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Continuity and Rupture in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

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Introduction. Continuity and Rupture in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

This issue of *afriche e orienti* reflects on the challenges of state- and nation-building in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). It collects articles from different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities that rely on empirical research conducted during the EPRDF period (1991-2019) and during the most recent political transition since 2018. Articles unpack trajectories of state- and nation-building from the vantage point of social and political change: they engage with the question of how to read Ethiopia's recent history through the analytical lens of continuity and rupture at a time of heightened social and political transformation.

In recent years Ethiopia has been in the spotlight of African politics and international relations. After a wave of anti-government protests that swept the country since the mid-2010s, Abiy Ahmed's surge to power in April 2018 marked the end of the control of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) over the EPRDF and, one year later, the disbandment of the EPRDF itself. While initially the transition was marked by a liberalisation of the political landscape, the country rapidly descended into a deep political crisis characterised by a surge of ethnonationalist politics, which, among other outcomes, escalated into a fully fledged military conflict in Tigray after November 2020, opposing the Federal government and the TPLF. The current political crisis, of

which the outcome remains uncertain, is rooted in deep transformations which have simmered over a long period of time, and which have at their heart the contested nature of Ethiopian history of state- and nation-building. While discussions around continuity and rupture are well articulated in Ethiopian studies, the EPRDF period as an analytically discernible timeframe has not been an object of systematic investigation and reflection. This special issue aims to start a conversation about this important topic. In the aftermath of the Derg military regime (1974-1991), the EPRDF/TPLF leadership, relying on the radical political ideology of 'revolutionary democracy', institutionalised ethnicity as the main principle of organisation of the Ethiopian state under the model of ethnic federalism. After the war with Eritrea (1998-2000), a political crisis within the EPRDF/TPLF in 2001, and with greater pace after the contested 2005 elections, Ethiopia embarked on a selective strategy of economic liberalisation driven by what the political leadership dubbed a 'developmental state'. Driven by a boom in the construction sector and services, in the course of the 2010s Ethiopia became one of Africa's fastest growing economies, eliciting representations of the country as a clear example of 'Africa rising'. Amid a context of growing authoritarianism, the scope of the reforms undertaken by the EPRDF in the course of the 2000s and 2010s encompassed most aspects of social, economic, and political life. The complex interplay between ethnic federalism, the developmental state, and authoritarianism is the terrain within which contributions to this issue interrogate questions around the nature of Ethiopian history, its structural and material drivers and representations as an analytical lens to read state-society relations under the EPRDF.

The first four articles of the special issue engage critically with some flagship projects and policies embarked on by the EPRDF under the developmental state. These articles demonstrate the centrality of the EPRDF's developmental ideology to dissect broader dynamics of state- and nation-building. They identify cases and instances in which policies and programmes designed under the developmental state have been successful and unsuccessful to nurture a cohesive national discourse. These articles point at the urgency of new research dissecting the legacy of the developmental state under the EPRDF to shape the formation of social and political identities in the current conjuncture. Tefera Negash Gebregziabher interrogates the concept of 'developmental patrimonialism' to unpack the nature of the Ethiopian 'growth miracle' under the Ethiopian developmental state. Pinning an analytical focus on the creation of party-military conglomerates, such as the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), the article argues that the EPRDF's economic strategy has entailed the significant concentration of economic and political power within the party-state and its elites, while obfuscating discussions around authoritarianism in the name of the developmental mission of the state. Yeshiwas Degu Belay, Emanuele Fantini and Iginio Gagliardone discuss one of the developmental state's flagship projects, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The article dissects how mainstream Ethiopian

media have represented the GERD across different leaderships between 2013 and 2020. While representations of the dam rely on multiple political narratives about state-building, a main finding of the article is that there is a remarkable continuity in the ways political elites have purported the GERD as a symbol of national unity. This is remarkable, the authors contend, especially if one considers the increasingly fractured and polarised media landscape along ethnonationalist lines after 2018.

