The Invention of Amhara Nationalism: Ethnicity and National Identity in Ethiopia

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother, brothers, sisters, and the memory of my father.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAPO: All-Amhara People’s Organization
AEUP: All Ethiopian Unity Party
ALF: Afar Liberation Front
AMC: Agricultural Marketing Corporation
ANDM: Amhara National Democratic Movement, EPRDF member
AESM: All Ethiopian Socialist Movement
CELU: Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions
COPWE: Commission for Organising the Workers’ Party of Ethiopia
CSA: Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia
EDU: Ethiopian Democratic Union
ELF: Eritrean Liberation Front
ELF-PLF: Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Forces
ELM: Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF: Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF: Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPLO: The Ethiopian People’s Liberation Organization
EPRA: The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Army
EPRP: Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party
ESM: Ethiopian Student Movement
ESANA: Ethiopian Students Association in North America
ESUE: Ethiopian Students Union in Europe
ESUNA: Ethiopian Students Union in North America
FDRE: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
IFLO: Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia
LPP: Liberal Progressive Party
MEISON: Amharic acronym for AESM
MLLT: Marxist Leninist League of Tigray
NDRA: National Democratic Revolution
NUEUS: The National Union of Ethiopian University Students
OLF: Oromo Liberation Front
OPDO: Oromo Peoples’ Democratic Organization, EPRDF member
ONC: Oromo National Congress
PDRE: People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
PMAC: Provisional Military Administration Council
PMG: Provisional Military Government
POMOA: Provincial Office for Mass Organisational Affairs
PPG: Provisional People’s Government
SEPDF: South Ethiopia People’s Democratic Front
SNNP: Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples
SALF: Somali Abo Liberation Front
TGE: Transitional Government of Ethiopia
Tigray Liberation Front (TLF).
TPLF: Tigray People’s Liberation Front
UCU: University College Union
UOSOE: Union of Oromo Students Organization in Europe
UCAA: The University College of Addis Ababa
USUAA: University Students Union of Addis Ababa
WPE: Workers’ Party of Ethiopia
WSLF: Western Somali Liberation Front
NOTES ON NAMES AND TRANSLITERATION

Ethiopians do not have family surnames. They are known by their personal name followed by their father’s name. The patronymic exists only to prevent confusion with namesakes. I followed this tradition, which is becoming widely accepted in Ethiopianist writing, both in the body and reference section of my dissertation. Thus, “Kassa Hailu” appears in that order and not “Hailu, Kassa” in the bibliography, and in the second mention in the body, it is “Kassa” not “Hailu.” Ethiopian proper nouns are spelled in variant ways and there is simply no standard to follow. For instance both “Shoa” and “Shewa” or “Haile-Selassie” and “Haile Sellassie” are widely used and my choice of the former in both instances is purely random. But I have tried to be consistent except when citing the work of others. And the same is true of transliterating Ethiopian languages into the Latin alphabet. There is no generally accepted system and I have decided against diacritics for the sake of simplicity.
ABSTRACT

THE INVENTION OF AMHARA NATIONALISM: ETHNICITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ETHIOPIA

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George Mason University, 2010

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This is an inquiry into the making of Amhara nationalism within a broader context of ethnicity and national identity in Ethiopia and the ways the two are articulated together. My dissertation problematises the widely-held view that equates Amhara ethnicity and nationalism with the Amharic language. This view conflates language and ethnicity and privileges purported objective markers of ethnic identity over boundaries that are contingent and structured by social formations. In contrast, my research focuses on the political manifestation of ethnicity and nationalism which, while deriving from objective material interests, is socially defined and historically determined. I argue that Amhara nationalism did not emerge out of ethnic bondages of collective myth, memories and symbols but rather as a reaction to ethno-political Othering. My dissertation traces the political discourse on Amhara nationality to the radical Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and analyzes the historical developments since then which led to the
emergence and eventual institutionalization of Amhara nationalism through the establishment of an Amhara National State.
INTRODUCTION

Many Ethio-nationalists deny that there is Amhara nationalism and ethnic identity, claiming Amharaness is an imposition from above, a recent political fad that will vanish once ethno-nationalists are removed from the helm of power. Ethno-nationalists and their partisan scholars, on the other hand, assume a primordial Amhara ethnic and national identity. My dissertation attempts to dispel these widely-held essentialist views, maintaining that Amhara ethnic and national identity, although emergent and conflicted in so many ways, does indeed, exist. My study argues that Amhara nationalism is not the continuation of Amhara ethnicity, which did not exist until recently. Rather, the two are inseparable. Both Amhara ethnicity and nationalism are recent inventions, social constructs, the effects of history and politics, reactions to being Othered, counter gaze.

The making of Amhara nationalism is not merely the result of imposition from above, as Ethio-nationalists claim. The majority of the Amhara people may have had little say in the creation of the Amhara National State. But Nations are not made by a decree. The making of the Amhara nation, as opposed to the juridical State, was and still is a contested and negotiated process. Amharaness is validated and affirmed when inhabitants of the region begin to think and live the Amhara nation. National identity is produced and maintained through cultural practices grounded in the popular and
everyday life. And in this realm of performing national identity, the Amhara had and do have a say. People make choices and make decisions. In other words, there is agency although, as Marx showed us, always burdened and constrained by history.¹

The argument about the imposition of Amharaness from above is, in fact, suggestive of the novelty of Amhara nationalism, which does not rest in its inventedness as all nationalisms are invented. Rather, unlike most nation-formation experiences, Amhara nationness is novel because it is reactive and not imaginative. Historically, ethno-nationalist movements emerge with the agenda of either forming an independent state, in which case the nation is imagined, or of seeking equitable representation in the national government, a demand for power-sharing. In its inception, Amhara nationalism was about neither of these -- it emerged as a reaction to ethnic *Othering*, as a political self-defence to the new reality of ethnic-based politics.

While using Amhara nationalism as an exemplar of ethno-national identity formation, my study generally addresses the question of ethnicity and national identity in Ethiopia. The inquiry into the making of Amhara nationalism is closely related to the question of Ethiopian national identity and whether or not it is articulated with or against ethnicities. And this requires a broader understanding of Ethiopian history, or more appropriately, the ways that history is interpreted and reinterpreted by the different actors.

¹ He observes that individuals “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and He observes that individuals “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited.” Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: Post Modern Interpretation*, ed. Mark Cowling & James Martin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 19.
For this purpose, my study revisits the historiographic debates on Ethiopian statehood and national identification.

Ethiopian history and state formation is anomalous. Aside from a brief occupation by Italy at the outset of World War II, Ethiopia has never been colonized. Far from it, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century it effectively competed with European powers in the scramble for land by forcefully incorporating populations now living in the southern and eastern parts of the country into the Ethiopian empire. An Amhara ethnic/national group is said to have played the leading role in this enterprise. Thus, modernist theories that attempt to explain the advent of nationalism in Africa within the context of colonialism do not strictly apply to Ethiopia. Or if they do, ironically it is only because of Ethiopia’s own participation in the scramble for land.

Contemporary academic and political discourses on ethnicity and national identity in Ethiopia are generally formulated within two opposing paradigms that could be termed as Ethio-nationalism and ethno-nationalism. These views became particularly polarized since 1991 when the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), seized state power and subsequently institutionalized ethno-nationalist politics. The EPRDF radicalized the institutional structures of the Ethiopian state by introducing a federal system based on ethno-linguistic identities. In stark contrast to the monarchical state, which appropriated a primordial interpretation of the empire-nation that stressed its historic and Judo-Christian cultural roots, and the nationalist military dictatorship which pretended socialism, the EPRDF adopted an ethnic-centred conceptualization of the nation, the state, and citizenship.
Ethio-nationalism imagines an idealized form of national identity which transcends ethnicity, while ethno-nationalism perceives Ethiopianness through ethnic participation. If the Ethio-nationalists emphasize national identity through common history and cultural assimilation, ethno-nationalists envision ethnic ownership as a way of forging national unity based on cultural or ethnic diversity. According to its opponents, ethno-nationalism will lead to the fragmentation and eventual dissolution of the Ethiopian state. Conversely, Ethio-nationalism is seen as privileging the ethnic identity of the dominant group through whose language and cultural practices the national symbolic markers are constructed, as was the case with the supposed Amhara rule since the time of Yekunno-Amlak or his modern incarnate Menelik.

However, both viewpoints share in common an essentialist view of what it means to be a nation or an ethnic group and how national identity is articulated. For the Ethio-nationalists, supra-ethnic Ethiopianness has always been a permanent fixture in the nation’s collective memory; the meaning of national identity is always fixed, never negotiated across ethnic lines. For ethno-nationalists, who conflate language and ethnicity, people who shared the same mother-tongue have always been distinct nationalities even if or even when they were not conscious that they constitute a group, as was the case with the Amhara.

My study brings to light the tension and contradiction in the way the nation, national identity, and ethnicity are imagined and articulated. To that end I will draw on Cultural Studies’ understanding of identity formations, particularly as reiterated by Stuart Hall, as well as on a wide canvas of constructionist views applied to the analysis of
ethnicity and nationalism. These insights and the critical debates surrounding them feature prominently throughout my work. But, I have presented below a brief theoretical summary in order to situate my study from the outset within the methodological practice of constructionism and the intellectual tradition of Cultural Studies.

Unstable Identities

Cultural Studies destabilizes the older notion of identity as stable, coherent and unitary. It rather conceives identity formation as relational, contextual and never already formed but always under transformation. Frantz Fanon first introduced the idea of identity as relational to ethnic studies through the psychoanalytic concept of the Other when he recalled how the gaze of the Other -- a white child pointing her finger at him and telling her mother “look, a Negro!” -- framed him as a Black man.\(^2\) Similarly, Edward Said maintains that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient,” adding that European cultural hegemony established itself by positing a European identity superior to all others.\(^3\)

Said elaborates on the notion of Otherness when he says the construction of social identity “involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us,’” adding that far from “a static thing then, identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a

contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies.” Unlike the “naive belief in the certain positivity and unchanging historicity of a culture, a self, and national identity,” Said observes insightfully that “human identity is not only not natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright.”

Stuart Hall for his part draws on Fanon and Said as well as Marx, Freud, Derrida, Gramsci, and Althusser, among others, to conceptualize identity as fluid, relational and contingent. To engage with the question of culture and power, domination and resistance, Cultural Studies problematises identity as a matter of becoming rather than being, an arbitrary closure, an “invention” always created under social pressure. Our identity is not inexorably tied to our past, real or imaginary; rather, it is subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. There is no single, stable or homogenous ethnic or national identity; it is contingent and structured by social formations.

As Hall points out, Marx’s insight about our choices being constrained by historical circumstances was among the first attempts to disrupt the notion of a stable identity. Marx reminds us that “there are always conditions to identity which the subject,

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4 Said, Orientalism, 332.
5 Ibid.
cannot construct,” that we are partly made by the histories we make: “We are always constructed in part by the practices and discourses that make us, such that we cannot find within ourselves as individual selves or subjects of identities the point of origin from which discourse or history or practice originates.”

Hall also identifies Freud’s discovery of the unconscious (the self cannot completely know its own identity), Saussurian linguistics (one is always inside the system of language that partly speaks him/her, thus there is no self in full control), and the Nietzschian tradition of questioning notions of absolute knowledge or truth (what becomes of the idea of “true self” if truth and objectivity are implicated in the game of knowledge and power) as the other disrupters of the logic of a stable identity or “true self.” Hall further draws on post-modernist insights and feminist theories to deconstruct the notion of cultural identity as being inescapably tied to our past.

Cultural identities have histories and undergo transformations; and far from “being externally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous ‘play,’ of history, culture, and power.” As Hall reminds us, cultural identity is a “cover story” for making us think that we stayed in the same place. We may not do away with the cover story “without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.” But we can reconceptualise it as a process of identification that happens overtime, “that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference.”

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10 Ibid., 340-41.
ethnicity is nothing but our way of thinking “the relationship between identity and difference,” between positionality in history or traditions and different discourses. My analysis of Amhara ethnic and national identity is informed by Cultural Studies’ insights on group identity that I have summarized above.

**Ethnicity and Nationalism: Constructionist Perspectives**

Constructionism does not dictate one single approach towards the study of ethnicity and nationalism. However, Constructivists in general put emphasis on contingency and flux of ethnic and national identities. They perceive ethnicity and nationalism within the realm of social and political processes, as a product of human agency and a creative social act. If primordialism sees ethnicity and national identity as natural, fixed, homogenous and inevitable, constructionism perceives ethnic and national identities as contingent, heterogeneous, and subject to change, as the product of human interaction, history and politics.

Modernist theories of nationalism in general, which hold that nationalism is a modern phenomenon inseparably connected with the rise of the modern centralizing state, are constructivists in orientation. Of these, the ones advanced by Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson proved to be the most influential. Gellner says “nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across...”

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politic ones,”16 and Anderson conceives the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”17 Both stress that “nations are ideological constructions seeking to forge a link between (self-defined) cultural group and state.”18

Whereas the idea of the nation as socially constructed is common to all forms of modernism, constructionism places emphasis on social engineering and the important role that elites play in mobilizing the masses.19 It asserts that nationalist movements are organised, led and ideologically inspired by elites, usually the intelligentsia. The theory of elite competition often helps to explain how nationalism arises out of specific types of interactions between the leadership of centralizing states and elites from non-dominant ethnic groups.20 But at the same time, constructionist theories recognize ethno-nationalist mobilisation as deriving from objective material interests.21 And my study broadly understands material interest to include cultural elements that have material significance and affect the quality of life.22

Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” is a particularly useful and versatile constructivist tool that can be applied to analyse collective identities other

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20 See, for example, Paul Brass, Ethnicity and Nationalism (London: Sage, 1991).
22 For instance, being a non-Christian and non-Amharic speaker was a big socio-economic disadvantage in pre-revolution Ethiopia.
than the nation.\textsuperscript{23} Although Anderson primarily developed the concept in relation to the origin and spread of nationalism, his formulation allows for the “possibility of employing the concept of ‘imagining’ for ethnicity as well.”\textsuperscript{24} As Anderson himself argues, “communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined” differing only “by the style in which they are imagined.”\textsuperscript{25} As I will show in subsequent pages, Anderson’s conception of “imagined community” becomes more useful when tempered with insights from Partha Chatterjee, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Samir Amin.

A constructionist view of ethnicity is generally believed to have emerged with the publication in 1969 of \textit{Ethnic Groups and Boundaries}, one of the most influential books on ethnicity. The seven essays by as many Scandinavian anthropologists, edited by Fredrik Barth, established the concept of ethnic identity as fluid and relational and anticipated post-modernist theoretical insights. In the introduction, Barth lays out the central idea around which the essays are structured claiming that it is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.”\textsuperscript{26}

For Barth and his colleagues, ethnicity is defined by continuous negotiations of boundaries between groups of peoples, and that ethnic identity is a matter of self-ascription and ascription by others through interaction. Therefore, their approach emphasises the relational aspect and the interconnectedness of ethnic identities: “ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Paris Yeros “Introduction: On the Uses and Implications of Constructivism,” , 3.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 6.
\end{itemize}
entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.”

According to Barth and his colleagues, the so called objective cultural markers attributed to groups by analysts are irrelevant in the absence of social boundaries through which a group maintains its identity by signalling membership and exclusion. In other words, “cultural differences relate to ethnicity if and only if such differences are made relevant in social interaction.” Karl Knutsson, one of the contributors, maintains that any concept of an ethnic group defined on the basis of “cultural content” is unproductive, adding that the “cultural stuff” gains significance only when it becomes part of the individual’s or group’s strategies for increasing resources or social status. Thomas Eriksen reinforces the above insight in Andersonian terminology: “The imagined community does not have an existence unless it is being imagined actively by its members.”

The theoretical insights from *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* are central to my analysis of the making of Amhara nationalism. Despite the fact that anthropologists and historians have been writing for decades about the so called Amhara nationality, and while the “cultural stuff” of Amharaness -- language, custom -- has been there for

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centuries, the social boundary that defines Amhara ethnicity and nationness emerged only at a specific historical juncture marked by particular form of power struggle which created the conditions for Amharic-speaking people to identify themselves as Amhara in relation to several other nationalities who had gained ethnic consciousness earlier.31

Cultural Studies’ perspectives on identity formation and a social constructivist understanding of ethnicity and nationness, as summarized above, help to “leach out”32 the essentialism that permeates the political and academic discourse on Ethiopian ethnic and national identities and promote the view that ethnic and national consciousness is not something fixed. Rather, it is the product of social and economic changes. Social identities, be it ethnic or national, are constantly produced, reproduced and redefined in a political struggle through an array of relations, which are reflective of power structures and control.33 And when power relations change in a given society, as the Ethiopian experience shows, so do ethnic or national imaginings.

My study contributes to the body of knowledge on ethnic studies and also aspires to advance our understanding of ethnic conflicts and power relations in politically volatile Horn of Africa. I would hope that insights from my dissertation that conceive ethnic and national identities as relational and contingent, that is having specific historical, social and political contexts, will help temper the rigidity, and break the gridlock, of

31 Ethiopianist discourse on “the national question” has been greatly influenced by Marxist-Leninist thought. As a result, “nationality” is the preferred term to “ethnic groups” in tune with traditional Marxist-Leninist literature. I use both terms interchangeably.
current academic and political discourses among scholars and opinion makers in the region.

Chapters’ Outline

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first provides a general overview of conflicting Ethiopian historiographies in order to help us understand how the debates on ethnicity and national identity in Ethiopia have been framed. The second argues against the widely-held view about a primordial Amhara ethnic identity. The argument in this chapter maintains that “Amhara” meant different things to different groups and people. It, however, suggests that in the discourse on political domination in pre-revolution Ethiopia, Amharaness makes a better analytical sense if conceived as a status group within the Weberian tradition.

The third chapter traces the discourse on Amhara nationality to the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s. It also analyses how radical reforms implemented after the 1974 revolution and the seventeen-year military dictatorship in different ways contributed to the end of multi-national opposition -- the only form of opposition the Amhara could participate in --, leaving ethno-nationalism as the only available avenue to resistance. The fourth chapter examines the rise and triumph of major ethno-nationalist movements in reaction to which Amhara ethnic consciousness began to emerge. And the final chapter discusses the emergence of Amhara nationalism and the institutionalization of ethnic-centred imagining of Ethiopian national identity.
My analysis makes a distinction between language and ethnic groups or generally between objective cultural markers and ethnic/national consciousness. Thus, terms like “Amhara,” “Oromo” or “Tigre” are used in order to avoid cumbersome expressions like “Amharic-speaking people” or “Oromo-speaking people” and do not designate ethnicity unless specified or becomes clear from context. And this holds true even for the Tigre, who had acquired ethnic consciousness earlier than others. Since I am arguing that Amhara ethnic and national identity has emerged only recently, it should be obvious that in the historical discussion “Amhara” refers to a language group and not ethnicity.

It might help to explain at this point the use of the term “invention” in my dissertation title. Ernest Gellner declares that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”\(^{34}\) Anderson criticizes Gellner whom he says “assimilates ‘invention’ to ‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity’, rather than to ‘imagining’ and ‘creation’,”\(^{35}\) I am using the term “invention” in the sense Gellner used it but do so without suggesting in any way that Amhara nationalism was “false” or “artificial.” I believe “invention” aptly express Amhara nationalism, which was reactive, fast in emerging, and had a lot to do with social engineering.

I must finally confess that I write with the “objectivity” of the scholar and the unabashed passion of the “native” about a land where I was born and raised in, and am deeply attached to but feel conflicted about. Perhaps this is as it should be. I cannot be impersonal about Ethiopia or some of the historical events that I have lived through,

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which partly help define my character and politics. I am sure that I’ve done my level best to hide this conflicted feeling, although, in doing so, I may have accentuated it -- so much for the confessionary claims of reflexivity, distancing and depersonalization.
CHAPTER ONE
HISTORY, THE STATE AND NATIONAL IMAGINING

Only so far as history serves life will we serve it.

Friedrich Nietzsche

While providing a general overview of Ethiopian history, the aim of this chapter is to highlight the history of the amalgamation of various peoples into the Ethiopian state and how this history is interpreted and reinterpreted in Ethiopian historiographies. Ultimately, the rise of ethnic consciousness and the nationalist movements it has engendered, as well as the conception and contestation of ethnic and national identities all relate to the making of the Ethiopian empire. The emergence of Amhara nationalism and the contested meanings of ethnic and national identities in Ethiopia can be properly analysed only within the framework of such broader historical understanding. Following a brief general remarks about Ethiopia, the chapter is divided in three sections: the first, on histories and nationalist reconstructions, the second, on the making of the Ethiopian empire, and the third on the rise of absolutism.

Located in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is bordered by Djibouti in the east, Somalia in the south-east, Kenya in the south, Sudan in the west, and its former province Eritrea in the north and north-east. With a population close to eighty-six million people,
Ethiopia is Africa’s second most populous country after Nigeria. The population of Ethiopian is extremely heterogeneous, speaking over eighty languages that belong to four linguistic groups. Three of these language groups, namely Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic, belong to one of the world’s super language families, Afro-asiatic. A forth group of languages is classified under a separate linguistic group known as Nilo-Saharan. Linguistically, Ethiopia ranks among the most diversified countries in the world.

According to Abrham Demoz:

The evidence is quite strong in fact that Ethiopia, being now the area of highest diversity, may have been the point of origin and diffusion of one of the great language superfamilies of the world, namely the Afroasiatic. Three of the members of this superfamily, Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic, with 8, 30, and 25 languages respectively, have been well represented in Ethiopia from the earliest periods of history, and two of them, Cushitic and Omotic, are represented nowhere else.36

Christianity and Islam were introduced in the region in the fourth and seventh century respectively. Sixty-one percent of the population is Christian while thirty-two percent professes Islam. Some six percent of the population practice indigenous religions. There is also a community in northern Ethiopia that professes Judaism, though the number of Ethiopian Jews has dwindled after tens of thousands of them left for Israel in the past two decades. The great majority of the Amharic and Tigrigna speaking northerners are orthodox Christians. Islam in Ethiopia is not associated with any

particular language group although some regions like Harrege and Bale are predominantly Muslim.37

The Semites, particularly the Amharic and the Tigrigna speaking people in the central and northern part of the country, respectively, have played a central role in Ethiopia’s history dominating succeeding empires and kingdoms that emerged in the region. Amharic and Tigrigna are related to Ge’ez, the oldest of the Semitic languages, and Amharic is the official language of the country. Of the Cushitic-speaking peoples of Ethiopia, the Oromo constitute the largest language group in the country. It is widely believed that the Oromo “began to migrate from the south in the sixteenth century, and latter settled over large parts of the country.”38

Ethiopia, also known to the outside world as Abyssinia, is an ancient land whose past can be traced to pre-historic times. In fact, for the scientific world, Ethiopia is best known as the region where humankind is believed to have first evolved. In October 2009, palaeontologist revealed the skeleton of 4.4 million year-old primate nick-named Ardi, after the species *Ardipithecus ramidus*. Ardi was discovered 17 years ago in middle Awash Valley, Ethiopia, the same region where paleoanthropologists had unearthed thirty years earlier the skeleton of what was then considered the oldest known hominid, whom they named Lucy.

38 Ibid., 5. However, Mohammed Hassen in *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A history 1570-1860*, (Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 1990) asserts that the Oromo had settled in and around Shoa, central Ethiopia, before the fourteenth century. But the evidence he has provided to support his claim was generally found to be unreliable. See book reviews of *The Oromo of Ethiopia* by Harold Marcus in *Ethiopian Review* June 1992, 34; and Guluma Gemeda in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 25 (Nov. 1992): 93-95.
Scientifically dubbed *Australopithecus Afarensis* and popularly known as *Dinkenesh* to Ethiopians, Lucy is believed to be three and a half million years old, a million years younger than Ardi.\(^3\) In the evolutionary sequence, *Ardipithecus* comes first followed by *Australopithecus* and then *Homo*. Many fragments of bones, teeth and parts of the skull of hominids dating back to millions of years as well as the earliest chipped stone artefacts were also discovered in different parts of Ethiopia. While the ancient character of the land and people of the region is taken for granted, the Ethiopian state is contested. The question at the centre of recent debates in Ethiopian historiography relates to how old the Ethiopian state is and the nature of its dominion.

History that perceives the Ethiopian state as ancient is associated with Ethiopian nationalists and their assumptions about supra-ethnic national identity. Critical historiography also acknowledges the long history of the Ethiopian state without subscribing to the essentialist views of national identity. Revisionist history, on the other hand, espoused mainly by ethno-nationalist scholars, denies the long tradition of the Ethiopian state. It challenges the notion of Ethiopian national identity claiming that Ethiopia was an empire state comprised of several nations under an Amhara hegemonic rule. This claim, which imagines both an Amhara ethnic and national identity, traces it origin to the Ethiopian student movement in the 1960s and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three. For the moment, I will concentrate on how Ethiopian national identity, one of the focuses of my work, is represented and contested in Ethiopian historiographies and nationalist reconstructions.

\(^3\) In Amharic *Dinkenesh* means “you are amazing” or “you are wonderful.”
1.1. Histories and Nationalist Reconstructions

This section deals with the theoretical debates in relation to the Ethiopian state and national identity and how these were understood and contested in mainstream, critical and revisionist historiographies. Since history is the story of the past told in a way it makes sense to the present, nationalism can only encourage and thrive on the construction of national histories which foster a sense of collective identity. This does not mean that nationalist historiography necessarily fabricates historical accounts. Sometimes it does, but when it does not, it conveniently rearranges or reinterprets, and at times completely omits histories to justify nationalist claims. Selective amnesia is a characteristic of nationalism, which is “partly an effect of the totalizing and homogenizing projects of state formation.”

National solidarity is reinforced by erasing memories of past atrocities from the collective consciousness as well as through narratives of a “heritage rooted in an immemorial past” and the cult of the ancestors.

Earnest Renan points out that national unity is often “effected by means of brutality,” and that forgetting the actual past or “historical error” is indispensible for the creation and continuity of the nation. In a sense, historical inquiry into the past may constitute “a danger for the principle of nationality.”

41 Ibid., 387.
similar point – that historical knowledge or truth just for the sake of it is worthless if it does not advance life in some ways – when he said “an excess of history is detrimental to life.”

National history, even when supposedly undisputed, is not necessarily invoked the way it happened. For instance, American history remembers the 1861-65 hostilities “as a great ‘civil’ war between ‘brothers’ rather than between – as they briefly were – two sovereign nation-states.” In histories, symbols as well as commemorations, the Civil War is often represented as a “family conflict” thus displacing the idea that one of the causes of the South was the defence of slavery and transforming “social and political conflict into a family saga.” The metaphor of the “family conflict” allows for “a sweeter reconciliation between the North and the South, creating a stronger bond and a more unified nation.”

Nationalism uses history anachronistically to justify a purported long tradition of the nation. Benedict Anderson provides us with some examples that clearly illustrate such practices. Among the first French historians, Jules Michelet “claimed to speak on behalf of large numbers of anonymous dead people” by interpreting their death as self-sacrifice for the nation “even when these sacrifices were not understood as such by the victims.” English history books teach children about William the Conqueror, the “great founding father” of England, though they are not “informed that William spoke no English, indeed

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43 Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life, 14.
44 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 201.
45 Paul Shackel, Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape, (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003), xvi.
46 Ibid.
47 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 198. Emphasis his.
could not have done so, since the English language did not exist in his epoch.”

It is for this kind of conveniently made-up or adopted history that the term “invented tradition” was coined by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger:

“Invented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.

Craig Calhoun elaborates on how nationalists engage in Whig historiography, history which renders favourable accounts of how nationals came to be and who they are. He gives the example of Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*, which reconstructs Indian identity retroactively by transforming both Dravidians and Mughals into Indians. Similarly, Pakistani history textbooks trace the nation’s history to the rise of Islam. Calhoun concludes: “By its nature, nationalist historiography – that which tells the story of the nation, however accurate the facts it cites, and whether or not it is overtly bellicose or ethnocentric – embeds actors and events in the history of the nation whether or not they had any conception of that nation.”

Traditional Ethiopian historiography tried to construct a primordialist Ethiopian identity by equating the generic and Biblical “Ethiopia” with the far more limited geographical and political entity located in the Horn of Africa. In this view, there is

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48 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 201.
50 Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism*, (Minneapolis: UP of Minnesota, 1997), 51.
continuity between present-day Ethiopia and the one that the pre-Christian Greek historian Diodorous Siculus wrote about: “The Ethiopians conceived themselves to be of greater antiquity than any other nation, and it is probable that, born under the sun’s path, its warmth may have ripened them sooner than other men.”\textsuperscript{51} Siculus further observes that Ethiopians “supposed themselves to be the inventors of Worship, of festivals, of solemn assemblies, of sacrifice, and every religious practice”\textsuperscript{52}

Perhaps the ancient dark-skinned people talked about by the Greeks and Romans were Ethiopians as much as the ancient Romans were Italians. As Donald Levine, among others, explains, for “Greeks and Romans generally, Ethiopians meant dark-skinned peoples who lived south of Egypt. At times the reference was so vague as to include peoples from West Africa, Arabia, and India. At times it was more localized, referring to the Nubian kingdom of Kush, with its capital first at Napata and later a Meroe.”\textsuperscript{53} Levine further observes that what “was constant was that the name Ethiopian denoted a person of dark color --literally, of burnt face -- and that it connoted, above all, remoteness.”\textsuperscript{54} And Bahru Zewde observes that the “term Ethiopia is of Greek origin, and in classical times was used as a generic and rather diffuse designation for the African landmass to the south of Egypt.”\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Quoted in Robins Cohen’s \textit{Global Diasporas} (Seattle: UP of Washington, 1997), 37-8.
\item[52] Ibid.,38.
\item[54] Ibid.
\item[55] Bahru, \textit{A History of Modern Ethiopia}, 1.
\end{footnotes}
Nonetheless, traditional historical accounts relate the beginning of Ethiopian history to the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon of Israel.\textsuperscript{56} According to legend, the Queen, whom Ethiopians call Makeda and claim as their own, is said to have conceived a child from King Solomon during her visit. And the offspring of the royal union, Menelik, is believed to have begun the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia. He is also credited with stealing the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem, when he visited his father, and with bringing it to Ethiopia where it now purportedly resides at the Church of Mary in Axum.\textsuperscript{57} For centuries, the kings who ruled over Ethiopia, up to the last monarch Haile-Selassie, claimed, in one way or another, to be the descendants of Menelik.

Seton-Watson suggests that the “legend that the Ethiopian dynasties were descendants of King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba may be based on reality.”\textsuperscript{58} Although in the minority, he was not alone in expressing such sentiment. In fact, according to Paul Henze, Israel not only believes the story to be true, but actually designed its policy on the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel based on it:

Since 1975 the official Israeli view has been that the Ethiopian Beta Israel are direct ethnic descendants of original Jewish emigrants to Ethiopia, thereby justifying their immigration to Israel under the Law of Return. According to this theory the first emigrants would indeed have accompanied the son of King

\textsuperscript{56} The account which links the history of Ethiopian kings to the House of Israel is recorded in the \textit{Kebra Negest} or “Glory of Kings,” the national epic during monarchical rule written in Ge’ez in the early fourteen century.
\textsuperscript{57} In \textit{The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant} (New York: Crown, 1992), Graham Hancock, a sociologist and journalist, makes a fascinating, and not an altogether implausible, argument that the Ark of the Covenant indeed resides in Ethiopia.
Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Menelik I, others would have followed, and a major wave would probably have come at the time of the Roman conquest of Palestine.  

Henze is quick to add that scholarly “effort has produced no evidence whatsoever to support these hypotheses.” But as Nietzsche puts it, historiography is not always capable of “distinguishing between a monumental past and a mythical fiction.”

Interestingly, a group of archaeologists from the University of Hamburg claimed in 2008 to have found in northern Ethiopia the remains of the palace of the Queen of Sheba. While the claim awaits further investigation, the important point is that true or fiction, the Solomon-Sheba story, which traces Ethiopian statehood to the time of the prophets, for long was taken seriously by the royalty, nobility, clergy and traditional historians, as well as millions of the Christian faithful. Even the revised Ethiopian constitution of 1955 claimed that “the ruling line descended from Menelik I, the son of Makeda, queen of Ethiopia, and King Solomon.”

This legend was no longer officially sanctioned after 1974, when a popular revolution brought an end to monarchic rule and the country became secular. But the

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60 Ibid.


62 The German researchers, lead by Helmut Ziegert, have been digging in Aksum since 1999. They claimed to have discovered not only the ancient palace but also the altar that may have once held the Ark of the Covenant, a claim contested by many archaeologists who believe archaeology should not concern itself with myth-chasing. The critics further maintain even if the Ark were found it would be impossible to establish scientifically whether it was the original receptacle for the Ten Commandments. See “The lost Ark: are the Germans on its trail,” *The Times* May 13, 2008 and “Helmut Ziegert: Axum-Project 2008 - Vote on Truth,” at [http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/helmut-ziegert/](http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/helmut-ziegert/).

effects of the long-entrenched belief in the Solomonic parentage of the Ethiopian monarchy would not easily wear off. It privileged the Amharic and Tigrigna speaking Semites and legitimized their claimed custodianship of the Ethiopian state. Mainstream Ethiopian historiography has relegated the claim of Solomonic lineage to the realm of myth and also maintains that historical evidence for a self-conscious Ethiopian state that predates the Aksumite Empire is lacking. It was only in the “fourth or fifth century that Hebraic and Hellenic allusions to Ethiopia began to be associated with the region now called Ethiopia, whose chief political center was then at Aksum.”

However, mainstream Ethiopian historiography itself, though renowned for its painstaking research, suffers from several shortcomings. That “history too often defined itself as the story of the state alone” is as true in Ethiopia as anywhere else. In addition, a good part of the scholarly literature is steeped in the Semitic philologist tradition. Consequently, it views Ethiopia primarily as an outpost of Semitic civilization and

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64 Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 2.
focuses on evidence that links ancient Ethiopia with Sabean culture as well as on aspects of Ethiopian culture which drew on Judaeo-Christian traditions.\(^{67}\)

The effect of such scholarly endeavour is that it presents the Amharic and Tigrigna speaking people as “true Ethiopians” and non-Semite groups as outsiders and inferior. As a result, little attention is given to the non-Semitic component of Amhara-Tigre culture and to the indigenous traditions of other Ethiopian peoples.\(^{68}\) Levine’s *Greater Ethiopia*, while still implicated in the belief in a homogenous Ethiopian national identity, nevertheless, stands out for being more inclusive in its treatment of the Oromo egalitarian socio-cultural system and its contribution in forging “greater Ethiopia.” This is remarkable for a book published in 1974, at a time when the prevailing historical narrative was state-centred and “tended to extol the centralizing and unitary role of Ethiopian monarchs.”\(^{69}\)

Levin maintains that a societal unit he termed “greater Ethiopia,” exists as a single cultural region. He argues that various ethnic groups that initially comprised a loose inter-social system over the last three millennia interacted with each other, shared cultural traditions and forged common resistance against foreign incursion to transform into a single societal system comprising diverse ethnic groups. He singles out and credits the Tigre (responsible for the national epic the *Kebra Negest*), Amhara (hierarchical,

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\(^{68}\) Ullendorff’s *The Ethiopians* would be a good example of history that privileges the Semites and their traditions.


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individualistic, empire builders) and the Oromo (egalitarian and solidaristic) for the political formation and survival of an autonomous Ethiopian society.

There has been another strand of historical thinking espoused mostly by social anthropologists which perceived Ethiopia as “an ethnic museum,” a term coined by the Ethiopianist Carlo Conti-Rossini. The research and field work focused mainly on the social organization of the peoples of southern Ethiopia. Informed by theories of cultural relativism -- every culture is self-sufficient and is as valid as any other -- these studies looked for a “self-sufficient, bounded system.” This view, Levine warned, undermines the cultural and political links that might have existed among different ethnic/language groups and inadvertently contributed to the view that “before the conquests of Menelik II in the late nineteenth century the other peoples of Ethiopia had lived independent and self-sufficient lives.”

What Levine was prophetically apprehensive about came to pass twenty years later when the EPRDF, which seized power in 1991, soon adopted “a peculiarly anthropological approach to state building” and carved the nation into its ethnic constituents to establish a federal system based on nationality. For the EPRDF, “Ethiopia needed to be taken apart and put together again – if it could be put together at all – in accordance with a formula that respected the identities and autonomy of the

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71 Ibid., 20-21.
72 Ibid., 21.
peoples of which it was composed.” And the restructuring of Ethiopia along ethnic lines resulted in the conflation of language and ethnic groups, one of whose effects was the invention of the Amhara Regional State.

Another way of looking at Ethiopian historiography is to divide it into three broad categories: mainstream or centrist, critical, and revisionist. The major difference between centrist and critical historiographies, on one side, and revisionist, on the other, is that the former accept continuity in Ethiopian history beginning with the Aksum period while the latter conceives Ethiopian history to have begun with Emperor Menelik. But critical historiography, which has emerged in the last couple of decades, is different from mainstream in important ways. Authored mostly by former members of the radical student movement, critical historiography tend to be more inclusive, class (if not gender) oriented, and sensitive to the histories of marginalized language and ethnic groups.

Clapham explains the problems with centrist Ethiopian historiography or “the viewpoint of the great tradition,” as he would like to call it, which critical histories try to correct:

For a start, of course, this history privileges a particular power structure, and the people associated with it. From the viewpoint of the great tradition, Orthodox Christians, and notably those who speak Amharic and Tigrinya, are Ethiopia, whereas other peoples merely become part of Ethiopia, either at times when

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75 See for example, Bahru’s *The History of Ethiopia*, the most up-to-date and critical account of modern Ethiopian history; Mohammed Hassen’s *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A history 1570-1860*, provides a fresh interpretation of the history of the Oromo, though flawed, as mentioned earlier, in its unsubstantiated assertion about Oromo settlement in Shoa before the fourteenth century; Gebru Tareke’s *Ethiopia: Power and Protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996), which deals with peasant revolts; and Teshale Tibebu’s *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1995), an interpretive social history applying a world system perspective.
they are incorporated within the boundaries of the modern Ethiopian state, or else when they associate themselves with the state, through conversion to Christianity, use of the Amharic language, or employment in some capacity by the state itself. Or to put it in a slightly different way, Amharas and Tigrayans have a history, whereas other peoples have only an anthropology, or at best a kind of sub-national sub-history that eventually gets subsumed within the national epic.\textsuperscript{76}

As Clapham points out, some people within Ethiopia may have been more powerful than others with a history much easier to write than others’. This, however, “does not entitle them to become the only peoples with a history,” nor should it deny the historian “the obligation to treat other histories as fully as the sources allow.”\textsuperscript{77}

A new wave of historical revisionist writing first by foreign and then by Ethiopian scholars emerged during the last twenty-five years in tow with the intensification of nationalist movements.\textsuperscript{78} Alessandro Triulzi points out, like “most reactions to oppressive conditions and denials of identity, the new historians’ narratives were intrinsically ideological and emotionally bound.”\textsuperscript{79} And one might add, mostly lacking in rigour. The case of an anthology on Oromo nationalism, and the commentary by the editors aimed at mitigating the theoretical shortcomings of the articles from the local contributors,

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. Emphasis his.
\textsuperscript{79} Alessandro Triulzi, “Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography,” 279.
illustrates this point. The foreign editors sympathetically claim that the contributors have endured all sorts of humiliating experience by virtue of their ethnicity. Therefore, it should matter less that “their approach is generalizing and essentialist” and perceives culture, ethnicity and nationality as “tangible, definable and enduring” than letting them reclaim their dignity by finding their voice.\textsuperscript{80}

Ethno-nationalist revisionist histories generally engage in what Alessandro Triulzi characterized as memory wining over history, the perception that the “reappropriation of ‘ethnic’ memory and the self-representation of one’s own past as the only valid test of legitimacy by the self-asserting new historiographies.”\textsuperscript{81} Triulzi further observes that these renewed historical narratives, “based on each group’s collective memory,” were mainly constructed along nationalist lines and “most ‘positionings’ about the past reflected political views.”\textsuperscript{82} Thus, in recent times, the question of how far Ethiopian history goes back has become a subject of fierce debate prompting historian Teshale Tibebu to quip that “Ethiopian history is as old as one wants it to be.”\textsuperscript{83}

Revisionist histories contest the claim by mainstream Ethiopian historiography that at least the northern part of the country, or what Teshale characterized as “Ge’ez Civilization,” is ancient.\textsuperscript{84} Ethno-nationalists and scholars sympathetic to their cause restrict the application of the name Ethiopia to the modern political entity which took its

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{81} Triulzi, “Battling with the Past,” 280.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Teshale Tibebu, \textit{The Making of Modern Ethiopia}, xi.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid. While Teshale’s conception of “Ge’ez Civilization” is complex, it generally refers to the tradition, mode of thinking and war practice of the Amharic and Tigrigna speaking Christian highlanders that overwhelmingly constitute the traditional Ethiopian polity.
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present shape at the end of the 19th century to argue that Ethiopia is just slightly over one hundred years old. The problem with their argument is that the name Ethiopia has been specifically applied to the northern part of the country since the time of Ezana, the first Christian king in Axum in fourth century AD.

Nevertheless, John Sorenson, a strong supporter of ethno-nationalists, for instance, argues that Ethiopian history cannot be traced back to ancient Axum, because “the borders of that kingdom and contemporary Ethiopia are not coterminous.” His argument which, if followed to its logical conclusion, will reduce the history of almost every country seems to ignore the historical fact that the territorial boundaries of states change by expanding or contracting across time. Pre-modern states seldom posses fixed boundaries but “spread out from the core into hinterlands of tributary rule and mere raiding, which expanded or contracted with the strength and ambition of the ruler.”

Furthermore, Sorenson takes history out of the hands of Africans and bestows it upon the colonizers when he declares patently that in Africa “all states are creations of colonialism.” Sorenson’s argument in its totality is not just simplistic but also biased as it renders Africa incapable of achieving statehood without the shackles of colonialism.

