' right to live and to act politically in all parts of the country (...). A right of secession will stimulate a surge of nationalism, and it is inconsistent with a competitive politics under federal arrangements: rather than practice the political art of compromise, some or most opposition parties will simply threaten to leave the state (...). Article 39 provisions on secession seem like a recipe for disaster, at least without a redraft or an interpretation (Brietzke, 1995, 28-35).*

The Amhara and other pro-unity camp rejected the Constitution, not only because of its exclusionary adoption process but also because the new Constitution was nothing more than TPLF's Party Manifesto. That is, the Constitution has been suffering from a legitimacy crisis. The Constitution, especially the secession clause, is earnestly loved by the extremist Oromo elites; while on the contrary, it is ardently loathed by the Amhara and pro-unity camps. The Amhara strongly defends the unity of Ethiopia mainly because they believe that they disproportionately contributed to the long process of building modern Ethiopia. Here again, the symbolic politics is given constitutional clothing, in the sense that the same document has different symbolic meaning for the two ethnic groups, not to mention other ethnic groups such as the Tigray Liberation Front (the TPLF).

It has to be noted that ethnic-based conflicts in Ethiopia, both in terms of its nature and magnitude, have intensified after the ethnic federalism came into force, which has caused massive internal displacement<sup>24</sup> and ethnic cleansing as highlighted in section two above. This argument is in tune with Wilkinson's assertion that India's

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consequence of the federal arrangement and years of sustained narratives of 'ethnic independence' through ethnic entitlement to homeland—homogenisation of regions.

<sup>24</sup> Ethiopian Human Rights Council Report (2017, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia). The report indicates that *systematic* and well organised ethnic based attacks against Amhara in different Regional States, including Oromia, have *not been reported* before the introduction of ethnic based federal structure came into existence. Moreover, the displacements and ethnic attacks were undertaken by the perpetrators emboldened by the 'we-feeling' of belongingness to the region and 'the others' who are outsiders and at times, invaders; all provided in the notion of 'self-determination' enshrined in the (in)famous constitution.

<sup>22</sup> Article 39(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia provides that "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession."

<sup>23</sup> Over the last 2 years, all the major ethnic groups in the Southern Nations and Nationalities have asked for their own regional autonomy (ethnic region), of which the Sidama people has secured an independent region while the claims of others are still on hold. These claims are not random phenomena, but the

increased consociational character resulted in more inter-ethnic violence (Wilkinson, 2000, 767). Consequently, the ethnic federalism has embroiled the relationship between the two ethnic groups instead of pacifying it, as it was ostensibly claimed. After all, it was naïve to institutionalize ethnic prejudices exactly in the same year (1994) when the former Yugoslavia with similar federal structure was disintegrating and not far away from Ethiopia, Rwanda was experiencing the worst genocide in Africa. Thence, if we have unprecedented ethnic conflict in Ethiopia which springs from symbolic politics of the constitutional design and the federal arrangement, it is a conflict by design.

An alternative argument can be made as to the enabling environment for the ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. The liberalization with less centralised decision-making process brought about by the current regime has, notably, empowered the ethnic entrepreneurs to play the ethnic card. Nevertheless, it has been possible only within the context of the preexisting institutionalized prejudices, symbolic politics, and strong ethnic consciousness.

The other structural defect of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism is an election system along ethnic line. Not surprisingly, out of the registered political parties operating in Ethiopia, only less than 4 percent are multi-ethnic in their programmes and composition. Elections in ethnically divided society are nothing more than having rounds of ethnic census. In this regard, Ishiyama correctly observed that "...elections in ethnically divided societies will produce *census elections*" that are inimical to democracy. This is because such elections tend to create impermeable blocs that detract from inter-ethnic accommodation" (Ishiyama, 2010, 290). He further observed that, based on empirical research, a partisan election is higher in Ethiopia as compared to other African Countries. It would have been extremely surprising had the result been different. It is unlikely that this trend will change as long as the ethnic federalism is in place and unless the electoral system is changed to incentivise (or legally require) political parties to organise themselves in multi-ethnic form such that transition towards politics based on ideology and competition of ideas will be possible. Democratisation in a divided society such as Ethiopia requires an innovative electoral system, in which inter-ethnic compromises and coalition should be a norm and that aims at mitigating the recurrent risk of inclusion and exclusion from politics, can contribute to an endeavor to manage ethnic conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that ethnic identity is very fluid and intermittent in the Ethiopian context. To this end, the case of the Amhara and the Oromo ethnic groups has been critically discussed. It has specifically argued that much of the conflict between the Amhara and the Oromo ethnic groups have stemmed from competing

narratives about ethnic origin, the roles of the respective groups in state-building and contested political history of Ethiopia. These competing narratives are accompanied by reciprocal negative prejudices, which are reinforced by an unbridled nationalistic passion of the ethno-nationalists and the institutionalised prejudices in the constitution and other documents. These, in turn, morphed into symbolic politics that has been relentlessly manipulated by ethnic entrepreneurs. Accordingly, it suggests that the starting point to bring about national reconciliation and heal the divided society is by changing the incompatible narratives and "replacing the inter-group symbolic politics of ethnic chauvinism with a politics that rewards moderation" (Kaufman, 2006); strengthen the ongoing work of the Truth Commission and giving transitional justice a proper chance (Teshome 2020); making substantial amendments to the Constitution that suffers from "legitimacy deficit" (Hessebon, 2013); restructuring the federations territorially and make people, instead of ethnicity, the sovereign since the "Constitution has tried to reify something which is by nature fluid and shifting: ethnic identity" (Abbink 1997, 172); and more generally, bring about national reconciliation before embarking on other political programmes to avoid recurrent ethnic conflicts and the risk of state disintegration. Indeed, it has been observed that the chances for continued state unity, particularly in divided societies, are high when the ethnic federal systems are divided into many small units to avoid core ethnic regions (Hale 2004, 193) and in the Ethiopian context, to further neutralise the quest for unceasing ethnic homelands.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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