The article by Logan Cochrane and Melisew Dejene Lemma historicises the role of social protection systems under the EPRDF. The authors discuss the power relations within which social protection policy is enmeshed, mapping the implications to broader questions about state-building. The article finds that, despite the ostensibly universal scope of policies elaborated as part of the developmental state's transformation agenda, the expansion of social protection systems has not been uniform and, rather, it must be regarded as an important tool through which the EPRDF government attempted to institutionalise power at the local level. The implementation of social protection systems reflected a context of growing authoritarianism, which disenfranchised political dissent, and furthered the marginalisation of livelihoods along ethnolinguistic identities. This has constrained significantly the transformational potential of social protection systems to nurture national inclusion under the EPRDF. The article by Davide Chinigò explores the quest for rapid industrialisation as another key feature of the project for socio-economic transformation under the Ethiopian developmental state. The article explores the question of labour that has emerged in conjunction with the expansion of the textile industry in Tigray region since the 2010s via the agency of global production networks. The article reconstructs the history of labour mobilisation in Tigray and contends that manufacturing development entrenched new forms of marginalisation of labour along class and gender lines, despite the narrative of the developmental state as a more inclusive model of economic transformation than its 'neoliberal' alternatives.

The next two articles discuss the symbolic and material value of borders to shape dynamics of state- and nation-building along the construction of social and political identities. Both articles use the 2018 political transition as an entry point to explore the history of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Aurora Massa), and between Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea (Luca Puddu). Using an ethnographic approach, Aurora Massa explores how regimes of mobility across time have shaped the symbolic and political value of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The author identifies both continuities and discontinuities in the ways Ethiopian returnees and Eritrean refugees have represented the border against critical events, such as the independence of Eritrea in the 1990s, the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000), and the peace agreements in 2018. The article finds that these events, in their own ways, contributed to shape the symbolic boundaries between Ethiopia and Eritrea, with significant implications to how ordinary people negotiate forms of national belonging in their everyday life. The article points

to how processes of nation- and state-building require an analytical perspective that scrutinises social change as the constant re-working of the past, as well as aspirations and expectations about the future. By historicising the relations between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan in Ethiopia's north-western frontier, Luca Puddu maps some of the regional ramifications of the conflict in Tigray since November 2020. The article contends that current border conflicts need to be contextualised against the historical competition for the control of natural resources and transboundary trade routes, as well as competing claims over territories that were artificially partitioned during the colonial period. The author argues we can fully understand the scope of these border conflicts only by pinning an analytical focus to historical sub-regional centres in competition for political power beyond a view of the Ethiopian state as a monolithic entity. This sheds light on why the different regimes that have been in power in Ethiopia since the late Imperial period have formulated conflicting, and often incoherent foreign policy objectives around how to claim these borderland territories. The two articles of Massa and Puddu combined highlight the necessity of understanding present-day dynamics of state- and nation-building in Ethiopia against competing claims for political authority between a variety of actors beyond the nation-state as a discernible unit of analysis.

The final two contributions bring us to address the 2018 political transition and its aftermath. The articles by both Yonas Ashine and Serawit Bekele Debele engage with the difficult question about how we might rethink present-day Ethiopian politics away from the divisive forces of ethnonationalism. What are the conditions of possibility for a new Ethiopian subject to emerge, one that is able to transcend a toxic politics that pins Ethiopian people against each other? Clearly, this question has methodological, epistemological and ontological dimensions that are immense and beyond the reach of this issue. However, mapping some of these dimensions is an important endeavour to start a critical discussion about how the disciplines of Ethiopian and African studies construct and make intelligible their research objects. In other words, how do we engage in a productive conversation about Ethiopian history and politics at a time of deep social and political crisis?

The article by Yonas Ashine addresses the topic of university conflicts during the political transition. Based on primary research conducted between 2017 and 2019, the article finds that conflicts between students based on the political mobilisation of identity have become increasingly prevalent in universities across Ethiopia after the 2018 political liberalisation. The author traces the roots of campus conflict in the unresolved 'question of nationalities' as it was initially formulated by the 1960s Ethiopian student movement during the late Imperial period. Universities, Yonas contends, have become a contested terrain in that they are the result of a divisive ethnonationalist discourse mobilised by elites competing for political power, and a microcosm of broader tensions that have simmered in Ethiopian society for a long time. The author contends that the only way to depoliticise ethnic identity is for universities

to engage in a critical pedagogy based on debate, dialogue and deliberation, towards the formation of subjectivities that transcend the inherent contradictions of Ethiopia's historical nation-building project.

For Serawit Bekele Debele the post-2018 political crisis begs the important question about what constitutes political change in present-day Ethiopia, and what does it entail to imagine a future for the country that transcends extreme social polarisation. Drawing on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the Oromo anti-government protests by the mid-2010s, the author reflects on the potential of feminist practices of solidarity that emerged during the encounter with her fieldwork subjects. The article scopes the notions of *waloo, tumsa* and *wallala* as potentially new conceptual underpinnings to foster democracy, solidarity and a politics geared towards attending the everyday struggles of people at the margins. These practices of political engagement are meant to interrogate the nation-state and its organisation from the perspective of those societal voices that remain unheard, bringing forward a notion of political transformation that relies on how ordinary people experience violence and marginalisation.