The most formidable attempt to discredit centrist Ethiopian historiography is represented by Bonnie Holcomb’s and Sisai Ibssa’s *The Invention of Ethiopia*. But in its

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understanding of what a nation is and the analytical terms it employs, it suffers from two major shortcomings. First, it espouses an organic form of a nation which is juxtaposed against an artificial type that Ethiopia is claimed to be one. Second, it applies a false dichotomy between Ethiopia and Abyssinia, in a move designed to deny continuity in Ethiopian history. Most scholars, even those who are not necessarily sympathetic to ethno-nationalism, use the term “Abyssinia” not to create a false dichotomy but simply as an alternative name to Ethiopia prior to the southern expansion. Holcomb and Ibssa claim to have chosen the title *The Invention of Ethiopia* in order “to draw attention to the fact that Ethiopia has been from its formation an artificial unit, not a naturally-occurring one as so many believe and it should be recognized as such.”

Subscribing to an organicist view of nationalism, which is one variety of primordialism, the underlying logic of Holcomb and Ibssa perceives some nations as natural or organic while others, like Ethiopia, as artificial. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the nation occurs when it is imagined and there is nothing natural or conversely artificial about national imaginary or for that matter the imagining of any community which is historical. Holcomb and Ibssa explain the Ethiopia/Abyssinia dichotomy as follow:

“Ethiopia” is the name that was eventually given to the geographic unit created

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90 It is a good example of an extreme view of ethno-nationalist historiography held hostage by a narrow political agenda. For an in-depth critique see Clapham, “Rewriting Ethiopian History” and Messay Kebede, *Survival and Modernization Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse* (Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1999).
91 Among the prominent historians, Bahru Zewde and Taddesse Tamrat are exemplary in completely avoiding the pitfall of the false dichotomy.
when Abyssinia, a cluster of small kingdoms in northeast Africa, expanded in the mid-1800s by conquering independent nations in the region using firearms provided by Europeans powers. Throughout this book *Ethiopia* refers to that empire formed in the late 1800s by means of conquest, and *Abyssinia* refers to the historic homeland of the Semitic-speaking residents of the group of highland kingdoms. Hence, Ethiopia includes independent nations.  

Even John Markakis, one of the most prominent Ethiopianist caught the “Abyssinian fever” and began to write, in a departure from earlier works, about Ethiopia, which he said was “formed during the imperialist scramble in the late nineteenth century,” and Abyssinia, “whose history does reach back to antiquity.”

Likewise, Donald Donham tells us how Abyssinia found Ethiopia. What Markakis, Donham and others conveniently overlook is that the old Christian polity identified itself as “Ethiopian” not “Abyssinian,” and that “Abyssinian” is a European adaptation of the name that Arab travellers traditionally used to refer to Ethiopians: *Habasha*. The term apparently derives from one of the South Arabian tribes which migrated to Ethiopia in antiquity -- the Habashat. The Europeanized name of the Ethiopian region cannot create a separate historical entity much as the ancient Greek’s

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93 Holcomb and Ibsa, *The Invention of Ethiopia*, 1.


95 Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history,” 17.

96 Muhammad Ibn Haukal (943-77), for instance, refers, to the mysterious queen that traditional historians simply called *Yodit Gudit* (*Yodit the Terrible*) because of her anti Christian stance, as follow: “The country of the *habasha* has been ruled by a woman for many years now: she has killed the king of the *habasha* who was called Hadani.” Quoted in Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 39.

characterization of outsiders as “barbarian” could not transform, say the Persians, into one.

Ethiopians, generally, do not, and traditionally did not, refer to themselves as Abyssinian but as Ethiopian. For example, a passage from the 14\textsuperscript{th} century national epic the \textit{Kebra Negest} reads: “And all the provinces of Ethiopia rejoiced, for Zion sent forth a light like that of the sun into the darkness wheresoever she came.”\textsuperscript{98} A five-hundred-year-old letter from an Ethiopian Emperor says, “In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, one God all powerful. Amen. I, Asnaf Sagad, King of Ethiopia, send this letter to the Governor of India.”\textsuperscript{99} Another letter, almost as old as the above one, states “this letter is sent from the presence of the king of Ethiopia,” while the Portuguese translator refers to it as “letter of 1550 from the King of Abyssinia to the King of Portugal,” which is how it is catalogued in the archives.\textsuperscript{100} Moreover, beginning with Amde-Tsion (1312-42) the “monarchs of this time all explicitly refer to themselves as rulers of Ethiopia” in the royal chronicles.\textsuperscript{101}

Contemporary Ethiopians use the term \textit{Abesha} (Amharic for \textit{Habasha}) only in limited settings, as for example in \textit{ye Abesha libs} (Abyssinian dress) or \textit{ye Abesha dabo} (Abyssinian bread). It is not clear, although, why “\textit{Abesha}” is preferred to “Ethiopian” in these restricted usages which appear to be common only among metropolitan Ethiopians.

\textsuperscript{99} R.S. Whiteway ed. \textit{The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543 As Narrated by Castanhoso, With Some Contemporary Letters, the Short Account of Bermudez and Certain Extracts from Corrêa} (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1967), 19.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{101} Pankhurst, \textit{The Ethiopians}, 58.
and Eritreans. These find the term “Abesha” quite useful in diasporic life, especially before Eritrea became an independent state, to maintain political correctness and avoid political tension that might otherwise arise from confusing Ethiopians with Eritreans or vice versa: “Are you an Abesha?” is nation-neutral because both national groups identify with the term.

It is confounding why scholars insist on using “Abyssinia” despite the fact that Ethiopians generally do not like the epithet and some may even find it offensive. Bahru tells us that while “it is not uncommon for Ethiopians to refer to themselves, particularly in informal circumstances, as “Habasha” (Abyssinians), officially they prefer to be called Ethiopians.”102 Levin concurs, saying that Ethiopians object to the term Abyssinian “since it has been used pejoratively by foreigners, even although they do use its indigenous counterpart, ‘Habasha.’”

Bahru’s and Levin’s cautionary observation has gone unheeded as it became a fad among historians and anthropologists to use “Abyssinia” in reference to the pre-nineteenth century Ethiopian state and “Ethiopia” to designate the modern political entity. The exercise might have remained harmless, if annoying, had it not been for the reductionist historiography a’ la Holcomb-Ibssa that denies continuity in Ethiopian history. In any case, it is a poorly thought intellectual endeavour to try and craft an analytical distinction out of two names in different languages that refer to the same entity.

102 Bahru A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1.
103 Levine, Wax and Gold, 1.
Most of revisionist historiography is more concerned with making political points and is less concerned with substantiating its claims with historical evidence. For instance, to see Ethiopia, as Holcomb and Ibssa do, as an Amhara empire, which is said to have colonized formerly independent nations, can help justify separatist demands under the garb of the “colonial question.” Levin is quite critical of revisionist historiography that perceives Ethiopia as the invention of 19th century imperialism:

Owing to the fact that scholars of nationhood had disputed the very existence of nations prior to the modern period, when the regime shift of 1991 catapulted into power an elite with a dim view of historic Ethiopia, apologists for the dismemberment of Africa’s oldest independent nation could wear the mantle of academic respectability for some patently counter-factual reconstructions. Books with titles like The Invention of Ethiopia ... and Imagining Ethiopia ... could then brazenly claim that the Ethiopian nation-state was an invention of late 19th-century-imperialism. 104

Aside from his admonishment of the ethno-nationalist camp, Levin touches on something important about the Euro-centrist misgiving and patronizing attitude of the modernist school of nationalism which defines nationness narrowly to locate its origin exclusively in Europe. In fact, Levine makes the bold claim that not only there were nations and nationalisms before modernity but also that these existed generally in the sense nation and nationalism are understood by modernist theorists.

Levin lists the “extensive use of ‘nation’ and kindred terms in classical Greek and Latin and older European vernaculars,” as well as the appearance of what he chose to call

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104 Levine “Reconfiguring the Ethiopian Nation in a global era,” 636.
“medieval and early modern nationalisms” to argue his case for nationalism before modernity.” Levine argues for Ethiopia’s status as a historic nation. He mentions the works of Liah Greenfield and Philip Gorski who locate the birthplace of nationalism in, respectively, Reformation England and the Netherlands of the early modern period and not in France and its Revolution as modernists argue. But Levine says, “even these revisionists seem content to keep the birthplace of nationalism in Western Europe in the post-medieval period,” adding that the origin of the nation is to be found in much earlier times: “Japan and Ethiopia had developed nationalist cultures as early as a millennium before their putative origins in Western Europe.”

Levine identifies political doctrine, an understanding that equates “nation” with “people” and “state,” a discursive formation, a vision that includes the entire nation as a unit, and political mobilization as important markers posited by modernist scholars to distinguish “truly national” from pre-national formations. He then takes on the modernist scholars on their own term to argue that Ethiopia fulfilled all the criteria set by them well before the emergence of modern nations in Europe. These include reference to one’s

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105 Levine “Reconfiguring the Ethiopian Nation in a global era,” 635.
106 Perennialism comes in two forms: one which emphasizes continuity, and the other recurrence. The first, which I termed “historicist,” argues that particular nations have a long and continuous history which can go back to the Middle Ages and at times even to antiquity. France, England, Scotland and Spain are some of the examples given. The second variety argues that particular nations are historical and change with time. However, the nation itself, as a category for human association, is perennial. It has reappeared in every period of history and in every part of the world. See Anthony Smith’s Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History (Cambridge: Polity, 200), 49-51.
107 Levine “Reconfiguring the Ethiopian Nation in a global era,” 635.
108 Ibid.
nation among nations, the equation of nation with people, the exposure to nationalist discourse and symbols, and the resort to nationalist political mobilization.

A prime text for this claim, the Kebra Negast stands for nothing if not the image of the Ethiopian nation as belonging to a world of distinct nations among which it stands out by virtue of possessing a special mission. The bulk of the epic contrasts the nation of Israel with that of Ethiopia, mentioning Egypt along the way, and it concludes by naming several others – Rome, Armenia, and Nagran – and asserting the primacy of Ethiopia as God’s favored among the nations... [It speaks of the rejoicing which took place in bihere Ityoppiya, a phrase that connotes land, country, and people alike.... Liturgically, it was unified by the classical Ethiopian language, Ge’ez, much as medieval Europeans speaking different languages were unified by Latin...Finally, from earliest times, the symbolism of Ethiopian statehood could mobilize members of diverse ethnic groups and regions on behalf of their national homeland.109

In short, Levine discerns in the old Ethiopian kingdom a self-conscious community of people which acquired national consciousness expressed through identification with Christianity and the Ge’ez language, defence of a homeland, and loyalty to a sovereign.

Levine is right. And the fact that Ethiopia was surrounded by, and fought wars against, hostile forces, particularly Muslim, for most of its history must have reinforced the idea of the homeland and Christian identity. When a large number of people from the different regions are constantly summoned together in the battle field in defence of their country, it will soon give rise to a collective -- call it national -- consciousness that they are fighting for something they have in common: Christianity, land, and king.

109 Ibid., 636.
Levine argues convincingly that it was possible to gain national consciousness and develop national culture for historic nations like Ethiopia and Japan although this formulation needs some qualification. But I do not think Levin proved, or as a matter of fact could prove, that the old Ethiopian or Japanese kingdom constituted a nation by modernist standards. Nor was his argument that nationalism existed before modernity convincing. The tasks Levine set himself against were doomed from the very start by the modernist circular assumption that nations are modern because they can only emerge in modern times as represented by Hobsbawm’s assertion: “The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity.”

Despite Levine’s futile attempt to break the vicious circle in the modernist assertions about nations and modernity, his arguments nonetheless help us to discern the confusion in the modernist school in connection with historic nations and pre-modern national sentiments. However, as stated before, Levine did not succeed in proving Ethiopian nationhood by modernist standard as he set out to do. He built his case by conveniently selecting what defines a nation and nationalism in the modernist sense. And this becomes apparent with the help of a sampling of the views of a few prominent modernist theorists.

For Elie Kedourie, nationalism is a doctrine invented at the start of the nineteenth century, which advocates that nations are natural divisions of humanity and therefore national self-government is the only legitimate form of self-rule. For Tom Nairn, 

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nationalism results from uneven development between core and periphery fuelled by industrial capitalism. For John Breuilly, nationalism is a political movement best understood as an especially appropriate form of political behaviour in the context of the modern state.” Earnest Gellner holds that both the nation and nationalism can arise only in industrialized societies which allow for a highly standardized, centralized and homogenized culture. Eric Hobsbawm relates nations and nationalism to “invented traditions,” which are products of social engineering. And for Benedict Anderson, the nation is an imagined community made possible by print capitalism.

Therefore, only industrial capitalism, the modern state, social engineering, print capitalism and the like can lead to “a common public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members,” all of which are the hallmarks of the nation in the modernist sense. Levine expediently leaves these out from his analysis to argue that nationalism existed before modernism, which it did not. But, he was right to insist that it is possible to acquire national consciousness, simply understood as identification with a historic nation, as was the case with Ethiopia, before the advent of nationalist

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114 Earnest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism.
115 Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions.” He says the nation “with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest” are a “comparatively recent historical innovation,” adding that all “these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation.”
116 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities. For Anderson, it becomes possible to imagine the nation only following the disintegration of three important cultural conceptions of great antiquity. First the scared ancient languages were replaced by the vernacular. Second, the “dynastic realm” fragmented under the assault of the Enlightenment. And third, the consciousness of traditional communities which equated “cosmology” with “history” gave way to the version of “simultaneity” in the wake of “print-capitalism.”
117 Smith, Nationalism, 13.
ideology or doctrine, which is a modern phenomenon. Critiques by Levin as well as by Partha Chatterjee, Lila Abu-Lughod and Samir Amin, among others, may prove useful in tempering the excesses of modernist theories.

Chatterjee argues Anderson’s assertion that the advent of nationalism in Western Europe, Russia, and the Americas served as a model for subsequent nationalisms cannot be reconciled with historical evidence on nation formation in different parts of the world.\textsuperscript{118} For instance, Ethiopian state/nationhood is anomalous whose analysis cannot be entirely based on either the Western or the anti-colonial modes of nationalism. Print capitalism may have been required to imagine the modern nation but not necessarily national consciousness as understood in relation to historic nations.

As the Ethiopian experience shows, a common territory, religion as well as a sovereign could serve as sufficient sources of national identification with a historic nation. Abu-Lughod points out that rather than being fixated on modular forms of nationalism, “we must admit that we are always studying nations at particular moments in their histories.”\textsuperscript{119} Amin, another objector to the universalistic view that invariably associates nation formation with capitalism, holds that state-nations existed prior to modernity, Egypt, the “eternal nation,” being the best example.\textsuperscript{120}

Some modernist theorists make or appear to make distinctions between the modern and historical understanding of nation and nationalism. Anthony Giddens and

\textsuperscript{120} Samir Amin, \textit{Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis} (New York: Monthly Review, 1980).
Nic Poulantzas betray such sentiments by declaring, respectively, that all “‘capitalist’ states’ have been nation-states,” though “the reverse, of course, does not apply,” and a “nation which has not yet succeeded in forging its own State on the basis of capitalism is no less of a nation for that.”

Hobsbawm writes the nation in “the modern sense of the word is no older than the eighteenth century, give or take the odd predecessor.”

Furthermore, while criticizing Gellner for his undue emphasis on the formation of nationalism from above, Hobsbawm maintains that nationalism “cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in the terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist.” Hobsbawm refers to these national sentiments of ordinary people manifested before the advent of nationalism as “popular proto-nationalism.” Proto-nationalist sentiments can serve as ingredients for the making of (but do not constitute) nationalism. Breuilly distinguishes between a national consciousness, which he says might have existed in medieval Europe, and a nationalist consciousness that he claims is a modern political doctrine.

Similarly, Gellner seems to imply a distinction between modern nationalism and pre-modern national sentiments, when he talks about “classical nationalism,” on which he does not elaborate much. Even the Ethno-symbolist Anthony Smith, who is critical of

124 Ibid., 10.
125 Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 3-4.
the modernist school, concurs on this point: “The contrast between an organized ideological movement of nationalism, on the one hand, and a more diffuse feeling of national belonging, on the other, is sufficiently clear to allow us to treat the concept of national consciousness or sentiment separately from that of nationalism,” adding that “even if in practice there is often some degree of overlap between them.”

However, most of these theorists do not clearly articulate how conceptually pre-modern national sentiments are to be differentiated from modern ones. If the claim is simply that pre-eighteen century national sentiments do not constitute cases of nationalism because they happened in pre-modern time while nations and nationalisms are modern phenomena, then the argument is definitional and circular at that, not conceptual. Hugh Watson-Seton can help us go past this theoretical murk as he brings in a much needed clarity into the muddled discussion with useful suggestions on how “old” nations are to be distinguished from “new” ones.

First it is important to note his understanding of nationalism, which he claims has two basic meanings: “One of these meanings is a doctrine about the character, interests, rights and duties of nations. The second meaning is an organised political movement, designed to further the alleged aims and interest of the nation.” Then he makes distinctions between the two categories of nations, the “old” and the “new”:

The old are those which had acquired national identity or national consciousness before the formulation of the doctrine of nationalism. The new are those for

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128 Seton-Watson Nations and States, 3.
whom two processes developed simultaneously: the formation of national consciousness and the creation of nationalist movements. Both processes were the work of small educated political elites.  

Amin was making a similar point when he argued, as mentioned above, that state-nations preceded capitalism. Seton-Watson is aware of the ambiguity in applying the concept of national identity in relation to old nations:

There is an inherent and inescapable anachronism in the application to the past of the “old” nations of the categories derived from the history of the “new.” Yet this has to be done, and aspects of the earlier cultures and institutions, and events from medieval or even ancient times which seem relevant to the formation of national consciousness, have to be mentioned.

Likewise, John Armstrong insists that even though some modern nations have histories that precede nationalist ideology, these were constituted as national histories only retrospectively. One might add that within the framework of statehood, and shorn of its glamour, national identity is the self-awareness of the citizen as a territorialized subject. And the legal subjection, best validated by the national passport, is of course the novelty of modernity.

Only when placed within the above theoretical parameter and qualified as such does Levin’s argument about Ethiopia’s status as a historic nation makes good sense.

Nationalism, the effect of modernity, creates the modern nation; but nations, in the

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129 Ibid., 6-7.
130 Amin, Class and Nation.
131 Seton-Watson Nations and States, 11.
traditional sense, centering around city states, kingdoms and empires may have existed since antiquity. National consciousness in the latter case could emanate by identifying with either a sovereign or a religion or a territory or a combination of these. The Ethiopian monarch Menelik’s famous proclamation of mobilization against the Italians best illustrates this point:

Assemble the army, beat the drum. God in his bounty has struck down my enemies and enlarged my empire and preserved me to this day. Enemies have come who would ruin our country and change our religion. They have passed beyond the sea that God gave us for our frontier. I, aware that herds were decimated and people were exhausted, did not wish to do anything about it until now. These enemies have advanced, burrowing into the country like moles. With God’s help I will get rid of them. You who are strong, give me your strength, and you who are weak, help me by prayer. If you refuse to follow me, look out! I shall not fail to punish you. 133

Traditionally, Ethiopian national identity was expressed through identification with Christianity, a common frontier and loyalty to a God-anointed king. This is not to suggest there was a monolithic, than a dominating, form of identifying with the state-nation. Even then, the idea of national identity must have been contested. For instance, Muslim Ethiopians would not obviously identify with Christianity and it was not uncommon for the nobility to identify with land and religion but not necessarily with the reigning monarch, although most would follow him in times of war against foreign enemy.

133 Cited in Henze, Layers of Time, 166. Emphasis added.
To sum up, there is no denying that the modern Ethiopian political unit, which is widely acknowledged to have emerged in the wake of Emperor Menelik’s military incorporation of the southern regions, is relatively young. But the Christian Ethiopian kingdom in which the Amharic and Tigrigna speaking people played a dominant role is quite ancient. And there is continuity in Ethiopian long history of statehood. As important it is to try and craft new histories that reflect our aspirations and express our emotion, we should also be sensitive to “social facts,” which would not budge under any historical re-writing informed by the noble idea of redressing the past.\(^{134}\) To argue his case why “no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist,” Hobsbawm quotes Renan who said “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.” But historians, says Hobsbawm, “are professionally obliged not to get it wrong, or at least to make an effort not to.”\(^{135}\)

It has never been an easy task for the historian to strike a delicate balance between, on the one hand, maintaining certain standards of objectivity and, on the other, having an understanding of history which is inclusive of, and relevant to, the peoples it claims to be about. As Triulzi observes, the task becomes even more difficult in present day Ethiopia where “researching the country’s past has been perceived, and is often practised, by several authors not as a mere advance in scholarly knowledge but as a direct intervention in the country’s history, and a rightful step in the direction of brighter future.”\(^{136}\) The reading of the past is “linked to the different expectations each group is


\(^{136}\) Triulzi, *Battling with the past*, 277.
advancing for its own imagined self in the country’s future” with little recognition of the danger that the “future can be a particularly ‘treacherous territory’ for the historian who maintains it as his ‘continued imagined ideal.’” Ethiopian history, in the hands of many a revisionist scholar, has become a treacherous undertaking.

1.2. Christian Core and South of Shoa

In outlining the history of the making of the Ethiopian empire state, which is the focus of this section, I will pay particular attention to the historical encounter between the old Ethiopian Christian kingdom of the north and the southern peoples. This encounter had resulted in the incorporation of the south into the Ethiopian empire and the institution of northern domination of the south. It is also this encounter, more than anything else, that laid the economic and cultural foundation for the rise of an Amhara status group which, through nationalist and quasi-Marxist discourse, was transposed to an imaginary Amhara ethnic and national group.

A reliable history about the origins of the Ethiopian state begins with the Aksumite kingdom in the north, established in the wake of a settled agricultural society thanks to the emergence of the ox-drawn plough. Aksum clearly displayed external influences, particularly that of South Arabia, from which people have been migrating

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since the second half of the first millennium BC.\textsuperscript{138} At the height of its power, from the first to the seventh century AD, the Aksumite state controlled large parts of northern Ethiopia and the Arabian coastline across the Red Sea.\textsuperscript{139} As a maritime power, Aksum welded great power in the region and its Red-Sea port Adulis was an important commercial hub.

Aksum minted its own coins in bronze, silver and gold. One of its kings, Ezana, converted to Christianity sometime around 350 AD, heralding the introduction of the Christian faith to the country.\textsuperscript{140} Three centuries later, a group of Muslim refugees arrived in Axum where they were well-received and allowed to practice their faith.\textsuperscript{141} The new faith did not attract many followers in the Ethiopian highlands but it gradually spread peacefully following the trade routes in the lowlands and coastal areas.\textsuperscript{142} By the sixth century, the Christian kingdom had expanded southwards and was well established in what traditionally had been the heart of Agew country in central-north Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{143}

Aksum was in a state of decline from about the middle of the seventh century due to the rise of Islam and the subsequent disruption of Red Sea Trade, a situation which the Agew exploited to seize state power and inaugurate the Zagwe dynasty.\textsuperscript{144} Not much is known about the Zagwe period, which, unlike the Aksumite, did not mint coins or produce inscriptions. The Zagwe, who lived “much further from the coast, made far less

\textsuperscript{139} See Figure 1.
\textsuperscript{140} Saheed Adejumobi, \textit{The History of Ethiopia} (West Port: Greenwood Press, 2007), 2.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{143} Taddesse Tamrat, \textit{Church and State}, 34.
\textsuperscript{144} Bahru, \textit{A History of Modern Ethiopia}, 8.
use of imported, datable, articles. No known foreign traveller moreover described the country at this time.”

However, the best known of the Zagwe kings, Lalibela, is renowned for the marvellous eleven rock-hewn churches he had built in Roha, north-central Ethiopia. The place was named “Lalibela” in his honour after his death.

The Zagwe ruled until 1270, when they were overthrown by an Amharic-speaking chieftain named Yekunno-Amlak from Shewa, central Ethiopia. He “inaugurated a dynasty which called itself ‘Solomonic’, to emphasize its legitimacy as opposed to the Zagwe, who were portrayed as usurpers.” Yekunno-Amlak’s accession to power also supposedly inaugurates “Amhara rule” which is said to have lasted either until 1974 or 1991. Under Yekunno-Amlak and his successors, particularly his grandson Amde-Tsion, the Christian kingdom expanded further into the south until its power, indeed its very existence, was seriously challenged by forces of Islam. A fierce and brilliant war leader by the name of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim (commonly called Gragn meaning “the left-handed”) galvanized a huge Muslim army from Adal, in Harrar region, to conduct a jihad against the Christian state from 1527 until his defeat in 1543.

Under Galawdewos, who succeeded his father Lebna-Dengel (1508-40), the Christians were able to defeat Gragn with Portuguese military assistance. This was made possible through the foresight of Empress Eleni, the king’s grandmother. She ruled as regent until Lebna-Dengel came of age. Anticipating Muslim threat from Adal and its potential alliance with the formidable and expanding Ottoman Empire, she sent a

diplomatic mission to the Portuguese in India in 1512. The king of Portugal responded with his own diplomatic mission to Ethiopia. But the young emperor could not see the merit of an alliance with Christian Europe until Gragn’s assault started whence upon he was persuaded by Eleni and reluctantly agreed to seek help from Portugal.

The Jesuits, who followed their brethren in arms, remained in the Orthodox Christian fortress working hard to convert to Catholicism King and people alike. They finally succeeded with emperor Susenyous in 1624 who abandoned his Orthodox faith. The backlash against his conversion and the bitter civil war it unleashed forced Susenyous to abdicate in favour of his son, Fasilidas (1632-1667). The new king soon embraced the old faith and expelled the Jesuits from Ethiopia. Aside from his role in the restoration of Orthodox Christianity, Fasilidas’ lasting influence was the founding of Gondar as permanent capital, ending the days of the roving monarchy. After the decline of Aksum and later on Lalibela, Ethiopian emperors for the most part did not “establish permanent capitals but ruled from encampments which were sometimes enormous in extent.”

In successive centuries following the invasion of Gragn, several attempts by Christian zealot monarchs -- the last one being Emperor Yohannes, whose “religious policy lacked the liberalism and spirit of tolerance that he had shown in the political field” -- to proscribe Islam and engender mass conversions to Christianity proved to be

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147 Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 83-84.
148 Ibid., 92.
ineffective.\textsuperscript{150} For the last hundred years or so Christians and Muslims enjoyed a relatively peaceful co-existence, except during the Italian occupation when relations got tense because the fascists systematically favoured the Muslims over the Christians. Nonetheless, Islam had been accorded secondary status in Ethiopia until fairly recently. Historically, and officially until 1974, Ethiopia considered itself and was viewed by others as a Christian state.

Traditionally, Ethiopian nationalism has been defined in terms of the country’s status as a Christian nation which had to constantly defend itself against Muslim and pagan incursion. As Abbink explains, due to “its link with the 'divinely ordained' Solomonic monarchy, Christianity inevitably was the core world-view of the political elite and a defining element of nationhood in a historical sense.”\textsuperscript{151} This perhaps explains why marginalized Ethiopian Muslims showed readiness to work with the Fascists during the Italian invasion and also their pioneering role in Eritrean nationalist insurgency, although the Christians became more influential later on.

The war between the Christian kingdom and the Muslims of Adal opened the way for the Oromo to sweep “across the highlands like a tidal wave” while the two exhausted fighting armies “lay prostate.”\textsuperscript{152} The Ethiopian state was greatly weakened in the wake of Gragn’s rampages and the political centre began to gradually retreat back into the north until Fasilidas founded Gondar in 1636. It served as the imperial capital until the reign of Menelik when there was a shift of political power back to the centre, Shoa. By

\textsuperscript{150} Bahru, \textit{A History of Modern Ethiopia}, 48.
\textsuperscript{152} Bahru, \textit{A History of Modern Ethiopia}, 9.
early 18th century, central state power had weakened to the extent that the monarchs who ruled from Gonder became figureheads. Following the assassination of the last legitimate heir to the Gonderine line in 1769, the provinces became, to varying degrees, independent under rivalling feudal lords. And civil war ensued heralding the period known as the Zamana Masafent or the “Age of Princes.”

Ethiopia’s modern history is commonly understood to have begun with Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868) when he brought an end to the “Age of Princes” by militarily reunifying the country. Tewodros had visionary ideas even though he lacked the tact to see them through. He made the first effort to end the slave-trade which was prevalent in Ethiopian society, created a professional state army which drew regular salary, and took away what he deemed to be excess landholdings by the clergy to distribute it among tribute-paying peasants. Furthermore, Tewodros wanted the clergy, whom he considered lazy and parasitic, to work for a living. The clergy did not take kindly to Tewodros’ radical ideas, and in a short time mobilized the nobility as well as the masses against him.

Tewodros found the first library of Ethiopian manuscripts and also formally established Amharic as the countries’ administrative and literary language by having his chronicles written in it rather than in Ge’ez as had been the tradition before him. Realizing that Ethiopia could not continue to defend itself against foreign incursions

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without firearms, Tewodros sought help from European powers. His frustration with European apparent indifference to his Christian nation surrounded by Islam brought him into collision with Britain, whose diplomats he humiliated in public.\textsuperscript{159} Weakened and isolated by internal wars, Tewodros was defeated by a punitive British mission in 1868. And declaring that a warrior king like him should die only by his own hand, the proud Emperor put his revolver to his mouth to become a legend.\textsuperscript{160}

The two emperors who followed Tewodros, Yohannes IV (1872-1889) of Tigray and Menelik II (1889-1914) of Shoa, continued the unification and defence of Ethiopia. Unlike Tewodros, who wanted to create a centralized unitary state, Yohannes was willing to let vassal kings rule over their domains as long as they acknowledged and paid tribute to him as Emperor. As such, he recognized Menelik as King of Shoa, although; he made his rival, Ras Adal Tessama crowned as King Tekle-Haymanot of Gojam to maintain a “political and military equilibrium between his two main vassals.”\textsuperscript{161}

Yohannes devoted much of his time defending Ethiopia against the Egyptian forces who had established a strong hold at Massawa, Eritrea, and the Mahdist or Dervishes in the Sudan. After defeating the Egyptians decisively at the battles of Gundat and Gura, Yohannes turned his attention to the newly arrived Italians who seized the Red Sea port Massawa in 1885. Even though Yohannes claimed sovereignty as far as the Red

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{159} Haggai Erlich, \textit{Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence} (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1986): 8-9.\
\textsuperscript{160} Pankhurst, \textit{The Ethiopians}, 160.\
\textsuperscript{161} Bahru, \textit{A History of Modern Ethiopia}, 44.}
Sea, Ethiopia controlled only the highlands of Eritrea under Ras Alula, the commander of the Imperial army and the governor of Hamasen and Seraie.162

Yohannes mobilized and personally led what could have been the largest peoples’ militia for “any single engagement in Ethiopian history, 120,000 strong -- to dislodge the Italians once and for all from Sahati, from Massawa and eventually from all Ethiopian territory.” 163 However, at the final moment Yohannes “blinked” and decided not to storm the enemy fortress manned by a small number of Italians and rather chose to face the Dervishes who attacked the western part of the country.164 His decision was to have great repercussion on the future of the country and the monarch himself. By not dislodging the Italians, and moreover, by withdrawing Ras Alula from his post of governor of Eritrea, Yohannes made it easier for the Italians to go deeper into the interior until they entered Asmara unopposed on August 13, 1889.165 Yohannes was killed at Metemma while fighting the Mahdists on March 9, 1889 paving the way for Menelik’s ascent to the throne.

Menelik’s greatest military achievement is of course his celebrated victory at Adwa in 1896, which crippled Italian colonial ambition towards Ethiopia. But like Yohannes he failed to try to dislodge the Italians from Eritrea. After Adwa, Menelik signed with European powers a series of treaties which recognized Ethiopian sovereignty within the newly acquired borders. But he also reached an agreement with Italy in 1900

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164 Ibid.
165 Ibid., 142.
legitimizing its right to rule over Eritrea, a pact which was justifiably interpreted by Eritrean nationalists as an abandonment of Eritrea to Italian colonialism.

Menelik took the re-unification (save Eritrea), expansion and the modernization of Ethiopia to a greater height. Haggai Erlich’s apt observation that while “rebuffing imperialism successfully in its north, Ethiopia managed to practice it to the south” characterizes Menelik’s imperial project.166 Erlich is referring, of course, to the military conquest of the south spearheaded by the Shoan dynasty and the imposition of northern values and economic structure on the south. By the time he died in 1914, Menelik had almost doubled the size of the country he had inherited from Yohannes.167 He had also founded Addis Ababa as the new capital, instituted the ministerial system in government, and introduced the railway, telegraph, modern banking as well as the automobile.

While Yohannes was preoccupied in repelling attacks from Mahdist, Egyptian and Italian forces, Menelik, as King of Shoa, was expanding the territory under his control by launching diplomatic and military campaign to occupy the sultanate of Harrar in the south-east and the regions of Wellega, Welleyeta, Bale, Arsi and Keffa in the south and south-west. Some regions like Wellega were spared the devastation of war and direct occupation by Menelik’s army because they submitted peacefully; others, particularly Welleyeta, were subjected to harsh treatment for fiercely resisting the Shoan advance.168

166 Erlich, Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence, 4.
167 The size of present day Ethiopia is more or less exactly as Menelik left it.
168 Bahru, A History of Modern Ethiopia, 61-68.
It appears Menelik was following guidelines from the *Fetha Nagast*, the traditional law of the kings:

> When you reach a city or a land to fight against its inhabitants, offer them terms of peace. If they accept you and open their gates, the men who are there shall become subjects and shall give you tribute, but if they refuse the terms of peace and offer battle, go forward to assault and oppress them, since the Lord your God will make you master of them.\(^{169}\)

Menelik’s acquisition of the mostly fertile territories, which took place in the decade prior to the battle of Adwa, was of major political and economic importance.\(^{170}\) Further, the occupation of Harrar gave Menelik access to the Gulf of Eden ports, through which he was soon to import vast quantities of firearms, which he later used against the Italians.\(^{171}\)

Before being absorbed into the empire, the peoples of southern Ethiopia had attained a “varying degrees of social and political organization” ranging from “communal societies” to “states with powerful kings and elaborate mechanisms for the exercise of authority,” like the kingdoms of Keffa, Wellayeta and Janjaro.\(^{172}\) Several of the Gibe states, so named because of their proximity to the Gibe River in south-western Ethiopia, and other Oromo monarchies in Wellega were among the newly-incorporated entities.

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\(^{169}\) Quoted in Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, 104.


\(^{171}\) Ibid.

\(^{172}\) Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 16. My designation of “southern Ethiopia” is similar to that of Bahru who says the term “southern” is “used here not in the strictly geographical sense, but as a convenient category embracing those states and peoples which did not directly engage in or were peripheral to the imperial politics of Gondar.”
Prior to becoming agrarian societies, the Oromo had an egalitarian and republican form of social organization based on generational-grade system known as *Gada*. The Oromo abandoned the egalitarian *Gada* system when they became agrarian societies. Sedentary life led to class differentiation as a result of changes in relations of property and production. This transformation from pastoral to agrarian mode of life had facilitated the emergence of the Gibe states and other monarchies which were absorbed into the Ethiopian empire by Menelik.

It is a historical irony that had Menelik not marched to the south, the region would have fallen prey to European colonial powers scrambling for land. A circular letter from Menelik to the heads of states of Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia states, “Ethiopia has been for fourteen centuries a Christian land in a sea of pagans. If Powers at a distance come forward to partition Africa between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator.” This is how Markakis described the ensuing scramble for territories in the Horn of Africa:

The British moved into southern Sudan to prevent it becoming a French or Ethiopian possession, and for practical reasons attached this region to their colony in the north. They also pushed the borders of Kenya into the north-eastern lowlands, until they were stopped by the Ethiopians and the Italians,

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174 As Markakis points out, property relations changed with the “emergence of family and individual rights of possession, as did the relations of production with the introduction of tenancy, serfdom and slavery. “Ethnic Conflict & the State in the Horn of Africa,” 19.

175 Cited in Greenfield’s, *Ethiopia*, 464. The letter was dated April 10, 1891.
who were both busily extending their respective domains in that area. Having established themselves in Eritrea in the north, the Italians invaded Ethiopia, only to be violently repulsed.\(^{176}\)

Yet, while exalting him for his defence of Ethiopia against Italian colonial ambition and generally his modernizing role, history for the most part has not seen Menelik as the saviour of the southern peoples. In the eyes of the southern elite and revisionist historiography, Menelik is at best a harsh expansionist and empire builder and at worst a cruel “colonizer.”\(^{177}\) However one looks at it, there is no denying that the northern “conquerors, chiefly represented by the Shewan aristocracy, imposed their system of production, culture, and mode of life on populations who until then had lived according to different norms and practices.”\(^{178}\) But northern culture in turn was influenced by southern traditions through interaction. Oromo culture in particular left a heavy linguistic, spiritual and artistic marks on northern traditions.\(^{179}\)

Nonetheless, despite years of assimilation the north south divide was visible even well into Haile-Selassie’s rule, helping foment nationalist insurgencies. The legacy of Menelik’s expansion to the south has shaped the exorbitant discourse on ethnic nationalism which informs contemporary Ethiopian politics. The EPRDF and other ethno-nationalist organizations like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), associate


\(^{177}\) For detailed discussions and varying points of view on whether Menelik’s incorporation of the south constitutes some form of colonialism, see Messay Kebede, *Survival and Modernization Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse*. (Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1999) as well as Holcomb and Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia*.


Ethiopian nationalism with the Amhara who they claimed had dominated the nation’s politics in the past. For the ethnic movements, the political entity called Ethiopia is the creation of Menelik’s “colonial” expansion which needs to be addressed through the devolution of power to the various ethnic groups resulting, if necessary, in the creation of separate national states.

It has become customary to flog the notion of “Amhara domination” to death. And the practice is not limited to the realm of politics as similar opinion reverberates through scholarly works which presumed an Amhara ethnic group although no cultural collectivity identified itself as such nor did any political or national movement claim to speak for the “Amhara” before 1992. In recent times ethno-nationalist movements like the EPRDF and OLF have begun to qualify “Amhara domination” as “domination by the Amhara ruling class.” As of recent, the term “Shoan domination” appears to be the favoured one, a sensible designation so long as the period in question does not go beyond 1974, when monarchic rule ended.

The change in rhetoric is informed more by political expediency than any sudden enlightenment about the ethnic-Amhara problematic. In the present political landscape marked by ethnic tensions, no political movement can afford to wilfully antagonize the Amhara, one of the largest language groups in the country, and also one of the eight Regional States since 1994. The next chapter will examine in great detail the idea of

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180 For example, Donald Crummey writes: “Since the thirteenth century the Amhara have been the dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia. The Solomonic dynasty which ruled from 1270 to 1974 was an Amhara dynasty.” See “Abyssinian Feudalism” in Past & Present 89 (1980): 118-19. Markakis echoes similar sentiment throughout his works on Ethiopia. See for example his “Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Horn of Africa.”
Amharaness to establish if there was an Amhara ethnic group before the advent of Amhara nationalism. Suffice to note at this point the distinction (historically) between Shoa, a regional entity not entirely composed of, although dominated by, Amharic-speakers and Amhara, (for now understood as) a linguistic group whose members were spread over the regions of Begemeder, Gojam, Wollo and Shoa.¹⁸¹

Nobles and peasant soldiers from all the above provinces as well as Tigray participated in the southern march. But the bulk of the northern army was from Shoa, Menelik’s power base. One immediate and enduring effect of the incorporation of southern regions into the Ethiopian empire was the introduction of new tripartite land-based economic relations between the southern peoples, the northern settlers or the Neftegna, and gult owners, resulting from the vast expropriation of southern land.¹⁸² As I will show in the next chapter, this relation lays the foundation for the emergence of an Amhara status group, which continued to be confused with an Amhara ethnic group that did not exist.

There has been an ongoing debate as to whether Ethiopia could be characterized a feudal state or not. And as usual, the debate was not mere academic but invested in politics. For instance, Donham’s views, which had shaped the thesis of Holcomb and Ibssa, discussed earlier, cast the northern conquest as an Amhara colonial occupation of free nations rather than a feudal expansion resulting in assimilation. Donham maintains that unlike the medieval states which were “less expansionist” and “not founded on

¹⁸¹ See Figure 4.
¹⁸² Literally meaning “rifleman,” Neftegna refers to those of northern origin who fought on Emperor Menelik’s side and later on settled in the south. Gult is non-hereditary right to collect tribute, granted by the Emperor to members of the nobility and clergy.
nationality,” Ethiopia was expansionist and absorbing nationalities and therefore not feudal. Addis Hiwet, on the other hand, treads a middle course by characterizing the pre-revolution Ethiopian state as a “military-feudal-colonialism.” The question whether Ethiopia was feudal or not had always been juxtaposed with the “colonial question” and had been fiercely debated beginning with the radical student movement in the 1970s because of its implication for the national question.

The Eritrean and Ogaden movements and their supporters had claimed they were “colonies” because doing so gives more legitimacy locally and internationally for separatist demands. The national/colonial question, as we will see in the third chapter, was the single most important issue that had divided the Ethiopian Student Movement in the 70s. Most radical activists recognized the right to self-determination including session as a legitimate right of the nationalist movements who claimed to be “colonized.” Other student activists like Andreas Eshete rejected the “colonial” claim by invoking Ethiopian feudalism: “Certainly, feudal Ethiopia did not possess any of the prerequisites which were components of more advanced stages of social and economic organization. With feudalism, one can speak of conquest not colonization; and this is quite a different matter.”

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I believe that in the broadest sense, the social-economic structure of the Ethiopian empire could be said to be feudal. But it departs in some ways from that of medieval Europe. In the latter’s case, according to Marc Bloch, a feudal society is characterized, among others, by “a subject peasantry” and a “widespread use of the service tenement” rather than salary; the “supremacy of a class of specialized warriors” and the presence of a system of “vassalage”; and “the fragmentation of authority leading inevitably to disorder.”

Another historian, Perry Anderson, describes Western feudalism as a system in which peasants occupied and tilled land on which they paid rents in kind or customary dues to the landlord. They were also forced to provide labour services. Land was privately controlled by a class of feudal lords, whose property rights over the land are limited because their estates were held as a fief. If a liege lord grants fief to a lesser feudal lord for a military service, he “in his turn would often be the vassal of a feudal superior, and the chain of such dependent tenures linked to military service would extend upwards,” often all the way to the monarch.

The Ethiopian socio-economic order betrayed many of the attributes listed by Bloch and Anderson, including vassalage, warrior class, fief, fragmented authority, for which it merits the general designation of feudal. But it is also departs from the European

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189 Ibid., 148.
model in important ways. First, unlike Europe fief or gult in Ethiopia was not hereditary.
Second, tenure in Ethiopia, at least in the Christian north, was communal which means
almost every peasant has, by birth right, a plot of land to till and pay tribute on. Also in
Ethiopia, particularly in the south, “absentee landlordism” was the rule than the
exception; the lord, who lived far away from his estate, showed little direct interest in
managing it, delegating that responsibility to a local agent. Given this lack of interest
by the landlord class who had the leisure to be inventive and could have benefited from
enhanced productivity, it is not surprising the level of technology in Ethiopia was
significantly lower. Further, compared to medieval Europe, towns were smaller, fewer
and their development slower and trade-induced urban centres were largely missing.

The communal tenure in northern Ethiopia is based on what anthropologists call a
cognatic or ambilineal descent group, men and women “share an ancestral land tract
because they believe they are descendents of its first holder.” An individual can at any
time claim rights to land or rist rights, in a given farming community if she or he could
establish descent from someone who was recognised to be the original holder of the land
in question. The community as a whole holds rights to all the land and “paid tribute to
the state over all the lands under its control, each holder contributing his share in
accordance with his holdings.” Individuals who had obtained usufruct rights over land

191 Crummey, “Abyssinian Feudalism.”
192 Allan Hoben, Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia: The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent
193 Unlike gult, which is non-hereditary, rist is a lineage system of land-ownership, which gives usufruct
rights to the claimant.
194 Dessalegn, Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia, 18.
holdings could not however transfer them to others by sale, mortgage or gift, though they
could lease them to others.\textsuperscript{195} The monarch can still (and often does) grant \textit{gult} rights
over \textit{rist} land to the nobility, as a result of which the peasantry had to perform corvee and
pay customary dues.\textsuperscript{196} The king also gave out land to the church, which did not actually
engage in agricultural activities but rather leased its holdings to others in return for tax or
tribute.

The communal tenure resulted in excessive fragmentation of land as the holdings
of the farming community as a whole remained constant while the number of claimants
increased in time. The expansion to the south must have eased land congestion in the
north. But, the hapless \textit{gabbar} still had to contend with paying the numerous tributes and
providing labour services.\textsuperscript{197} And this is not to mention the vagaries of nature such as
drought and locust invasions as well as the persecution and harassment of the prowling
armies, all of which made the peasant’s life precarious.\textsuperscript{198} The northern \textit{gabbar}’s only
consolation was having a plot of land to hold on to, which most peasants in the south,
where tenure was in the main private, did not have.

In the south, all land was expropriated by the state, though in theory, every land in
the country belonged to it by the ancient law of “eminent domain.”\textsuperscript{199} Only those regions
that submitted to Menelik’s army peacefully like Wellega and Jimma were allowed to

\textsuperscript{195} Dessalegn, \textit{Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia}, 17.
\textsuperscript{196} I am providing here a simpler version of an otherwise complex system. For detailed discussions on
imperial Ethiopian land tenure, see John Cohen and Dov Weintraub, \textit{Land and Peasants in Imperial
Ethiopia: The Social Background to a Revolution} (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975); Patrick Gilkes, \textit{The Dying
Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia} (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1975); John Markakis,
\textit{Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity} and Allan Hoben’s \textit{Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia}.
\textsuperscript{197} A \textit{gabbar} is tribute-paying peasant. It is derived from \textit{giber}, meaning tribute.
\textsuperscript{198} Bahru, \textit{A History of Ethiopia}, 15.
\textsuperscript{199} Dessalegn, \textit{Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia}, 21.
retain local autonomy and pay fixed annual tributes. The state granted large areas as fief to the nobility who were instrumental in conquering the region, transforming the southern farmer into a *gabbar*. But unlike the northern peasant who had secured rights over his land, the southern peasantry “which found itself on land claimed by the state lost whatever rights it had held traditionally over the land” to become a *gabbar* of “the state and of the privileged group to whom the state granted rights over such land.”

While retaining rights of tribute over it, the state also distributed land to the clergy, who would build churches and spread the faith, and to northern peasant-soldiers, who chose to settle in the south and agreed to provide military service if and when called upon. However, realizing the difficulty of imposing direct rule on “the vast and heterogeneous masses of people which had come under” its control, the Ethiopian state sought the service of the “indigenous traditional authorities, whom they called *balabbats*, and to whom they offered recognition and economic privileges.” They were given land and Ethiopian titles for their services in mediating between the peasant and the state, which is to say, for their “intermediary role in the whole exploitative system.” This class of local authorities would eventually integrate itself into the Ethiopian ruling class.

In the Christian north of imperial Ethiopia, social status was determined by one’s position vis-a-vis *rist-gult* as well as membership in the clergy or nobility, while in the south one was immediately accorded privileged status by virtue of being Christian and speaking Amharic. The northern conquerors not only imposed exploitative economic

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201 Ibid., 106. Traditionally a *balabbat* was a hereditary owner of *rist* land; later, it began to denote traditional leaders in the south as well.

structures on the local population but also considered themselves as “civilizing” forces bringing the word to the southern “heathen.” Thus, domination in the south, even when it was rooted in economic relations — after all what gave the neftegna the power to dominate was his gult right more than his tongue or creed — was perceived in regional or cultural terms.

The imposition of northern mode of life on the southern population and moreover the failure by successive regimes to make the newly incorporated peoples equal partners in economic, political and social life served as a bedrock of ethno-nationalism. Ethno-nationalism would capitalize on southern history of exploitation and humiliation by the north without acknowledging the assimilation and hybridization that might have taken place since Menelik’s southern march a century ago. True to nationalist remembering, southern nationalism that emerged decades after northern occupation recalled with remarkable vividness all the north-induced atrocities while developing amnesia to the despicable acts committed by southern nobles some of whom were slave traders and owners.

**1.3. The Emergence of Absolutism**

Haile-Selassie’s dogged absolutism, which I will discuss below, marginalized the various regions, including Amharic speaking groups like the Gojame, by depriving them of the relative independence they had. His despotism fostered northern, particularly Eritrean and Tigray, nationalism. It was also against Haile-Selassie’s rule that the radical
Ethiopian Student Movement, which for the first time imagined a dominant Amhara nationality, rallied. And finally, Haile-Sellassie’s refusal to reform led to deep economic and political crises culminating in the 1974 revolution. The revolution turned into a nightmare when an ultra nationalist junta, the Derg, came to power to rule Ethiopia for the coming seventeen years. The Derg viciously eliminated all multi-ethnic political opposition before succumbing to defeat by ethno-nationalists, who instituted an ethnic federal system that gave birth to the Amhara nation.

Menelik had no recognized living sons and when he died in 1914, his sixteen-year-old grandson Lij Eyassu began to rule as heir apparent. He was deposed shortly for alleged apostasy by the Shoan nobility who, several years earlier had ganged up against Empress Taytu. After Menelik suffered a massive stroke in 1909, Taytu stepped into her husband’s shoes to the distaste of the Shoan nobles who feared northern influence through her office. Taytu is from Gondar, a lone voice amidst Shoan circle of power. While both Gondares and Shoans are Amharic speakers, neither considers themselves anything else but Gondare and Shoan. In fact Shoa had become so autonomous with its own political dynasty that by that time of the Zamana Masafent traveller-historians did not consider it to be part of the “Amhara political unit.”203 It should be emphasised, though, that in those days, an “Amhara political unit” existed only in the imagination of outsiders who conflate language and ethnicity or linguistic groups and nationalities.

After the deposal of Taytu and Lij Eyassu, Menelik’s daughter Zewdetu was made queen and Teferi, a son of Menelik’s cousin Ras Mekonnen, regent. Zewdetu, although

203 Pankhurst, The Ethiopians, 132.
lacking real power represented the traditionalist factions in the government while Teferi, who had the benefit of modern Western education, pushed for modernization. When Zewdetu died in 1930, he assumed the imperial throne as Emperor Haile-Selassie I to rule until his ousting in 1974. Ethiopia under Haile-Sellassie became an absolutist monarchy. Poulantzas says the absolutist monarch “concentrates in his hands a power which is not controllable by the other institutions and whose exercise is not curbed by any limiting law.”

According to Perry Anderson, the absolutist states were pre-capitalist feudal monarchies with “standing armies, a permanent bureaucracy, national taxation, a codified law, and the beginnings of a unified market.” Similar measures were taken in the period of Haile-Sellassie’s rule beginning with the constitution of 1931, which “set up the juridical framework of emergent absolutism.” Although, as discussed above, Ethiopia is said to be feudal only in a qualified sense of the term, “there is sufficient congruence between Ethiopia and the absolutist states for an identification to be made between them.” Under Haile-Sellassie, monarchical state power reached its zenith in all spheres including regional administration, military organization and fiscal control.

Haile-Selassie had gained wide experience before he ascended to the throne through his involvement in state affairs as Regent and his travels to Europe. One of his achievements as Regent was to have Ethiopia accepted as a member of the League of

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Nations in 1923. The practice of slave-owning and slave-trade in Ethiopia was cited as a reason by Europeans to unsuccessfully oppose its admittance to the League of Nations; and the same reason was ostensibly invoked when imposing arms blockade on Ethiopia, which eventually left it defenceless against Italian aggression. As regent, Haile-Selassie also helped abolish slave-trade and free all slaves in 1924. When he became Emperor seven years later, he embarked on a number of reform programmes, which “helped create the foundational building block for the gradual metamorphosis of Ethiopia from a feudal or tributary state to a cash-nexus economic structure and a participant in the modern world economic order.”

Most of his reform programmes had not yet been implemented when Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Italy’s occupation of Ethiopia allowed it to physically join Eritrea and Somalia, its northern and southern colonies, respectively, and create a larger territorial entity named “Italian East Africa.” Subsequently, Italy introduced a new administrative model which divided the region largely along ethnic lines, a practice which resulted in the creation for the first time of a political and territorial unit called Amhara, Gondar as its capital. The other regional divisions were Eritrea, which included Tigray, Asmara serving as its capital; Galla and Sidama, capital Jimma; Shoa, including the capital Addis Ababa; and Harrar and Somalia, with Mogadishu as capital.

Italy’s ethnic-based colonial administration, however, was short lived. Ethiopian forces, engaged in protracted guerrilla warfare, were finally able to liberate their country

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211 See Figure 3.
with the help of the British in 1941. When Italy lost most of its colonies after its defeat in World War II, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia under the decision of the UN General Assembly. However, Haile-Selassie continuously undermined Eritrean autonomy and manipulated the political process until the Eritrean Assembly was dissolved in 1962 and Eritrea was unified with Ethiopia. Soon after, several Eritrean groups took arms to resist what they saw as the re-colonization of their country.

After his restoration in 1941, Haile-Selassie continued the process he had began a decade earlier, the establishment of a highly centralization and bureaucratized imperial state. The first constitution that he had ratified declared Ethiopia to be a constitutional monarchy. But what the supreme law did was simply affirm that the authority of the Crown was absolute: “The constitution legalized the emperor’s absolute powers in appointments and dismissals, the rendering of justice, the declaration and termination of wars, and the granting of land and honours.”\(^\text{212}\) Parliament had two houses: a Senate composed of members of the aristocracy chosen by the emperor; and a Chamber of Deputies, whose members were mainly drawn from the landed gentry through indirect elections.

As it turned out, parliament could do little more than rubber-stamping laws and regulations that helped the monarch run a “tightly centralized system of provincial administration, directly controlled from the Ministry of the Interior in Addis Ababa.”\(^\text{213}\) The country was divided into fourteen provinces, their governors personally

\(^{212}\) Bahru, *A Modern History of Ethiopia*, 143.
appointed by the emperor. Secular gult and corvee as well as conventional forms of tribute were abolished and a uniform rate of taxation as well as payment of salaries from the treasury to provincial administrators was introduced. Consequently, power was swept from the traditional aristocracy into the hands of the monarch.

The creation of the modern army, which had begun in the 1920’s, was intensified after restoration with the establishment of academies for the army, navy, air force and the police with help from India, Israel, Norway and Sweden. This period also witnessed the opening of elementary, secondary and vocational schools as well as the first university, a process that helped maintain a centralised working bureaucracy. Urban centres flourished following trade activities, commercial agriculture and light industrialization. It could be said that the manufacturing sector in Ethiopia began almost from scratch in 1941 and on the eve of the 1974 revolution, the number of industrial enterprises grew to 436 and the share of the sector in GDP increased to around five percent -- progress, yet not one that gives cause for celebration as it took one-third of a century to achieve.

Nevertheless, most of the modernization effort in connection with financial institutions, public works, education and social services was concentrated in the capital Addis Ababa and a few other major cities in the north like Asmara. For all the limited economic growth and modernization that Haile-Selassie’s rule ushered in, it was still a

214 See Figure 4.
215 Markakis, Class and Revolution in Ethiopia, 36.
217 Pankhurst, The Ethiopians, 259-60.
218 Eshetu Chole, Underdevelopment in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa: OSSREA, 2004), 50.
repressive system, particularly to the peasantry, to the great benefit of the royalty and
nobility who controlled the wealth of the land. That the fate of the peasantry turned out to
be worse under the Derg is a testimony to the brutality and misguided policy of the
military regime than any leniency shown to the gabbar by the absolutist monarch. After
all, Ethiopia under Haile-Selassie “remained poor and backward even by African
standards.”

Haile-Selassie’s centralism was challenged by Tigray’s provincialism, Gojam’s
regionalism and Bale’s nationalism, among others. Known as the Weyane rebellion, the
first uprising broke out in 1943 in Tigray, a province which had enjoyed a good amount
of autonomy throughout its history. The rebellion brought together sections of the
nobility and peasantry as well as regular bandits in a common cause. The uprising was
motivated by the “usurpation of provincial autonomy, threats to popular customs and
institutions, maladministration, and economic hardship.” The rebels were successful
initially and captured the regional capital Mekele before they were crushed by the
Ethiopian army supported with air power.

Two decades later, a similar uprising began in the southern region of Bale. The
rebellion was once again a reaction to a host of problems, primarily in connection to
economic exploitation. But in Bale, which is mainly Muslim and inhabited by the Somali

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219 Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, 166. Unfortunately, Marcus’ observation continues to hold true. Ethiopia
both under the Derg and the EPRDF remained to be one of the poorest countries on the African Continent.
221 John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People’s Liberation Front, 1975-1991*
(Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 1997. 52.)
and Oromo, the uprising had anti-Christian and anti-northern overtones.\textsuperscript{222} And 1968 saw the peasant revolt in Gojam. “Though there were many reasons for popular discontent, the revolt was sparked off by the new agricultural income tax of 1967, which it wanted to circumvent.”\textsuperscript{223} Defiance of Haile-Selassie’s rule also came from the elite. Dejazmach Belay Zelake of Gojam was one of the most renowned and charismatic leaders of the resistance movement during Italian occupation. Like many others, Belay resented the restoration of Haile-Selassie, who had spent the five years of occupation safely in exile. The resentment was further “exacerbated by the honours and privileges accorded not only to the other exiles but to known \textit{banda}, to those who had served the Italians.”\textsuperscript{224} Belay defied Haile-Selassie until he was defeated, captured and hanged in 1943.

Another patriotic Gojame and grandson of King Tekle-Haymanot, \textit{Bitwaded} Nagash Bazabeh, met the same fate in 1951 after being accused of attempting to assassinate the emperor. Yet another aristocrat, \textit{Blatta} Tekle Wolde-Hawaryat, who shared Belay’s sentiment, would conspire secretly against Haile-Selassie for over two decades until he died in a shoot-out with imperial forces in 1969.\textsuperscript{225} The resistance by Gojame aristocrats to Haile-Selassie’s rule and their execution together with the appointment of outsiders to administer Gojam after the deposal of \textit{Ras} Hailu, son of King Tekle-Haymanot, contributed to strong Gojame regional sentiment and resentment of Shoa political domination. While Gojame and Wollo were regional powers, unlike Gondar, Shoa and Tigre, they never had one of their own become an emperor.

\textsuperscript{222} Bahru, \textit{A Modern History of Ethiopia}, 216; Gebru, \textit{Ethiopia: Power and Protest}, 89.
\textsuperscript{223} Gebru, \textit{Ethiopia: Power and Protest}, 161.
\textsuperscript{224} Bahru, \textit{A History of Modern Ethiopia}, 210.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid.
But the most formidable attempt to depose Haile-Selassie was the aborted coup by Mengistu and his younger brother Gerame Neway. Mengistu was a Brigadier-General and Commander of the Imperial Bodyguard. Gerame was educated in Addis Ababa at Haile-Selassie I Secondary School before being sent to the US where he earned his BA from University of Wisconsin and an MA from Columbia. He also served as president of the Ethiopian Student’s Association in North America (ESUNA). Upon his return to Ethiopia he joined the Ministry of Interior where he served as administrator first to Wellayeta and then Jigiga, two remote areas in south and south-eastern Ethiopia, respectively. Gerame’s experience in these regions helped him to see firsthand the degradation of life in rural Ethiopia, a situation he tried to ameliorate in areas within his mandate but was unable to because the problem was systemic.

Having concluded that change in government was necessary, Gerame convinced his older brother as well as Col. Workeneh Gebeyehu, Head of the Imperial Security, of the need to overthrow Haile-Selassie. The planned coup began on December 14th 1960 while the Emperor was away on a visit to Brazil and the following day a new government was declared. Its objective, which drew support from university students expressed in public demonstration, was to alleviate the prevailing chronic poverty and bring to the national fold the marginalized peoples of southern Ethiopia.\footnote{Greenfield, \textit{Ethiopia}, see Chapter 19 “Mengistu Neway”; Marcus, \textit{A History of Ethiopia}, 164-170.}
However, the coup leaders made serious mistakes in their planning, including failure to draw in the army and underestimating the power of the church and the aristocracy, both of which were loyal to the emperor. Soon, the coup leaders and their followers in the Imperial Guard were isolated and cornered. Both Germame and Workeneh killed themselves rather than being captured alive. Mengistu, wounded and captured, was put to trial, sentenced to death and hanged in public.

Neither the effort by members of the aristocracy to dethrone him nor the peasant uprisings nor the coup attempt led by one of his most trusted generals put a dent in Haile-Selassie’s belief in his infallibility. Until he was removed from power in 1974, Haile-Selassie remained convinced that his absolute rule was the only way that would lead Ethiopia out of poverty and backwardness. And with such conviction he was not open to new ideas, and the reforms he championed at the start of his rule decades earlier began to look as old as the emperor himself.

Haile-Selassie was so much obsessed with power to the extent that he saw Ethiopia’s and his fate inseparable and was reported saying once, “Ethiopia is nothing without me. Her fate is intertwined with mine. Don’t imagine that Ethiopia will survive after I am gone.” 227 Even Clapham gives some credence to the perception about the fate

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of Ethiopia and Haile-Selassie being inextricably linked by pondering ominously over “What will happen when the Emperor goes?”

In the end it was Haile-Selassie’s “dogged determination to perpetuate royal absolutism in Ethiopia” that would lead to his well-deserved demise. It would be unproductive to speculate what might have happened if the old monarch was less absolute and more open to reform. But it was clear that given the kind of political and economic repression imposed on the Ethiopian peoples and the mounting opposition against it, absolutism had to crack from contradictions within it, from opposition between forces of change it generated and the repressive system bent on stifling it. And the contradiction found resolution in the revolution of 1974. I will return to the revolution and its effect on ethno-nationalist movements, which emerged in opposition against an imagined Amhara ethnic hegemony.

I have tried to show in this chapter first, how traditionally Ethiopian national identity was perceived in relation to Christianity, common territory and God anointed monarch; second, the debates surrounding Ethiopian historiographies and how revisionist histories in particular were invested in politics which helped shape construct an Amhara ethnic/national identity; and third, how Haile-Selassie’s absolutism marginalized the various regions and failed to address deep socio-economic problems creating conditions for an impending revolution. In chapter four, I will examine how all these relate to ethno-

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228 Christopher Clapham, *Haile-Selassie’s Government* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1969), 188. It should be noted this is Clapham writing uncritically over forty years ago. He has come a long way to be considered one of the best authorities on Ethiopia. As the previous pages show, while his writing in the last twenty-five years or so are critical of centrist Ethiopian historiography, his approach at the same time is constructive and not overtly biased towards or against any political movement.  

229 Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 44.
nationalist movements whose success gave rise to Amhara nationalism. But in the following chapter, I will analyse the nature of Amhara identity and the problems associated in conceptualizing “Amhara” as an ethnic marker.
CHAPTER TWO
ON AMHARA IDENTITY

You speak Amharic, you eat enjera and you break your shoulder in eskesta; then you must be Amhara!

The notion of Amhara ethnic identity before the rise of ethno-nationalist politics in Ethiopia is not conceptually defensible. The presumption of Amhara ethnicity as opposed to a linguistic identity got wider currency for political reasons. This chapter argues that in the political discourse of domination in multi-ethnic Ethiopia, Amhara identity makes analytical sense if it is conceived as a status group within the Weberian tradition. First, I will briefly outline the history of the Amhara peoples. Then, I will show the theoretical poverty of conceptualizing “Amhara” as an ethnic group before arguing how Max Weber’s understanding of status groups is a useful analytical tool to conceptualize Amhara identity and its dominant position in relation to the southern peoples in pre-revolution Ethiopia. What will emerge from my discussion is that “Amhara” meant several things by virtue of its association with Christianity, economic and social status, and Amharic, the dominant language since the 12th century.
2.1. Who Are the Amhara?

In his seminal work on land tenure among Amharic-speaking communities, Allan Hoben declares that the Amhara emerged “as a self-conscious ethnic and linguistic group in the beginning of the second millennium A.D.”\(^{230}\) But he does not provide any evidence to support his claim. Nor does he explain how Amhara self-consciousness expressed itself. It is also interesting to note his designation -- as though he was not sure -- of the Amhara as both an ethnic and linguistic group. As to the truth of the latter, there is no doubt. What needs to be established is as to whether there was an Amhara ethnic group since, or even before, the advent of the Amharic language, as the established wisdom seems to dictate. But even if there was a self-conscious Amhara ethnic group – perhaps tribe, as anthropologists would call it retrospectively – some thousand years ago, does it mean Amharic speakers since then are ipso facto ethnic-Amhara?

Not much is known about the origin or history of the Amhara. Even Taddesse Tamarat, generally acknowledged as the best authority on the Ethiopian Christian kingdom has very little to say about it. He traces the origin of the Amhara partly to the Semitic immigrants from South Arabia who had settled on the northern part of the land populated by the Agew, “the native inhabitants of the Ethiopian plateau.”\(^ {231}\) The Agew population “gradually adopted the language of the settlers.” And these “linguistically semitized natives,” which would later constitute the “dominant section of the peoples of

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\(^ {231}\) Taddesse, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 37.
Aksum,” spread further south, intermarried with the local people and formed other 
semitized communities into the interior of the Agew country:

It is apparent that all the Semitic linguistic groups south of the Tigre region 
had similar origin. The Amhara tribal group is the most northerly of these 
communities and was probably the earliest to be established as such. Traditional 
matterial on the Amhara is lacking and it is impossible here to give any specific 
dates for their origin. It is most likely, however, that it belongs to the pre-
Christian period of Aksumite history ... and the expansion of the kingdom in this 
direction was already in full swing during the intensive military activities of king 
Ezana. The earliest recorded tradition of Christian settlement indicates that there 
was already a distinct Amhara population occupying the upper basin of the river 
Bashilo. The tradition seems to belong to the first half of the nine century. 

Levine also tells us that during “the first millennium A.D. the inhabitants of Amhara were 
Agew peoples who developed a distinct South-Ethio-Semitic tongue,” Amharic.

While the genealogy of Amharic is still debated, Taddesse is not alone in tracing 
the origins of the Amhara to ancient South Arabian influence. Sergew draws attention 
to a historical record where one of the ancient rulers of Yemen was described as 
belonging to “the Abyssinian tribe of Amhara.” And Robert Chessman describes the 
Amhara as Semitic immigrants from Yemen. The above discussions seem to suggest

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232 Taddesse, Church and State in Ethiopia, 37-38. There is no total agreement as how exactly Amharic is 
related to Ge’ez, the oldest Semitic language in Ethiopia; whether it is direct descendant of Ge’ez or 
whether it is descended from yet unidentified Semitic language.
233 Levine, Greater Ethiopia, 72.
234 Nobody denies the influx of people from Asia to the Ethiopian region; the debate is on the nature and 
extent of influence the South Arabsians had on Ethiopian state formation and linguistic development.
235 Sergew Hable Sellassie. Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History, 262.
that there was an Amhara tribe or ethnic group, at least in the mind of the historian and foreign traveller, even before the development of the Amharic language. In travellers’ account of Ethiopia as well as the historical literature, “Amhara” is used not only to mean either a language or ethnic/tribal group or both, but also to refer to a region called Amhara, which was found “somewhere in today’s Wello,” in north-central Ethiopia.  

Accounts by travellers, anthropologists and historians also abound with descriptions of the “physical traits and attitudes of the Amhara.” For some they appeared courteous, pleasant and dignified. And for others, they appeared proud and haughty. Levine, who wrote extensively on the Amhara, describes them as “practical-minded peasants, austere religionists, and spirited warriors. Their interests and achievements as a nation are chiefly in the spheres of military activity and government.” Sweeping judgments, like the ones listed above, which claim to capture the supposed character and essence of the Amhara -- millions of people scattered over several regions covering a huge geographic area -- are symptomatic of what Abu-Lughod characterized as the “most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence and timelessness.”

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239 Chessman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile: An Abyssinian Quest*.
241 Levin, *Wax and Gold*, 5. It is interesting to note that here Levin refers to the Amhara as a nation, a point I will return to.
Due to the lack of sufficient evidence, it is difficult to reconstruct a reliable history of the Amhara or the Amharic language. And this leads to a lot of speculation, which in turn invites heated debates -- where the Amhara, the imagined hegemonic ethnic group, is involved passions flare up easily. I will quickly summarize historical accounts of the Amhara that most scholars agree on or claims about the Amhara for which there is believed to be sufficient historical and linguistic evidence.

It is not known when and how exactly Amharic evolved. Between the ninth and twelfth centuries Amharic and other languages replaced Ge’ez, Aksum’s imperial language, as vernaculars on the Ethiopian plateau.\textsuperscript{243} During the Zagwe era, Amharic seems “to have evolved into a language of wide use.”\textsuperscript{244} Amharic replaced Ge’ez as a court language (or it became “the language of the king”) following the so called Solomonic restoration of 1270. By this time, Ge’ez had become extinct as a mother tongue although it continued to be a literary language and is to this day the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{245}

According to Ge’ez-Amharic lexicographers concerned with the etymology of “Amhara,” the word means free, descent, chosen people.\textsuperscript{246} Amharic developed through a process of pidginization and creolization, and analysis of Ethiopian languages reveals that Amharic possesses “six of the eight phonological markers and sixteen of the eighteen

\begin{itemize}
\item[244] Henze, \textit{Layers of Time}, 50.
\item[245] Cooper, “The Spread of Amharic,” 289.
\end{itemize}
grammatical features identified as characterizing the broader Ethiopian language area.”

Historically, only the people of the region known as Amhara began to speak Amharic. But according to Getachew Haile, for “unknown historical reasons, the language of the Amhara started to spread outside Amhara, especially into Gonder, Gojam, Lasta, and northern Shoa (notably Menz, Tegulet, Bulga). All these people spoke other languages before they were overrun by Amharic.”

Amharic (አማርኛ) uses a writing system inherited directly from Ge’ez and a number of new characters, based on the Ge’ez letter-set, “were added in the 14th century to accommodate sounds, mostly palatals, peculiar to Amharic.” But, as suggested above, in many aspects, particularly in its syntax, Amharic is related more to languages of the Cushitic and Omotic groups than to Ge’ez or Tigrigna. Historically, Amharic had two advantages over Tigrigna which helped it spread faster. First, “Tigrigna has some harsh guttural sounds that are a bit hard on the throat” while Amharic has not. Second,

Amharic has long been a court language. This means that all kinds of laws, decrees, proclamations and instructions were often expressed in Amharic. This state of affairs has had such a deep and lasting effect on the population as a

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250 Lionel Bender quoted in Messay, Survival and Modernization, 32.
251 Amanuel Sahle, “Tigrigna: Recent History and Development,” in Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, ed. Sven Rubenson (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies; East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1984): 87. Amanuel says, “Conti Rossini thinks that Tigrigna is nearer to Ge’ez than the other Semitic languages of Ethiopia. In fact he believes that Amharic may have evolved from an old dialect further removed from Ge’ez,” 79.
whole that until recently Amharic was looked upon as the language of education and progress.\textsuperscript{252}

The earliest written testimonies of Amharic known to date are the “Old Amharic Royal Songs which were composed in honour of famous Ethiopian kings somewhere between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.”\textsuperscript{253} Although Tewodros had his chronicles written in Amharic and it achieved a quasi official status during Menelik’s time, Amharic attained the legal status of an official language only upon “the promulgation of the Revised Constitution of 1955 of which article 125 states: ‘The official language of the Empire is Amharic.’”\textsuperscript{254} Aside from what I have summarized above, there is not much known about the history of the Amharic speaking people.

2.2. The Question of Amhara Ethnicity

With few exceptions, there has been little academic discussion of Amhara ethnicity, which is generally taken for granted.\textsuperscript{255} Both the first public declaration of the existence of an Amhara ethnic group and its repudiation took place at a televised panel discussion in 1991. The participants were Meles Zenawe, leader of both TPLF/EPRDF and then President of the Transitional Government (TGE), and three academics: Andreas

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{254} Abhrham, “State Policy and the Medium of Expression,” 17.
\textsuperscript{255} Aside from brief discussions as part of a larger work, the following two are the only full-length articles that I know of that deal with Amhara ethnicity: Takkele Taddese, “Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?” and Tegegne Teka, “Amhara Ethnicity in the Making,” in \textit{Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa}, ed. Mohamed Salih and John Markakis (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998).
Eshete, Mekonnen Bishaw and Mesfin Wolde-Mariam.\textsuperscript{256} Asked if there was an Amhara ethnic group Andreas prevaricated. He referred to a claim by ethno-nationalists that the Amhara hide behind an Ethiopian identity by not acknowledging they are Amhara but simply Ethiopian. But he did not take a position on the issue.\textsuperscript{257} What Andreas alludes to, which is at the centre of ethno-nationalist view of national identity will be discussed in chapter five but it might be useful to say a few words about it here.

For ethno-nationalists, ethnic groups or distinct “nations” within a multi-national state like Ethiopia constitute the “natural” societal unit around which political and economic life should be organized. And the perception of national identity follows that principle. Accordingly, as for example the EPRDF reiterates, Ethiopian national identity does not exist in a vacuum. One becomes Ethiopian through ethnic participation -- one does not simply become an Ethiopian but an Oromo-Ethiopian, Tigre-Ethiopian and Amhara-Ethiopian.\textsuperscript{258} Thus, goes the ethno-nationalist claim, Amharas have traditionally tried to hide their privileged ethnic identity by claiming they are simply Ethiopians and not making any reference to their ethnicity.

When his turn came to address the issue of Amhara ethnicity, Mesfin, denied there was an Amhara ethnic group. He cited his field research where he asked a large

\textsuperscript{256} For a transcript of the discussion see the July 20 and 27, 1991 issues of the Amharic weekly \textit{Yezareyitu Ethiopia}.

\textsuperscript{257} While Andreas is now closely allied with the EPRDF, during his student activism he was one of the leaders of the student faction in the US which condemned nationalist movements as “separatist” and advancing a cause that stood “contrary to the Ethiopian people’s emancipation from feudalism and imperialism,” “Resolution of the 17 Conference of ESUNA” \textit{Challenge} 10 (1970): 5. Andreas is presently the government-appointed president of the state-owned Addis Ababa University. It is not clear what intellectual path led him to reverse his position and become a supporter of ethno-nationalism.

\textsuperscript{258} See “Revolutionary Democracy on the Question of Eritrea and Unity,” \textit{EPRDF Publication} (February 1992).
number of Amharic-speaking peasants if they were Amhara. Those who were Christian admitted they were while Muslim Amharic speakers answered they were not, thus, argues Mesfin, “Amhara” designates Christianity than ethnicity. Mesfin further pointed out correctly that Amharic speakers identify themselves regionally as Gondare, Gojame and the like and not as Amhara. For his part, the EPRDF leader Meles argued for the existence of an Amhara ethnic group saying that even if Mesfin’s claim were true, there was the Amharic language which implies an Amhara culture and therefore an Amhara ethnicity. The discussion did not get any further because the panellists had a host of other issues to cover. The unprecedented TV debate between a head of state and academics also proved to be the last of its kind.²⁵⁹

Mesfin subsequently elaborates on his correct observation about the association of “Amhara” with Christianity, a claim shared by several other scholars and evidenced by Amharic idioms. Before the institution of an ethnic federal system, Muslim Amharic speakers in the north did not identify themselves as Amhara while Christian Oromos of Shoa were considered Amhara by the Muslim Oromo of Arsi and Bale.²⁶⁰ Mordechai Abir concurs with Mesfin and so does Richard Greenfield who says that in “Harar today the term Amhara means little more than Christian.”²⁶¹ Similarly, Markakis writes that the

²⁵⁹ It is the sad fact of Ethiopian history that freedom of expression and political transparency seem to flourish only during transitions when the new government had not yet consolidated power, as was also the case when the Derg seized state power.
²⁶¹ Greenfield, Ethiopia, 57; Abir, Ethiopia: The Era of The Princes.
Selte in southern Ethiopia “were likely to identify all Christians as ‘Amhara’, the dominant Abyssinian group.” Amharic expressions confirm the above assessment:

Since ancient times the Amaras have been Christians, so when a Galla [sic] or Muslim takes up Christianity it is said he has become an Amara. According also to the custom of the country when a person quarrel with his provider he says, “From now on you and I are Muslim and Amara.” This means “You and I are like Christian and Muslim, who have no unity in either religion or property.”

The traditional juxtaposition of “Amhara” against “Muslim” to express a state of acrimony is still in use today though mostly by elderly people. The politically-correct younger generation uses it only in humour.

Written in 1900, Afawarq Gebrayasus’ Tobya, the first known Amharic prose fiction, further substantiates the association of “Amhara” with Christianity. Tobya, which is a short name for Itoby (Ethiopia), narrates the story of how “infidels,” who had invaded a Christian nation became Amhara, Christian, when the king of the invaders fell in love and married Tobya, the beautiful and intelligent daughter of one of the defeated Christian generals. The symbolism of the name Tobya – both as title of the book and name of the heroine – is too obvious to be lost on anyone, but what is remarkable about Afework language is his usage of Amhara synonymously with Christianity.

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263 Grover Hudson and Tekeste Negash quoted in Takkele Taddese, “Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?” 176. “Galla” is the name the Oromo were traditionally known by outsiders. The term is derogatory and nobody uses it presently though until recently anthropologists and historians, except those who are Oromo, used it interchangeably with Oromo. “Amara” is a variant spelling of Amhara.
end of the novel, the king tells Tobya that the “infidel and Amhara” became one.\textsuperscript{264}

Revelling in victory Tobya composes the following:

He who made thousands upon thousands of Amharas flee
He who smashed the Rases and Dajazmaches
He who dethroned the one with the great crown
He who never scared of even the cannon,
Let alone the spear and sword,
He whose news brought shivers even at a distance
He whose voice brought panic across the precipice
He who broke the ox of the monastery
He whom the most solid chain could not restrain
The lion is tamed and shackled with a
\textit{matab} [neck-cord]\textsuperscript{265}

“Amhara” had not featured as a designation of an ethnic group in any literary work that I know of, which is a strong evidence to support the claim that there was no Amhara ethnic consciousness until the recent past.\textsuperscript{266} Neither was there any reference to an Amhara ethnic or tribal group in traditional Ethiopian or Ge’ez literature, including the royal chronicles.\textsuperscript{267}

\textsuperscript{266} I am referring to literary work written before the 1990s. I have not surveyed the development since then because it obviously will not be relevant to my argument.
\textsuperscript{267} Mesfin, \textit{Yekehedet Kulkulet}, 133.
In Amharic literary works, group identities, allegiances or loyalties found expressions in regional terms. It is indeed ironic and revealing at the same time that foreign commentators and a few educated local elites obsessed about Amhara ethnic group while millions of putative Amhara nationals remained oblivious to their Amharaness and lived a happy (or miserable, as often was the case) life as Gojame, Gondare, Wolloye and Shoan. It is revealing because it shows the complicity of scholars, particularly anthropologists, in inventing ethnic identities by equating language with ethnicity, or in Barth’s words by confusing the “cultural stuff” with “the ethnic boundary.”  

As explained below, a commentary on Addis Alemayehu’s *Feqer eska maqaber* (love unto the grave), illustrates how literary critics can also be complicit in constructing ethnic identities.

Written in 1965, *Feqer eska maqaber*, generally considered to be the greatest Amharic novel ever written, is a great love story. It is also a social critique in its treatment of the “tension between the static form of an archaic social system and the dynamic content of the growing socio-political consciousness of the oppressed.” In this lengthy novel in which Amharic-speaking characters wander from place to place and feudal lords fantasise about their lineages, not once is Amhara ethnicity mentioned. The setting is mostly in Gojam but the characters often identify strongly with specific localities like Dimma or Mankussa.

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268 See Yeros, “Introduction: On the Uses and Implications of Constructivism” and my introduction for the discussion on Barth.

One of the protagonists is a vain and heartless aristocrat: “Fitawrari Meshesha is very proud of his position in society. He spends time tracing his ancestry to past rulers of Tigre, Shoa and Gondar.”270 But this Gojame Fitawrari, who looks back to the glorious days of his ancestors as rulers of Shoa and Gondar, is transformed into “Amhara nobility” by the critic Fikre Tolossa, who declares that “Meshesha is indeed a typical Amhara landlord.”271 Fikre is writing (in 1995) at a time when Amhara ethnic consciousness has already taken roots. Nonetheless, he is attributing Amhara ethnic identity to a fictional character whose identity was conceived by the author as a Gojame and not Amhara.

If there was no self-conscious group that identified itself as Amhara as all the historical and literary evidence seem to indicate, then in what sense was Amhara ethnicity invoked by scholars? Is it analytically defensible to argue that the Amhara had always constituted a distinct ethnic group? This requires defining ethnicity or what constitutes an ethnic group. And short of providing a circular definition like ethnicity is “belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group,”272 doing so is not an easy task for two reasons. First, there are simply too many definitions to consider all. And second, there is wide disagreement on what criteria to follow while defining ethnicity, especially if one is to avoid thinking of culture as “a finite and self-sufficient body of contents, customs and traditions.”273 For these reasons, discussions “on the definition of

ethnicity often conclude that the term need not be defined for scholarly work to proceed.”274 This, however, is one of those occasions where defining terms proves more useful than not.

Such practice -- while necessary to show the analytical poverty in the presumption of an Amhara ethnicity -- always entails the danger of falling back into an essentialist mind-set that defines ethnic identity by focusing on so-called objective cultural markers, and not how these become relevant in social interaction. As I stated in the introductory chapter, and continue to mention throughout this work, cultural elements become relevant to ethnicity only when they help define social boundaries, which of course are fluid and relational. Fundamental to the idea of ethnic identity, and indeed any group identity, is the application of distinctions between “us” and “others.” Still, the very practice of taking ethnic groups or other collectivities as “fundamental units of social analysis” risks the impression that these are “internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common proposes,” which they are not.275

I am concerned here with “ethnicity” in its anthropological sense where “it refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive,” and therefore can be applicable to both minorities and majorities276 In its broader application, particularly in economically advanced societies, the term may refer to “minority issues” and “race relations,” and it should be clear that there is no fixity to ethnic and national labelling. As Benedict

276 Eriksen, Ethnicity and Nationalism, 4.
Anderson showed us, the nation is imagined within a historicized territory where occupants share the same space and time. But once detached from its local mooring, the national marker becomes an ethnic appellation creating categories like ethnic Chinese, Korean, Ethiopian and the like.

A good example of the broader application of the concept of ethnicity would be one by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan stated in their introduction to a volume titled *Ethnicity*. They argue that any group identification based on language or religion or national origin, as long as it is geared towards specific political goals, constitutes ethnicity. However, as Walker Conner observes, “despite the usefulness that such a categorization possesses for the study of the politics of special interest groups,” generally the practice of employing ethnicity “as a clock for several different types of identity” adds confusion to the already difficult task of theorizing ethnicity. In the United States, for instance, as R. Radhakrishnan observes, “the renaming of ethnic identity in national terms produces a preposterous effect. Take the case of the Indian immigrant. Her naturalization into American citizenship simultaneously minoritizes her identity. She is now reborn as an ethnic minority American citizen.”

Anthony Smith and Martin Bulmer each provide a definition that is widely-accepted in ethnic studies. Smith defines ethnic group as “a named human community

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277 Anderson, *Imagined Community*.  
connected to a homeland, possessing common myths of ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of shared culture, and a measure of solidarity, at least among elites.”

And Bulmer’s definition goes as follows:

An “ethnic group” is a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group’s identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to the group.

According to both definitions, the most important criteria of ethnic groups include: a collective name; shared homeland; myth of common ancestry; shared history; elements of shared culture; and sense of group identity.

Is there an Amhara ethnic group by these standards? For reasons that will become clear soon, I will start with the last criterion listed above, sense of group identity. Since, as discussed in the introduction, Barth introduced his transactional approach to the study of ethnic groups some forty years ago, the most important, and widely-accepted, marker of ethnicity has been group self-awareness, which allows for agency. Even the ethnosymbolist Smith, who doggedly insists on the symbolic and cultural rather than the political and relational acknowledges that there can be no ethnic community without “a strong sense of belonging and an active solidarity.” On this count, one can from the

281 Smith, Nationalism, 13.
283 It should be noted although that this may not be the case with primordialist or essentialist understanding of ethnicity.
outset conclude emphatically that there was no Amhara ethnic group or community. For all the disagreement on what constitutes ethnicity, self-awareness is the only constant in all non-primordialist definitions.