Davide Chinigò, *editor of this issue*

Was EPRDF's Ethiopia a "Developmental Patrimonial" State? A Critical Engagement

Tefera Negash Gebregziabher

Abstract

Ethiopia was lauded for sustained fast economic growth for two decades under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Some scholars framed the regime's political economy "developmental patrimonialism", suggesting that EPRDF's Ethiopia is characterised by "long-horizon rent deployment" that allowed the EPRDF regime to centralise rent for the greater good of entrenching the basis of development. This paper takes interest in such a framing and shows the possible gap in Ethiopia's development narration. The paper revisits the story of Ethiopia's economic growth that may have obscured the concentration of economic and political power by the party-state and its elites. It shows how the necessity of exploring the logic of the creation of party-military conglomerates and the nature of the economy remains important to understand what happened and persisted under the EPRDF regime. In this light, the paper argues, the developmental facade of the regime has served the double purpose of power concentration in the hands of the few and an apparent heroism for development that feeds into sacrificing other rights on the altars of authoritarian development. Methodologically, this paper takes a critical look at the economic growth and its interpretations that took centre-stage in EPRDF's political economy through research conducted during the EPRDF era.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Economic growth, developmental patrimonialism

Introduction

The last decade of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime in Ethiopia has seen undeniable economic growth. According to a state official, although there has been an impressive economic growth rate of 10 percent per year

since 2000 and a decline of national poverty from 45.5 percent in 1995 to 23.5 percent in 2016, "poverty is still a major developmental challenge" (Manyazawal 2019: 176). In this context of unprecedented economic growth, there is a growing scholarly interest which resulted in multiple interpretations of economic growth and its developmentalist nature.[1] One approach this paper engages with is the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP), that conceptualises "developmental patrimonialism" and applies it to explain development processes in several regimes in Africa. APPP researchers argue that the developmental role of such regimes took the expensive road to development as opposed to achieving short-term political and economic gains. They argue that the political economy of these regimes is characterised by *rent centralisation* and a *long-horizon rent deployment* as features of African developmental patrimonial states (Kelsall 2013).

So, according to developmental patrimonial interpretations, Ethiopia under the EPRDF regime was developmentalist with neo-patrimonial characteristics. The theoretical underpinnings of this conceptualisation will be briefly discussed below. In contravention to a neopatrimonial explanation, I argue that the economic growth and associated processes of wealth creation of the EPRDF period was not a long horizon rent deployment that employed its rent centralization for the development and shared growth for all Ethiopians. Thus, in this paper, I show that the EPRDF regime has entertained the idea of developmental state in its ideological rhetoric for some time, which was understood as a developmental and patrimonial regime by the APPP scholars such as Kelsall. I argue that a developmental patrimonial interpretation blurs the nature and characteristics of the regime.

The politics of development of the EPRDF years (1991-2018) deserves an investigation in its own terms. This is about moving the discussion beyond the framework of neo-patrimonialism and developmental patrimonialism. The political motive behind the regime's self-assertion that Ethiopia is a "developmental state" makes the EPRDF and its core politico-military might a very interesting object of analysis. My interest here is to go beyond the claimed developmental state. I argue that the EPRDF regime planned a long-term vision of controlling power, not necessarily long-term rent deployment, towards the development of the Ethiopian state. In development terms, the economic growth recorded in Ethiopia should be understood cautiously because the underlying dynamics of economic power concentration by the political party and military establishment conceals fundamental factors in the economic growth experienced by the country. The same old power and wealth nexus dominated by politico-military elites underlies the politics of development in the country. One notable issue remains the invocation of ethnicity and the subtle art of deploying it politically. In post-1991 Ethiopia ethnicity is an answer to "a national question", a tool for mobilisation for war, a subtle code in economic administration and associated economic control.