If not an ethnic group, did the Amhara constitute an ethnic category? Ethnic category is an analytical designation for a social formation which possesses many of the ethnic elements outlined but lacks the subjective element -- awareness of group identity. According to Smith, an ethnic group “is not just a category of population with a common name, descent myths, history, culture and territorial association. It is also a community with a definite sense of identity and solidarity.”285 And as Paul Brass put it, “ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class.”286 The analytical distinction between ethnic communities and ethnic categories appears to be both an implicit acknowledgment that agency is central to any theory of group-formation, and recognition of the scholarly need to construct categories to make social analysis manageable.

The Amhara do not have myths of common ancestry nor do they have shared historical memories. Regarding collective name and homeland, Amharic-speaking people did not have one but several. Some called themselves Gojame, others Gondare, and still others, Wolloye. Those from Shoa tend to identify themselves with specific localities like Menz or Tegulet. Markakis comments on how collective actions among the Amhara is based on provincial divisions:

While in earlier times Amhara was a distinct region, the term now applies to

285 Ibid., 29.
286 Brass, Ethnicity and Nationalism, 19.
all Amharinya-speaking people of northern Ethiopia – that is, the bulk of traditional Ethiopia, excluding the provinces of Tigre and Eritrea and small minority groups of ancient origin in the northern plateau. Used in this broad sense, the Amhara label has little meaning in the context of traditional provincialism, since the Amharinya-speaking population has been divided into clearly defined provincial units which serve as the foci of provincial attachments and provide the framework for collective action in defence of area interests.  

Levin, whose earlier position on Amhara identity shifted not only from work to work but also sometimes within a particular work, makes a similar observation: “In their home territory Amhara rarely express a strong sense of belonging to the community of all Amhara. They identify themselves either on a regional basis – Gojjami versus Gondare – or else by means of the supraethnic term Habesha.” Levin finally brings himself to recognize that there is no single Amhara ethnic identity but unfortunately by the time he started advocating his new position in 1992, both Amhara ethnic identity and Amhara nationalism were on the rise – the country was already structured along ethnic lines creating an Amhara homeland and the All Amhara Peoples Organization (AAPO) was already established. What many miss about the nature of ethnic or national identity is that it is at the mercy of history, which invents it where there was none.

Furthermore, Levin does not conceptually justify his newly-arrived conclusion as opposed to his previous positions which described the Amhara interchangeably as an

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287 Markakis, Anatomy of a Traditional Polity, 46-47.
288 Levine, Greater Ethiopia, 118. For instance in Wax and Gold, he refers to the Amhara as an “ethnic group” on page three and as a “nation” on page five.
ethnic and national group. Still, what Levin writes about Amhara regional identification is revealing about the pre-1991 period:

Amhara today do not constitute a single ethnic group, but rather a language community composed of diverse ethnic groups that have adopted the Amharic language over the centuries – much as the Oromo today, who speak a common *Afan Oromo* but consist of ethnic communities who previously knew themselves only by such names as Boran, Guji, Jimma, and the like.\(^{289}\)

Indeed, unlike the idea of Amhara ethnicity, which is found wanting, it would make sense to speak of a Gondere or Gojame ethnic identity for these groups each has a collective name, a shared history, a common territory, and most importantly a sense of group identity. The following testimony, given by an Ethiopian government official who was trained in Western Europe almost half a century ago further elucidates how the Amhara expressed their identity by identifying with particular regions:

In the midst of my studies in Western Europe I had the chance one summer to visit a number of West African countries and then to return home and spend some time in Gondar. I had not thought very highly of my people before that trip, and what I experienced was a great surprise. What I found – what we have, that I did not find in the African countries I visited – is a special sort of dignity of manner. When I talked with the elders at Gondar I was moved to tears. That is something priceless; that is a great and irreplaceable national resource.\(^{290}\)


\(^{290}\) Quoted in Levin, *Wax and Gold*, 53.
The testimonial is revealing first because it shows that identity is relational, that ethnicity, as Stuart Hall puts it, “has to recognize its position in relation to the importance of difference.” Second and more relevant to my argument, the official strongly and poignantly identifies with first and foremost Gondar, and second with Ethiopia, as implied in “national resources,” and never, as invariably the case is, with “Amhara.”

But there is a twist in the comment made by Levine, who said that in “the course of his studies abroad,” the official “had become estranged from the traditional ties and symbols of his Gondare-Amhara background.” There once again we have the scholar who hears, and embeds in his narration, “Amhara” when nationals say Gondare, Gojame, Wolloye or Menze. And the fact that Levin’s position on Amhara ethnicity evolved along the years does not absolve his earlier writing from being complicit in the scholarly construction of Amhara ethnic identity.

The pervasiveness of regional identifications and sentiments among the Amharic speaking peoples of Gondar, Gojam, Shoa and Wello is partly the result of geography but mostly the effect of their political history. For instance, as Pankhurst observes, Gojam was isolated from the other provinces “by the great arm of the Blue Nile, and therefore had only tenuous links with Gondar and the main import trade routes. The rulers of the province were therefore seldom able to exercise any very decisive influence on state affairs.” Gojam, unlike Shoa, Gondar and Tigray, never had one of its own on the

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293 Pankhurst, A Social History of Ethiopia, 88.
imperial throne. And what frustrated Gojam’s aspiration, best represented by King Tekle-Haymanot, was the power and ambition of the Shoan dynasty.

In the case of Shoa, it is to be recalled that it was the centre of political power from the time of Yekunno-Amlak until the rise of Gondar as the imperial capital. Although Shoa achieved its greatest expansion under Menelik as king of Shoa, the process had started over a century ago with his ancestors. Shoa’s supremacy declined following Gragn’s invasion when the centre of political power shifted to Gondar. Shoa was relatively unaffected by the debilitating civil wars which engulfed the northern regions during the Zamana Masafent largely due to its long-established, stable dynasty and its geographic distance from Gondar.294 By this time, while nominally part of the empire, Shoa, whose contact with the north was further restricted by the Oromo, was practically independent.295

Following Menelik’s ascendance to power, Shoa once again became the imperial power-house until the end of monarchic rule. Gondares, who could not “forget that their city was the capital of Ethiopia for more than two hundred years,” must have shared Gojam’s resentment of Shoan supremacy.296 Henze comments that under Haile-Selassie’s rule, the “core Amhara regions – Gojjam, Begemder, and Wollo – provided only a small proportion of the leading officials in the imperial government and were at least as neglected as Tigray in allocation of developmental resources during the entire period.”297

While regional jealousies did not seriously threaten Haile-Selassie’s rule, they left a deep

294 Pankhurst, The Ethiopians, 133.
295 Pankhurst, A Social History of Ethiopia, 88.
296 Levin, Wax and Gold, 47.
297 Henze, Layers of Time, 195.
mark of provincial sentiments which can be still felt even after the creation of an Amhara regional state that brought the provinces together.

Aside from religion, “regional identification has had the first claim on people’s loyalties,” and this is true for the Amhara as it is for the Oromo or Gurage. The tide of history shaped by nationalist politics may help forge, as it did in Ethiopia, ethnic and national identities out of disparate regions sharing the same language. But this should not justifiably lead the scholar into following the nationalist to embed ethnic identities and national actors in the past when they did not yet exist. Unlike the primordialist view that ignores the dynamics of culture, Amhara, or for that matter Tigre or Oromo ethnic identity has not always been there but was constructed historically.

In the end, the claim about Amhara ethnicity boils down to sharing elements of common culture, most importantly a common language, though, spoken with regional dialect (Gondare, Gojame, Wolloye), which of course reinforces identification with specific regions. But shared language by itself cannot define an ethnic group for the simple reason that people who speak the same language do not necessarily share the belief in “common ethnicity” or “wish to stand shoulder to shoulder.” If language is mentioned as one of the criteria of belonging to an ethnic group, it does not mean it is the

“prime or most decisive factor. But it is the easiest to define and the easiest to grasp.”

As Levin explains, even that may be too much to claim for Amharic:

The Amharic language, rather than being the tongue of a historically distinct ethnic group, appears to have emerged as a native lingua franca through a process of pidginization and creolization, such that it incorporated a good deal of Cushitic vocabulary and syntax as well as combined features distinctive of both the northern and southern branches of Ethiopian Semitic.

The experience of the Tigrigna-speaking peoples of Eritrea and Ethiopia illustrates how common language does not always foster group solidarity. While these two communities speak the same language and may share other cultural elements, because of their political history they consider themselves as separate as two peoples can be. Under the current political tension, most Eritreans, if not all, are loath to be called “Tigre” much as the Tigre might hate to be mistaken for Eritrean. The case of the Beta Israel is yet another example in showing the problem in equating language and ethnicity: while most Ethiopian Jews are Amharic-speakers, they considered themselves and were seen by outsiders as nothing else but “Felasha.” History is replete with examples that people often feel stronger about their faith than their ethnicity. This could hold truer in Ethiopia where Christianity had for long served as state religion, which resulted in Jews and Muslims feeling marginalized and finding good reason to rally behind their faiths.

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The case of the Selte provides another case of the precariousness of assigning ethnicity based on language. The Gurage, as they were called collectively, are loosely associated groups, the Selte being one, occupying a dense area on the central Ethiopian plateau. Their speech belongs to the Semitic linguistic family and they depend on *ensat* (false banana) cultivation for subsistence like many other south-western peoples. The Gurage practice different religions and the Selte are Muslims, which for them constitutes “the cornerstone of identity.” Following the Ethnic federal arrangement in 1994, The Gurage were lumped together as a single ethnic group. The Selte, who considered themselves different primarily because of their religion, went through a protracted legal procedure to finally have themselves declared a separate ethnic group following a referendum in 2001. While it may be unusual for ethnic sentiments to develop in the absence of a common language, the reverse is not true.

If speakers of the same language lacked a sense of solidarity as a group, there were instances that showed the formation of group identities among people speaking different languages, illustrating once again the absence of a direct relationship between language and ethnicity. For example, some parts of Gondar were Tigrigna speakers who all identified themselves as Gondare. They were later incorporated into Tigray following the establishment of Ethnic federalism. While it is beyond the scope of my work to compressively critique the assumptions of ethnic federalism, one of which is that “ethnic group rights are more important than individual, class or gender rights,” it is clear that in

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its implementation the rights of individuals to exercise their ethnic choices were curtailed. The options of language or ethnic groups to assert, exercise or negotiate identities of their choosing are often constrained by politics and power structures.

Those who repudiated the existence of Amhara ethnic group in the past were all correct. But most of them subscribe to an essentialist view taking ethnicity to be inscribed in stone. They insist that if there was no Amhara nationality in the past there cannot be, or at any cost there should not be, one in the future. Raising the banner of Ethiopian nationalism, they passionately assert that the Amhara are “ethnic Ethiopian” and any claim to the contrary is to become a “tribalist” and (for Mesfin) might even constitute treason. This view denies Amharic speakers their rights to become Amhara nationals if they choose to. Identity does not operate on an “either or” logic. It is more of a process filled with “buts” and “ands.” There was no Amhara ethnicity/nationality in the distant past, but it has emerged reluctantly among the populous and with vengeance officially in the recent past. And if it was imposed from outside, it was also contested from inside.

In the volume that Tsuda Takeyuki edited with his colleagues, Ethnic Identity, there are several examples that illustrate how ethnic identities partly tend to be constituted by external ascriptions and how categories imposed from outside are

305 See for instance, Mesfin, Yekehedet Kulkulet; Getachew, “Amharic Speakers and the Question of Nationalities,” and Tegegne, “Amhara Ethnicity in the Making.”
306 Getachew, “Amharic Speakers and the Question of Nationalities,” Mesfin, Yekehedet Kulkulet. Mesfin writes, “It is TPLF’s betrayal [of Ethiopia] which transformed the Amhara into an ethnic group, and all those who accepted Amhara ethnicity are complicit in the betrayal,” 135.
307 As we will see in upcoming chapters, a “homeland” was carved out for the Amhara from the regions of Gondar, Gojam, Shoa and Wello. This was done without any consultation with the people who, unlike other major language or ethnic groups, did not have any organization representing them at the time.
sometimes resisted and other times accepted but often times selectively appropriated depending on political, economic and historical factors.\textsuperscript{308} The essay by Andrea Boscobinik about the “Roma” or Gypsies of Eastern-Europe is particularly relevant to the discussion on Amhara ethnicity despite the glaring differences between the Amhara, who are a settled community and the Gypsies, who are nomadic.\textsuperscript{309} In both cases a collective ethnic identity – that of Roma and Amhara -- has emerged through a complex process of impositions and contestations.

As Tsuda elaborates since “there is often a conflict between internally experienced and externally defined identities, the development of ethnic identity is inherently a process of competing ethnic constructs and contestation over cultural meanings.”\textsuperscript{310} Similarly, Raymond Williams cautions us that experience does not come as a finished product and identities, ethnic or otherwise, are lived and unfinished, never already formed.\textsuperscript{311} Thus, even though the Amhara, who have been officially subjected to a process of homogenizing-ethnicization since 1991, appear to have been sentenced to life in nationality, this should not lead us to the conclusion that they are helpless victims forced to wear their ethnic badge on their arm.


\textsuperscript{309} Boscobinik, “Becoming Rom.” The term “Roma” is an outside ascription applied to the Gypsy peoples of the region who do not identify themselves as “Roma” because they do not share a collective ethnic identity and rather identify according to regional grouping. However, there is now a social and political process initiated by the elite to create a collective “Roma” ethnic identity among the disparate Gypsy groups. However, there is a wide-spread resistance to accepting a collective “Roman identity.”


The construction of ethnic identity is not something completely imposed from outside or purely fashioned out of a group’s self-consciousness of its cultural distinction, -- which after all can only be realized through interaction with others -- but a continuous struggle and negotiation between the two. Identities are constructed and evolve through a complex dialectic process of self identification as well as recognition and validation from without. Identity formation, as Radhakrishnan maintains, is “a matter of rich and complex negotiation and not the result of some blind and official decree.” And the formation of Amhara ethnic identity cannot be otherwise, even though the external factor, in the form of state policies, appears to have played a larger role up to this point.

Confronted with the theoretical problems of categorizing the Amhara as an ethnic group in the past, some had chosen to conceptualize Amhara ethnicity in terms of “supra-ethnic consciousness” or the “plasticity of Amhara.” Thus according to Takkele, the Amhara can “be said to exist in the sense of being a fused stock, a supra-ethnically conscious ethnic Ethiopian serving as the pot in which all the other ethnic groups are supposed to melt,” and the, “language, Amharic, serves as the center of this melting process.”

Similarly, Clapham writes:

It is essential to emphasise the plasticity of Amhara – and hence, in a sense, of Ethiopian – identity, in order to correct the very misleading impression that can be given by associating it with the descent-based ethnic identities characteristic of many other African societies. Being Amhara is much more a matter of how one behaves than of who one’s parents were; and without this capacity for

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313 Radhakrishnan, “Ethnicity in Age of Diaspora,” 129.
assimilating other peoples into a core culture which can be regarded as national, and not the exclusive property of a particular group of people, the Ethiopian state would probably have been unable to sustain itself in the first place.\textsuperscript{315}

Clapham further says that like the English, Amhara “ethnicity is so weakly defined” adding that unlike “the great majority of African peoples, they do not constitute a ‘tribe’ – a group, that is to say, defined by a mythology of common descent from a single ancestor.”\textsuperscript{316}

Clapham makes a compelling argument notwithstanding his truism about the Amhara not being a tribe and his insistence on weakly-defined Amhara ethnicity drawn from a generalized and misleading comparison between the English and the Amhara. While, as we have seen from Taddesse’s account, there might have been an Amhara tribe over two millennia ago, nobody suggested that there was one presently. It would indeed be strange to talk of a tribe comprising over twenty million people. On the second point, there are fundamental differences between the nature of English and Amhara identity without denying that the comparison is justified. It may be true that English ethnicity was weakly defined; but there was no Amhara ethnicity – in any analytical sense -- to define weakly or strongly.

However, it could be said that Gondare, Gojame, Wolloye or Shoan identities are weakly defined as those from Gondar, Gojame or Wollo are as likely to say they are Ethiopian as Gondare, Gojame or Wolloye. Because historically their identity as Amharic-speakers was not threatened, (far from it, their language was progressively

\textsuperscript{315} Clapham, \textit{Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia}, 24.  
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 23-24.
court, national and official language of the county) these groups may not find it important to assert their regionally-defined ethnic identity on every occasion: by identifying with the Ethiopian state, the Amhara tend to view themselves as Ethiopians.\(^{317}\) Another way of putting is that the Amhara were less inclined not to be patriotic. This was not always true of other language or ethnic groups, particularly those engaged in nationalist movements. There also may be another similarity between the English and the Amhara: English nationalism is claimed to hide behind Britishness just as the Amhara are said to hide behind Ethiopia.\(^{318}\)

But the characteristics English and Amhara identities are also different in important ways. Amhara nationalism, when it finally emerged, was not based on historical identification of a group of people with an ethnic group, nation, or any political entity called Amhara. For a long time in history the English saw themselves and were seen by others as English, lived in a place called England, had myth about the origin of England, told stories about English men and women. The “fact” of Englishness was recorded both in blood and ink. The Amhara did not have or lived in a place called Amhara for a millennia, did not see themselves as Amhara nor did they have a common myth about the origin of the Amhara people or nation.

Even Yekunno-Amlak, the first Amharic-speaking Emperor, did not think he was establishing Amhara dynasty but was restoring the Solomonic one when he seized power

\(^{317}\) Tegegne, “Amhara Ethnicity in the Making.” 119.

\(^{318}\) For discussion on Britishness and English nationalism see Krishan Kumar, “Nation and Empire: English and British National Identity in Comparative Perspective,” _Theory and Society_ 29 (Oct., 2000). It is debatable if Kumar has made a good case for existence of English nationalism, one of his arguments being: “There is such a thing as English nationalism. The very denial of it speaks it,” 567. I can think of a number of things to deny and be sure at the same time they do not exist.
in 1270, although his cataloguers thought otherwise.\textsuperscript{319} “Under the kings of Amhara, \textit{as Yikunno Amlak and his successors were called by contemporary Arab writers}, the Amhara sphere of influence expanded considerably,” writes Levine.\textsuperscript{320} It is interesting to observe that no sooner had Levine told us (in his first sentence) that Arab writers established the tradition of calling Yekunno-Amlak and his followers “Amhara” than he found himself (in his second sentence) part of the convention. And the tradition by Arab writers of designating Ethiopia as \textit{Habasha}/Abyssinia and calling Ethiopian monarchs as Amhara kings has played an important part in Ethiopian ethnic politics and the construction of Amhara nationalism. Until the 1990s, the Amhara, as an ethnic or national group, existed only in the mind of the outsider.

\textbf{2.3. Amhara Status Group}

Given the analytical poverty of the claim about Amhara ethnicity, I suggest Amhara identity in the north-south dynamics or pre-revolutionary Ethiopia be theorized as a status group. Doing so requires disentangling the notion of “Amhara domination” from an Amhara ethnic group and aligning it with an Amhara status group. For reasons already discussed in details (the association of Amhara with Christianity and of course the Amharic language), the Ethiopian state was said to have been dominated by the Amhara since, by some account, 1270 and by others since Menelik’s rise to power.

\textsuperscript{319} Actually, the significance of Yekunno-Amlak’s restoration is it brought an end to the line of Agew-speaking rulers of the Christian Kingdom and “the throne was once again occupied by a Semitic-speaking monarch.” See Taddesse, \textit{Church and State}, 68.

\textsuperscript{320} Levine, \textit{Greater Ethiopia}, 73. Emphasis mine.
“Amhara domination” is a term regularly employed by ethno-nationalist and most Ethiopians. Strictly speaking, Amhara domination could only refer to linguistic domination. Otherwise, there was nothing Amharic, so to speak, about the imposition of Christianity, northern customs and traditions as well as economic exploitation. In fact as far as economic domination was concerned, every land-lord or nobility was implicated whether he came from south or north.

In relation to northern domination of the south, it should be noted that it was not only the Amhara of Shoa but all northerners who followed Menelik, including the Tigre, that were responsible for the success of the southern march. Language difference aside, the similarities between the Amhara and Tigre is striking. The “two groups share the legacy of Aksum, the Ethiopic alphabet, Ge’ez literature, Monophysite Christianity, similar political and social institutions, and the same style of life.” Their culture of production is based on ox-plough farming, the land tenure is *rist-gult* and they share the myth of the Solomonic heritage. When we talk about the imposition of northern mode of production, way of life, religion and the like, we are talking about Amhara-Tigre values.

But the label “Amhara domination” persevered because the face, the most visible expression of the northern settlers in the south was the Amharic language, which has come to symbolize northern political and cultural domination. The important point to note is that acknowledging Amhara domination should not require one to believe in the existence of an Amhara ethnic group. The latter gained wider currency for political reasons -- it was easier to galvanize the masses of dominated ethnic, religious and

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language groups against an enemy imaginable in person, an ethnic Amhara, than an Amharic language, an abstract idea.

It is one of the ironies of Ethiopian history – that it was not colonized – that Amharic, which is fused from not only Semitic languages but also Omotic and Cushitic languages prevalent in the south, is still seen as a “colonial” symbol by southern nationalists even a century-and-half after the southern marches of Menelik. In colonized black Africa, the people often accepted, albeit with ambivalence, the language of the colonizer. They made it the official language, a practice which, whether by intent or default, helped them avoid privileging one local language over another. Alas, the same courtesy could not be extended to Amharic. Unlike the French, English, Italians and Portuguese, who left Africa when they lost their colonies, the Amhara -- who intermarried and mixed with the southern population -- did not and could not leave, inviting the wrath or ethno-nationalists even decades after the economic foundations of northern domination were dismantled.

Clapham aptly captures this historical irony. After explaining, as already stated, the “plasticity of Amhara,” which as a “core identity” helped sustain the Ethiopian state, Clapham observes:

At the same time, it is precisely because Ethiopia has this core identity, associated with one people but also claiming a special national status, that it suffers from much intense problems of national identity and integration than other African states, in which ethnicity is the result of the almost haphazard process by which different peoples were tossed by colonialism into a common political unit. Assimilation to the core identity, while it offers on the one hand the chance of
participating in the national system, involves on the other hand the subordination of one’s original affiliation. This is much more of a problem for some groups than for others, but at its worst it has fostered a level of resistance which few other African states have had to face.322

Thus, “becoming Amhara” was as much embraced as resisted for the material and social benefits it affords. It is this openness to outsiders together with an economic foundation based on land which characterized the Amhara status group that emerged in the south in the wake of Shoan conquest.

After the southern march, Amharaness, which was a linguistic identity with religious connotation, was transformed into a status once it gained economic foundation, land; and cultural legitimation, being Christian among “heathens.” The Amhara along with the Tigre and others who settled in the south realized they were different in relation to the southern non-Christian and “uncivilized” population. In this sense it could be said an Amhara consciousness was expressed in terms of being “civilized” -- Christian, long history of statehood, literate, well-groomed, skill of fire arms. For the construction of a status group, it matters less whether or not northerners were superior in all this respect than they believed they were and had the economic power to prove it. Thus, Amharaness as extra-linguistic-cum-religious marker gained social significance for the first time. But only the southern settlers acquired this awareness while the great majority of the Amhara remained scattered in the north toiling as always oblivious to the stature they earned in absentia.

Once we move away from the theoretically untenable position of an Amhara ethnicity and the correlation of Amhara domination with an Amhara ethnic group, we can find a useful analytical tool to explain the Amhara phenomena, so to speak, in the Weberian concept of status groups, which both compliments and differs from Marxian understanding of class. Both Marx and Weber agree that classes are the basic economic expressions of social formations, that they are founded on property relations, and that the market is the playground where free labour and capital meet to define class relations. Both believe in the alienation and dehumanization of the worker in capitalist societies. Marx and Weber also believe that class struggles play important roles in defining power relations and transforming societies.

Yet, another way of analysing the theories of the two German thinkers is to view Weber’s theory as a counterpoint to Marx. Weber rejects Marx’s conflict model of social systems which explains the course of history as a continuum of class struggles that will culminate in a class-less utopia. For Weber, class struggle is neither the main nor the only reason for societal transformations; conflicts between states, castes, and ethnic as well as status groups play as much important roles. Weber acknowledges the presence of conflict between capital and wage labour in capitalism but restricts the contradiction to the market situation.

For Weber, class struggle is not a universal phenomenon which explains the shift of history. Rather, Weber argues that class struggle expresses itself only in specific market situations: “men in the same class situation regularly react in mass actions to such
tangible situations” like for instance, disputes over wages.\textsuperscript{323} Unlike Marx, Weber does not believe that class struggle is important enough on its own to define power structure or the social order. He assigns that role to the combined influence of classes, status groups, and parties. Weber defined status groups as a community of people who share similar cultural lifestyle and interests as well as honour code but not necessarily similar economic status.\textsuperscript{324}

For Weber, status groups are as important as classes and in one respect more important: they are “normally groups” though quite often “an amorphous kind,” while classes are not communities and at best only provide conditions for communal actions.\textsuperscript{325} Status groups trace their history to the feudal economic order and in their extremity may lead to “ethnic segregation” or evolve into caste system.\textsuperscript{326} Weber promoted the concept of status groups to “contrast with economic class, in that status groups are not mere statistical categories but groups with real social organization. Status groups may also be organized around economic classes, provided that these classes have a cultural distinctiveness and enact themselves as groups.”\textsuperscript{327} The land-owning “civilized” Christian settlers from the north, known invariably as Amhara or neftegna, fit nicely Weber’s understanding of a status group.

And the Amhara status group was relatively open to anyone. Unlike the racial marker which makes it difficult for Blacks and Asians, for instance, to become English,

\textsuperscript{324} Ibid., 932-33.
\textsuperscript{325} Weber, \textit{Economy and Society}, 932.
\textsuperscript{326} Ibid., 933.
in a largely “racially” homogenised Ethiopia, one can easily became Amhara by learning the language and embracing Orthodox Christianity. The absence of family-name system makes the process much easier. Ethiopians do not have family surnames and they are addressed and identified by their first name; also, a woman does not change her patronymic to that of her husband. Moreover, since titles were not hereditary, (the son of a Ras for instance may inherit land from his father but will not become Ras unless the emperor specifically confers that title upon him) anyone in theory can join the nobility.

The Amharic novel *Feqer eska maqaber* provides an ironic commentary on a state of affair that may have resulted from the absence of a system of family surnames and hereditary titles. *Fitawrari* Meshesha and his wife *Weyzero* Tiruaynet have a daughter, Seblewongel, who, by traditional standards, is past the ideal marriage age. And this is because her vain parents could not find anyone among her many suitors noble enough to marry their daughter. This is how Haddis characterizes the usual conversation between the spouses on the subject of Seblewongel’s marriage:

*Fitawrari* Meshesha: *Kegnazmach* so and so asked me if his son could marry Seblewongel.

*Weyzero* Tiruaynet: Who is *Kegnazmach* so and so?

*Fitawrari* Meshesha: Let alone I, he himself doesn’t know his father!

*Weyzero* Tiruaynet: What impertinence!

*Fitawrari* Meshesha: My dear, *Grazmach* so and so asked for my daughter’s hand.

*Weyzero* Tiruaynet: Who is his father my lord?

*Fitawrari* Meshesha: His father is not human; he is a peasant.
Weyzero Tiruaynet: I wish I were dead! 328

If there was an Amhara tribe once upon a time, it outgrew itself through two thousand years of assimilating other groups. And in the absence of a last name-system, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of one’s lineage as it would be possible, in theory at least, for a Maguire to claim his Irish-ness or for a Laurent to claim her French-ness notwithstanding that neither might have a clue about Ireland nor France.

Thus, outsiders were “invited” into the Amhara status group by accepting Christianity and learning to speak Amharic. Aside Ras Mekonnen, Haile-Selassie’s father and governor of Harrar, Emperor Menelik’s most important generals namely Ras Gobena, Dejazmach Balcha, and Fitawrari Habte-Giogris, were among those who accepted the “invitation.” As was King Michael of Wello (formerly known as Muhammad Ali), Menelik’s son-in-law and father of Lij Eyassu, heir to the throne.

The concept of an Amhara status groups explains both the economic and cultural expressions of northern domination of the south without resorting to locating the ethnic identity of actors, a task which, analytically, is unnecessarily complex and politically irrelevant because oppression by any other name feels just as bad. Paul Baxter understanding of how the Oromo perceive Amharaness further reinforces the analytical usefulness of theorizing “Amhara” as a status group in pre-revolutionary Ethiopia:

From an Oromo viewpoint, an Amhara is anyone who is either born into Amhara society and culture or anyone who chooses to enter these by speaking Amharic in domestic situations, by adopting an Amhara lifestyle and by acting in public.

328 Haddis, Feqer eska maqaber, 65.
situations in support of Amhara values, in particular by following the fasting rules of the Coptic Church.

Triulzi cautions us that understanding what “Amhara domination” meant to the southern peoples is more important than explaining it in “epistemologically adequate terms.”329 I believe the concept of an “Amhara status group” satisfies both.

To sum up by raising the question once again, what did “Amhara” stand for before the ethnicization of the Amhara or the emergence of Amhara nationalism and the creation of the Amhara nation? It stood for several things. While “Amhara” constituted a linguistic group generally and a status group within north-south relations, it also had religious connotation. Furthermore, it was rhetorically imagined as an ethnic group by ethno-nationalist. To put it in another way, in religious identification “Amhara” meant Christian. Analytically it stood for a language group. Politically, it was construed as an effigy of a purported dominant ethnic group, against which ethno-nationalist could rally the masses. Functionally, it served as a status group, a social ranking reasonably open to anyone who owned land, accepted Christianity and spoke Amharic.

As Liisa Malkki observes, “identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield.”330 And what does “Amhara” presently mean? Now there is a nation bearing that name. Amhara has also been institutionalised as ethnic designation. And of

course it is still a linguistic category. And for some, particularly Ethio-nationalist, the idea of an ethnic Amhara is a fantastic imagination of ethno-nationalist with sinister political agenda. The meaning of “Amhara” has always been and still is highly politicized and contested. In the next chapter, I will show how “Amhara nationality,” was imagined in the political discourse of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s.
CHAPTER THREE
RADICALISM, REVOLUTION AND THE “NATIONAL QUESTION”

There was in Ethiopia a generation that had a sweet dream. But History decided otherwise, and the dream turned into an ugly nightmare. And that generation withered away after writing a history of tragedy and sacrifice. It engaged in an exercise of mutual annihilation. It easily surrendered itself to its enemy (and the enemy of Ethiopia). The sacrifice thus bore no fruit; nay, its fruit was an extremely bitter one.

Eshetu Chole

Emergent Amhara ethnic sentiment and Amhara nationalism are reactions to ethno-nationalist politics. The ethnicization of Ethiopian politics has gone through several phases which this chapter, divided in two parts, explores. The first part traces the genesis of nationalist politics and the imagining of an Amhara ethnic and national group to the radical Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s. The second part deals with the complexities of the 1974 revolution whose success and failure in different ways paved the way for the intensification of ethnic politics. The military regime, Derg, which sized power after deposing Haile-Selassie, introduced a radical land reform. The land reform dismantled the economic foundation of the Amhara status group and earned the Derg -- at least at the initial stage of the revolution -- the support of the rural population.

Consequently, it became difficult for multi-national Marxist movements in the country to mobilize the peasantry against the Derg. On the other hand, the regime’s
failure to address the so called national question fostered ethno-nationalist movements that rallied against a perceived Amhara domination. The political discourse on Amhara domination, which had its roots in the Ethiopian Student Movement, presupposed an Amhara ethnic and national group. And it is in reaction to this *Othering* that Amhara nationalism would eventually emerge.

### 3.1. The Ethiopian Student Movement

Following his restoration in 1941, Haile-Sellassie made it one of his priorities to expand education by helping open primary and secondary schools as well as institutes of higher education. These were largely concentrated in the capital Addis Ababa and a few selected cities across the country. The student population, which was said to have numbered around 700,000 by the 1960s, was inadequate to meet the country’s needs.\(^{331}\) In 1972, the number of individuals with two to four-year college degree was estimated to be around ten thousand; close to three thousand students were abroad working on higher degrees.\(^{332}\) All this was not quite significant by other African countries’ standards and Ethiopia probably had a smaller educated sector for the size of its population.\(^{333}\) But the progress made in education, limited as it was, was significant in that it unleashed the most implacable opposition to Haile-Selassie’s regime, contributing in many ways to its

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demise and challenging for the first time the notion of an all-embracing Ethiopian national identity.

It is remarkable that every political programme for fundamental change and every organized political opposition to overthrow first the monarchy and then the military regime had its roots in the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). It shaped the political course and ideology the country would follow to this day; from socialism, which had been tried under the dictatorship of the junta not the proletariat, to the rights of nations to secede, which is now recognized in the Ethiopian constitution and served as a basis to recognize Eritrean independence from Ethiopia in 1993. It is the most radical wing of the ESM which politicized, polarized and transformed the anthropological view of Ethiopia the “ethnic museum” into Ethiopia the “ethnic prison.” And in this prison, the Amhara were said to rule over different nations and nationalities. Thus, radical ESM imagined the Amhara nation which ethno-nationalist politics soon populated with ethnic Amharas.

The country’s first political parties, all clandestine and espousing Marxism-Leninism, were formed by the radical student intelligentsia. By the end of the 1970s, leaders of the ESM and their large following, representing Ethiopia’s best, brightest and angriest, had either annihilated each other or had made themselves easy targets for extermination by the Derg. Aside from a few lucky ones who escaped the human carnage to lead life in exile, and a few others who chose to serve the junta, the only survivors

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were those who had quite early on left to the rural areas of Eritrea and Tigray to join and form nationalist insurgencies. They would bid their time to defeat the Derg, liberate Eritrea and seize state power in Addis Ababa in 1991.

The student movement includes activities in Ethiopia, Europe and North America. Most of the students abroad showed theoretical sophistication, perhaps because they were better educated and had better access to revolutionary literature. Those within the country, on the other hand, were more radicalized. They experienced the worsening economic and political conditions in the country and were also subject to suppression, including beatings, imprisonment and in a very few cases killings by Haile-Sellassie’s security forces. The repression under the monarchy would prove milder compared to what the students and generally progressive forces would face during the military regime, mass murder and unspeakable physical torture.

Initially, the student movement at home was concentrated in the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA), no doubt because of the advantage a residential university provides by way of offering a forum where students from different walks of life and regions can come together and exchange ideas. The student movement cut its teeth on defying the University’s Jesuit administration for its pedagogical methods based on primary and secondary education in Ethiopia as well as parochial restrictions which included “forbidding dancing and whistling on campus.”335 By 1960, there was already a student publication, News and Views, which was apolitical but still subject to strict censorship by the dean’s office.

The arrival of scholarship students at UCAA beginning in 1958 from other African countries had a radicalizing effect on the student movement. The experience of the anti-colonial nationalist movement still fresh on their mind, African scholarship students were “disconcerted by the medieval residue in the Ethiopian social and political system and were the first independent sources of comparative information about developments elsewhere on the continent.”

Ethiopia’s economic and political backwardness was the main reason given for the need to overthrow Haile-Sellassie during the failed coup attempt of 1960, which the students supported after being wooed by Mengistu Neway.

The proclamation that the aborted coup leaders had broadcast on December 14, which called for justice, progress, and selflessness was an eye opener for many. It talks about the little progress made despite the country’s long history of independence: “The Ethiopian people hoping one day to be freed from ignorance, illiteracy and poverty have waited patiently all this time but nothing tangible has materialised from a mountain of promises.”

That same day Mengistu addressed student leaders representing all colleges to seek their help: “We have called you not only to inform you of events but to seek your help and co-operation, for our cause is one in which you are equally concerned.”

The university students answered his call by holding a huge rally the following day chanting:

My countrymen awake! Your history calls to you.
Let slavery depart. Let freedom reign anew.
Awake! Awake! For dignity – her sake.

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337 Quoted in Greenfield, Ethiopia, 398.
338 Ibid., 405.
My countrymen recall – your value and your due,
Take courage and tout heart – Great joy shall be with you.
Awake! Awake! For dignity – her sake.\textsuperscript{339}

One can only imagine the self-sacrifice of the young charismatic general and his co-
conspirators as well as the image of their dead bodies left hanging for public observance
must have left its deep mark on the collective psyche of the student body, which up to
that point had not seen firsthand the long arm of Haile-Selassie lashing out in vengeance.

In 1961, the colleges were brought together to form the Haile-Selassie I
University (HSIU). The very first act of HSIU under its first president, Haile-Selassie’s
grand-son-in-law, was to end boarding facilities, ostensibly for budgetary reasons. But
the measure had the unintended effect of helping “integrate the students into the life of
the capital and bring them closer to its population.”\textsuperscript{340} Students began expressing their
dissatisfaction with Ethiopian state of affairs through the annual poetry contests held on
College Days. These popular events were initially attended by the emperor and his
entourage but the verses, characterized by political critique and social satire, soon became
too critical of the government for the authorities to ignore. In 1962 Haile-Selassie stayed
away from the events, officials of the University College Union (UCU), the only student
organization at the time, were dismissed and new regulations were introduced to police
the content of the poems.

However, not known to the authorities and to most of the university students, a
militant group named the “Crocodiles” was formed within the student body. Members of

\textsuperscript{339} Greenfield, \textit{Ethiopia}, 414.
\textsuperscript{340} Kiflu, \textit{The Generation Part I}, 36.
this group were studying Marxist-Leninist literature and works by other revolutionaries like Franz Fanon and Che Guevara. The militants are to play a big part in Ethiopia’s political future and as Bahru correctly observes, both “the brave achievements and the fatal blunders of the Ethiopian Student Movement are ultimately attributable to this group.”

In 1964, a field service programme was introduced whereby university students spend a year in the countryside teaching high school students. The programme brought the students in direct contact with the people whose life they wanted to improve.

The National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS) was established in 1964 and Berhane-Meskel Redda, one of the most charismatic members of the ESM, became its first Secretary General. The growing influence of the militants became evident through the first resolutions passed by NUEUS which called for an end to oppression, fundamental social and economic reforms, and solidarity with the African masses in their fight against imperialism and neo-colonialism. In 1965, students held a big rally chanting “Land to the Tiller,” announcing the radical Ethiopian Student Movement has come of age. In 1968, several demonstrations were organized, their aim ranging from expressing solidarity with the people of Vietnam, protesting against white minority rule in Rhodesia to denouncing a fashion-show organized on campus as an expression of cultural imperialism. It soon became a tradition in students’ writings to extol socialism and condemn capitalism and feudalism.

At the persistent instigation of the student militants, a new city-wide students association named the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) was

341 Bahru, A Modern History of Ethiopia, 223.
established in 1967. The new student association and its organ, *Struggle*, were fully controlled by the radicals. Student unions were being founded in Europe and North America as well. The Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE), which was formed in Bonn, Germany, in the early 1960s, became very active and was publishing a student journal *Tatek*. Its counterpart across the Atlantic, the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA), was doing the same through its popular organ *Challenge*.342

Most of the leaders and active members of these student organizations were to become leaders of the first two socialist parties in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM), better known by its Amharic acronym MEISON. It should be noted, however, that beginning in the mid 1960s most of the future leaders of the socialist parties were already PhDs and although active in the student movements in Europe and North America, they were no longer students per se.343 There was no formal coordination between the student movements abroad and at home, though in 1965 both ESUE and ESUNA became more attuned to the movement at home by rallying behind the slogan “Land to the Tiller.”

The national question, as it was popularly known in socialist literature, was not addressed by the Ethiopian Student Movement until the late 1960s. A movement which had adopted class as the analytic framework to examine Ethiopian society cared less about ethnicity, which has a narrow focus. Among students who were not sufficiently

342 Until 1969 ESUNA was known as ESANA, Ethiopian Students Association in North America.
343 For instance Haile Fida, Negede Gobeze, and Tesfaye Debessai were all part of the ESUE. Tesfaye, the youngest of the three was the leader of the EPRP until he committed suicide to avoid arrest after he had been shot. Haile, who was murdered by the Derg that he was closely allied with, was the leader of MEISON. Negede is one of the few survivors among the MEISON leadership.
radicalized, there was in fact a good dose of patriotism which got a further boost as a result of the war Ethiopia had fought against Somalia in 1964. For these reasons, important concerns of students from non-privileged language and religious groups -- the association of Ethiopian national identity with Christianity and the neglect of other languages in favour of Amharic -- were not addressed.

However, this state of affairs could not continue for the simple reason that a large number of Eritreans and Tigres and a smaller number of Oromos were prominent members of the radical faction of the Ethiopian Student Movement. Ignoring their sensitivity to the national question would only have proven detrimental to the student movement in general. For the radical activists, this concern was validated by the fact that university students from Eritrea had begun flocking to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).\textsuperscript{344} Kiflu describes the nationalist mood, so to speak, of the 1960s as follows:

Members of the oppressed nationalities attending higher educational institutions began to assert themselves. It was during this period that, probably to the surprise of many, some Addis-Abeba born and reared Tigrigna-speakers and Oromos started speaking in their first languages on the university campus and elsewhere. Oromo ethnic identity was galvanized by the formation of the Mecha and Tulema Association. On the university campus, some Oromo radical groups were forming. Similar feelings were aroused among Tigrai students who believed that their poverty-stricken province was condemned to eternal stagnation by its exclusion from power in the Amhara-dominated state bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{345}

\textsuperscript{344} These include Isaias Afwerki, current president of Eritrea, who was a student of the Faculty of Engineering at HSU in Addis Ababa.

\textsuperscript{345} Kiflu, \textit{The Generation Part I}, 52.
But there was still resistance to define Ethiopian politics along ethnic lines. This became evident when the NUEUS debated the “national question” at its 6th annual meeting in 1967 and passed resolutions condemning sectarian movements in Ethiopia. Supporters of nationalist movements were labelled reactionary and opportunist as well as obstructionist of the efforts to establish a national democratic front. ESUE took similar positions during its 8th congress held in Yugoslavia.

An article titled “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” which appeared in the November issue of Struggle in 1969, changed everything. The short and polemical piece by Wallelign Mekonnen, an Amharic-speaking student activist from Wello, was remarkable both for its bold approach to the national question in Ethiopia and the irreconcilable divisions it created within the student movement. Wallelign claimed “socialist forces in the student movement” have been very reluctant to raise the “Questions of Nationalities” because of the “fear that it may alienate certain segments of the student population and as well the fear that the government may take advantage of an honest discussion to discredit the revolutionary student movement.” Acknowledging that the fear is well-founded, he suggests the solution is to hold an open discussion on the issue and not shirk from it. He writes:

What are the Ethiopian peoples composed of? I stress on the word peoples because sociologically speaking at this stage Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing,

346 Wallelign’s “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia” originally appeared in Struggle 2 (November, 1969) and subsequently reprinted in several student journals.
history, social organization and territorial entity. I conclude that in Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigray Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation, the Sidama Nation, the Wellamo Nation, the Adere Nation, and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation. 348

Wallelign points out that to be a “genuine Ethiopian,” one has to speak Amharic and profess Orthodox Christianity: “In short, to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon’s expression).”349 Relying on the classical Marxist theory of ideology where the economic structure (forces and relations of production) determines the superstructure (ideological forms like the legal, political and religious), Wallelign argues that Ethiopian national identity was equated with the cultural practices of the Amhara-Tigre coalition which he says also dominates economically:350

To anybody who has got a nodding acquaintance with Marxism, culture is nothing more than the super-structure of an economic basis. So cultural domination always presupposes economic subjugation. A clear example of economic subjugation would be the Amhara and to a certain extent Tigray Neftegna system in the south and the Amhara-Tigre coalition in the urban areas.351

349 Ibid., 10.
350 In the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx writes, “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.” In Eugene Kamenka The Portable Karl Marx (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 159.
Moreover, quoting from Lenin extensively, Walleign called for an unequivocal support for socialist-lead nationalist movements which he said were missing at the moment. He expressed support for the right of nations to self-determination arguing that as long as the nationalist movements were lead by peasants and workers, separation would prove the better option for the oppressed nationalities than living under an oppressive government. As was the tradition among radical student activists then, the entirety of Walleign’s argument, as well as the debates it engendered, were framed within the Marxist-Leninist analytic. A brief summary of the socialist tradition on the national question will help put Walleign’s claim and reactions to it into perspective.

There is an ongoing debate whether there is a coherent Marxist theory of the nation or nationalism. For Nairn, for instance, “the theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure.” But he tries to absolve the founders of Marxism from blame by adding that the “overall characteristics of ‘uneven development’ had not been sufficiently delineated by history itself” at the time Marx and Engels were formulating their theories. Ephrain Nimni, on the other hand, argues that while fragmentary and rigid, Marx’s and Engels’ writings on the nation have an underlying coherence.

The founding fathers of Marxism and their immediate successors did not have much to say about nationalism and their position in relation to nationalist movements.

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353 Nairn, The Break-Up of Britain, 329.
354 Ibid.,355.
355 Nimni, Marxism and Nationalism.
appears to be conditioned by political exigencies, which for them invariably means upholding the interest of the working class and the international proletariat. Marx, for instance, insisted that Ireland’s independence must be supported not just on its own merit -- that it would be good for the Irish -- but because it will rid the English working-class of the antagonism it feels towards the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers its standard of life. For Marx, this antagonism, which plays well into the hands of the English aristocrats and capitalists, impedes the chance of workers’ revolution in England. He says English workers must be made to realize that “for them the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the first condition of their own social emancipation.”

This idea that the national question must be subsidiary to class struggle and the socialist revolution would continue to be at the centre of Marxist thinking. In fact in Otto Bauer’s work, which could be considered as the first systematic attempt to theorize on nationalism within a Marxist framework, socialism and nationalism, properly understood, are complimentary. Defining the nation, as “a community of character that grows out of a community of destiny,” Bauer maintains that the national character or culture is shaped by existing class relations. Therefore, where class antagonism exists, there would be conflicts among different nationalities. But such would not be the case in socialist societies where antagonistic relations based on class division cease to exist.

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However, it was only Lenin and Stalin who were faced with the daunting task of dealing with the national question during a socialist revolution for the first time. They had to concede the independence of Finland from Russia and subsequently the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) becomes the only socialist country to recognize the rights of nations and nationalities within a state to secede. For them, the question of self-determination was not a question of rights in the abstract but a practical one on which success of the first socialist state depended on. And it is Lenin’s and Stalin’s analysis of the national question that Ethiopian radical students relied on while envisioning their own socialist revolution for a state which they believed comprised of several distinct nations and nationalities.

Stalin defined the nation as “a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.” This perhaps is the most objective definition of the nation. If there is any subjective aspect to it, it must be embedded in the obscure formulation of “psychological make-up.” Stalin further stresses that while none of the above characteristics -- common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up -- is by itself sufficient to define a nation, on the other hand “it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be absent and the nation ceased to be a nation.” Cultural collectivities which fell short of being a nation are designated as nationalities and are said to exist within multi-national states of semi-feudal and semi-capitalist societies.

358 Article 72 of the new, 1977, constitution of the USSR states “Each Union Republic shall retain the right freely to secede from the USSR.”
359 Joseph Stalin, Marxism and the National Question: Selected Writings and Speeches (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 12.
Both Lenin and Stalin advocate the right to self-determination including session. But while Lenin never seems to equivocate saying “it would be wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as meaning anything but the right to existence as a separate state,” Stalin on the other hand qualifies the right of oppressed nations to self-determination: “A nation has the right to arrange its life on autonomous lines. It even has the right to secede. But this does not mean that it should do so under all circumstances.” Just like Marx and Engels and the other Marxists that came before them, both Lenin and Stalin justify support for separatist nationalist movements in order to create solidarity between the working people of the dominated nations and the proletariat of the dominant nation, a solidarity that would enhance, or at the very least clear obstacles for, a socialist revolution.

Wallelign’s short treatise on the national question in Ethiopia and both the favourable and negative reactions to it were framed within the Marxist-Leninist tradition I outlined above. But the attempts to apply a Marxist-Leninist analysis to the Ethiopian socio-political structure were more characterized by emotionalism than by theoretical coherence. For instance, according to Stalin’s definition, which everyone then took as the final authority concerning the national question, neither the Amhara nor the Oromo nor any one of the language/ethnic groups that Wallelign mentions qualifies to be called a nation. None of Wallelign’s named “nation” displays the characteristic of a common

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361 Stalin, Marxism and the National Question, 24.
economy or, with few exceptions, a common territory. And if “psychological make-up” is brought into the equation, it is doubtful that there would be any nation anywhere.

In a similar crude and ahistorical application of Marxism to Ethiopian society, the New York chapter of ESUNA declares:

We believe that the great majority of the so-called “tribes” in Ethiopia are, in fact, nations or nationalities; that because of the historical evolution they have undergone and because they fully satisfy the four characteristics (i.e. common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture) required for the definition of “nation” ... the Oromo, the Amharas, Tigreans, Guragies ...are fully developed nations or fast developing nationalities...these nations or nationalities have the right to self-determination, up to an including secession...the Amhara nation is the main national oppressor and the dominant nation.362

A year later, another treatise entitled “On the National Question in Ethiopia” came out in support of Wallelign’s position by a student radical group based in Algiers.363 Although polemical, this paper was by far the most exhaustive and theoretically sophisticated articulation of the national question by the radical left. However even this piece was not free from a blind application of Marxism to the Ethiopian reality resulting in a teleological theory of nation formation: “If Ethiopia is

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363 Published under the pen-name Tilahun Takele, the article might have been authored by Berhane-Meskel Redda or the “Algiers Group” as a hole. What had become known as the “Algiers Group” was a group of seven radical students, including Berhane-Meskel, who in 1969 hijacked an Ethiopian Airlines plane to the Sudan and eventually settled in Algiers.
passing through period of rising capitalism, is it not theoretically correct to state that in Ethiopia today there are many nations and nationalities.”

It was in Wallelign’s article on the national question and reactions to it that “Amhara” for the first time was imagined as a nation in Ethiopian political discourse. Before Wallelign’s article, the different language and ethnic groups in Ethiopia were generally called tribes and also the tradition was to refer to the national question as regionalism. This does not mean that Wallelign single-handedly introduced the idea of Amhara nationality and Amhara domination into the political discourse. In fact, he admits in his article that a small group of students have been discussing for about a year “this delicate issue for the most part in secluded places.”

Rather, the significance of Wallelign is that he was the first among the radical students to publically articulate within a Marxist-Leninist ideological framework the idea of Ethiopia as a prison of nations and nationalities ruled by the Amhara nation. His bold effort to confront the most sensitive issue during the days of student activism instantly made him a hero to a large section of the radicals. Furthermore, his qualities as an accomplished debater and his subsequent tragic death at the hands of the Ethiopian security forces made him a cult figure.

As the discourse centred around Wallelign’s thesis reveals, the only analytical basis invoked to claim the existence of an Amhara nation, which lends itself to the presupposition of an Amhara ethnic group, was the Marxist-Leninist one, or to be exact,

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the Stalinist one. While the attempt to construct an Amhara and other nations according to Marxian principles was theoretically futile, it proved to be politically potent. It should be noted, however, that Wallelign and most of his supporters were not intent on encouraging ethno-nationalist sentiments that would weaken the socialist struggle against Haile-Sellassie’s absolutism. On the contrary, their support for the principle of self-determination up to session was invoked in the “higher interest of socialism and internationalism” and “to foster mutual trust, confidence and genuine fraternity among the various peoples of Ethiopia.”

Stating that the Amhara became the dominant nation by historical accident and not because of “inherent imperialist tendencies,” Wallelign called for the creation of a “genuine national state,” which he envisioned as follow:

It is a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, it is a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history. It is a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally.

The socialist ideals of the student radicals would never be realized except the principle of self-determination. The ethno-nationalist movement which prevailed in 1991 was the ideological child of the radical left whose view about the nature of Ethiopian society was first articulated publically by Wallelign. Wallelign and his comrades were wrong when they claimed over forty years ago that Ethiopia was composed of distinct

366 New York Chapter ESUNA, 51.
368 The EPRDF even named one of its decisive offensives against the Derg after Wallelign.
nations like the Amhara, Oromo, Somali and the like. Their assumptions about what constitutes a nation were flawed by any analytical standards, including the Stalinist one. It is a historical irony that now Ethiopia comprises some of the nations that Wallelign imagined to have existed back then and that these nations owe their emergence to the ethno-nationalist politics that evolved out of his well-meant but flawed analysis of Ethiopian society. In a way, it could be said that Wallelign was indeed ahead of his time in the literal sense of the expression.

The national question divided the student movement both at home and abroad. The acrimonious debates that ensued following the publication of Wallelign’s article in November 1969 would eventually split ESUNA into different factions. The North American student organization had debated the national issue following the presentation of four working papers on regionalism and religion earlier in September.\(^\text{369}\) It had also passed a resolution condemning signs of ethno-nationalist movements as regionalist and separatist sentiments detrimental to the cause of fighting feudalism and imperialism.\(^\text{370}\) In the wake of Wallelign’s article, the New York chapter felt embolden to challenge the ESUNA leadership’s position on the national question claiming “the stand taken by the ESUNA leaders has already done incalculable harm; it has compromised the Ethiopian Student Movement in the eyes of the oppressed nationalities of Ethiopia.”\(^\text{371}\)

Wallelign’s article was also significant in the unprecedented harsh response it drew from the Ethiopian government. Given the recent war it had fought with Somalia

\(^{369}\) Balsvik, Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie’s Students*, 278.

\(^{370}\) *Challenge* 10 (February 1970).

\(^{371}\) *New York Chapter ESUNA*, 52.
and concerns over the Eritrean insurgency, ethnic politics was one area the Haile-Selassie regime had no tolerance for. It started cracking down on the student movement by banning both USUAA and *Struggle*. In December 1969, a month after *Struggle* published Wallelign’s article, Ethiopian security forces assassinated USUAA president Tilahun Gizaw. Several more students were killed when they protested the murder of Tilahun and refused to hand over his corpse which they had forcefully taken from the hospital. The political atmosphere got very tense and Wallelign and several other activists were put in jail, where they would remain for over a year. Finally, the University was shut down indefinitely and all student unions and publications were banned.

The repression that followed the events of fall 1969 convinced radical student activists that they must take the struggle to a higher level by forming a political organization or joining the nationalist insurgencies, which many Eritreans did. The student exodus was in earnest in the early 70s. Many chose a less risky means to leave the country while a few bold ones chose to follow a path that Berhane-Meskel and six of his colleges had taken in 1969 when they hijacked an Ethiopian airlines plane to the Sudan. There were two more successful hijacking attempts but the third one ended in a tragedy. In December 1971, Wallelign, who was not long out of prison, and six other activists tried to hijack a plane destined to Europe. But they were overpowered by commandos aboard and six of the hijackers, including Wallelign, were killed.\(^{372}\)

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\(^{372}\) Although it was never officially acknowledged, it appears that the anti-hijacking commandos were forewarned about plans to hijack the plane.
Following the departure of hundreds of university activists, the 1970’s saw the centre of student activity shifting to high schools. In the few years preceding the 1974 revolution, high school students were boycotting classes and constantly taking to the streets. Moreover, unlike the university radicals, high school activists showed no scruples about protesting violently. Meanwhile, outside the country, the newly-arrived radical students were disappointed to find out there were no political organizations established in Europe and North America ready to lead a socialist revolution. Soon, efforts were made by several groups and student leaders in the US, Europe, Algeria and Ethiopia to form political parties. Moreover, factional activities in ESUNA emphasised the need for a disciplined organization with a clearly-defined political programme. Consequently, two clandestine Marxist-Leninist organizations emerged: The Ethiopian People’s Liberation Organization (EPLO), later to become the EPRP, and the MEISON.

Led by the French-educated Haile Fida, the group that would serve as the core of the MEISON is believed to have been established in 1968. Most members of this group were the older and better educated among the student activists. Displaying theoretical sophistication and betraying political opportunism, they often refrained from embracing the idea of launching an armed struggle or supporting nationalist movements, all of which did not endear them to the young radicals. Most MEISON leaders were either Oromo or Amhara. The base of this group was almost exclusively from outside Ethiopia, mostly from Europe, and this would make it difficult for MEISON to command large following among students at home during the revolution.
By contrast, the EPLO, which was founded in Berlin in 1972, brought together a large number of Ethiopian radicals both inside and outside the country. It also had its share of thinkers in league with the likes of Haile Fida, most notably in Tesfaye Debessai, whose activism was a great inspiration to the early success of the EPLO/EPRP, as his untimely death would accelerate the rapid decline and eventual demise of the party he helped form. But it was Berhane-Meskel, one of the most popular names in the Ethiopian Student Movement, and his colleagues in Allergies who played the leading role in founding the EPLO. The leadership of the EPLO/EPRP was dominated by Amharas, Eritreans and Tigres. Nonetheless, both the EPLO and MEISON were multi-national.

The Amhara-Oromo and Amhara-Eritrean-Tigre numerical superiority in MEISON and EPLO leadership, respectively, is more than anything reflective of the comparative high literacy rate for these language groups. However, political leaders from other ethnic and language groups, particularly, the Gurage, as well as women and Muslims played crucial role in the two organizations’ history. This was truer of the EPLO/EPRP, which had a larger following than the MEISON. Kiflu observes that among the radicals, “national origin had little political or organizational significance. They were like-minded activists who came together because of their affinity to the cause. Issues, not national origin, were the most important factors that divided one group from
The EPRP even had an expatriate, a British professor at the Addis Ababa University, as one of its members. The EPLO embraced all the radical agendas. It reiterated Wallelign’s view of the national question as elaborated and rearticulated in “On The National Question in Ethiopia,” which had become the standard position among most radical groups. Unlike Wallelign’s original articulation, Tilahun’s essay directly linked the national question, at least in the south, to class issues by pointing out that southerners lost their land to the dominant group in the north. It also expressed unequivocally the rights to self-determination including secession while tacitly acknowledging the assumption uncritically embraced by many Marxists that “if the national movements were supported by the radicals, secessionist aspirations would be renounced following the successful overthrow of the imperial regime.” The Marxists would learn belatedly that only they had kept their side of the bargain.

Since the start of the 1970, when Marxism-Leninism as well as the teaching of Mao Tse-Tung was endorsed by the student movement as the only viable ideology to transform Ethiopia into a better society, hard-line leftists believed it was necessary and

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373 Kiflu, *The Generation Part I*, 85-86. For instance, the first and second Secretary Generals of the EPLO/EPRP, Berhane-Meskel and Tesfaye, respectively, as well as many other higher party officials were Tigrigna speaking. But this had no effect whatsoever in the battle that raged between the EPRP and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) in which many Tigres on EPRP’s side lost their lives.

374 Dr William Hasting Morton was killed with three other Central Committee members of the EPRP in March 1977 during the “Red Terror” campaign by the Military Regime. See Kiflu, *The Generation Part II*, 196.

thought it “would be easy to instigate peasant uprisings in the countryside.” Thus, it was not surprising that drawing on the experience of China, the EPLO decided to adopt a rural-based armed insurrection as a means to implement a socialist revolution in Ethiopia. And to that end the EPLO decided to establish a multi-ethnic armed wing, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Army (EPRA). A group of fourteen that includes Amharic, Tigrigna, Oromo and Gurage speakers was chosen and sent to Syria to be trained by the Palestinian groups of George Habash and Hawatmeh. The arrangement with the Palestinians was made through the newly-formed and left leaning Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF).

In the few years leading to the 1974 Revolution, the Ethiopian left appeared to have been making significant progress in radicalizing a larger section of the student body and the intelligentsia in general. It also formed at least two secret Marxist-Leninist organizations either of which could serve as the basis for the envisioned proletariat party to emerge. But this period also witnessed the polarization of the divide that had occurred in the Ethiopian Student Movement. The division had crystallized in the founding of the EPLO and MEISON, which could not iron out their difference to work together for the larger cause of transforming Ethiopia into a better society.

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376 Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie’s Students*, 294. She writes in USUAA election speeches in March and December 1971, for instance, “all ten candidates professed that Marxism-Leninism was the only possible ideology for Ethiopia” and the “one remedy for the country’s ills was revolution accompanied by the violence and human costs it involved.”


378 It was the ELF-PLF, which was more progressive than the older ELF that had attracted the interest of the radical left as well as Eritrean students of Haile-Sellassie University. More will be said about the Eritrean movement in the next chapter.
The EPLO and MEISON held different positions on several issues, the most important ones being the national question and the fulfilment of both subjective and objective condition for a revolutionary struggle in Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{379} On the national question, the EPLO endorsed Wallelign’s position as restated by Tilahun while MEISON initially stood by ESUNA’s resolution at its 17th congress which condemned regionalism. However, MEISON would soon adopt a position closer to its rival. On the fulfilment of a revolutionary condition, MEISON argued that the subjective condition was lagging and thus advocated political agitation of the masses. The EPLO, on the other hand, not only asserted that revolutionary conditions were ripe, but as mentioned above, had already established an armed wing and sent what would be the first batch of fighters for training.

While these differences were not irreconcilable at all, a nagging problem from the days of student activism, intolerance for dissenting opinions, reared its ugly head. Rather than civil or even heated debates on the issues, it was found convenient to label one’s political opponent as “regionalist” or “chauvinist.” Offensive and defamatory polemics marred the writings of the radicals creating unnecessary polarization among the Ethiopian left. The clandestine nature of the organizations together with the Marxist organizational rules of democratic centralism meant that party officials were elected and other important decisions were made in secret. And such practice was not exactly a tradition that fosters free speech and tolerance.

\textsuperscript{379} For a detailed discussion of the political difference between EPLO and MEISON, see Kiflu, \textit{The Generation Part I}, Chapter III.
Basically, the absence of a democratic political tradition in Ethiopia left its mark in the manner the radicals conducted their politics and themselves. Consequently, the 1974 revolution caught the radicals abroad enmeshed in acrimonious divisions. And these divisions would be transposed to the revolutionary setting in Ethiopia with disastrous consequences as became evident when the radicals began shooting at each other not with harsh words but with guns. Another enormous mistake of the radical left was accepting Marxism-Leninism as an article of faith rather than as a system of thought which can help analyse and transform Ethiopian society.

Ultimately, it is the failure of the EPRP and MEISON as well as other lesser multi-ethnic socialist movements which would leave the Ethiopian political landscape at the mercy of the Derg engaged in a losing confrontation with ethno-nationalists. The latter had to perpetuate the idea of an “Amhara nation” or “Amhara ethnic group,” without which their movements could not galvanize a large following. Thus, it could be said in one sense that the ethnicization of Ethiopian politics and the invention of Amhara nationalism has resulted from the failure of the radical left which had the courage and idealism to accord a place for ethnicity in emancipatory politics but lacked the political will and subtlety required to harness ethno-nationalism to advance the cause of socialism.

3.2. The Revolution and Its Aftermath

Since the days of the Ethiopian Student Movement, the Ethiopian left championed two major causes: peasants’ right to own land to farm and the right of nationalities to
self-determination. The Derg responded to the first positively and only paid lip service to the second. While the radical land reform measure dismantled the economic foundations of the Amhara status group, it also deprived the Ethiopian left of one of its major causes, making it difficult to rally the rural population against the repressive Derg. Capitalizing on the bitter divisions that had emerged among the Ethiopian left, and skilfully manipulating Ethiopian nationalism, the Derg was able to wipe out every pan-Ethiopian opposition in the country. The end of multi-ethnic political movements together with the regime’s failure to address the national question made ethnic insurgency the only attractive and available form of resistance.

The revolution took the radical left by surprise.380 It was clear to see that pressure was building against Haile-Selassie’s absolutism. But nobody could have predicted a popular revolution that would end monarchical rule for the simple reason that there was no organized political opposition, not even a charismatic figure behind whom the various urban oppositions could rally. Eventually, the only organized body in the country with considerable power to enforce its will, the military, presented itself as a vehicle of change. There were at least three catalysts that led to the break-out of wide-spread civil unrest in 1974: the Wollo famine, which took tens of thousands of life, the government-proposed educational reform programme, and exorbitant rise in the price of petrol.

Beginning in 1970, northern Ethiopia, particularly Wollo, was hit with massive food shortages, a problem the regime not only neglected to address but kept secret from the public. By 1973, the drought changed into famine claiming the lives of some 200,000 people. There was a huge public uproar when starving peasants from Wollo began to arrive at the capital, despite the government’s attempt to block their passage, and the story of the famine was made public by the foreign media. High school and university students took to the streets and the ensuing clashes saw several of them killed, shot dead by the police. These violent confrontations finally forced the regime to publicly acknowledge that there was famine in Wollo.

In 1974, the Haile-Selassie government introduced an educational programme known as “Sector Review,” which aimed at changing the existing academic-oriented system to one that emphasised vocational education. Accordingly, there would be there levels of self-contained educational programme, each lasting four years, at the end of which students join the work-force while participating in non-formal or adult education. This meant that only a relatively small number of students would make it to high school, and still smaller to college. The programme further called for students to partly bear the cost of education; it also sought to lower the required qualifications of primary-school teachers. Students, teachers and parents alike saw the “Sector Review” as

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381 The documentary depicting the famine in Wollo by the British journalist Jonathan Dimbleby was the first reporting of the horror story. The film overnight tarnished Haile-Selassie’s image both domestically and abroad and would air constantly on Ethiopian Television to garner support for the military takeover. See “The Unknown Famine: a Report on Famine in Ethiopia, by Jonathan Dimbleby on Thames Television, first broadcast October 18, 1973.

an attempt to frustrate students’ aspirations to gain higher education. They protested strongly and at times violently, until the Emperor announced the suspension of the programme in a nation-wide address.\footnote{For Haile-Sellassie’s speech, see \textit{The Ethiopian Herald}, February 24, 1974.}

And finally, the fifty percent price raise on petrol as a result of OPEC’s decision to increase the price of oil brought another urban sector into the fray, the taxi drivers. The government prohibited transporters from raising their rates despite the additional cost of petrol. Soon, teachers and taxi drivers went on strike and students, who have boycotted classes, along with the unemployed started attacking buses and luxury cars, further disrupting traffic. By this time, public protests had become the norm not only in the capital but also in all major towns across the country. Moreover, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU), which until that moment had been politically lethargic, called a general strike demanding a wage increase.

However, what understandably worried the regime most was the start of army mutiny in different parts of the country beginning at the army’s Fourth Division in Negelle-Borana, in southern Ethiopia. The complaints by the soldiers initially centred around lack of potable water, poor quality and shortage of food supply, and delay in the payment of salaries. But soon the demand by the army took a political dimension. Leaflets claiming to be from the Armed Forces were dropped by air force and army aviation helicopters over the capital, demanding among others, a free press, freedom of assembly and demonstration, as well as land reform.\footnote{Marina and David Ottaway, \textit{Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution}, 48.}
The revolt entered its final stage when a Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, the Police and the Territorial Army was established in June 1974. The Haile-Sellassie regime made several unsuccessful attempts, including the appointment of new cabinet of ministers, to defuse the popular upsurge. Finally, the Coordinating Committee, which consists of junior military officers, deposed Haile-Sellassie on September 12 and established a government run by the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC), better known by the short form of its Amharic name, Derg.

At first, the Derg was not sure of itself; it lacked political philosophy and did not seem to know in what direction to lead the country. The Derg tirelessly reiterated its motto “Ethiopia Tikdem” or “Ethiopia First,” which it said would accomplish without any bloodshed, an ideal that it would not live up to. From the start the PMAC betrayed its dictatorial strain -- its very first proclamation, the one that deposed the emperor and established a Provisional Military Government (PMG), also suspended all strikes and demonstrations. The decree, moreover, made it illegal to oppose the principle of “Ethiopia First.”

It did not take long for the Derg to renege on its promise of bloodless change. Just three months into its rule, the Derg concocted several charges against its chairman, Lieutenant General Aman Andom, whom it attacked and killed at his house. Aman was a highly respected and charismatic military leader from Eritrea. While he was unwavering

385 The stated objectives of “Ethiopia First” or “Ethiopia Tikdem” include a loosely stated guidelines like, for instance, to ensure equality among Ethiopians, to reform the judiciary, to launch a national health campaign, to decree a land reform legislation, to safeguard the fundamental rights of Ethiopians, to promote the dignity of labour, and to ensure equality among Ethiopians. See the Ethiopian Herald, February 26, 1974.
about Ethiopia’s unity, his popularity among Eritreans and his cautious approach to the Eritrean question might have helped to reach a negotiated settlement with the insurgents. The same day Aman was killed, the *Derg* also summarily executed some sixty detainees, mostly former officials and members of the aristocracy. The prime instigator of these measures was Major Mengistu Haile-Mariam, the first Vice Chairman of the PMAC. He would successfully contrive to eliminate several senior *Derg* members as well as the next chairman of the PMAC, Brigadier General Teferi Bente, until the ruthless Major stood unopposed to preside over a seventeen-year reign of terror.

At this stage, the *Derg* still commanded considerable support from the urban population, with the notable exception of the CELU and the students, who were fearful of military dictatorship. They demanded the immediate establishment of a Provisional People’s Government (PPG), endorsing the position taken by the EPRP.\(^{387}\) This was the earliest indication of the EPRP’s influence on students and labour unions. The EPRP and MEISON, as well as a large number of Marxist intellectuals, who were not affiliated with the two organizations, had begun flocking back to the country following the outbreak of the revolution. Both the EPRP and MEISON were able in a short time to recruit from or place their members in the bureaucracy, civil servant and the *Derg* itself. The National Work Campaign for Development through Cooperation, *Edgat Behebret Zemecha*,\(^{388}\) would further help Marxist groups to widely disseminate socialist ideas among, and recruit members from, a large number of students and teachers.

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\(^{387}\) The EPLO merges with other smaller groups to officially become the EPRP only in 1975. To avoid confusion, hereafter I will use EPRP throughout.

\(^{388}\) Henceforth simply referred by its short form *Zemecha*, which means campaign. The participants were popularly known as *Zemach*, campaigners.
The Zemecha would deploy high-school and university students as well as teachers to rural areas all over the country. Their main objectives were to familiarize the rural population with the principles of “Ethiopia First,” and to help implement land reform. When the Zemecha was first announced in October 1974, radicals were sceptic about it thinking it was an attempt to disperse the opposition the Derg faced from students and teachers. It was also far from clear if the Derg would implement a radical land reform, which Marxists and progressive forces in general were demanding. The EPRP, in particular, insisted vehemently that to depose the emperor was not significant on its own as long as the feudal land holding system was left intact. Finally, the Derg, whose radicalism up to that moment had only gone as far as flirting with the idea of “Ethiopian Socialism,” began to implement revolutionary measures.

In a series of proclamations beginning in early 1975, the Derg nationalized financial institutions, commercial and industrial enterprises, rural land, and urban land and extra houses. By far the most transformative measure was the nationalization of rural land. The livelihood of over ninety percent of the population was based on rural land and by ending landlordism and promising equitable distribution, the Derg gained an overwhelming support from the populous. This measure also proved to be the catalyst for the final and bitter divide among the Ethiopian left. The MEISON argued there were progressive and reactionary elements in the Derg and that the former deserved the critical

389 See for instance Democracia, the EPLO/EPRP organ, vol. 1 no. 7.
390 “Ethiopian Socialism,” which espoused equality, self-reliance, the dignity of labour and the like, was basically a redefinition of “Ethiopia First” under a progressive garb.
guidance of Marxist intellectuals, without which the revolution would be defeated. The EPRP, on the other hand, demanded a quick end to military rule and the formation of Provisional Peoples’ Government insisting that the Derg was in fact a fascist and should not be given the chance to consolidate power.

In hindsight the EPRP was proven to be right in discerning the dictatorial ambitions of the Derg. Nonetheless, despite its complicity in the “red terror,” MEISON’s position that the Derg should not be left to its whims was also understandable at the time. After all the EPRP itself had recruited high-placed Derg members and was working with them to sideline Mengistu, which the EPRP correctly identified as big threat both to itself and the revolution. But however one wants to characterize the nature of the Derg, Janus-faced, one good the other evil, as the MESON maintained, or a fascist, courting popular support to consolidate power, as the EPRP asserted, it was simply difficult to conceive the positive response to the long-standing radicals’ demand of “land to the tiller” as anything but progressive.

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391 See Voice of the Masses, MEISON organ, no. 32 and no. 50.
392 The EPRP’s designation of the Derg as fascist was not simply in reference to the latter’s brutality but was meant to be conceptual in a sense that the Derg was basically a reactionary petty-bourgeois military force which courted popular support by taking radical measures. See Democracia, no. 30. To assess the merits, if any, of EPRP’s argument is beyond the scope of this study. But the “fascism” argument was not generally popular among world socialist movements outside Ethiopia. For instance, Halliday and Molyneux contend that the “EPRP still characterizes the Derg as ‘fascist’, a term that does not indicate that they have yet comprehended the nature of the state in contemporary Ethiopia and the changes it has instituted: no fascist regime ever carried out a land reform,” The Ethiopian Revolution, 125.
393 The “Red Terror” was a campaign that would soon be launched by the Derg and its ally MEISON to wipe out EPRP and its supporters.
394 It was one of the biggest blunders of the EPRP to focus on the internal struggle in the Derg, to the neglect of the rural armed struggle, hoping the side which secretly worked with the EPRP to win. Following advice from its Derg members, the EPRP even tried to assassinate Mengistu. The latter proved canning when he identified and exterminated all his enemies among the Derg members before turning on its major foe, the EPRP.
The land reform was a positive step taken by the junta notwithstanding it might have been prompted by an ambition to consolidate power than a principled position. The land reform proclamation abolished not only private land ownership, which was prevalent in the south, but also *rist*, the so called communal tenure, in the north. Land became the collective property of the people held in trust by the state. The legislation provided for the allotment of land to those who did not have it though they cannot sell, lease or mortgage it. Thus, peasants will have only usufructuary right over their holdings. The proclamation also called for the establishment of peasant cooperatives which would be instrumental in implementing land distribution.\(^\text{395}\)

Initially, the land reform improved the lot of the peasantry. But a series of unpopular measures by the *Derg* would soon alienate the peasantry. The establishment of the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), *Derg*’s main mechanism of surplus appropriation, proved to be the most damaging. Peasants were required to sell produce to AMC, the national grain stock, at fixed government price which was disadvantageous to the farmers. Forcible and intrusive resettlement, villagization and collectivization were the other reasons that resulted in wide-spread rural dissatisfaction. Also, drought and famine continued to surface periodically in the north. And as the war with the EPLF and TPLF intensified so did the conscription of peasants into the Ethiopian army. All these factors pushed the peasantry in the north into the fold of the EPLF and TPLF who promised life free from exploitation, intrusion and relocation, with the added advantage of self-rule which provides for using one’s own language in schools and administration.

\(^{395}\) See Public Ownership of Rural Lands Proclamation, no. 31, 1975.
Things were slightly different in the south, the major beneficiary of the land reform by virtue of being freed from northern economic domination. In addition to the nationalization of land, which dismantled the economic foundation of the Amhara status group, new laws that declared Ethiopia a secular state also eroded the basis for northern cultural domination. The Church lost its large land holding as well as the financial support of the state and Islam now was officially treated on equal footing with Christianity. All These measures explain the wide support the Derg had initially enjoyed from the southern peoples, particularly the Oromo. Furthermore, unlike the northern highland mostly affected by ecological degradation, the south, except for the Ogaden area, is mainly fertile and gets almost year-round rains, for which reasons it has remained less vulnerable to cyclical drought and recurrent famine. It was the lure of the surplus-producing south-west that informed Menelik’s southern expansion in the first place.

For these and other historical reasons that will be discussed in the next chapter, southern nationalism had remained weak and never threatened the Derg in any significant way. Nonetheless, the south, just like the north, was subjected to the exploitation of the AMC, villagization, collectivization, and conscription, which in fact was carried out at a larger scale. Also, resettlement disrupted southern life as most of the relocation was directed towards the south from the drought-stricken north. The relocation might have

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396 Villagization, a government programme to resettle people into designated villages, was not based on the consent of the peasantry.
397 Between 1975 and 1986 when the resettlement programme ended, some 600,000 people were believed to have been relocated to southern regions and Gojam. According to the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 90,000 of the settlers were from Tigray, 107, from Shoa, and 370,000 from Wello. See Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 192-194.
been perceived by the south as a yet another form of northern occupation serving as a breeding ground for a fresh outbreak of ethnic resentment.\textsuperscript{398}

All the problems discussed above had not yet surfaced during the \textit{Zemecha}, which witnessed an intensified political activity between EPRP and \textit{Derg} supporters vying for the peasant’s support. Despite the government’s intention to prolong the \textit{Zemecha}, radicals, impatient as they were, began abandoning their posts to return to the capital and other cities to engage in organizational activities. The rapprochement between the MEISON and the \textit{Derg}, which had begun after the land reform proclamation, transformed into an alliance following the declaration by the PMAC of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) programme.\textsuperscript{399} The \textit{Derg} also announced the formation of the Provincial Office for Mass Organisational Affairs (POMOA).

The MEISON and three other smaller groups, which until now were clandestine, officially aligned themselves with the \textit{Derg} by joining the POMOA. These were the \textit{Waz} League, the Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization, and the Ethiopian Oppressed People’s Struggle, the last two better known by their Amharic acronyms MALRED and ECHAT, receptively. A fifth organization, \textit{Abiyotawe Seded}, led by Mengistu-Hailemariam would soon be the latest addition to POMOA.\textsuperscript{400} MEISON’s leader Haile Fida was named chairman of the POMA, which was entrusted with the main

\textsuperscript{398} Triulzi, “Competing Views of National Identity in Ethiopia,” 125.
\textsuperscript{399} In Marxist-Leninist thought, the NDR is a short cut for socialist transformation in third world countries without having to go through the painful experience of a bourgeois revolution. The proletariat party aligned with the peasantry was supposed to lead the NDR, but the \textit{Derg} considered itself the caretaker until such party was established.
\textsuperscript{400} After going through Marxist-Leninist indoctrination, Mengistu founded the \textit{Abiyotawe Seded} or “Revolutionary Flame,” most of whose members were men-in-uniform. The \textit{Seded} was soon co-opted into the POMOA in order to counter-balance the influence of the other four Marxist groups, particularly the MEISON.
tasks of ensuring the implementation of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) programme, disseminating socialism, running a political school and training cadres. Only the EPRP, which had declared itself as the revolutionary party of the proletariat in August 1975, remained alone to face the junta and its newly-found comrades.

Through the NDR programme the *Derg* for the first time charted a clearly-stated socialist course. The major stated aim of the programme was to “completely abolish feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism from Ethiopian and with the united effort of all anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces build a new Ethiopia and lay a strong foundation for the transition to socialism.” Towards this end, the NDR programme was said to aim for the establishment of a people’s democratic republic “under the leadership of the working class and on the basis of the worker-peasant alliance.” As Addis Hiwet observes, “the regime has truly plagiarised the fundamental tenets and slogans of the Left, robbed it naked of major programmes.” At this point, it became fundamentally difficult to find significant differences between the political programmes of the *Derg* and the EPRP, even with regard to the thorny issue of the national question.

The EPRP’s stated main objective was the abolition of feudalism and imperialism and the creation of Peoples' Democratic Republic on the basis of the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry in close alliance with all revolutionary

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401 See Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs Organization and Operation Improvement Proclamation no. 130, September, 1977.
402 See National Democratic Revolutionary Programme of Ethiopia, PMAC, April, 1976.
forces. The EPRP also recognized the Leninist-Stalinist principle of the rights of
nations to self-determination including secession. While the Derg professed similar
positions on the question of nationalities, it chose Mao’s position of “regional autonomy”
over that of Lenin’s, which recognizes the right to form an independent state.
The programme of the NDR of Ethiopia states that the right to self-determination of all
nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. It also asserts that no nationality will
dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality
will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. And it concludes:

Given Ethiopia’s existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved
if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each
nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its
internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its
political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders
and administrators to head it internal organs.

Had these measures been implemented, it could be speculated with some justification that
ethno-nationalism may not have become the order of the day, the legacy of Derg’s
tyrranical rule. And this question of political will to implement real reforms explains the
real difference between the Derg and the EPRP.

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404 See EPRP Programme, 1975.
405 As explained by Chou En-lai in “Some Questions,” while recognising the right to secede might have
been appropriate in the USSR for historical reasons, the “system of national regional autonomy” was found
“suitable to Chinese conditions and favourable to national co-operation.” Chou cautions against laying
“emphasis on the secession of nationalities,” which “imperialism will take advantage of.” Quoted in
406 National Democratic Revolutionary Programme of Ethiopia.
There was a glaring and irreconcilable difference between the Derg and the EPRP. But it had less to do with their programmes than their motives and practices. The EPRP, born out of the radical student movements, strived to bring fundamental changes to the Ethiopian peoples and transform their lives for the better. For all the mistakes it had committed bringing its own downfall, the EPRP was a truly socialist movement. Most EPRP members and their supporters were selfless individuals who abandoned a life of comfort and privilege choosing to dedicate their lives to the cause of the poor and disfranchised. In contrast, the Derg, as an institution, was guided by the principle of staying in power no matter what. To that end it kept on changing like a chameleon, professing first Ethiopia Tikdem, then Ethiopian Socialism, NDR, and finally Mixed Economy. The Derg served the people only so far as doing so helped it retain power and it trampled on their rights and lives when it did not.

The Derg claimed to be Marxist-Leninist -- but even then always selecting those themes that served its purpose -- primarily because it found it most convenient to retain power. First, it helped it to deny legitimacy to the opposition from the left. Second, its claimed Marxist-Leninist credentials helped the Derg earn the recognition and support of socialist countries who supplied it with weaponry to fight the EPLF and TPLF. But most importantly, only the Marxist-Leninist formula would help the Derg legitimize its usurpation of power by transforming itself into the Workers’ Party of Ethiopia (WPE). And what a charade it was to see the Derg become the proletariat’s party and the men-in-uniform its politburo members. What a political joke, bitter as it was, to witness the
transformation of Colonel Mengistu, Chairman of the PMAC, into Comrade Mengistu, Secretary General of WPE, the fatigues swapped for the tunic.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the *Derg* did not implement the policies on the right to self-determination of nationalities as outlined in the NDR programme because that would have meant devolution of power, which was anathema to the junta. The PMAC would take half-hearted measures like, for instance, allowing local languages for literacy instruction and for limited broadcasting. The *Derg* would manipulate Ethiopian nationalism skilfully to shy from devolving power. Any sign of concern about the rights of nationalities was considered contrary to socialist principles and a threat to Ethiopia’s territorial integrity. The EPLF, TPLF and OLF were all labelled narrow nationalists and imperialist lackeys whose aim was to dismember the country.

Although its initial slogan “Ethiopia First” faded from public pronouncement, the *Derg* soon picked another maxim, “Revolutionary mother land or Death,” which it would reiterate till its dying days. Even the unspeakable “Red Terror” campaign of the *Derg* against the EPRP, which consumed the lives of thousands of people, was presented in a nationalist metaphor that equates the revolution with the motherland: “The Revolution Devours its Children,” the mantra of the junta and its ideological mentors filled the air waves. The invasion by Somalia in 1977 and tense relations with the Sudan made the *Derg*’s task easier. In an address to the nation about the Somali invasion, Mengistu relied on nationalist language rather than on Marxist jargon as was customary then:

My compatriots, after understanding the danger posed against your land, property, family and the country and its unity, and understanding the intention
of the war, which is to denigrate and make you a second class citizen, in the name of the Derg, I call upon you to rise up for the war.  

It is remarkable to see the resemblance in tone between this speech and Emperor Menelik’s proclamation of mobilization against the Italians discussed in the first chapter. Mengistu talks about the looming “denigration” of the people in the same way Menelik talks about “enemies have come who would ruin our country.” Menelik, naturally, presents himself as the executor of war saying “give me your strength and “follow me” and Mengistu accords that role to the Derg.