For situating the object of my analysis and juxtaposing it with the APPP theorisation,

I will first present developmental patrimonialism as an approach in general and as a specific narration of Ethiopia's development. Secondly, I will briefly discuss the nature of economic growth and associated debt issues as a context that matters in the development of party and military businesses. These party affiliated businesses were the central object of the APPP theorisation in the case of the so-called Ethiopia's neopatrimonial developmentalism. Then, thirdly, I show how these businesses are not necessarily (patrimonial) developmentalist and their overriding presence is complicated with possible promiscuity in the country's economy. Finally, I contend that economic and political power centralisation does not necessarily result in a developmentalist state with neopatrimonial characteristics, as purported by APPP scholars. In the next section I will provide a brief methodological reflection on the context of my research.

The object of the study: a methodological note

In the past three decades Ethiopian politics has been dominated by the party coalition of the EPRDF and, at its core, the TPLF. The EPRDF overthrew the socialist-military regime of the Derg in 1991 and immediately commenced liberalising the socialist state. This liberalisation has had a vanguardist flavour – the ruling party played a vital role in steering the direction of the privatisation which will eventually set the party to the upper hand of the economy. With a rather interesting ideological claim of revolutionary democracy, political and economic control took root in the hands of the party-state. In the framework of my PhD study, my investigation attempted to cast the net wide and studied the ideological turns and twists of the party, the foundations of economic growth, and, especially, what actors (corporations in particular) emerged as important players. Then, the study zoomed into specific actors and processes that emerged as culmination of wealth and power concentration.

The study of so-called authoritarian development and the nature of economic growth of regimes such as the EPRDF is complicated for various reasons. During my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 people were afraid to openly discuss the relationship between politics and the economy. One of my informants, an expert working at the chamber of commerce, told me "Your study is sensitive. I would suggest you get government (quantitative) data from ministries and draw your conclusion on the subject, rather than bring direct interview questions".[2] My fieldwork required building trust with informants, accommodating the request of some respondents to change venue in the middle of interviews. Building trust was sometimes not enough. For instance, a prominent government official made it clear that it would have been impossible for me to interview military generals in relation to their business affairs and their affiliated military corporations. Indeed, studying the nexus between political power and wealth is sensitive as it implicates top political leadership. The relationship between political elites and business was hard to discern, and could be grasped only occasionally, such as in cases of political splits and controversies followed by corruption charges.

Methodologically, the paper follows a qualitative and interpretative approach. The analysis of economic control and its implications to the functioning of the economy attempts to uncover general mechanisms about the relation between economic means and politico-military elites, which include the analysis of critical junctures, elite bargaining and civil-military relations. The methods of data collection included interviews, informal discussions, media content analysis, studies of various documents, biographies and autobiographies. I believe that what is skilfully done by astute politicians requires a creative approach in research and a daring confrontation both with the socio-political system and possible "intellectual fans" of political processes in EPRDF's Ethiopia.

Developmental patrimonialism: the model

This section introduces the "developmental patrimonialism" framework as described by APPP scholars. The model deals with regimes and development performance in Africa inspired by the literature on Asia and has rent as a main focus of analysis. That is, "the degree of centralisation and the length of the time-horizon" (Kelsall *et al.* 2010: 1). The following quote from Kelsall captures the importance of rents (excess income) in the model: "*rents are centrally managed when there is a structure in place that allows an individual or group at the apex of the state to determine the major rents that are created and to distribute them at will. It is long-term when leaders have a vision that inspires them to create rents and discipline rent-seeking with a view to expanding income through productive investment over the long term*" (emphasis in original, Kelsall 2013: 24).

First, I focus on clientelist *rent centralisation*. According to Kelsall (2011a: 1), "there is growing evidence that some African regimes have [...] harnessed neo-patrimonialism[3] for developmental ends". Developmental patrimonialists argue that, "it is not neo-patrimonialism per se that is bad for investment and growth, this shows, but rather the specific form that neo-patrimonialism often takes" (Kelsall *et al.* 2010: 3). What is crucial is "the way in which clientelism is bound up with the creation, utilisation, and distribution of economic rents, and whether this occurs in an organised, or unorganised way" (*ibid*). While clientelism is central, other factors such as a visionary leadership are equally important. Economic rent management for these researchers is predicated on the existence of a system of concentrated power that envisages long-term growth. Thus, the mechanisms that underpin rent centralisation include the presence of "a strong, visionary leader, a single or dominant party system, competent and confident economic technocracy, a strategy to include, at least partially, the most important groups in some of the benefits of growth", as well as "a sound policy framework (...) broadly pro-capitalist, pro-rural bias" (Kelsall 2011: 2). Yet, these scholars argue that in addition to rent-centralisation, the rent process must be oriented to the long-term.