By failing to address the question of nationalities, the Derg basically perpetuated the traditional monolithic view of Ethiopian national identity. It drew on the idea of national identity inherited from old, divorced it from its religious trappings to secularize it into a modern form of nationalism. If in the old days the national imaginary centred around Ethiopia, the Christian island amidst Muslim forces, now it was the Revolutionary Motherland surrounded by reactionaries. And the old identification with a God-anointed monarch gave way to identification with a Godless autocrat. Mengistu was so adept at using Ethiopian nationalism to rally as well as coerce the population that along the years he successfully presented himself as the custodian of Ethiopia’s territorial integrity.

It should be noted that until the fast and impressive transformation of the TPLF into EPRDF, a formidable force capable of governing and holding Ethiopia together -- albeit without Eritrea -- changed the dynamics of Ethiopian politics, the prospect for a unified Ethiopian state after the Derg was bleak. As a result, even those who despised

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Mengistu’s brutality felt that without him Ethiopia would simply fragment under ethno-
nationalist assault. Many pondered ominously about the fate of Ethiopia after Mengistu,
reminiscent of the way many had felt about Haile-Sellassie. The country was in a pensive
mood when it appeared that the EPLF and TPLF might prevail, as they would, against the
*Derg*. But before his defeat, Mengistu would preside over many terror campaigns and
several famines that consumed the lives of tens of thousands of people.

What made it possible for Mengistu to consolidate power by playing Marxist
groups against one another was the violence that had erupted between the MEISON and
the EPRP. The acrimonious debate between the two escalated into armed conflict once
the MEISON aligned itself with the *Derg*. It would be futile to determine who fired the
first shot but soon the EPRP began assassinating MEISON members who it claimed
provided the *Derg* security with the names of EPRP leaders. With the help of the
Marxist groups under the fold of the POMA, Mengistu first got rid of EPRP infiltrators
and sympathizers among the *Derg* leadership. Then he declared an all out war on the
EPRP, a task made easier by the MESION, whose members now openly collaborated by
identifying EPRP members and supporters. The ill advised EPRP retaliated by
assassinating POMA and government functionaries, getting embroiled in an urban
warfare it had no chance of winning.

By conducting a house to house search and instituting the infamous “Red
Terror” campaign, which gave security forces and urban militias the licence to kill on

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408 The MEISON and the EPRP leadership knew each other since the days of the student movement and
until the final rift between the two, their party chairmen, Haile and Tesfaye, respectively, were meeting in
Addis to iron out their differences. See Kiflu, *The Generation II*. 
sight anyone suspected of being an EPRP member or sympathizer, the *Derg* was able in a short time to destroy the EPRP’s party structure in all major cities and towns. Most of the EPRP leaders, including Berhane-Meskel and Tesfaye, as well as a large number of party members and followers were also killed. To make matters worse the factional conflict that had begun among the EPRP leadership in 1976 took an ugly turn when some members of the faction opposed to the leadership started collaborating with the *Derg*, providing it with vital information about the party’s structure and betraying names of their comrades. When all was done, only several members of the EPRP leadership and a few hundred of its members survived the carnage and these regrouped in Asimba, Tigray, the base of the EPRA, EPRP’S armed wing.

One of the basic mistakes (and there were many)\(^{409}\) the EPRP made was its underestimation of Ethiopian nationalism. Whereas Mengistu exploited skilfully the Ethio-Somalia war to rally support for himself and the *Derg*, the EPRP equivocated, discussing at length the nature of the conflict which it said was the expression of Oromo and Somali nationalism in reaction to *Derg*’s dictatorial policies.\(^{410}\) The EPRP acknowledged the role of Somali irredentism in the conflict and excoriated Somalia for its interference in the conflict. But it presented the conflict as a war unleashed by the *Derg* against Oromo and Somali nationalist. There may have been some truth in EPRP’s assessment of the conflict, but many, including its own members, found it incredibly difficult to believe that those who were engaging the Ethiopian army with tanks and

\(^{409}\) Some of these were relying on its allies in the *Derg* to change the course of events, engaging in urban armed struggle, stationing its leaders, most of whom were known to MESON and the *Derg*, unnecessarily exposed in Addis Ababa and other major cities, and neglecting the rural-based armed struggle.

\(^{410}\) See *Democracia* vol.4 no. 9.
aeroplanes were nationalist insurgents and not the Somali government forces. Its stand on the Ethio-Somali conflict proved damaging to EPRP -- it encouraged internal disgruntlement leading to factional activities and it alienated patriotic Ethiopians.

In the end, it is this flawed understanding of the power of nationalism that would seal EPRP’s fate when its army, the EPRA, suffered defeat at the hand of the TPLF and was forced to leave Tigray. There had been tensions between the two groups from the start, tensions embedded in their respective understanding of domination and the appropriate form of struggle to resist it. The TPLF maintained that since oppression in Ethiopia took the form of Amhara domination, the appropriate form of struggle was for each oppressed nationalities to form its own vanguard organization to fight and dismantle the Amhara state. It accused multi-ethnic organizations which advocate a state-wide multinational struggle of failing to accept the reality of Amhara domination. 411 The TPLF accused the EPRP of Amhara chauvinism for not accepting the primacy of national domination which required ethnic-based resistance. It also asked the EPRP to leave Tigray, insisting that the TPLF was the only legitimate representative of the people of Tigray.

For the EPRP, an organization with a national agenda and membership composed of various groups including Eritreans, the position of the TPLF, which it labelled narrow nationalist, was unacceptable. The EPRP was striving to overthrow a repressive regime not dismantle the Ethiopian state apparatus through which it planned to carry out a socialist revolution. Furthermore, the EPRP asserted its right to operate anywhere in

Ethiopia, including Tigray. But to its detriment, the, initially larger and stronger EPRP looked down on the smaller TPLF, which advocated the narrow agenda of liberating Tigray. There are conflicting accounts about who provoked whom but in 1978 the TPLF launched an organized attack against its rival, inflicting heavy causalities on and forcing the EPRA to retreat to Gondar area.412

The defeat of the EPRA, a multi-ethnic force at the hands of the TPLF, an ethno-nationalist group, heralded the ascendancy of ethno-nationalism which will thrive to victory by defining its cause persistently against an “Amhara Domination.” The important point to note here is that the TPLF was able in a short time to overtake the EPRA because the former could galvanize the support of the Tigre peasantry along ethnic lines. After the land reform, it became increasingly difficult for the EPRP to gain the support of the peasantry along ideological lines. The peasantry is strongly attached to its land, the source of its livelihood, to family, the basis of productive and communal activity, and religion, which largely defines its world view. A community of people such as this needs strong motivation to abandon its way of life, however sordid it was, and become an insurgent.

To the peasant, freedom fundamentally meant the abolition of landlordism and the ability to use their land without restriction, not the establishment of a Provisional People’s Government. And the land reform has provided that freedom. Compared to the reality of common history, myth, language, custom and all the other ethnic arsenals available to the TPLF, the lofty ideals like the formation of a PPG and freedom of

412 For details of the armed conflict, see Kiflu, The Generation II, 399-407.
expressions espoused by the EPRP were remote conceptions for the peasantry to grasp. True, as the revolutions of China and Vietnam, among others, showed, the peasantry can become a potent force of socialist change, but that required a protracted political work through life of close proximity to the rural population.

The EPRA base in Asimba was remote, deep in the mountains. And while this provided security from the Derg’s army, it also meant little contact with the peasant. One big difference between the composition of the EPRA and the TPLF was that the former was largely composed of urbanites while the latter was predominantly a peasant-fighting force. This is not to say that the EPRP/EPRA did not establish good relations with the peasantry or did not earn the confidence of the rural population at all. But it remains that the EPRP leadership was impatient to wrest power from the Derg through urban warfare, devoting considerable time and energy to activities in and around the capital.

In any case, after its defeat by the TPLF, there was understandably a wide-spread discontent among EPRA/EPRP survivors, which resulted in mass defection. Some gave themselves up to the Derg. Most went into exile through the Sudan. A few hundred dedicated fighters chose to continue the struggle keeping the name EPRP alive until most of them were killed in 1991 by their old adversary, the TPLF, which was marching to capture the capital Addis Ababa. Thus ends the revolutionary struggle of one of the most dedicated and self-less socialist parties anywhere. There was one small splinter group from the EPRP which sought refuge in TPLF controlled area. This group would establish the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM) under the tutelage of the TPLF and later on transform itself into the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM).
Once the EPRP was defeated, the *Derg* turned against the MESON, killing most of its leading members, including Haile Fida. Next in line was ECHAT, which was accused of promoting narrow nationalism. By acting against ECHAT, a predominantly Oromo group, the *Derg* alienated an important section of the society from which it received a good share of support. Most ECHAT members who managed to escape joined the OLF. Once again the *Derg* closed all avenues to politics except ethno-nationalism. The fate of other POMA’s members, except Mengistu’s *Seded* was no better than ECHAT. And soon POMA was declared defunct and in its place a new Commission for Organising the Workers’ Party of Ethiopia (COPWE), chaired by Mengistu, was established. The whole drama would continue until COPWE becomes WPE and finally the PMG transform itself into the Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in September 1987.
CHAPTER FOUR
ETHNO-NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS

Where national memories were concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort.

Ernest Renan

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the end of multi-ethnic political movements together with the regime’s failure to address the national question left ethnic-nationalism as the only viable form of resistance. The defeat of multi-ethnic parties also meant the end of Amhara participation in Ethiopian opposition movement. Whereas different language, ethnic and national groups were trying to liberate themselves from “Amhara domination” and form their own independent states, the Amharic-speaking people, who could only liberate themselves from Derg’s tyranny, were faced with a difficult choice to make. In the absence of a nation-wide movement which they could be part of, they now had to accept either the possibility of an Ethiopian state without Eritrea, Tigray and Oromia or support the military regime, which presented itself as the champion of Ethiopian territorial unity.

Most Amharas, who tend to be patriotic for the simple reason that their language and religion had been privileged, gave their qualified support to the Derg whom they felt
was the only force that could thwart the disintegration of the Ethiopian state. Ethno-nationalists saw this as a validation of their claim that the Amhara hide behind Ethiopia and that even if Amhara domination in the south lost its economic foundation it was still expressed through Ethiopian nationalism, which tries to stifle the rights of nationalities.

In this chapter, I will discuss the rise and triumph of ethnic and national movements in reaction to and as a result of which Amhara nationalism emerged. The sections on Eritrean and Tigre insurgencies may appear to be more exhaustive than the one on Oromo nationalism because it was the former which for a long time challenged and eventually defeated the military regime, resulting in Eritrean independence, the adoption of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, and the establishment of the Amhara regional State. Also, I did not include Somali, Afar and similar other nationalist movements in my discussion. And this is not simply because they were not as strong as the ones I have discussed. My aim is not to exhaustively analyse ethno-nationalism in Ethiopia but to show how Amhara nationalism emerged in reaction to it and I felt the three cases that I have discussed would serve my purpose.

In my discussion, the emphasis is all along on how ethnic and national identities are historical constructions shaped by power struggle and not the logical or natural outgrowth of communities sharing common language or custom as essentialist thinking would have us believe. Language, as the Amhara experience illustrates, gains ethnic significance through history and politics.
4.1. Eritrean Nationalism

The first organized nationalist movement in Ethiopia emerged in Eritrea. It should be noted that the Eritrean movement was not strictly speaking ethnic-based, though the movement in its earliest days was dominated by Muslim lowlanders and later by Tigrigna-speaking Christians. The Eritrean question is a complex issue whose detailed analysis is beyond the scope of my study. My discussion of the Eritrean uprising will show first, how the emergence of Eritrean nationalism for the first time challenged the traditional view of Ethiopian national identity as well as how the nationalist movements of the TPLF and the OLF were in different ways modelled after Eritrean nationalism.

Second, my analysis will reveal that despite claims by Eritrean nationalists and the dominant current of Eritrean historiography, there was neither an Eritrean nation nor a coherently articulated Eritrean national identity before the rise of Eritrean nationalism, which first found expression in the political movement against unification with Ethiopia. My understanding of Eritrean nationalism and national identity is consistent with my argument about the making of Amhara ethnicity and nationalism -- it is a socially defined and historically determined political manifestation.

And finally, I will briefly discuss the influence of the Eritrean insurgency on both multi-ethnic and ethno-nationalist movements in Ethiopia. The EPLF, the hegemonic Eritrean movement, discouraged ethnic divisions in multi-ethnic Eritrea and expressed its desire to see a unified Ethiopia based on equal rights of all nationalities. However, it has, at the same time, remained belligerent towards multi-national movements like the EPRP, which did not succumb to EPLF’s demand to recognize the Eritrean question as a colonial one. As a result, the EPLF supported the TPLF, which recognized the Eritrean movement as anti-colonialist, against the EPRP, contributing to the ascendance of ethno-nationalism and the demise of multi-ethnic movements in Ethiopia.

The political unit we now know as Eritrea did not exist before 1890. Eritrea is the creation of Italian colonization, an area encompassing several language and ethnic groups. The claims by Eritrean nationalists about Eritrean long history and Ethio-nationalists about Eritrea being part of Ethiopia for thousands of years are both steeped in Whig historiographies, which embed actors and events in the history of the nation anachronistically. If the historical reference, on the other hand, is about the land and the various peoples that had occupied it, then without doubt their histories go thousands of years in the past. But only the highland of Eritrea, mostly populated with Tigrigna-speaking Christians, had been part of Ethiopia since the Aksumite Empire withdrew inwards losing the Red Sea coast due to Muslim and Beja pressures from the north.

\footnote{See Chapter One for discussion on Whig historiographies, about which I will say more in subsequent pages in connection with Eritrean nationalism.}
Beginning in 1882, Italy brought together the different constituencies, some nine nationalities, to establish in 1890 the colony it named Eritrea. Italy’s rule lasted until 1941 when the British, who helped Ethiopia defeat Italy, liberated Eritrea and controlled an administration until the fate of former Italian colonies was decided by the big powers. During the years of British administration, Eritreans took active part in shaping their homeland’s political future. Eritrean politics was drawn mainly along religious lines. The Christian highlanders, who had historic links with Ethiopia and constituted half of the Eritrean population, overwhelmingly showed interest to reunite with Ethiopia, while the other and Muslim half did not. A small minority of Christians were also against reunification rallying behind the slogan “Eritrea for Eritreans.”

The politics to decide Eritrean future intensified once the allied power’s decision denying Italy any claim on its former colony was known. The Christians formed and rallied behind the Eritrea-Ethiopia Union Party, whose most active leader was Tedla Bairu. The Muslims under the leadership of Ibrahim Sultan founded the Muslim League, also known as Rabita. A third party, the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP) was also founded. Its leading activist was Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam, whom most Eritrean nationalists recognize as the father of Eritrean nationalism. He was the editor of the Tigrigna edition of the Eritrean Weekly Gazette. Eritreans were faced with the choice of either independence or unity with Ethiopia. There was another option floated by the British which suggested the partition of Eritrea, the Christian highland and the Muslim lowland joined with Ethiopia and Sudan, respectively.
Both the Unionist party and the Muslim League rejected the partition of Eritrea. But the idea of partition attracted a splinter Muslim group across the Sudanese border, which goes to show the Muslims were not as unified as the Unionists.\textsuperscript{415} The politics of all the three parties was articulated in terms of both hope and fear the prospects of a union with Ethiopia may entail. And this politics of hope and fear is directly related to the perception of Ethiopian national identity. The Unionist wanted to be assimilated into the national political culture largely defined in terms of the monarch and Christianity if not the Amharic language. The Muslim League and the Liberals were fearful of Christian and Shoan hegemony, respectively. As Mesfin Araya explains, the Unionist

sought support on the basis not only of past experiences, values, and symbols, but also of imminent emancipation from colonial bondage. They recalled the glorious history of Ethiopia with its Axumite civilisation and long Christian tradition, and depicted Eritrea as the geographical, historical, and cultural extension of the Empire since ancient times. Their secretary-general, Tedla Bairu, articulated the Ethiopian nationalism of the Unionists when he bluntly claimed: “We are Ethiopians, but we have been apart from our country for more than sixty years.” The Unionist cause was depicted as a struggle of blacks against a white conspiracy. The triumphant return of Haile Selassie in 1941, after five years of an Italian-forced exile, symbolised the victory and dignity of Ethiopia, portrayed as the home of free blacks.\textsuperscript{416}

The Muslim League, on the other hand, emphatically rejected any cultural link with Ethiopia, stressing the historical and religious distinctiveness of Eritrea. The League

\textsuperscript{415} John Markakis, \textit{National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa}, 67-68.
\textsuperscript{416} Mesfin “The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation,” 82-83.
pointed out union with Ethiopia meant disaster claiming that Eritrean lowlands had experienced devastation at the hands of Ethiopian Christian kings and nobility. It also emphasised the unfavourable social conditions of Muslims under Haile-Selassie. The LPP also adamantly rejected union with Ethiopia and rather called for a "Greater Eritrea," which would include Tigray. The LPP stressed the historical and cultural identity between Tigray and highland Eritrea, both of which were venerated as the core of ancient Ethiopian civilization. Claiming that "Ethiopia was dominated by an Imperial Shoan Government," the LPP expressed resentment that "a previous vassal state had come to assume political supremacy" over the Tigrigna-speaking people and that "Amharic was the only official language for the whole of Ethiopia." 417

While both the Muslim League and the LPP challenged the privileged view of Ethiopian national identity, it is in the latter’s view that we see, interestingly, the origin, convergence and divergence of Eritrean and Tigre nationalism. Eritrean nationalists will drop the emphasis on the Tigray-Eritrea cultural link to frame the Eritrean question as a colonial one, as the occupation of a multi-ethnic Eritrean nation by a multi-ethnic Ethiopian empire state. Tigre nationalism, for its part, taking cue from Wallelign, transforms the hegemonic power correctly identified by the Eritrean Liberals as that of Shoan dynasty into an Amhara ethnic and national group, against which it will mobilize the peasantry in Tigray. But both nationalist groups drew their Amharic-speaking Other from the LPP, even if one conceived it as internal and the other as external Other.

417 417 Mesfin “The Eritrean Question,” 83.
The political stance of the Eritrean Liberals also heralded the emergence in Eritrea-Ethiopia of an urban intelligentsia capable of grasping and articulating the modern ideological doctrine of nationalism. This was largely the result of Italian colonial rule which brought about a relatively high degree of education and urbanization. Nationalist political consciousness would replicate itself both in northern and southern Ethiopia and if the TPLF, as mentioned above, diverged from the Eritrean model, the OLF, as will be shown, would mimic the Eritrean model by framing the Oromo question as a colonial one. Eritreans gained nationalist consciousness and experience in political activism earlier on as a result of Eritrea’s contested federation with Ethiopia and its controversial dissolution. This explains their active role in the Ethiopian Student Movement and in the EPRP.

The UN decision to join Eritrea, as a self-governing unit, with Ethiopia in a federation was more than anything else an attempt to appease all concerned parties: the Unionist, the Muslim League, the LPP and Ethiopia. Prior to the UN decisions, two commissions were entrusted in assessing the wishes of the Eritrean people. The first was the Four Power’s Commission with representatives from Britain, France, the US and the USSR. The findings of the Commission, which spent some time in Eritrea in 1948, confirmed what was obvious all along -- largely drawn along religious lines, half the Eritrean population wanted union with Ethiopia while the other half chose independence. The second commission was set up by the UN General Assembly. After surveying Eritrean political opinion in 1950, the UN Commission arrived at the same conclusion of its predecessor.
While the members were divided in their recommendations, the majority proposed that Eritrea should be either incorporated into or federated with Ethiopia. The federal option won the day and the UN passed a resolution stipulating that “Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown.” The resolution came into effect in September 15, 1952 when the Union Jack was replaced with Eritrean and Ethiopian flags, ending ten-year of British rule. The federation was doomed from its inception. And this is not only because it received little support from either of the major Eritrean protagonists. It tried to reconcile an absolutist monarchy with an autonomous political unit which, at least in theory, was to govern itself democratically.

The Eritrean constitution drafted by the UN provided for an Eritrean government with an elected Assembly with full legislative powers over domestic affairs as well as an independent judiciary. Furthermore, the constitution protected civil liberties and political freedom. Eritrea would have its own flag and Arabic and Tigrigna would serve as official languages and media of education. In the first elections, held in 1952, the Unionist party emerged with the majority of seats and Tedla Bairu became the Chief Executive of Eritrea. But no sooner had the federation was ratified and the first Eritrean administration put in place before Haile-Selassie, with the help of some Unionists, set out to erode Eritrean autonomy and bring about a union.

419 See The Eritrean Constitution, 1952.
Haile-Selassie simply could not afford to have the progressive spirit kindled by Eritrean constitution serve as a glaring contrast between his absolutism and the vibrant politics in Eritrea. Through the Emperor’s Chief Representative in Eritrea and Unionist supporters in the Eritrean Assembly, Haile-Selassie engineered a series of measures that eroded Eritrea’s federal status. These ranged from scraping the Eritrean flag to replacing its penal code with Ethiopian laws.\textsuperscript{420} In 1960, the Eritrean assembly voted unanimously to change the name “Eritrean Government” to “Eritrean Administration,” signalling the end of self-government.\textsuperscript{421} And finally, the Eritrean Assembly voted in 1962 to dissolve the federation and unite Eritrea with the rest of Ethiopia.

However, as Mesfin correctly points out, “Haile Selassie was able to dismantle the 'federation' not because he was so strong, but because no serious attempt had been made to create an all-embracing Eritrean identity.”\textsuperscript{422} Haile-Selassie succeeded in bringing about the end of the federation and unifying Eritrea with Ethiopia not by forceful annexation, as Eritrean nationalists and their supporters insist, but through manoeuvring with the pivotal help of the Unionist in the Eritrean Assembly. This historical fact has been conveniently overlooked in most Eritrean historiography, which as I have mentioned earlier, is partisan and lacking in rigour.

But what is most important for my purpose about the dominant trend in Eritrean historiography is the presumption about an Eritrean nation and a shared Eritrean national

\textsuperscript{421} Markakis, Ethiopia: Anatomy of A Traditional Polity, 363.
\textsuperscript{422} Mesfin “The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation,” 89-90.
identity -- except in the juridical sense of belonging to the former Italian colony -- before the rise of Eritrean nationalism. Some have tried to circumvent this tenuous argument, which imagines the nation before nationalism, by anachronistically using the concept of “Eritrea” before the 1980s, when there was no Eritrea to speak of.⁴²³

We have already seen that the Christian highlanders identified with Ethiopia, the Liberals with all Tigrigna-speaking people, and the Muslim were simply against Christian domination. The critical phase for the emergence of Eritrean nationalism was the period of the federation and its dissolution. And as the following pages will show, the Eritrean nation and a unifying Eritrean national identity emerged only through a long nationalist struggle which brought Muslims, Christians and the various nationalities together in imagining a sovereign Eritrean political community. Gellner’s observation about nationalism inventing nations where they did not exist holds true for Eritrea as it does for the Amhara, Tigray or Oromia.

What held the Eritrean polity together until 1941 was Italian colonialism. And Italy was the very same power which had created Eritrea by lumping disparate peoples together within a political border mostly defined by war and resistance between Italy and Ethiopia. Unless one chooses to go down the disparaging path of claiming there was an Eritrean national identity which had expressed itself through identification with the colonial master, there was no Eritrean nation or national identity before the advent of

Eritrean nationalism. At the time of Eritrea’s liberation from Italy at the start of World War I, the anti-colonial movement in Africa had not yet come of age and there was not even an incipient anti-colonial national resistance in Eritrea. Eritrean nationalism cut its teeth on resisting Eritrea’s unification with Ethiopia which ushered in absolutist political and cultural domination. In modernity, there is no nation without a political history behind it and the experience of both Eritreans and the Amhara confirms that.

The dissolution of the federation and the subsequent measures taken by the Ethiopian government, which stifled the relative political and cultural freedom Eritreans had enjoyed, proved the worst fears of the Muslim League and the LLP. Non-Eritrean governors and officials were appointed and given key posts in all departments, political parties were banned, and Arabic and Tigrigna ceased to be the media of instruction. These measures not only alienated the Muslim population and the Liberals but also those who initially supported union with Ethiopia. The first armed insurrection for the independence of Eritrea was launched by the Muslim dominated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was founded in 1961.

The first Eritrean separatist organization, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) had been established in 1958, but it espoused achieving its goals through political and diplomatic means. Eritrean Muslims overwhelmingly supported the ELF, which did not become militarily very active until 1965. Some Christian elites, most notably, Wolde Ab Wolde Mariam and Tedla Bairu, both of whom were in exile, expressed their support for the ELF. But whatever little support the ELF had among the Christian highlanders

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was “essentially peripheral and largely confined to the educated urban youth, who resented the dismantling of the federation.”\footnote{Mesfin “The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation,” 91.}

The reluctance by Christian Eritreans to support the ELF had a lot to do with the presumption that the latter was promoting an Islamist agenda, not an altogether wild perception given the ELF’s close association with Arab countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, from which it received military and financial support. Egypt, in particular, served as the hub of Eritrean dissidents since 1954 when former LLP leader Wolde Ab first arrived there. It was also Egypt which provided crucial material and logistics support for the fledgling Eritrean nationalist movement.\footnote{According to Markakis, Egypt not only proved a “generous host to the Eritrean refugees, whom it provided with work permits, stipends, and a house that served as their meeting place,” but also allowed Wolde Ab to “conduct a daily broadcast in Tigrigna over Radio Cairo, while another Eritrean broadcast the same programme in Arabic,” National and Class Conflict, 109.}

At the start of the 1970s, there were sufficient ethnic and religious tensions in the ELF resulting in the formation of several splinter groups. Three of these splinter groups formed in 1972 the Eritrean Liberation Front and Popular Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF). This group reflected a good proportion of Christians and Muslims as well as a variety of ideological currents. This proved useful as it began to attract a large number of urbanite, mostly high school students from the Eritrean highlands. But the ELF-PLF was far from being ideologically coherent and still divided along religious lines. The 1974 revolution, caught the ELF-EPLF embroiled in inter-group rivalry which invariably ended in one
faction eliminating another. The ELF-PLF finally broke into two in 1976. One group, lead by Osman Saleh Sabbe, kept the old name and aligned itself with the ELF. Another group, professing Marxism-Leninism and led by Ramadan Mohammed Nur and Isaias Afework, among others, formed the EPLF, which would lead Eritrea to independence in 1991.

The repressive measures by the military regime after Mengistu got the upper hand in the Derg targeted not only the EPRP structure in Eritrea but also the nationalists and their supporters. Eritrean youth, civil servants and members of the armed forces flocked en mass to the EPLF, bolstering its fighting capacity immensely. By early 1978, the EPLF and ELF controlled most part of Eritrea except several major towns and the capital Asmara. But the tide was reversed when the Derg, fresh from its victory against Somalia, unleashed the might of its army against the insurgents, inflicting heavy damage on the ELF and pushing the EPLF all the way back to the Sudanese borders.

Its military setback made the EPLF realize that the Eritrean insurgency needed to be coordinated under one organization. And the solution, typically, was to militarily defeat the ELF, which the EPLF did in 1981 with the help of its ally the TPLF. While it is remarkably tragic that perhaps as many Eritreans lost their lives fighting the Derg as fighting each other, in hindsight the EPLF’s decision to clean house proved decisive for its final victory against the Derg. After establishing its hegemony, the EPLF was deemed by the majority of Eritreans as the only viable liberation movement which deserved their

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427 For detailed and insightful discussion on inter-group rivalry among the Eritrean liberation movements, see the section “The Eritrean Revolution” in Markakis, National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa, 104-136.
unreserved support. And with the financial, technical, and most importantly, human support of the Eritrean masses, the EPLF was able to withstand repeated military campaigns against it by the *Derg* until it emerged victorious, concluding a thirty-year insurrection for the independence of Eritrea.

Another big factor for the EPLF’s victory was the effective alliance it had forged with the TPLF. The EPLF helped train the first contingent of TPLF fighters and provided the fledgling organization with arms and other logistics support. Except for a short period when relations were strained between the two, the TPLF and EPLF cooperated effectively. The decision by the former to send its fighters to Eritrea to buttress the EPLF’s during *Derg*’s fierce “Red Star” campaign proved decisive in turning the tide which had threatened the very survival of the Eritrean insurgent group. Aside from the need to stand together against a common enemy and their commonly professed leftist ideology, what sealed the alliance between the two was TPLF’s recognition of Eritrea’s status as Ethiopia’s colony.

The EPLF made the recognition of the Eritrean struggle as “anti-colonial” a condition for cooperation with any organization, and this was one of the major factors that influenced the EPLF to side with the TPLF against the EPRP. While EPRP recognized the Eritrean question as a national question and recognized Eritrea’s right to self determination up to session, the TPLF argued the Eritrean question was a colonial
one, whose only resolution was to be found through Eritrean independence from Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{428}

The EPRP had had close relations with the ELF-PLF, which, as stated in the first section of the third chapter, helped arrange for the former’s fighters to be trained by the Palestinian Liberation Front. However, once the EPLF emerged as the strongest group following the break-up of the ELF-PLF, relations between the two were strained and finally the EPLF severed all contacts with the EPRP. This meant the EPRP lost its main route to arms and supplies, a situation which weakened its fighting capacity, making it more vulnerable to the impending TPLF attack. In fact, according to Kiflu, the EPLF abused and caused the death of hundreds of EPRP members who had sought refuge in EPLF-liberated areas during the “Red Terror” campaign and requested safe passage to the EPRA in Tigray.\textsuperscript{429}

The role the EPLF played in the demise of the EPRP, although a minor one, and generally its alliance with the ethno-nationalist TPLF has made the Eritrean liberation movement unpopular among the left, including Eritrean Marxists some of whom were leading EPRP members. The EPLF’s uncompromising demand for Eritrean independence made it even more unpopular among Ethiopians in general. What caused this resentment towards the EPLF was not only the idea of Ethiopian nationalism obsessed with the country’s territorial integrity, but also the practical consideration that without Eritrea Ethiopia would be landlocked. And the Amharic-speaking people, the main protagonist

\textsuperscript{428} For EPRP’s position, See “Explanation on the stand that EPRP took on the Eritrean question,” June, 1976 and for TPLF’s position, “Eritrean people’s struggle from where to where,” TPLF Assessment, 1979.  
\textsuperscript{429} Kiflu, \textit{The Generation II}, 259.
of Ethio-nationalism, played a leading role in voicing strong opposition against Eritrean
independence.

But one must take caution not to characterize Ethiopian nationalism as an all
Amhara affair as ethno-nationalists like to do. While the Amhara tend to be more
patriotic because they had never experienced cultural domination, most members of other
language groups also wanted to see an undivided Ethiopia that respected the rights of all
its nationalities. Nonetheless, the issue was framed by ethno-nationalist as Amhara versus
the oppressed nations and nationalities of Ethiopia, a framing that helped to both rally
support for the ethno-nationalist cause and create an Amhara ethnic sentiment. It should
also be noted that despite speaking the same language and sharing similar customs, the
Tigrigna-speaking Eritreans and the population of Tigray did not develop the ethnic
solidarity envisioned by the LPP’s vision of “Greater Eritrea,” which goes to show that
objective cultural markers do not form ethnic identity; history and politics do.

Out of necessity, the Tigres and Tigrigna-speaking Eritreans forged close
relations during the days of the armed insurrection through their vanguard organizations.
But under the surface there have always been tensions informed by their respective
histories expressed through widely-held stereotypes. One of these was the perception that
Eritreans consider themselves superior to their southern brethren because of their relative
advanced economy and level of education. And what appeared to give credence to this
stereotype is the presence of many Tigre migrant workers in Eritrea. Also the belief by some Eritreans that the Derg had exploited the fact that Tigres and Tigrigna-speaking Eritreans shared similar language and customs to use the former to infiltrate and spy on the latter may have contributed to the antipathy between the two groups.

The important point for my argument is not whether the stereotypes are true or false -- as stereotypes go, they are often wrong if nothing else for their unwarranted generalization. Their importance, rather, lies in the role the stereotypes have played in creating division among a community which shared similar cultural markers. The tension between Tigres and Eritreans finally erupted in 1988 when Eritrea invaded Badme, a disputed border territory under EPRDF’s control, unleashing a war that consumed the lives of more people than had been lost during the Tigre and Eritrean insurgency.

Before concluding my discussion on Eritrean nationalism, I want to make brief remarks on the related issues of the so called colonial question and the ideological orientation of the EPLF, both topics which do not merit detailed discussion because they are ancillary to my basic argument but cannot, at the same time, be ignored altogether.

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430 Soon after Eritrean independence, the EPLF would deport some 200,000 migrant workers most of whom were Tigres, causing a huge uproar. There were wide-spread allegations that the deportees were forced to leave behind their propriety, a claim both the EPLF and its then ally the EPRDF denied. When war broke out between the two in 1998, the EPRDF returned the favour by expelling some 50,000 Eritreans from Ethiopia. See Marcus, A History of Ethiopia, 239-255.

431 Ethiopia eventually won the war in 2000 and took back Badme, which it still controls. However, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, by whose decision both parties pre-committed to abide, ruled in 2002 that the area belongs to Eritrea.
The claim about Eritrean colonial status is fraught with problems.\footnote{For debates on Eritrea and the “colonial question” see Okbazghi Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics; Paterman, Eritrea, Even the Stones are Burning; Bereket Habte Selassie, Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Messay, Survival and Modernization; Mesfin “The Eritrean Question,”; Patrick Gilkes, “Eritrea: Historiography and Mythology,” African Affairs 90 (October, 1991); and Melakou “Eritrea: Evolution Towards Independence and Beyond.”} According to this view, Eritrea was an Italian colony which subsequently fell under a British military administration. It was then federated with Ethiopia under a UN mandate, but Ethiopia dissolved the federation and forcefully annexed Eritrea, thus becoming the new colonial master. There are two problems with the “colonial” thesis.

First, for all the manipulation, coercion and bribery Haile-Selassie might have used to have his ways, it was the Eritrean Assembly -- stooge it may be -- which by anonymous vote reduced Eritrean autonomous status to “administration” and eventually voted itself out of existence. Second, it will be extremely difficult to conceptually justify the relationship between Ethiopian and Eritrean as a colonial one -- economic exploitation, creation of new markets, cheap labour force, cultural imperialism and the like. It should, however, be emphasized here that Eritreans deserved the right to self-determination, including forming their own independent state as they chose to do.

The fact that the Eritrean Assembly, which at the time at best reflected only the wishes of the majority of Christian highlanders, voted for unification with Ethiopia, should not condemn the peoples of Eritrea to life under successive repressive Ethiopian regimes. It is the violation of their socio-political rights which they had enjoyed under the federal arrangement that brought most Eritreans together in common opposition against
Ethiopian rule. The demand to redress the injustice imposed on Eritrea required its peoples should be given the chance to determine their future but not endorse the indefensible position that Eritrea was Ethiopia’s colony. The two are not mutually inclusive.

The EPLF had good reasons to advance the “colonial” thesis. During its debate with the TPLF on the national question to clear the ground for the formation of a broader anti-Derg front, the Marxist-Leninist professing EPLF took a hard-line Stalinist stand which threatened to undermine the TPLF’s demand for independence from Ethiopia. The EPLF claimed there was no need for nationalities in Ethiopia to raise the question of secession once “the system of national domination and oppression gives way to one based on the equal rights of all nationalities,” adding that separatist demands would not be “justifiable from the standpoint of the interests of the masses.”

Therefore, while the right of Eritrea to form an independent state was justified on the ground that it was a colonial question, nationalities in Ethiopian, and by implication, those within Eritrea were denied the right to secede because doing so undermines the interest of the masses. The EPLF’s position may have been motivated by a long-term aspiration of establishing economic relations with a strong democratic Ethiopia once Eritrea was independent, a wish the EPLF has reiterated. But it would be naive to deny that EPLF’s immediate concern was to pre-empt potential separatist trends within multi-ethnic Eritrea with a long history of religious division.

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As their debate on the national question indicates, The EPLF and TPLF were no different from their adversary the Derg in conveniently selecting and applying Marxist-Leninist principles which only served their purposes. If the Derg used Marxism-Leninism to stay in power by transforming itself into the proletariat party, the nationalists used the credo for its proven effectiveness in mobilizing, organizing and controlling opposition to the state. The difference was the nationalists had the interest of their peoples’ at heart while the junta cared the most about itself. In the end all three would discard their Marxist-Leninist credentials with the same alacrity they had embraced them when they found themselves confronted with the reality of a “post-communist” world political order.

4.2. Tigre Nationalism

Tigray was the first region to develop ethnic and national consciousness in Ethiopia. The main reason for this can be traced to Tigray’s politics of rivalry against Shoa. But Tigray’s cultural and geographic uniqueness as well as its rich history and poor economy are big contributing factors. Tigray is the most culturally homogenous region in Ethiopia in terms of language and religion. Furthermore, unlike the Amhara and Oromo who did not have a homeland bearing their names until 1992, the Tigres lived in a region named Tigray for hundreds of years. The province of Tigray is the only constant in the political map of Ethiopia under Haile-Sellassie, the Derg and the EPRDF. No region in Ethiopia displays considerable overlap between language, religion and region like Tigray.

434 See figures 2, 4, and 5.
Even under Shoan domination, politically Tigray remained the most autonomous region in the empire until the Derg seized power. Tigray has a special place in Ethiopian history. Aksum, the birthplace of the Ethiopian state, and the Church of Mary, where the Ark of the Covenant is said to reside, are in Tigray. So is Adwa, where the decisive victory against Italy took place. Tigray was also one of the most impoverished regions in the country and the peasantry faced extreme economic hardships. The elites of Tigray took tremendous pride in their history and cultural heritages as they were indignant about the poverty of their homeland and the loss of power to Shoa.

It was this pride and resentment that the TPLF was able to transform into the most powerful ethno-nationalist movement in Ethiopia which, in alliance with the EPLF, toppled the Derg. The TPLF was formed in 1975 in Western Tigray by a small group of educated urbanities including Meles Zenawe, who led the TPLF/EPRDF to victory in 1991 and since then has been serving as Ethiopia’s chief of state. The EPLF helped train the first batch of TPLF fighters and supplied arms and other logistics support.435 Several founding members of the TPLF, including Meles, were part of the Ethiopian Student

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435 For a comprehensive history and analysis of the TPLF and generally Tigray’s nationalist struggle, see Young’s Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia. While it is not to be compared to Young’s work in scope and insight and is exaggeratedly biased towards the TPLF, who had invited the author to do the story, Jenny Hammond’s book provides some information on Tigray’s nationalism: Fire from the Ashes: A chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1999.
Movement who witnessed beginning in the late 1960s the soaring of tensions between Amharic and Tigrigna speaking students.\(^{436}\)

In its inception, the TPLF-lead movement was basically a continuation of Tigray’s provincialism under a leftist garb. Traditionally, Tigray’s provincialism emerged against Shoan domination that began with Emperor Menelik. The north -- Begemeder, Gojam, Wollo, Tigray -- considered Shoa, which until Tewodros ended its independence “was only nominally part of the empire,” an outsider and not deserving the throne.\(^{437}\) And Menelik was considered by Tigray as a usurper because Emperor Yohannes who was fatally wounded fighting the Dervish was said to have declared his son Mengesha his successor just before he died. As we will see below, the TPLF endorsed the view that Tigray’s oppression began upon the death of Yohannes, the last Tigre emperor. But more importantly for its cause, the TPLF transformed the oppressor from “Shoa” to “Amhara.”

In 1976, the TPLF released its Manifesto which stated that “the first task of this national struggle will be the establishment of an Independent democratic republic of Tigray,” claiming that “Tigray lost its autonomy and independence after the death of Yohannes IV.”\(^ {438}\) Another nationalist pamphlet stated that “From that time onwards [the death of Yohannes] the national contradictions between the Amhara oppressor nation and

\(^{436}\) See Ottaway, *Ethiopia in Revolution*, “After the mid-1960s, Tigrean and Eritrean students refused to speak Amharic any longer, and all discussions involving the entire student body generally took place in English as a neutral lingua franca acceptable to all ethnic group,” 28. And according to Young, by “the late 1960s an unofficial association of Tigrayan students at the university agreed that their province was condemned to stagnation because of its exclusion from power in an Amhara-dominated state bureaucracy,” *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 82.


the oppressed nations in Ethiopia, including Tigray came into the scene.”

Unlike the Eritrean Liberals who saw Haile-Sellassie’s rule for what it was, a continuation of Shoan domination that began with Menelik, Tigre nationalists presented it as an Amhara rule by an Amhara nation. In this formulation, Gondar, Gojam and Wollo, which were as much dominated by Shoa as Tigray was, were transformed into oppressors because the imagined Amhara nation would include not only Shoa but all Amharic-speaking regions.

The young TPLF even implicates the Amhara peasants, as opposed to the “Amhara ruling class,” in playing a minor role in dominating Tigray and rules out any possibility of solidarity between Amharas and Tigres against the Derg:

> Even though it is undeniable that the oppressed masses of the Amhara nationality itself do not play a major role in the oppression of the Tigrayan masses the two peoples have developed bitter hatred towards each other. They are deeply suspicious of each other. In short they cannot wage a joint struggle for a joint cause.

Over the years the TPLF would learn to harness ethnic politics with better sophistication and criticize some of its earlier positions as “narrow nationalist deviations.” And the Manifesto is not a document the mature TPLF was particularly proud of. Nevertheless, the TPLF was able to rally the support of the peasantry along ethnic lines by transforming the enemy from “Shoan domination,” which is regional, into “Amhara domination,”

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439 Quoted in Markakis, National and Class Conflict, 248-249.
440 Manifesto of the TPLF, in Young, 100.
441 Gebru, Ethiopia: Power and Protest, 221.
which is ethnic. “Bitter hatred” is better internalized if perceived between two peoples (Amhara and Tigre) than between a region and people (Shoa and Tigre).

Thus, Tigre nationalism advanced the imagining of the Amhara nation and ethnicity, which first found expression in Wallelign’s thesis, to a higher level. Now Amharaness is not simply seen as an analytic concept but a concrete political enemy against whom war is to be waged. The notion of “Amhara domination” also serves another important purpose for Tigre nationalism. It masks the marginalization of Gondar, Gojam and Wollo by the Shoan dynasty and leaves Tigray as the only victim in the north, making it easier for Tigre nationalists to make a common cause with southern nationalists.

For instance, if one considers the pre-1974 political order as Shoan domination, then statistics would show that Tigray held a privileged position compared to Begemeder, Gojam, Wollo and every other region except Shoa and Eritrea in terms of education and representation in the government and the army. And this is not to mention that no other region in Ethiopia enjoyed the level of autonomy Tigray was allowed to have. But according to the “Amhara domination” model, for example, the number of Shoan central

442 See Clapham, *Haile-Selassie’s Government*, 75-80; see particularly the table on page 77; Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 251-252; Henze, *Layers of Time*, 194-195. Clapham says the “Gondarris and Gojamis have had far fewer ties with the present regime, and have therefore had less chance to establish themselves; several of their leaders have been consigned to the dignified impotence of the senate, whilst their Shoan equivalents have been given executive positions,” 76. And Henze on his part writes, “In actuality the core Amhara regions – Gojjam, Begemder, and Wollo – provided only a small proportion of the leading officials in the imperial government and were at least as neglected as Tigray in allocation of developmental resources,” 195.

443 Erlich says, “Haile Sellassie remained to the end respectful of Tigre’s unique status in the empire. Seymm, Yohannes’ grandson, though never crowned as negus [king], was the governor general of the province until his death in 1960. He was succeeded by his son, ras Mangasha, who filled his post until the revolution.” *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*, 133.
government official, which was eighty-five in the 1970s, will be compared to the twenty-six held by Tigrigna-speakers to emphasise Amhara domination. What remains unsaid is that the combined number of officials from Gojam and Begemeder was eleven and Wollo was not represented at all. One characteristic feature of all ethno-nationalist movements in Ethiopia was their penchant to hide the political and economic oppression of the northern Amhara regions by Shoa as though the fact of speaking Amharic was a transformative mark of privilege.

As I have discussed in chapter two, historically the idea of Amhara domination makes sense only in relation to south-north relations in pre-revolution Ethiopia. And even that becomes conceptually justifiable when placed within the framework of an Amhara status group. The TPLF’s attempt to graft the historical cause of southern nationalism onto its own by claiming it has been victim of Amhara domination since the death of Emperor Yohannes has no historical or material basis. Culturally, Tigray was as privileged as the Amhara. Economically, Tigray was as neglected as Gondar, Gojam and Wollo not to mention the southern regions. The only form of oppression that Tigrigna-speaking people as a group faced along with all non-Amharic speakers was linguistic domination. However, Amharic-language domination became economically significant not upon the death of Emperor Yohannes but with the spread of modern education and bureaucratic system, both of which favoured the Amhara because Amharic served as the medium of education and administration.

Amharic has been the court language since the twelfth century even during the reign of Yohannes, a Tigre Emperor. It has also become the most widely-spoken language serving as a lingua franca throughout the years. Before the advent of modernity in Ethiopia, nobody needed to learn to speak Amharic unless one aspired for a position of power, an avenue which was not open to the great masses. Peasants -- because that was what the majority of Ethiopians were and still are -- farmed in their own language, so to speak. Only the establishment of the modern bureaucratic system and the spread of the state apparatus brought ordinary people and government officials in contact. And this meant those who did not speak Amharic were at a disadvantage in dealing with the tax collector, the police, the court and the like.

But it was Haile-Selassie’s and Derg’s policy of leaving Amharic as the only language of instruction in a country where some eighty languages are spoken that created a powerful breeding ground for resentment against Amharic which ethno-nationalist directed against the Amhara. Those who had gone through the difficult experience of learning another language in order to compete for access to education and state office were the ones who first gained ethnic consciousness. Ethnicity and nationalism are modern phenomena inseparably connected with the activities of the modern centralizing state arising from interactions between the leadership of centralizing states and elites from non-dominant ethnic groups.\(^445\)

\(^{445}\) See Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism.*
Members of non-dominant language groups with a higher “volume of capital,” as opposed to economic exploitation because first, they are not as exploited as the masses, and second, because they have to compete against the dominant group for better economic and social positions. As Markakis observes, ethnic “movements, like nationalist ones, are organized, led and ideologically inspired by intellectual and petty bourgeois elements.” And in Ethiopia it was invariably the educated, the rich and those of social high-birth who lead the nationalist movements. The masses may make history, but always under the leadership of the elite.

When ethno-nationalism emerged in Ethiopia in the 1970s, some ninety percent of the population was agrarian. The peasantry had little need for Amharic to go to school because there were not any, or watch TV and listen to the radio because it did not have these. Nor did the illiterate peasantry need Amharic to read the newspaper. Ethnic consciousness in reaction to Amharic linguistic domination was less about the peasantry than about the elite who aspired for economic and political power. But in order to be successful, ethno-nationalists, elites both in the north and south, had to invite the masses

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447 Markakis, “Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Horn of Africa,” 76.

448 For instance, virtually all the leading members of the TPLF were educated and all the three Chairmen the organization has had come from influential families. The first TPLF Chairman, Aregawi Berhe, is the son of a powerful judge. The second Chairman, Sebhat Nega, is the son of a Fitawrari and the third and present leader, Meles Zenawe, is the grandson of a Dejazmach. Meles went to General Wingate School, one of the most prestigious secondary schools in Ethiopia at the time, before joining the AA University. After the EPRDF takeover, ethnic organizations mushroomed in the country and Markakis who had conducted a survey claims that the leading figures in all the ethnic organizations were schoolteachers, civil servants, and traders. See “Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Horn of Africa,” 76.
into history. And as Nairn puts it, “the invitation card had to be written in a language they understood.” Therefore, Amharic language domination was presented as Amhara domination to give “Amhara” flesh and blood, to create an ethnic bogey against which the multitude would rally.

Amharic linguistic domination which has resulted in the exclusion of Tigray’s elite from (or at least in the denial of fair representation in) the state’s affair was not the main concern of the peasantry in Tigray or the south. The peasant in Tigray, like anywhere else, wanted land to farm and take the full benefit from it without any hindrance from the landlord or the government. It wanted assistance from the state when its land was struck by drought, its community by famine, and its family by disease. While these were goals the TPLF strived for, its ethno-nationalist agenda was at the same time informed by the traditional Shoa-Tigray rivalry which was presented to the masses as a struggle against Amhara domination.

The TPLF framed its cause of ethno-nationalism within the Marxist-Leninist tradition and its pamphlets and programmes championed the cause of the peasants and workers. Although it admitted (at least once) that nationalism was the “best tactic to rally the oppressed peoples of Ethiopia in general and that of Tigray in particular,” the TPLF generally tried to present its stand on the precedence of the national question over class struggle in Ethiopia as a principled Marxist-Leninist position called forth by objective conditions in the country. It maintained that while normally class contradiction

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449 Nairn, The Break-up of Britain, 340.
must be resolved first, historical conditions in Ethiopian dictate that ethnic and national oppression was the primary contradiction that had to be resolved and therefore national liberation must take precedence over class emancipation.\textsuperscript{451}

Whereas the claim about the primacy of the national question over class oppression in Ethiopia is debatable, there is no arguing about the superiority of ethno-nationalist politics over class ideology in agrarian Ethiopia. As far as the peasantry, which Marx says lacks strong class base,\textsuperscript{452} was concerned, ethnicity proved a more useful principle of political mobilization than the intellectualist ideal of class consciousness.\textsuperscript{453} This was more so, as the EPRP learned the hard way, in post-revolution Ethiopia which saw the implementation of a radical land reform. And as illustrated below, the TPLF relied, especially during the earlier days of the movement, on ethno-nationalist language and emotive terms that drew on Tigray’s past filtered through the TPLF’S lens. It was in this nationalist sprit that the TPLF invoked the memory of the Weyane rebellion of 1943, which imparts to the Tigre peasantry that the source of its problem was that of ethnic domination by the Amhara.

According to the TPLF, the Weyane revolt was “one of the spectacular examples of Tigrean resistance against the dominance of the Amhara nation.”\textsuperscript{454} This retroactive

\textsuperscript{451} Markakis, \textit{National and Class Conflict}, 252; Young, “Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia,” 534.
\textsuperscript{452} See Marx, \textit{The Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte}.
\textsuperscript{453} The proven effectiveness of ethnicity as a principle of political mobilization is, as Markakis explains due to the “instant recognition and ready response it elicits from masses of people,” “Nationalism and Ethnicity,” 76. And according to Terence Ranger, one of the great strengths of ethnicity as ideology is that once it has been “invented and imagined” ethnicity appears to be primordial and makes it “virtually impossible to imagine any other basis of human association.” See his “Concluding Comments” in \textit{Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa: Constructivist Reflections and Contemporary Politics}, 134. I would say Ranger’s observation is a bit exaggerated but still to the point.
and convenient reinterpretation of history had enabled the TPLF to construct a long history of anti-Amhara resistance in Tigray and present itself as a continuation of that tradition. Invoking the memory of the Weyane uprising and calling on the present generation to do no less than its predecessors by standing up to the Amhara was a language the Tigre peasantry can identify with. Searching for a history of legitimation and inspiration that would enhance the cause of national liberty, the TPLF interpreted Tigray’s past as one of “oppressed uniqueness.”

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My intention here is not to hold the TPLF captive to its old misguided rhetoric, which, to its credit, it had outgrown, but rather to show how its politics helped to reinforce the idea of Amhara ethnicity to which Amharic speakers would eventually begin to react. Along the years, when the TPLF became stronger, more confident and mature, its early days’ nationalistic rhetoric gave way to class-oriented articulations. The movement emphasised the point that the “struggle of the people of Tigray is against the Amhara ruling classes and their lackeys and not against the Amhara people or the other peoples of Ethiopia.”456 And the oppressor would metamorphose from “Amhara” to “Amhara ruling class,” “Shoan Amhara,” and finally “the Shoan ruling class.”

The TPLF had also repudiated its objective to form an independent Tigre state. From the outset, the idea of an independent Tigray, given its material impoverishment, could not have been an attractive one. And this is what the TPLF leader Meles confirmed when he told Markakis why the organization later rejected the option of independence:

455 Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*, 133.
“We looked at Tigray and saw there is nothing there.” Nonetheless, the TPLF maintained all along that the unlimited right to self-determination should be recognized for all nations and nationalities in Ethiopia. And it was in keeping with its long-standing principle that upon seizing state power, the EPLF/EPRDF had the rights of nations and nationalities to self-determination including secession enshrined in the new Ethiopian constitution.

The political scope of the TPLF broadened after the foundation, within the organization, of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT). It claimed to be part of the international communist movement and advocated a stance of anti-fascism, American imperialism and anti USSR’s social imperialism and called for the establishment of a national proletarian party in Ethiopia. The TPLF also began spreading outside Tigray in conjunction with its protégé the multi-ethnic ANDM, which, as mentioned earlier, was formed by a small group that had splintered from the EPRP.

The TPLF had emulated its northern ally the EPLF to become the only armed opposition in Tigray by defeating and expelling all other insurrection groups in the region. These included two nationalist organizations: the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), led by Emperor Yohannes’s great grandson, and another nationalist organization called Tigray Liberation Front (TLF). The EDU was attacked for its obvious feudal aspiration and the TLF for advancing narrow nationalism, which is to say its programme.

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457 Markakis, “Nationalism and Ethnicity,” 78. Meles gave the interview to Markakis in 1994, three years after the TPLF/EPRDF victory over the Derg.
459 Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT), July 1985. The TPLF/MLLT was simply following in the tradition of the EPRP in its designation of the Derg as fascist, a reactionary petty-bourgeois military force which courted popular support by taking radical measures.
was not framed within the Marxist-Leninist tradition. And the final successful
confrontation was, as already discussed, with the EPRP. After establishing hegemony in
their respective regions, the TPLF and EPLF became the only viable armed insurgencies
in the country to bring down the military regime.

The EPLF, which by now had converted into a conventional frightening force,
and the TPLF sustained an organized military campaign inflicting heavy damages against
the Ethiopian army throughout the late 1980s. And Mengistu’s reaction was either to kill
his generals who had lost battles, which lowered morale among soldiers, or bomb the
civilian population in rebel-controlled areas, which only made the insurgents more
determined to win the war. The most atrocious civilian bombing occurred at Hausien, a
town in north-eastern Tigray, in June 1988, killing hundreds of civilians. In February
1989, a joint attack by the TPLF and the EPLF scored a decisive victory against the Derg
army in the town of Endaselassie, Shere, capturing more than twenty-thousand prisoners.
This stunning defeat forced the Derg to evacuate from the whole of Tigray, in any case
from the few areas it had control over by then.

After liberating Tigray, the TPLF renewed its call for the establishment of a
multi-national front, a call turned down by both the OLF and the EPRA, or what was left
of it. All the same, The TPLF went ahead and formed the EPRDF, a coalition of four
organizations. These were the TPLF, EPDM, the Oromo People’s Democratic
Organization (OPDO), and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers’ Revolutionary Movement
(EDORM). Not many people had heard about the EPDM until the EPRDF seized state

460 Young, Peasant Revolution, 163.
power. I will have more to say about it in the next chapter in relation to its transformation to ANDM. The OPDO and EDORM were composed of TPLF-captured Oromo soldiers and Derg army officers, respectively.

The insurgents kept the military pressure on the Derg, which began to show signs of cracking when a group of top army generals attempted a failed *coup d’état* against Mengistu. His typical response was to exterminate everyone involved, resulting in the intensifying of low morale among the troops. Furthermore, Mikhail Gorbachev’s USSR refused to continue providing the Derg with its much needed military supply and weaponry, without which the regime could not sustain the unpopular war.

The TPLF and EPLF launched their final offensive beginning in late 1989 and by spring the following year their forces controlled the whole of northern Ethiopia except a few towns and the Eritrean capital, Asmara. The Derg finally agreed to peace talks to be mediated by the US in London. However, Mengistu’s flight to Zimbabwe, a few days before the talks were to start, led to the instantaneous collapse of the Ethiopian army, paving the way for the EPLF and EPRDF to enter unopposed Asmara and Addis Ababa, respectively.\(^{461}\)

\(^{461}\) In light of the widely-held perception that the territorial unity of Ethiopia was inextricably connected with Mengistu, the reaction to the news of his flight to Zimbabwe was not surprising at all. The Ethiopian army, still a formidable fighting force, collapsed and the mood of the nation’s capital became distinctly pessimistic Bahru captures the national mood then when he says “the manner of his departure belied popular anticipation that he would follow the example of his hero, Emperor Tewodros, by committing suicide rather than fleeing to the safety of exile.” *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 267-268.

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4.3. Oromo Nationalism

Oromo nationalism did not develop to a degree comparable to Eritrean or Tigre nationalism nor did the OLF pose serious military threats to the military regime for various reasons. In a sense it is an irony that ethno-nationalism was least developed in the south which, historically, was politically and culturally dominated by the north. The Oromo are the largest and most widely dispersed language groups in the country, represented in seven of the former provinces in pre-1991 Ethiopia. The population diffusion together with lower literacy rate, division along religious line, absence of improved mode of transportation as well as the relative smaller number of Oromo intellectuals may have hindered the development of Oromo identity and nationalism.

Moreover, as Mohammed Hassen explains, nascent Oromo nationalism faced pressure from both the Ethiopian and Somali states. He argues that without Oromia Ethiopia would lose most of its resources and an independent Oromia would thwart the ambition to build Greater Somalia: “Whereas the Amhara elites saw the danger to their empire in the growth of Oromo nationalism, the Somali elites perceived the frustration of their ambition in the birth of Oromo nationalism.” The first sign of organized Oromo ethnic aspirations could be traced back to the Mecha and Tulema Self-Help Association which was established in 1963 and lasted until 1967. The objective of the organization to transcend provincial divisions and represent all Oromos in Ethiopia was indicated by its

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[462] Mohammed Hassen, “The Development of Oromo Nationalism,” in Being and Becoming Oromo, 67-68. The “Greater Somalia” concept refers to Somalia’s long-standing ambition to incorporate Ethiopian regions in the south populated by ethnic Somalis. But these regions like Harrar and Bale are also populated by Oromos thus the conflict of interest.

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name which encompassed the eastern Oromo region (Tulema) and the western Oromo area (Mecha).

Led by a former commander of the police, General Tadesse Berru, the Association had Oromo intellectuals and army officers in its leadership. The organization was apolitical at its inception aiming to expand social services like health and education in the Oromo region. However, the actions of the organization soon took political overtones when public rallies were held in southern towns at which Taddesse appeared delivering speeches that were critical of government policies towards the region. First the government banned public meetings and then the organization itself. Tadesse was arrested on charges of treason following a bombing incident in Addis Ababa. He was sentenced to death but the sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Tadesse was released following the 1974 revolution but was executed a year later by the junta under a concocted charge of opposing the land reform proclamation.

Aside from the strong affiliation of the Marxist group ECHAT with the Oromo, there was not much of activity by way of organizing an Oromo opposition until the establishment of the OLF in 1976. Oromo ethnic sentiment had already begun to find political expression in the Ethiopian Student Movement. For instance, a pamphlet by a student group for the study of Oromo history and culture declared, “No Oromo can rely on his ability, qualifications, or even hypocrisy to attain material wealth and self-

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463 Markakis, National and Class Conflict, 260.
466 Bahru, A History of Modern Ethiopia, 262.
467 For discussion on ECHAT, see the second section of Chapter Three.
aggrandisement, because the racist regime considers him as its dangerous enemy exactly for these reasons.”

468 The 1974 revolution, which was popular among the Oromo as it was with other southern peoples for destroying the economic foundation of northern domination, made it difficult for emergent Oromo nationalism to take root.

Unlike Tigre nationalism, which was driven by the traditional Shoa-Tigray rivalry, emergent southern nationalism could only feed on the economic and cultural domination of the north, which the Derg promised to dismantle. Furthermore, there were several Oromo members of the Derg, including its second Chairman General Teferi Bente. A national weekly in Oromo language, Barrisa, was launched and prominent Oromo intellectuals like Haile Fida and Barro Tumssa, ECHAT’s leader, appeared on the national scene. A large number of Oromos were also EPRP members and supporters. For all these reasons and others already mentioned above, a dominant Oromo nationalist movement could not emerge. Nevertheless, a group of former university and secondary school students gathered in Addis Ababa in July 1976 to form the OLF, which declared as its objective the establishment of an independent state called Oromia. 469

Like the TPLF, the OLF also determined that rural-based armed insurrection was the appropriate form of struggle. And as was the case with the TPLF, the EPLF once again trained the first batch of OLF fighters. There is not much to say about OLF’s military success and the significance of the organization to this day remains its symbolic and political role in rallying mostly the Oromo elite against both the Derg and the

468 “The Voice of the Oromo people Against Tyranny,” quoted in Markakis, National and Class Conflict, 260.
469 Markakis, National and Class Conflict, 262.
EPRDF. The OLF is the only major ethno-nationalist movement in Ethiopia which had not subscribed to a Marxist-Leninist ideology, which served northern nationalist as an effective tool of organizing opposition.

Not tempered with Marxist ideology, which always leaves room for solidarity with outside groups, Oromo nationalism, until recently, had remained virulent. Claiming that the struggle of the Oromo was anti-colonial, Oromo nationalism in its early days even condemned multi-ethnic oppositions against the Derg as “spokespersons of the Habasha colonizers”\(^{470}\) Although the “Habasha,” the Amhara and Tigre, are identified as the colonizers, the emphasis was always on “the politically dominant ethnic group, the Amhara.”\(^{471}\) And as we have seen in the last section, the TPLF has tried to distance or mitigate Tigray’s complicity in the northern occupation of the south by claiming Tigray was also the victim of Amhara ethnic/national domination. Thus Tigre and Oromo nationalists converged in the Othering of the Amhara.

It should be noted that not all currents of Oromo nationalism advocated an independent Oromia. There are some Oromo nationalists who seek self-determination for Oromia within a democratic Ethiopia though these have been by far in the minority.\(^{472}\) The dominant Oromo nationalist movement, the OLF, had framed the Oromo question as a colonial one and claimed that there was an independent nation of Oromia before its

\(^{470}\) Union of Oromo Students Organization in Europe, vo. 1. no. 1, July 1976.
\(^{472}\) A prime example of this is the Oromo National Congress, which was established in 1996. For analysis and comprehensive listing of ethno-nationalist organizations and their political trends see Merera Gudina “Contradictory Interpretations of Ethiopian History: The Need for a New Consensus,” in Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective, ed. David Turton (Oxford: James Curry, 2006) and Wondwosen Teshome, “Ethiopian Opposition Political Parties and Rebel Fronts: Past and Present,” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 4 (2009).
incorporation into the Ethiopian state.\footnote{See for instance “Oromia shall be free,” OLF, 1978. For critical discussion on Oromo and the national question see Merera “Contradictory Interpretations of Ethiopian History.”} It asserts that the “aim of the Oromo struggle led by the OLF is only to gain back our country that was taken away from us by force.”\footnote{Oromia Speaks Vol. 10 Issue 1.}

Like their Eritrean counterparts, Oromo nationalists relied on essentialist Whig historiography which imagines the nation before nationalism. The claim about the existence of an ancient and independent country or nation called Oromia is based on the belief of the existence of a homogeneous and autonomous culture which serves as a marker of Oromo ethnicity and national identity. For instance, for Mekuria, “the possession of a common language, a distinct cultural tradition, and geographical territory” is sufficient to “distinguish an ethnie or a nationality from all others.”\footnote{Mekuria, “The Politics of Linguistic Homogenization,” 327. For similar arguments that conflate common Oromo cultural attributes with Oromo nationhood see also Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy, ed. Asafa Jalata (Lawrenceville & Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1998).} What is often cited as evidence of a primordial Oromo nation is the \textit{Gada} system which marked the socio-political tradition of the Oromo while they were pastoralists.\footnote{See P.T.W. Baxter ed. Being and Becoming Oromo. Refer to Chapter One for a brief discussion of the \textit{Gada} and the historical conditions that led the Oromo to abandon it.} But the argument about an Oromo nation based on the \textit{Gada} tradition is as tenuous as it would be to argue about an all-embracing historic Arab or Somali nation because of shared cultural traits that exist among the Arabs or Somalis.

One of the most primordialist views about Oromo identity finds expression in the writing of Gemetchu Megerssa, a university professor. He assumes the existence of a distinct, culturally uniform and self-sufficient Oromo identity which is impervious to the vagaries of history and politics: “What is fascinating about Oromo cultures, all Oromo
communities found in East Africa and Northeast Africa retain the essential features of their ancient religious and philosophical system of thought.” Gemetchu goes on to claim that an Oromo does not become Oromo but is born Oromo:

In short, for the Oromo, the belief system, ethnicity and identity are given with birth. An Oromo person does not become a member of a believing community through a formal rite of incorporation such as baptism....Thus, the simplest definition of Oromo would be that he/she is born of an Oromo father.

Therefore, according to this essentialist-culturalist view of ethnic and national identity, the historical experience of a language group which might lead to different political and cultural self-perception is rendered irrelevant.

However, the Oromo are a diverse people in terms of religion, dialect, customs, and political history. As I have discussed in chapter one, the Oromo had attained varying degrees of political organization. Some like Jima, Wellega, had their own kingdoms while others remained communal societies. There was no self-conscious political unit embracing all or even most of the Oromo, who also happen to exist outside Ethiopia. By insisting that there had been an independent Oromo nation, Oromo nationalists are locating in the past what they would like to see in the future. And they are close to achieving their goal because there is now an Oromo nation if not an independent one. The irony is Oromia was made possible largely as a result of the long and bitter struggle

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477 Gemetchu Megerssa, “Oromumma: Tradition, consciousness and Identity,” in Being and Becoming Oromo, 93.
478 Ibid., 94.
wagged by the TPLF and the EPLF and not by the OLF, which has now launched an armed insurgency against the TPLF/EPRDF.

As my discussion in this chapter shows, ethnic and national identities are social constructs, products of historical dynamics. Shared cultural markers like language, religion, and customs may serve as a basis for, but do not necessarily lead to, the construction of ethnic or national identity. Tigray’s provincialism was transformed into a strong Tigre ethnic/national identity through years of ethno-nationalist struggle. The same holds true for Eritrea. The Oromo nationalist movement, which from its inception had been fractured based on differences in region, religion and dialect, failed to attain what the TPLF and the EPLF were able to.\(^{479}\) No Oromo movement could establish a political hegemony in the Oromo region, which might have helped to mobilize a large section of the population by undermining religious and regional differences, as the EPLF was able to do in Eritrea.

While the OLF is considered to be the strongest political movement, its rival the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromo (IFLO), appears to appeal more to Muslim Oromos.\(^{480}\) The OLF also have to contend against the Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF), a mixed Oromo-Somali alliance. All said and as Paulos Chanie sums it up, the “different Oromo elite factions have never been capable of effectively mobilizing the

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\(^{479}\) The division along religious line is not limited to Christian/Muslim but also Orthodox Christians vs. Protestants. And internal divisions had cost the OLF right from the start. For instance, former ECHAT’s leader Barro Tumssa, a formidable politician who has joined the OLF when ECHAT was disbanded by the Derg, is widely believed to have been a victim of OLF’s factional war.

\(^{480}\) It was established in 1976 with a strong backing from the Somali government. One of the founders and leader of the IFLO, Abdulkarim Ibrahim, better known as “Jara,” is believed to have been a military commander in the OLF until he helped form the IFLO in 1985.
many Oromo groups living in Ethiopia around a mass-based nationalism. Rather, the history of the Oromo elite is the history of discord and fracture which has adversely affected Oromo solidarity. As a result, the OLF has largely remained a nationalist movement catering to the emotional need of the Oromo elite, not to the material need of the Oromo people whom it failed to mobilize.

The OLF became more visible and helped win important rights for the Oromo people in the few months it had been part of the Transitional Government than it had during the previous fifteen years of its existence. And a strong all-embracing Oromo national identity has emerged not during the Oromo ethno-nationalist insurgency, which was limited to small areas, but only in the post-EPRDF era where the politics of ethnicity and nationalism was allowed into the public sphere for the first time in Ethiopian history. In the following chapter, I will say more about this public discourse on ethnicity and nationalism in relation to Amhara ethnic/national identity and the Amhara National State.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMHARA NATIONALISM AND ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Amhara nationalism is not the awakening of the Amhara nation to self-consciousness; it invented the Amhara nation where it did not exist.

In this final chapter, which is divided in two sections, I will examine the rise of Amhara nationalism and the ethnic-centred imagining of Ethiopian national identity in post-EPRDF Ethiopia. The first section discusses how the institutionalization of ethno-nationalism within an ethnic-based federal system gave rise to both resistive and official forms of Amhara nationalism. Unlike the ethno-nationalist movements discussed in the previous chapter, both currents of Amhara nationalism are reactive and not imaginative in their orientation. And the Amhara Regional State, which was borne out of the ethnic federal arrangement, in a sense, is an invention in the literal sense because the Amhara did not imagine or aspire for one. Rather, they felt compelled to embrace one carved out for them. The second section of this chapter will analyse the articulation of ethnic and national identities in post-EPRDF Ethiopia as well as the tensions and contradictions associated with this new national imagining.
5.1. Amhara Nationalism and the Amhara Nation

The TPLF/EPRDF seized power in May 1991 and formed a provisional government which lasted until the establishment of a Transitional Government (TG) two months later. The Derg’s army, police, and security forces were disbanded and EPRDF’s overwhelmingly Tigre fighters were transformed into the new Ethiopian army. In July the same year, the EPRDF convened a national conference to approve a Charter and establish a TG to see Ethiopia through a two-year transitional period. This had been agreed upon earlier in the month at the US-sponsored meeting in London involving the TPLF, OLF and EPLF. The last agreed to refrain from officially declaring Eritrea an independent state until a referendum was held. But the EPLF, already at the helm of a de facto independent Eritrean, made it clear it would not be part of Ethiopia’s transitional political process. The draft charter was prepared by the EPRDF and the OLF and the participants of the conference were selected and screened by the EPRDF.

Some five-hundred delegates attended the meeting dubbed a National Conference of Peace and Reconciliation (NCPR), held in Addis Ababa from first to fifth of July, 1991. The delegates were drawn from twenty-seven, mostly ethnic-based, political groups as well as a few professional organizations. Most of the political groups were unheard of before and appeared to have been formed overnight with the blessing of the
EPRDF to take part in the conference.\textsuperscript{482} Furthermore, several political groups in diaspora who had been opposed not only to the Derg but to the TPFL and the EPLF as well were excluded from the conference for allegedly failing to renounce violence.\textsuperscript{483} Also, individuals and groups associated with the Derg were, deservedly, not allowed to participate in the conference. The EPLF participated, strictly as an observer.

At a conference whose major agenda was the question of nationalities, what was conspicuously absent was a group claiming to represent the interest of the Amhara. This once again belies ethno-nationalists’ perception of a primordial Amhara ethnic identity. While Amhara ethnic sentiment has been rising gradually in reaction to ethno-nationalist politics which defined itself against an imaginary Amhara ethnic group and nation, at this point Amhara ethnicity has not yet been imagined actively through political expression. During the conference, even Asrat Woldeyes, one of the two representatives of the Addis Ababa University and future leader of the All Amhara People’s Organization (AAPO), did not speak for the Amhara. As is the case with most Amharas, he expressed Ethio-nationalist sentiments and showed reservation about ethnic-based politics.

The conference adopted the Charter -- which would serve as a sort of constitution during the transition -- presented to it. It also established an eighty-seven-member legislative body or Council of Representatives. The Charter recognised the basic human

\textsuperscript{482} Merera Gudina observes that leaders of the EPRDF who were “keen on the consolidation of their hard-won victory, made sure to selectively invite weak parties most of which were created overnight, and selectively excluded the actual or potential real power contenders from the processes,” \textit{Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalism and the Quest for Democracy, 1960-2000} (Addis Ababa: Chamber Printing Press, 2003), 121.

\textsuperscript{483} Prominent among these were remnants of the EPRP and the MESON who, in a strange twist of history, have forged a common front against the EPRDF.
and political rights of Ethiopians. In addition, it guaranteed the rights of each nationality to preserve its identity, promote its culture and history, and develop its language. Each nation or nationality was further guaranteed the right “to self-determination of independence” when it is “convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated.” With the sole objection of Asrat, the conference also recognized, Eritrea’s right to hold a referendum and form an independent state if it chooses to do so. Until that time, the EPLF was recognized as the legitimate ruler of Eritrea.

Of the eighty-seven seats in the Council of Representatives, thirty-two were held by the EPRDF, twelve by the OLF and the rest by different ethnic organizations. Meles Zenawe of the TPLF became the president and EPDM chairman Tamrat Layne, the prime minister. Six cabinet posts went to the OLF which, nonetheless, was unhappy with the TPLF controlling the presidency as well as the important ministries of defence and foreign affairs. The TG took a number of legislative measures, the most important one being the reorganization of the country’s political map along ethnic lines. While this measure was presented at the time as a provisional one, the legal provisions which allowed for the creation of ethnic regions or Kilils were later incorporated into the 1994 constitution without major changes.

The provisional regional map which divided Ethiopia into twelve Kilils had been agreed to by the EPRDF and the OLF in October 1991. Ethio-nationalist saw this as a validation of their long-held suspicion that the TPLF and other ethno-nationalists like the

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OLF were bent on destroying Ethiopian unity. What appeared to give credence to the allegation was the rush by the TG to introduce such an important policy measure when it did not have a popular mandate to rule. The EPRDF turned deaf ears to requests not to introduce the Kilils until elections were held. While most elites and urbanites, with the exception of Tigres and Oromos, resisted the idea of the Kilils, the Amhara were most vocal in their opposition to the ethnic-based administrative system.

For all its shortcomings and potential divisiveness, the ethnic-based federal system, which to a degree has empowered the various peoples of Ethiopia, has begun to be seen as a fact of life by most pan-Ethiopianist political oppositions. But this was not the case in the early days of the EPRDF rule, and as difficult as it is, I am trying to reconstruct the political tension in that historical period which gave rise to Amhara nationalism. Ethnic tension was the highest during the first few years of the 1990s when ethnic-based politics became the order of the day. The restrictive press law which is now in place had not yet been enacted and private newspapers and magazines flourished. These largely served as the mouthpiece of the opposition just as the state owned TV, radio and newspapers were blatantly used to advance ethno-nationalist agendas.

Ethno-nationalists revisionist history which reduced Ethiopian statehood to hundred years filled the airways and the Amhara became the favourite choice for ethnic target practice. Irresponsible acts and glib remarks by government and party officials
added fuel to the already polarizing ethnic politics.\textsuperscript{486} For a brief moment, ethnic politics got very ugly and appeared to go out of control when Oromo ultra-nationalists began to indiscriminately kill Amharas in the south, including children and pregnant women, while forcing others to leave the area.\textsuperscript{487} It was in the aftermath of these killings that the first Amhara organization, the AAPO, was established in January 1992, stating as its major objectives the protection of the rights of the Amhara people.

One of AAPO’s founders, and until his death its leader, was Asrat. The sixty-two year-old physician, who was generally considered to be the country’s top surgeon, won the admiration of Ethio-nationalist during the national conference which approved the Charter. He was the lone voice of dissent in questioning the mandate of the conference to adopt a decision which paved the way for the legal separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia. Asrat had been arrested twice in relation to his political activities and was serving his second prison term when he was seriously taken ill in December 1998. He was allowed to leave for a medical treatment in the US, where he died a month later. The Amhara found their first nationalist leader in Asrat and their first ethnic organization in AAPO.

\textsuperscript{486} At one time, Meles, reacting to questions about the alleged practice of replacing the Ethiopian tri-colour with the EPRDF ensign, commented that “the flag was just a rag,” infuriating many. The irony is that what he said was literally, if not symbolically, true. But in saying so, he underestimated the importance Ethio-nationalists attach to the flag. Subscribing to the Abyssinia/ Ethiopia distinction, the younger Meles also liked to reiterate that Ethiopia was not much older than hundred years and dismiss Ethiopian historiography as filled with rubbish. Also, most Amharas were offended when Tamarat went to Eritrea and apologized publicly on behalf of the Amhara for all the atrocities committed against the Eritrean people. Meles would soon learn to measure his words while Tamarat would be disgraced for corruption and embezzlement and spend years in prison, which helped him to see the light. He now resides in the US praising the Lord.

\textsuperscript{487} While the Council of Representatives condemned the atrocities, it did not hold any particular group responsible. Many, however, blame the OLF and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) for the violence against the Amhara. For sources of literature on the killings, see Wondwosen Teshome, “Ethiopian Opposition Political Parties and Rebel Fronto: Past and Present,” 63.
But AAPO’s nationalism has been conflicted from the start because it was inherently reactive. It felt the need to transform the Amhara language group into an Amhara ethnic shield while remaining, at the same time, deeply attached to pan-Ethiopianist principles. The AAPO was often at pain to emphasize that its creation should not be construed as an endorsement of ethnic politics. It insisted that the AAPO was established in recognition of the “acute need of the Amhara, who were being denied all their basic rights,” and not to advance ethno-nationalism. However, according to its programme, the AAPO does not sound much different from other ethnic organizations. It says:

[The AAPO] respects the legitimate existence of other political organizations, parties, and ethnic movements and fronts. On the other hand, it will strive without delay to see to it that the interests, aspirations, democratic rights and freedom of the Amhara people are respected wherever they are found.

The reaction to the establishment of the AAPO among the Amhara was overwhelmingly supportive. But there was also unease, especially among the elite, that the formation of an Amhara ethnic organization may legitimize ethnic politics and contribute to the fragmentation of Ethiopia that many Amharas believed was the EPRDF’s agenda. Getachew Haile, for instance, suggested that the AAPO changes its name to All Ethiopian People Organization and reformulate the above quoted objective as “it [AAPO] will strive without delay to see to it that the interests, aspirations, democratic

rights and freedom of minorities and other peoples not organized by ethnicity are respected.”

The anti-Amhara rhetoric in Oromo regions in the south intensified following the introduction of Kilils and the beginning of the political campaign for the planned 1992 local elections. This was largely the result of the competition between the OLF and the EPRDF-affiliated OPDO for the Oromo vote. The former considered itself as the sole legitimate representative of the Oromo and saw the OPDO as anything but Oromo-speaking version of the TPLF. In order to establish its credentials as a genuine Oromo political organization, the OPDO felt the need to engage in Amhara-bashing competition against the OLF. While the latter appeared to enjoy a wide support among the Oromo, organizationally it was no match for the OPDO/EPRDF, which had the state media and other government apparatuses, including the army, under its disposal.

Before long, tensions soared and the OLF withdrew from local and regional elections held in February 1992, as well as from the TG, provoking a brief armed conflict between itself and the EPRDF. The latter won the war easily, neutralizing the OLF from the political field and paving the way for the OPDO to establish hegemony in Oromia.

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491 I should point out here that there has been little, if any, animosity between the Amhara and the various nationalities in the south except Oromo and Somali nationalists. In fact, the Gurage, the fourth largest language group in the country, along with the Amhara, play a dominant role in pan-Ethiopianist movements.
492 As Marcus observes, the OLF committed political suicide by letting itself be provoked into an armed conflict against its formidable foe: “The move was unwise since the more disciplined, battle hardened, better-armed national (EPRDF) army then entered the south and southeast with the goal of ensuring internal security. Within a few months, 20,000 OLF fighters, supporters, and sympathizers had been captured or detained and the organization neutered as a fighting force. Since it had abandoned its role in the government, the OLF was no longer politically influential, and the field was left to the OPDO,” A History of Ethiopia, 235.
Similar conflicts between EPRDF-affiliated organizations and independent ones became part of the new political spectrum as the EPRDF tried to broaden its narrow ethnic base by initiating various ethnic movements.\footnote{By 1997, the number of EPRDF-initiated PDOs and PDMs would reach twenty-one. See Sarah Vaughan, “Responses to Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia’s Southern Region,” in \textit{Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective}, ed. David Turton (Oxford: James Curry, 2006), 188.}

An organization claiming to represent the interest of several nationalists in the south, the Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Organization (SEPDM) was formed as the new addition to the EPRDF.\footnote{So far I have been using the terms “south” or “southern peoples” as a broader designation of all the areas incorporated into Ethiopia as a result of the northern conquest. In post-1991 politics “southern peoples” refers only to a group of nationalities who came together to form the Southern Peoples’ Regional State. This will become clear in subsequent pages, but for now suffice to note that the Oromo, Somali, Gambella and Harari do not fall under “Southern People.”} It soon became very obvious that among the major language groups only the Amhara lacked representation in the ruling coalition. And the EPDM stepped up to fill the spot by transforming itself into the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). The establishment of the second Amhara political organization, which would preside over the prospective Amhara Regional State, was once again a reaction to the new reality of ethnic-based politics.

Before the fall of the \textit{Derg}, the multi-ethnic EPDM had a role to play in the EPRDF as the only member of the collation which could potentially attract non-Oromo and non Tigre Ethiopians. (Oromos and Tigres could join the TPLF and OPDO respectively.) The EPDM was in fact recruiting and training as cadre members of different nationalities in the south from captured \textit{Derg} soldiers.\footnote{Vaughan, “Responses to Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia’s Southern Region,” 185.} After May 1991, these cadres went to the south to form the various organizations that would help the EPRDF control the south. Only Amharic-speaking members of the EPDM had nowhere else to...
go, leaving the EPDM a de facto Amhara organization. Therefore, it might as well change its name to reflect its “ethnic” composition and claim the Amhara Kilil as its political domain, which was exactly what it did.

In contrast to the official nationalism of ANDM and the conflicted ethnic politics of AAPO, the most forceful and potentially effective form of Amhara nationalism emerged in the writing of Andargachew Tsigie, a former EPRP member. After the defeat of the EPRA by the TPLF, Andargachew was among those who chose exile. He was in London when the EPRDF came to power but soon joined the victors in Addis Ababa. It is not clear how or when he re-established contact with his former comrades who had founded the EPDM. But he was collaborating with them for about a year when he suddenly resigned from his post as the Deputy-Secretary of the Addis Ababa City Council, voicing his criticism of the EPRDF. He soon went back to London after publishing in June 1993 what could be best described as a manifesto of Amhara nationalism, entitled *The Amhara People: From Where to Where*.496

Andargachew begins by saying “we [the Amhara] find ourselves alone in the middle of nowhere, depressed, frustrated, disoriented and lost. It is this sad and disconcerting state of affairs which prompted this piece on Amhara nationalism.”497 He insists the Amhara have to accept the new reality in Ethiopia, embrace their ethnicity and advance Amhara nationalism:

496 Andargachew would return to Ethiopia to become a very active member of the opposition. He was imprisoned in 2005 during the civil unrest that broke out following the general elections the same year. Since then, he has formed, together with another former EPRP member, an opposition called GINBOT 7, which vows to topple the EPRDF by all necessary means, including armed insurrection.
Present-day politics in Ethiopia is based on ethnicity. The political landscape is filled with ethnic-based organizations which have the capacity to promote and protect the political and economic interests of their nationalities. This capacity will get stronger because it is fuelled by nationalism. Groups like the Amhara, which are not organized along ethnic lines, will trail behind and fail to attain an equal level of development with others. The Amhara can avoid this pitfall only by organizing on the basis of ethnicity. An ethnic Amhara organization can become stronger only if it draws on Amhara national consciousness. And it is this Amhara national consciousness that we call Amhara nationalism.\textsuperscript{498}

Compared to all the literature on Eritrean, Tigre, or Oromo nationalism we have seen in the preceding chapters, \textit{The Amhara People} is by far the most sophisticated one. Its refined argument expressed in well-crafted language is designed to appeal both to the intellect and the emotion. This Amhara manifesto also refrains from targeting any ethnic groups as responsible for the plight of the Amhara. It rather argues that the Amhara, more than anything else, were victims of the cruel turn in Ethiopian history, in which they had played a major part.