The second component of the model is a *long-horizon orientation*. This means that "the

rent-earning opportunities were steered to activities that involved increases in value-added, or transformations in the productive forces over time, rather than the simple quick wins that could be gained from embezzling monies or taxing markets" (Kelsall 2011a: 2). The long-term rent management must be longer than a typical electoral cycle (Kelsall 2013). Based on the centralisation of rent and its time horizon, APPP authors developed a typology of forms of rent management, of which "developmental patrimonialism" is their theoretical interest. This type of regime "retains a neo-patrimonial character, with a more or less systematic blurring of the boundaries between public resources and the private property of the ruler(s)" (Kelsall 2013: 25). In these regimes "illegality and corruption" might be very high but the rent process does not hamper investments (*ibid* 25-26).

Although the various challenges of developmental patrimonial regimes are acknowledged, APPP researchers still want us to see political economic processes in a different, "unorthodox" light. They argue: "All of the regimes that appear to us to exemplify the more developmental form of neo-patrimonialism pose ethically difficult questions about trade-offs between liberal freedoms and human rights, on the one hand, and development outcomes (and thus other human rights) on the other. These issues merit discussion but we firmly believe that such discussions are only fruitful when they are grounded in a good understanding not just of all the relevant facts but also of systems and linkages" (Booth, Golooba-Mutebi 2012: 384).

In a nutshell, the factors responsible for "long-horizon rent centralization" are: a visionary leader, a dominant party, a top-down patron-client network, and competent technocracy (Kelsall 2013: 26). Based on the analysis of different case studies APPP scholars conclude that "neo-patrimonialism is a "good enough" form of governance for economic development, and that may go more with the grain, and make a "better fit' with socio-political realities in many African states, than good governance" (Kelsall 2013: 46-47). This proposition prompted Richard Joseph[4] to label APPP scholars "revisionists", asserting that the sequence of "development first and good governance latter" was advocated a long time ago, while it doesn't consider the long road that African states took since independence and the results they achieved. In any case, the developmental patrimonial model was put in use to explain recently booming economies such as Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Indeed, it is interesting to see how neopatrimonialism is applied to explain Africa's political economy in its own specificities. A lot has been written on both neopatrimonialism and the developmental state. From a conceptual standpoint, I argue that the conflation of developmentalism with the already problematic notion of neopatrimonialism in explaining African political economies is problematic. Mkandawire (2015: 563) exhaustively debunks what he calls the "Neopatrimonialism school" – a school of thought whose "intellectual triumph is that its analyses have become part of the general knowledge of foreign policymakers and journalists reporting on Africa".

Neopatrimonialism provides "an impoverished understanding of the complexities of the continent" by "neglecting the cross-sectional and longitudinal variance of the African experience" (*ibid*: 602). As Mkandawire (2015: 571-72) succinctly captures, African neopatrimonialism is said to be characterised by three features. First, an "economy of affection or moral economy of corruption, which lends normalcy to corruption". Second, its "untoward deference to authority" and, third, "the nature of the African big man himself". Developmental neopatrimonialism pins a specific focus on the "developmental ethos" of authoritarian regimes.

Developmental patrimonialism in Ethiopia

For developmental patrimonialists EPRDF's Ethiopia has grown extremely rapidly and has done this "by ignoring a great deal of conventional donor advice, claiming to be following an Asian development model instead" (Kelsall 2013: 93). This was accomplished by mobilising a structure that "centralises rent management and gearing it to the long term" via sectors such as floriculture, leather industry and endowment companies (*ibid*). However, these are not yet the main sources of Ethiopia's economic growth.[5] The APPP researchers studied endowment companies, specifically the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), to make the case for "developmental patrimonialism in Ethiopia". For instance, they have contended that "The endowment-owned businesses constitute an important series of actors designed to "promote by example" the government and ruling party's agenda for economic transformation, "safeguarding the system" from within the private sector, which (arguably until recently) had played a relatively limited role in the process. But there are a number of other aspects of the contemporary Ethiopian situation that would need much more qualitative study if we were to have a fuller picture of the extent of Ethiopian centralisation of rents, and of the contours of its developmental patrimonialism" (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011: 13).