However, the piece is as nationalist as any in its essentialist understanding of history and use of emotive language to arouse ethnic and national sentiments. Also, one cannot miss the overtone of the manifesto about the Amhara getting short-shrift despite their monumental contribution and sacrifice from the student movement to fighting the brutal military regime: “at one moment in history, there were thousands of dedicated Amhara democrats who shook the mountain.”\textsuperscript{499} The manifesto exploits what it saw as

\textsuperscript{498} Andargachew, \textit{YeAmhara Hizb: Keyet Wedet}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{499} Ibid., 54.
both the proud history and humiliation of the Amhara. This was accomplished by transforming the *histories of the Amharic-speaking peoples* into the *history of the Amhara*. And once again we see the making of nationalist historiography which embeds Amhara nationals in the past where there were none.

Andargachew’s manifesto claims Mengistu and Germaame Neway, Wallelign, as well as the thousands of Amharic-speaking student activists and EPRP members as educated ethnic-Amharas who dedicated their lives to the cause of the Ethiopian peoples in general. It says in the past, the Amhara intellectual elite bled for the cause of Afars, Eritreans and Oromos among others. Amhara activists participated in a multi-national struggle not only for justice and democracy but also for the end of Amhara cultural domination. The manifesto claims that while Amhara democrats, in principle, still believe in pan-Ethiopian form of struggle, the reality dictates otherwise. Today, the Ogaden people did not want a Germame to represent them nor do the various nationalities need a visionary Amhara like Wallelign to champion their cause:

Decades ago, the Amhara democratic force called upon the various peoples of Ethiopia for a common struggle against oppression. These peoples have now learned to do what needs to be done on their own by establishing their respective ethnic organizations. The Amhara should do the same. Ethno-nationalism is not a political fad that will go away as some would have us believe. It is based on strong nationalist sentiments that exist in Ethiopia and remains the only available avenue to safeguard the political and economic interests of the Amhara.\

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Andargachew warns the Amhara elite against wallowing in ideas of multi-national politics of a bygone era and trying to justify it by citing globalization or the experience of the European Union. He says:

Only the Amhara are finding it difficult to accept the reality of politics based on nationality, a sentiment that may have a catastrophic effect on the Amhara people. We should not doubt for a moment that failure to rally behind Amhara nationalism will result in the humiliation of the Amhara as a people and will threaten not only their pride and freedom but their very existence.\textsuperscript{501}

*The Amhara People* talks at length about impoverishment of the Amhara *Kilil*, carved out of the former provinces of Gondar, Gojam, Wollo and Shoa. Drawing on government statistics, Andargachew laments how the thirteen million residents of the region are poorly served in terms of health, education and infrastructure. Hospital beds in the region could accommodate only 820 patients and the doctor-patient ratio was 1:200,000. There was no university in the Amhara region and only fourteen percent of the school-age population had access to education. Of the over hundred districts only twenty-one had access to clean water and electricity. Banks and other financial services were almost non-existent and there were just eleven petrol stations serving the entire region.\textsuperscript{502}

“As far as we know,” says the manifesto, “this is the life of the Amhara and nobody can hide this reality under the rubric of Amhara oppression.” It adds: “Many point out that the Amhara are humiliated. Yes, we have been humiliated. But our humiliation is what we have seen hidden behind our history of conquest -- our forbidding  

\textsuperscript{501} Andargachew, *YeAmhara Hizb: Keyet Wedet*, 5. 
\textsuperscript{502} Take note the piece was written in 1993 and there has been some change since then, including the population size of the region, which has gone over twenty million.
poverty and backwardness.” The manifesto calls on the Amhara to accept the humbling truth of their poverty and degradation and concludes: “but our humiliation will not induce us to put our tail between our legs and grovel like a dog. Rather, ours is like the lion, which has to kneel before it sprints.”

*The Amhara People: From Where to Where* does not claim to serve as a programme for or announce the establishment of any organization. It hoped to initiate the establishment of a united Amhara People’s Organization. While implicitly critical of both the AAPO and ANDM, the manifesto tried to be unifying by acknowledging their claims to represent sections of the Amhara people. It also invited both organizations to join in the establishment of a common front. Further, Andargachew’s manifesto completely avoided the framing of Amhara nationalism in relation to TPLF’s domination as was the case with almost all opposition movements. In fact, it constantly warns against narrow nationalism and emphasises the need for the Amhara to forge solidarity with all other nationalities. Betraying the Marxist-Leninist ideological background of its author, who was a former member of the EPRP, the manifesto emphasised that the interest of the peasantry should be at the centre of any Amhara national organization worth its name.

As we have seen, Amhara ethnicity and nationalism found three forms of political expressions through the AAPO, ANDM and Andargachew’s manifesto. And of these, the

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504 Ibid., 62.
505 This would change though when Andargachew wrote a few years later a scathing criticism against the TPLF which he characterized as the “un-liberated liberator.”
AAPO proved to be the most influential among the urbanites.\footnote{506} This was the result of AAPO’s combative politics -- which appealed to the Amhara that felt marginalized -- and the EPRDF’s harsh response to it. AAPO’s popularity soared when it began to strongly criticise the EPRDF’s role in facilitating Eritrean independence, to which the AAPO was opposed. Expressing similar sentiments, university students took to the streets in January 1993 and the government used force to disperse the students, killing some in the process.\footnote{507}

The EPRDF used this incident as a pretext to dismiss in March 1993 forty-one Addis Ababa University professors -- among them AAPO leader Asrat Woldeyes -- whom it said were inciting violence.\footnote{508} The fact that most of the dismissed professors were Amharas seemed to lend credence to AAPO’s claim that the Amhara were targeted by the EPRDF for repression.\footnote{509} AAPO supporters became more vocal and at times militant following the imprisonment of Asrat and EPRDF’s harsh stance towards the AAPO. It was under such charged political atmosphere that the 1994 Ethiopian constitution was ratified. It institutionalized a federal system based on self-administrating ethno-linguistic units. Several of the twelve Kilils in the south had opted to merge and

\footnote{506} The overwhelmingly illiterate peasant with little access to the radio (forget TV) remained oblivious to opposition politics and only the EPDM’s official Amhara nationalism could claim the support of the peasantry. 
\footnote{507} According to Marcus, “the police suppressed student demonstrations against Eritrean independence by indiscriminately charging, and firing into, the crowd, killing a still-disputed number of protestors,” \textit{A History of Ethiopia}, 240.
\footnote{508} Losing forty-one professors, the majority of them being the most experienced, at a stroke would be a blow to any higher institution. This is even truer when the institution in question was the only university in the country. The AA University was never able to recover from that blow. 
\footnote{509} That the majority of the purged professors are Amharas may be a coincidence or simply a reflection of the superior number of Amharas in the professorate. But in politics, especially ethnic-based politics, perceptions of a political act are as important as the real motive.
form the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) State, and adopt Amharic as their working language, reducing the number of ethnic regions to nine.

These were elevated to the status of regional states to constitute the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). And one of the nine states was the Amhara National State, which, like the rest, has its own flag, capital city, parliament and president, among others. Elections were held the following year and as expected the EPRDF won a landslide victory to control both the national parliament and regional assemblies. This meant that the EPRDF legitimized its de facto rule over Ethiopia and the TPLF, OPDO and ANDM became the hegemonic political powers in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara States respectively. The EPRDF also controlled the other States through the various PDOs and PDMs it had initiated.

ANDM’s official nationalism would play a very important role in the making of Amhara national identity. It had the full resource of the Amhara National State, including the media, the bureaucracy, and the structures of the urban dwellers’ and peasants’ associations to propagate Whig historiography about a primordial Amhara ethnic and national identity. It would help create the Amhara flag and issue the Amhara national ID card. It would organize the Amhara football, volleyball, basketball teams and finance other Amhara sporting events. In short, ANDM would preside over numerous official and symbolic functions which help to perform and reproduce Amhara national identity.

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510 The others are Tigray, Afar, Oromia, Somali, Beni Shangul-Gumuz, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), Gambella and Harrar. Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa are to be administered by city councils. See Figure 5.
As Michael Billig observes, national identity is maintained and reproduced through cultural practices grounded in the popular and the everyday, in short through banal nationalism.\textsuperscript{511} People are constantly reminded of their national identity through unobtrusive routine symbols (the flag which hangs unnoticed outside a public building) and habits of language in the media (journalists and politicians using “we” unreflexively to signify “us” as nationals). Similarly, Tim Edensor maintains that national identity is performed on symbolic stages or spaces like monuments or historic centres and generally on the common landscapes of domestic and everyday life.\textsuperscript{512}

It was ANDM’s official nationalism which helped the masses to perform and reproduce, in short, to actively imagine the Amhara nation. The Amhara nation may have been imagined in Andargachew’s manifesto and Amhara ethnicity might have found political expression in AAPO’s activities, but it was ANDM’s ethno-politics which helped spread Amhara nationalism beyond the narrow circle of the elite and urbanite. As Seton-Watson observes, “a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one.”\textsuperscript{513}

This is not to say combative or resistive Amhara nationalism did not have a significant role to play. It did and does. But its influence was mostly confined to the elite, including

\textsuperscript{511} Michael Billig, Banal Nationalism, (London: Sage, 1995).
\textsuperscript{512} Tim Edensor, National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life, (Oxford: Berg, 2002).
\textsuperscript{513} Seton-Watson, Nations and States, 5. He adds: “It is not necessary that the whole of the population should so feel, or so behave, and it is not possible to lay down dogmatically a minimum percentage of a population which must be so affected. When a significant group holds this belief, it possesses ‘national consciousness.’"
those in diaspora, and generally the urbanite while ANDM’s official nationalism and state practice provided forums for a wider collective discourse and mass mobilization.\textsuperscript{514}

Most Ethio-nationalists consider ANDM as the Amharic version of the TPLF just as the OLF sees the OPDO as the Oromo rendition of the TPLF. Unlike Andargachew’s manifesto, the AAPO is harsh on ANDM and generally all Amharas who work in partnership with the EPRDF.\textsuperscript{515} It may be true that EPDM/ANDM was closely aligned with its mentor and has shown little political independence. But it cannot simply be denied agency and treated as mere surrogate of the TPLF with no political will of its own.\textsuperscript{516} ANDM must have been trying to find some political leverage in its own ways to promote, at least, the interest of the Amhara peasantry. And as we have already seen, it has played a very important role in Amhara ethnic and national imagining.

Ethio-nationalists also maintain that Amhara nationalism and the Amhara nation are the results of outside imposition, the realization of EPRDF’s ethno-nationalistic design for Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{517} This is only half true. Amharaness is not just the effect of imposition from above nor is it simply the result of an elite-driven mass movement from below. It is a little bit of both. Amharaness is a negotiated process between the different actors who had a stake in the making, or not, of Amhara nationalism. If the Amhara ethnic/national category was imposed from the outside, it was also contested from the

\textsuperscript{514} To put it in another way, resistive Amhara nationalism had more influence on around one-third of the Amharic-speakers who live outside the Amhara State, spread all over the country and outside it, than those who reside in their “homeland.”

\textsuperscript{515} Asrat labelled them as \textit{hodam} (avaricious) Amhara who sold their ethnicity for material gain.

\textsuperscript{516} My focus is on ANDM and its role in emergent Amhara nationalism, otherwise, the same argument can be made about the OPDO.

\textsuperscript{517} See for instance, Getachew, “Amharic Speakers and the Question of Nationalities”; Takkele “Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?”; and Mesfin \textit{Yekehedet Kulkulet}.
inside. The establishment of the Amhara State may have been an imposition from the outside. After all, nobody asked the millions of Amharic-speaking peoples who had not identified themselves as Amhara if they wanted their own ethnic niche. But the founding of the Amhara State has only facilitated, not created, the Amhara nation.

Nations are not made by fiat and the establishment of the Amhara State, which has a specific date, should not be confused with the emergence of the Amhara nation, which is a historical process. The Amhara National State got its meaningful validation, as opposed to its juridical status, when nationals in the region began to think and live Amhara: carry an Amhara ID card and driver’s licence, pay Amhara tax, listen to Amhara radio, watch Amhara TV, support Amhara teams in sports competitions against Tigray or Oromia, identify with the Amhara flag -- golden with a red diagonal across the centre --, become conscious of getting to bed at night and waking up in the morning in a nation called Amhara that one shares with millions others.

It is in these domains of performing Amhara national identity that Amhara nationness is affirmed. The majority of the Amhara people may not have a say in the legal creation of the Amhara State. But they do have choices -- choices as always being constrained by one’s life history -- in affirming or contesting Amhara nationness. However, the emergence of Amhara nationalism and ethnicity is argued, the following observations appear to hold true. First, the Amhara were not bystanders to their fate; some resisted the ethnicization process and disavowed Amhara nationalism while others did not. And second, the construction of Amhara ethnicity and nationalism is still an ongoing process to warrant any generalization about imposition and resistance except to
say these two have been negotiated. Sixteen years after the foundation of the Amhara State, Amhara nationalism and indeed the very term “Amhara” are still highly politicized, contested and mean different things to different groups and people.

The novelty of Amhara nationalism is not that it was imposed from above, which I said was only partially true. Amhara nationalism and the Amhara nation are not unique either for being recent inventions. All nations and nationalism are recent inventions. Given the role of official nationalism which accelerated the pace of the making of Amhara nationalism and the Amhara Nation, the Amhara experience in some sense could be said to be unique. However, in the final analysis, the novelty of Amhara nationalism is not that it was invented in a relatively short span of time but rather it was reactive and not imaginative as most nationalist movements are.

Historically, nationalist sentiments emerge when elites identify and mobilize a group of people under a designated national ideology which imagines the nation. In the case of the Amhara, nationalism primarily emerged as a reaction to ethnic Othering and the reality of politics based on ethnicity. The nation was constructed juridically before it was imagined popularly. In most nationalist movements, the national state is fought for; in the case of the Amhara it was thrust upon them. True, confirming to the historical experience of nation-making, it was Amhara nationalism which made the Amhara nation. But unlike most nationalist experiences, it was official, not resistive, nationalism which played the dominant role in the construction of Amhara national identity.

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518 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Traditions*. 226
Over the years, resistive Amhara nationalism would get stronger. Just like the TPLF and other ethno-nationalists had drawn their strength by mobilizing their peoples against an imagined Amhara ethnic/national group, now the Amhara and other oppositions try to muster support against a perceived Tigre domination. It is fascinating to watch the opposition refuse to recognize the ruling party and the FDRE as anything but a dictatorship by Tigre elites, reminiscent of TPLF’s own framing of national oppression in pre-1991 Ethiopia as domination by an Amhara ruling class.\textsuperscript{519} It is even more interesting to hear the victorious TPLF insist that what matters most is not the ethnic composition of the EPRDF but the principle of revolutionary democracy it stands for.\textsuperscript{520}

Nevertheless, it has now become the Amharas’ turn to filter politics through an ethnic lens. Tigray is said to rip the benefits of ethnic federalism at the expense of the Amhara and other peoples of Ethiopia. Being a Tigre in present-day Ethiopia is seen as having political capital which can translate into economic benefits while being Amhara, unless one is a member of ANDM, is said to be a political liability. Even the dismissal of ANDM’s chairman and Deputy-Prime Minister Tamarat for corruption in October 1996 was interpreted by some as a Tigre conspiracy to deny the Amhara whatever little power

\textsuperscript{519} It would be futile to cite examples as virtually all the opposition (except the few loyal ones in the Ethiopian parliament) frame the issue as such. For an elaborate articulation of what is seen as domination by a Tigre elite see Mesfin’s \textit{Yekehedet Kulkulet}.

\textsuperscript{520} In his first televised interview as president of the interim government, Meles was asked why the EPRDF fighting force is largely composed of Tigres. He replied that although that might appear to be the case because of the long experience of the TPLF in the armed struggle against the \textit{Derg}, what one must focus on was the cause that the organization stood for and not the ethnic composition of its forces. What Meles said was right in principle though not in practice. In a political arrangement where power sharing is based on ethnicity, the group that controls the army will have the final say on virtually all important decisions. And as it happens, it is the TPLF which has that privilege.
they had. This is remarkable because until his ousting Tamarat was perhaps the most unpopular Amhara politician, and there was no question about his corruption to which he publicly admitted at a televised extraordinary parliamentary session.

The Amhara counter gaze, which has emerged in reaction to years of ethno-nationalist *Othering*, now threatens to become a powerful force to reckon with. The important point here is not whether the claim about Tigre domination has any real basis, but rather that the Amhara feel alienated and are marginalized for various reasons. And it is this marginalization that lends the material basis to the rise of resistive Amhara nationalism. The marginalization of the Amhara can be said to be partly self-inflicted, partly the weakness of ANDM and partly TPLF’s domination.

The Amhara who constitute a large block in the pan-Ethiopian movement scorned several opportunities to take part in the country’s political process. In a sense, they were displaying the same impatience to seize state power that marked EPRP’s politics, which had contributed to its demise. For instance, members of the coalition of opposition parties -- in which the Amhara elite, including Andargachew, played an important role -- refused to take some of the 173 seats they had won in the 547-seat Ethiopian parliament during the 2005 general elections. This was remarkable given that the opposition held only

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521 For analysis of Tamarat’s fall from grace, see “What Tamirat’s disgrace means” and “Axing a fallen tree” in the October 30 and November 20, 1996 issues of *The Reporter*, respectively.

522 He was later tried and sentenced for abuse of power and corruption and served twelve years in prison.
twelve seats before 2005. The opposition had also won, but did not (or as some see it was not allowed to) take, every seat in the powerful Addis Ababa City Council.  

The Amhara National Democratic Movement, which found itself representing the Amhara more by default than by design, never appealed to the Amhara elite because it overplayed one of its implied obligations as the Amhara representative in the EPRDF coalition while the TPLF underplayed its share of responsibility. The ANDM was supposed to show its solidarity with dominated nationalities by standing firm against “Amhara chauvinism,” while the TPLF was to guard against the trend of “Tigre narrow nationalism.” ANDM was overzealous in performing its duties, while the TPLF did not bother about its obligation for fear of marginalising some Tigres and narrowing its already thin ethnic base.  

As a result, while Tigres generally remained extremely proud of the TPLF, the Amhara elite have become antagonistic to the organization that bears their name but appear to care little about the Amhara. Moreover, the Amhara generally felt a sense of alienation when they found themselves “no more than a constituent identity within a

523 For details on the election and its aftermath, see Lahra Smith, “Political Violence and Democratic Uncertainty in Ethiopia,” United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, August, 2007. The opposition claimed it was defrauded of the majority seas it had won. That may be so though there was no way of substantiating that claim given the control the government had over the election board which ruled otherwise. The opposition had its share of blame to take for the tense political atmosphere that ensued, though not for the brutal reaction of the regime, when its supporters held massive public protests. EPRDF’s reaction was swift. According to Smith, security forces killed at least 193 people and hundred others were injured. Further, some 30,000 people were estimated to have been arrested. Opposition leaders, including Andargachew, were tried and sentenced to life in prison even though the prosecution had sought the death penalty. These were later pardoned, but the whole experience convinced some that peaceful forms of political resistance were not possible. They went on exile to try and organize armed insurrections against the EPRDF. Thus, the Amhara became more marginalized from the country’s political process.

524 Recall for example, the public apology by former ANDM leader Tamarat to Eritreans on behalf of the Amhara people giving the impression that the Amhara were the only ones who stood between Eritreans and their independence. This has enraged the Amhara particularly since no other EPRDF-affiliated group offered similar apologies.
larger state” inhabiting “one of the poorest, least developed and most environmentally degraded parts of the national territory.”

As often is the case with nationalism, the political and economic disadvantages of a group attain greater significance in comparison to the perceived advantages of the dominant group. Thus, the post-1991 visibility of Tigres in Ethiopian political and economic life and the unavoidable Tigre ethnic nepotism which emanates from TPLF’s privileged position as the senior partner in the EPRDF coalition appear to further fuel both Amhara and Oromo nationalism. The Amhara and Oromo find it unacceptable that Tigres who represent six percent of the population should dominate the Oromo and Amhara who represent thirty-two and thirty percent of the population, respectively. They demand political power commensurate with their human and natural resource potentials.

It is not necessary to go into further detail about how ethnicity correlates with political and economic empowerment in Ethiopia. My aim was to show how the marginalization of the Amhara elite, which affects their quality of life, has given resistive Amhara nationalism its material basis. I have also tried to show how Amhara nationalism reversed the Tigre gaze that had historically been directed at the Amhara to claim a place for the Amhara as the new victimized ethnic group. What is left now is to show how the newly-emerged Amhara and other ethnic and national identities articulate with Ethiopian national identity, which I will do in the following section.

526 See Christopher Clapham, “Comments on the Ethiopian Crisis,” (Center for African Studies: University of Cambridge, 2005). He says the “EPRDF has never been able to rid itself of the sense that this is essentially a Tigray government. Though it has selected ministers from a wide range of nationalities, the core of the regime has always lain in the TPLF that created it.”
5.2. Ethnic-Federalism and Hyphenated Identities

The EPRDF radicalized the institutional structures of the Ethiopian state by introducing a federal system based on ethno-linguistic identities. In sharp contrast to the monarchical state that stressed Ethiopian historic and Judo-Christian cultural roots, and the military dictatorship, which fed on patriotic fervour, the federal form of statehood introduced by the EPRDF adopted an ethnic-based conceptualization of the nation. Accordingly, the EPRDF understands Ethiopian national identity as the articulation of the various ethnic identities in the country sharing Ethiopia as a common factor. Therefore, one becomes an Ethiopian by first becoming an Afar, Somali, Tigre or Oromo. In other words, this view advocates a hyphenated form of national identity like Tigre-Ethiopians, Oromo-Ethiopians or Amhara-Ethiopians.527

For ethno-nationalists, who perceive ethnicity as the basis for national identity, Ethiopian state nationalism doesn’t make much sense because it is not inclusive and at best applies to the sentiment of only the Amhara-Tigre collation of the Ethiopian highlands. For Ethno-nationalists, modern-day Ethiopia is the creation of Menelik’s “colonial” expansion. They maintain that most of the populations south of Shoa have been treated as subjects of an empire and not as citizens of a country and as such do not identify with the Ethiopian state much less feel patriotic about it.

527 See “Revolutionary Democracy on the Question of Eritrea and Unity.” Meles likes to reiterate this view beginning from his first televised interview in 1991. He recently articulated similar point of view in an interview with Ethiopiafirst, November 29, 2009.
This view militates against the view of a monolithic national identity which is popular in Ethiopia as everywhere else. EPRDF’s view on Ethiopian national identity brought it into sharp clash with Ethio-nationalists who believe in an idealized form of Ethiopianness in which every citizen participates equally by transcending group identity. For Ethio-nationalists, ethnicity is secondary to national identity, which symbolizes commonly-shared values irrespective of one’s ethnic background. A hyphenated form of national identity proved particularly unpopular Among the Amhara, who have been used to identifying themselves as Ethiopian and have shown reservations about asserting their ethnicity even when they were advancing Amhara nationalism.

If the Ethio-nationalists emphasize national identity through common history and cultural assimilation, ethno-nationalists envision ethnic ownership as a way of forging national unity based on cultural or ethnic diversity. In its opponents’ view, ethno-nationalism will lead to the fragmentation and eventual dissolution of the Ethiopian state. Conversely, Ethio-nationalism is seen as privileging the ethnic identity of the dominant group through whose language and culture the national symbolic markers are constructed, as was the case with the supposed Amhara rule since the time of Yekunno-Amlak or Menelik. A lot has already been said about Ethio-nationalists’ view of national identity which makes further discussion repetitive. I will thus focus on ethno-nationalists’ understanding of what it means to be Ethiopian under an ethnic-federal system.

The idea of plurality in expressing Ethiopian national identity is embedded in the FDRE Constitution whose preamble begins not with the customary “we the people of so and so” but with “We the Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples of Ethiopia.” And article
eight of the constitution states that “All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia” adding that “This Constitution is an expression of their sovereignty.” Article thirty-nine further strengthens the idea of plurality in the national imagining: “Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.”

The introduction of the ethnic-based federal system was intended to decentralize power and resolve the hitherto unaddressed “national question” by accommodating Ethiopia’s various ethno-linguistic groups. The EPRDF was basically applying the Leninist-Stalinist principle of self-determination as implemented in the USSR both in its understanding of nations and nationalities as well as their rights that need to be recognized. Even Stalin’s dubious term “psychological make-up” found itself in the supreme law of the land: “A ‘Nation, Nationality or People’ for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.”

There is a fundamental contradiction with EPRDF’s stated vision of a democratic and united Ethiopia through the application of a federal system based on the Soviet model. This contradiction also informs EPRDF’s understanding of ethnicity and national identity and how the two are articulated in Ethiopia. In the USSR a federal system which

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528 Chapter Two, Article 8, Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), 1995.
529 Ibid., Article 39: “Rights of Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples.”
upholds the principle of self-determination was implemented within the framework of socialism. This means the different nationalities participate in the larger political unit or relate to the Soviet State by identifying with socialist ideals. How enduring that kind of (socialist) national identity has been partly answered by history. But there is no denying that socialist states can be as nationalist as any, and serve as a source of participatory national identification.

The EPRDF, on the other hand, wants to implement a socialist principle of self-determination in the absence of socialism. It reconceptualises Ethiopian national identity as participatory when it is not clear what the various nationalities are participating in. It cannot be a common history because for ethno-nationalists only the Amhara and Tigre have a common history that they proudly identify with while the rest had in the past considered themselves subjects of an empire state. For ethno-nationalists, neither Amharic, though widely-spoken and serving for long as the national/official language, can serve as a source of national identification because of its past “colonial” role.

Ultimately, ethno-nationalist understanding of national identity becomes a mere juridical concept, that Amharas, Tigres or Oromos are Ethiopians simply because they are citizens of Ethiopia. Without the legal framework of citizenship, EPRDF’s formula of ethnic participation, as problematic as it is, would not make much sense. For example,

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530 But history’s verdict drawn from the experience of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia is not unambiguous as to whether it was the tyranny of the Communist Party or inherent problems with socialist principles that led to the disintegration of the socialist republics.
531 See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, particularly the preface and the introduction.
532 The fact that national identification on the basis of a socialist principle took the form of a highly centralized state controlled by a Communist Party does not alter the fact that socialist states were capable of holding different nationalities together which, in the case of the USSR, lasted for more than seventy years.
why would one first become an Oromo to become Ethiopian when the same logic equally leads one to become Kenyan because there are Oromos in Kenya? The same holds true for Afars and Tigres, who are also found in Eritrea, and Somalis, who are largely present in both Djibouti and Somalia.

Ethno-participatory conception of national identity would be particularly problematic in Africa where states overlapping different language groups were randomly carved out by European colonizers. Ethiopia may not have been colonized but it participated in the 19th century scramble for land incorporating, in the process, diverse language groups into the empire. There is a big irony in EPRDF’s understanding of national identity as the product of ethnic participation, according to which the Amhara will be more Ethiopian than most other groups: only the Amhara, among the major linguistic groups in the country, can unequivocally claim to be Ethiopian because only they are exclusive to Ethiopia. This also holds true, I might add, to the Amharic language.

In EPRDF’s understanding of Ethiopian national identity, the relationship between the state and its peoples becomes like that of the sack and the potatoes it holds. Indeed, in the absence of state nationalism, such relationship would characterize any multi-ethnic statehood. Without the discourse of state nationalism, which helps select histories, memories, and symbols of particular groups and reinvent them as shared traditions, national identity remains little more than the self-awareness of the citizen as a territorialized subject. It was understandable for the EPRDF, like all other ethno-nationalists, to reject the controlling and homogenising effect of state nationalism.
However, once the EPRDF seized state power, it had to justify to other ethno-nationalists why the various nations and nationalities in Ethiopia should remain unified. The EPRDF had renounced Marxism-Leninism and therefore cannot use the cult of the proletariat, peasantry and working people of Ethiopia as a unifying source of socialist national identity. Nor could it present the federal system as economically convenient for every National State in the federation because most non-Tigre nationalists, particularly the OLF, do not see it that way.\textsuperscript{533} EPRDF’s solution was to advocate Ethiopian national identity based on ethnic participation though, in practice, invoking Ethio-nationalist symbols and rhetoric whenever it found it necessary.

Compare, for example, the two interviews given by Meles to \textit{Time Magazine} in 1991 and 2007. In the former, the young Meles, who was advocating ethno-nationalist historiography that perceives Ethiopian history a little over-hundred years, appeared not to be very much worried about Ethiopia’s fate if ethnic-based politics did not work. He says “A feudal monarchy and a repressive dictator couldn’t hold Ethiopia together. Now we are trying another way. If Ethiopia breaks apart, then it wasn’t meant to be.”\textsuperscript{534} Sixteen years later, the experienced statesman describes Ethiopia as “the only African country that has never been colonized,” adding that “this is perhaps the last surviving African civilization. We have our own script. We have our own calendar. We represent the greatness of Africa's past.” And when asked “What keeps you awake at night?” he

\textsuperscript{533} If the TPLF, as mentioned earlier, changed its mind about forming an independent Tigray because it saw “nothing “ in the region, the OLF wants an independent Oromia for the opposite reason, it sees a lot. The Oromo National State is the largest, most populous and has the most fertile land and areas that get almost year-round rains.

\textsuperscript{534} \textit{Time Magazine}, November 4, 1991.
replied “It has always been fear -- fear that this great nation, which was great 1,000 years ago ... may be on the verge of total collapse.”

During the war with Eritrea between 1998 and 2000, the state-controlled media began churning out Ethio-nationalist rhetoric that insisted on the long and proud history of Ethiopia, the courage of its peoples who had always stood together to defend their proud nation. Furthermore, displaying at every public function the once-maligned Ethiopian flag became a common practice. And at the celebrations of the Ethiopian millennium, Meles appeared publicly in the traditional *Habasha* (Abyssinian) white garb to make a reconciliatory speech that emphasised Ethiopian unity and patriotism.

To sum up, EPRDF’s understanding of national identification is flawed because it presumes a transcendent Ethiopian national identity that overreaches but coexists with ethnic identities while at the same time denying a common history with which the various nationalities can identify. Ethno-participatory conception of national identity, and indeed the very idea of ethnic-federalism, is also problematic because it privileges ethnicity over other forms of identities. Why, for instance, does one become an Ethiopian only by first being an Oromo or a Tigre? Why cannot one be first a Muslim or a Christian? Or generally, why is the hyphen that connects particular groups to Ethiopianness the prerogative of only ethnicity and not other categories like gender, family, profession, religion, and region?

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536 Ethiopian calendar is seven or eight years behind the Gregorian calendar.
Even the privileged category of ethnicity is not, in fact cannot be, institutionalised into the political process to equally benefit all groups. This is the result of Ethno-nationalists’ primordial understanding of history and social identities which imagines Ethiopia as an assemblage of ready-made distinct ethnicities. A federal arrangement based on such flawed perception of ethnicity was bound to privilege regions like Tigray which, for historical reasons are socially more homogenous than others and have also developed a strong ethnic/national identity due to a protracted nationalist movement. Under ethno-federalism, groups that have developed a strong ethnic awareness are motivated to take part in socio-economic activities of their respective regions while others still have to forge the ethnic bondage that can lead to strong identification with their National States.

Furthermore, the ethnic-federal system is fundamentally concerned with creating political units congruent with ethnic boundaries and not forming economically viable administrative units. As a result, those regions rich in natural and human resources tend to benefit more from the ethnic-federal arrangement. Some nationalities in the south had merged in an attempt to form a viable State, the SNNP, but ended up adopting Amharic, the “colonial language,” as a neutral medium of instruction and administration, rendering the very main objective of ethnic-federalism irrelevant: the right to use and develop one’s

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537 Others regions marked by a higher degree of culturally homogeneity include the Afar and Somali regions, both of which are exclusively Muslim. Though I have not heard of any, there may be Christian Afar or Somali but they do not exist as a community as, for instance, Christians Arabs do.
own language.\textsuperscript{538} Constitutional rights become meaningless in the absence of the material conditions which make it possible to implement them.\textsuperscript{539}

The inherent contradiction embedded in trying to implement a Marxist-Leninist principle of self-determination outside the framework of a unifying socialist state appears to threaten both Ethiopian unity and EPRDF’s rule. As it stands, ethnic-federalism provides ethno-nationalists an “institutional base” to engage in separatist nationalist politics.\textsuperscript{540} But bereft of a socialist form of government, a federal system that upholds the Marxist-Leninist ideals of self-determination up to and including secession at best can prove precarious. The only way the EPRDF can guarantee the unity of the country under such condition is to control the political process of every National State in the federation, which it largely does.

Despite Ethio-nationalist claims, the EPRDF could not possibly have any interest in the fragmentation of Ethiopia and, in fact, it is to prevent this scenario that it tries to control all the regional National States directly or by proxy. And its brand of democracy, known as “revolutionary,” can only be as charitable as the unity of the country, which the EPRDF has linked to its stay in power. The EPRDF may flatter itself, at least publicly,

\begin{itemize}
\item Article 39 of the Constitution states that, “Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.”
\item In addition, the inability to use one’s language meaningfully makes the implementation of other provisions in the Constitution, like promoting one’s culture and history difficult.
\item Mark Beissinger writes, “Ethnofederalism is a good example of an institutional practice established by states in order to co-opt challenging groups, usually as a last resort against widespread claims to secession, but a practice which, contrary to the intentions of its creators, tends to consolidate cultural groups and to provide them with an institutional base for conducting a ‘quiet’ politics of nationalism. But in essence challengers seek to use whatever institutional forms with which they are presented to achieve these same ends.” See “Nationalisms that bark and nationalisms that bite: Ernest Gellner and the substantiation of nations,” in \textit{The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism}, ed. John Hall (Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 1998), 182.
\end{itemize}

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that it was Article thirty-nine of the Constitution, which grants the States the right to secede if they chose to, and not its hegemonic power that held the country together. But it would be hard to imagine at least a couple of the States not flirting with the idea of secession if their assemblies were not controlled by the EPRDF.

Simply put, the EPRDF is in a political quagmire. It cannot allow “untrammelled” western-styled democracy, which might topple it from power. Aside from the fact that no political organization wants to lose power if it can help it, the EPRDF fully realizes that without its might and with the current constitutional provision of State’s rights still in place, the country may fragment further. On the other hand, it cannot have Article thirty-nine repealed without enraging ethno-nationalists and opening a door for a fresh spate of insurgencies. From its perspective, EPRDF’s best option is, of course, to keep the status quo, which it has chosen to do. But this path can only lead to repression, and if Ethiopian history is any guide, repression is invariably resolved through insurrection.

Finally, it is interesting to note that among those who are opposed to the EPRDF, some have begun to see it as the best available hope to maintain Ethiopia’s unity, a sentiment reminiscent of the ambivalent support the Derg had enjoyed from a section of the population. If it were the EPLF and TPLF that had induced some Ethio-nationalists into supporting the Derg, it is the secessionist agenda of the OLF and other nationalist movements in the Ogaden which has now convinced others to reservedly extend their
support to the EPRDF. And the EPRDF is learning to play its cards right, especially its leader Meles, who must have come to realize that one may seize state power as an ethno-nationalist but can rule long only as an Ethio-nationalist, or at least with a good dose of it.

The Amhara, who generally are proponents of Ethio-nationalism, once again find themselves in a political dilemma: should they support a regime which they think is repressive but which seems to be holding the country together? Placed in a similar situation in the past, some Amharas had given their reserved support to the brutal military regime, believing the Derg would save the country from fragmentation. The choice that the Amhara have to make in the present situation is slightly different from the past. Now there is an Amhara nationalism which is trying to gain momentum by defining itself against a perceived Tigre domination. Consequently, the Amhara may have to choose to support a government that they consider not only repressive but also particularly antagonistic towards them. In choosing to support a government that they think will keep the country together, the Amhara will be going against the interest of Amhara nationalism.

These conflicting sentiments among the Amhara -- pan-Ethiopianism versus emerging Amhara ethnic/national consciousness -- threaten to weaken Amhara

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541 It is remarkable how successive regimes in Ethiopia have the penchant to present themselves as indispensible for the unity of the country. Haile-Sellassie believed Ethiopia’s fate was intertwined with him, Mengistu created the impression that if he were gone Ethiopia would be dismembered, and now there is a growing sentiment that only the EPRDF held Ethiopia together. Maybe there is some truth in that if one believes in reverse historical linearity. In the history of modern Ethiopia, the size of the country increased from under Emperor Tewodros to Yohannes, Menelik, and Haile-Sellassie. That trend changed course with Mengistu -- and yes, much as many would contest that claim it was Mengistu, not the EPRDF, that lost Eritrea. And who is to say the Ethiopian state would not continue to shrink should the EPRDF lose power?
nationalism. The brilliance of ethno-nationalism, which Amhara nationalism has not yet attained, is to convince members of an ethnic group of differing and often opposing interests that their imagined cultural and symbolic unity is more important than the collective interest of the larger political unit, the state. To find such a strong nationalist expression, reactive Amhara nationalism must first prevail over Amhara pan-Ethiopianist sentiment to become imaginative, a transformation which could ultimately find expression in the imagining of an independent Amhara nation. However, given their strong attachment to Ethiopia and recent trends in Amhara nationalism, it is difficult to imagine the Amhara imagining an independent state of their own.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation, which perceives national and ethnic identities as the product of social and historical dynamics, has shown that Amhara nationalism was contingent upon the course that recent Ethiopian history had taken. If history had been different, Amharaness might have remained a status indicator and not become an ethnic and national marker. Looking ahead, one cannot but adhere to the same principle of historical contingency. Amhara national identity will be reproduced officially, symbolically, and in everyday life. It will also be contested from within the Amhara National State and from without. While the interplay between reproduction and resistance is affected by the politics of the different actors, it is also largely determined by the country’s power structure, which presently privileges ethnic-centred politics. If or when the political and power structure of the state changes, so does the dynamics of Amhara nationalism.

Amhara nationalism remains as conflicted and Amharic speakers as divided as ever. There is now a generation of adolescents born and raised as Amhara nationals, participating in the symbolic space and unreflexive patterns of Amhara social life. Amhara nationalism leaves its imprints on a range of cultural practices and day to day activities which serve much as sites of resistance as sources of reproduction for national identities. A large section of the Amhara elite and Amharic-speaking urbanites, in
general, have remained ambivalent about, when not outright opposed to, Amhara nationalism. Moreover, in 2002 the AAPO transformed itself into All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), citing the negative effects of ethnic-based politics. And Andargachew, the author of the Amhara manifesto, has become more active in the politics of another multinational party, GENBOT 7, than in the mobilization of the Amhara along ethnic lines.

There is another group which has a big influence on Ethiopian politics primarily due to its financial leverage, the Ethiopian diaspora. A large section of the diaspora is Amharic-speaking and active in pan-Ethiopianist politics. Research on this group is important to get a complete picture of what is meant by Ethiopian national identity, which is not only articulated with ethnicity but is also disrupted by the diasporic. In its uprootedness, the Ethiopian diaspora has undergone hybridization through interaction with various groups in Europe and the US, among others. There is tension between the cultural purists at home, whose source of authority is grounded in their position as territorialized subjects, and the diasporic capitalists, the distant patrons of homeland politics.

It will be worthwhile to explore how the Ethiopian diaspora imagines a national space within a transnational terrain by engaging in homeland politics marked by ethnic sensibilities to compete for influence and recognition. The future research should do well to juxtapose territorialized identities with the diasporic to map out the interplay between the national and the transnational, the local and the global in negotiating multiple hyphenated Ethiopian diasporic identities shaped and reshaped by symbolic ties to, and
politics of, the homeland. And it would be interesting to see how this interaction affects the dynamics of Amhara nationalism.
APPENDIX I

Figure 1: Ancient Ethiopia (Credit: Henze)
Figure 2: Medieval Ethiopia (Credit: Henze)
Figure 3: “Italian East Africa” 1936-1941 (Credit: Bahru)
Figure 4: Provinces 1946-1980 (Credit: Henze)
Figure 5: Ethnic Federalism (Credit: Vestal)
GLOSSARY

*Afan Oromo*: Oromo language

*Balabhat*: local gentry

*Banda*: collaborator during Italian occupation of Ethiopia

*Beta Israel*: the house of Israel, a name for Ethiopian Jews

*Bitwaded*: literally, “most favoured,” imperial counsellor

*Blatta*: minor official at court

*Dejazmach*: commander of the king’s gate, below Ras

*Derg*: the junta that ruled after Haile-Selassie until 1991

*Enjera*: a pancake-like, but much larger, staple food of the Amhara and Tigre. It has now become common in almost all parts of the country to be considered a “national food.”

*Eskesta*: breaking the shoulder in traditional “Amhara” dance.

*Felasha*: literally “immigrant,” a name Ethiopian Jews are widely known by

*Fetha Negast*: the traditional law of the kings

*Fitawrari*: commander of the vanguard, below Dejazmach

*Gabbar*: tribute-paying peasant

*Gada*: Oromo age-grade socio-political system

*Grazmach*: commander of the left column, below Kegnazmach

*Gult*: non-hereditary right to collect tribute, granted by the Emperor to the nobility

*Hodam*: avaricious

*Kebrə Negest*: the Glory of Kings, the national epic during monarchical rule

*Kegnazmach*: commander of the right column, below Fitawrari

*Kilils*: ethnic-based regions

*Lij*: literally, “child,” honorific title reserved for sons of high-ranking nobility
Negus: king

Neftegna: settler, literally, “rifleman”

Ras: literally, “head,” the highest traditional title below the king; commander of the army

Rist: a lineage system of land-ownership, which gives usufruct rights to the claimant

Seded: flame

Tatek: literally “gird yourself,” name of ESUE’s publication

Tikdem: first, forward

Weyzero: Mrs

Zamana Masafent: the Age of the Princes

Zemecha: campaign

Waz: sweat
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*Adulis*, EPLF organ

*Challenge*, ESUNA publication

*Democracia*, EPLO/EPRP organ

*Negarit Gazetta*, the official gazette where all legislation is published

*Oromia Speaks*, OLF publication

*People’s Voice*, TPLF publication

*Struggle*, USUAA publication

*Tatek*, ESUE publication

*The Ethiopian Herald*, English Daily

*The Reporter*, English weekly

*Time*, English Weekly

*Voice of the Masses*, MEISON organ

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