This article explores the same case of EFFORT and related business endeavours of the ruling party to challenge these claims. EFFORT, led by senior members of the TPLF, was established in the mid-1990s through a cluster of sixteen companies operating in various sectors, ranging from industry to trade and services (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011). One of the central arguments of the APPP researchers is that the party and its elites wouldn't benefit from the conglomerate, thus arguing: "The bulk of rents associated with EFFORT do not go directly to the ruling party or its members. In our analysis, whilst they do feed the ideologically defined and long-horizon social, economic and political interests perceived by the political organisation, there is little credible evidence that they serve the short-term decentralised individual or commercial interests of its members. Commercial profits and rents accruing seem to serve long-term economic purposes, and they do this to a lesser degree by means of formal taxation but primarily as a result of the creation of positive externalities. This analysis is, of course, controversial" (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011: 33).

As controversial as the above analysis could be, business conglomerates such as EFFORT

do not have to give immediate, short-term dividends to their owners and managers for several reasons. The political and economic externalities of the endowments are complicated at best. EFFORT is characterised by tight political connection with the ruling TPLF and lacks transparency (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011). More importantly, the resource centralisation by EFFORT "perhaps reflects a strongly evolved collective sense both of emotional ethno-national commitment to the organisation and its region" (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011: 36). Back in 2010 EFFORT's wealth was reported to be 360 million US dollars in assets and 160 million US dollars in capital, while its business activities were divided over five commercial business units: Engineering and Construction, Manufacturing, Services, Agro-processing, and Mining (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011). With its ever-expanding investments and generous loans obtained from the Development Bank of Ethiopia, as well as its 14,000 permanent employees, EFFORT saw itself as the main driver of Ethiopia's developmental state (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011). EFFORT has been an important player in the economy of post-1991 Ethiopia and this paper attempts to push the analysis a bit further to locate the meaning of this economic dominance and its implications.

Beyond and above EFFORT, the APPP researchers point out that, "growth has been broad based, with agriculture, industry, and services all recording double-digit expansion for much of the past decade" (Kelsall 2013: 115-16). Furthermore, "the upsurge in production of flowers, garments, and leather products demonstrates an ability to move into higher-value-added sectors", although "the impact of the growth on structural transformation, however, has been less impressive" (Kelsall 2013: 115-16). Yet, as I will discuss later in more details, the source of Ethiopia's economic growth is located in the commerce and service sectors, with state-led infrastructure development and construction playing a prominent role. Kelsall (2013: 118) concludes that the EPRDF regime has "succeeded in centralising economic rent management to a considerable degree" which "permitted some ambitious experiments in the industrial policy which appears genuinely focused on the long term". Apparently, "rent centralisation is driven by a regime that is controversial to large sections of the population, but which has chosen to pursue legitimacy through broad-based development" (Kelsall 2013: 118). Additionally, the developmental role of the regime has faced challenges relating to the political subservience of the civil service, political succession and poor performance in respecting civil liberties (Kelsall 2013). However, it is not difficult to see that the claim to broad-based development is as controversial as the regime itself. To show this, I will first briefly recap contextual discussions on the nature of Ethiopia's economic growth as well as the role of debt in it, and then I will return to EFFORT, the central object of APPP's analysis under the developmental state.

Economic growth: serving the service sector or the poor?

Ethiopia's rapid economic growth has received appreciation from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Indeed, as

Cochrane and Bekele (2018: 2) indicate, there have been multiple narratives about Ethiopia's post-1991 economic growth: "while high levels of sustained macroeconomic growth is one of the most common narratives about the Ethiopian economy, it is not the only narrative that is common to the Ethiopian macro-economic story". The most recent narrative relates to "an emerging debt crisis and, in particular, the problematic role of Chinese lending contributing to that" (Cochrane, Bekele 2018: 2). According to some officials, Ethiopia's economic growth since 1991 has gone through two phases, the first of which was a decade-long recovery from the war economy of the preceding military regime, while the second led to a process of "shared growth" (Gebregziabher, Hout 2018). In Ethiopia, "the agricultural sector has been the mainstay of the economy and the driver of growth" (Tesfaye 2017: 94). Emphasising how agriculture remained the most important sector in the economy, Altenburg (2010:1) writes: "From 2004 onwards, the Ethiopian economy has grown at 11% annually. This growth, however, has mainly been due to favourable agro-climatic conditions, high coffee prices, considerable inflows of aid and remittances, and a boom in construction; it does not reflect increased competitiveness, and it has not yet prompted significant changes in the economic structure. The share of manufacturing in GDP stagnates at 5%, and still virtually all exports are unprocessed or at best semi-processed".

In recent years, however, the service sector has taken over and has become the main recipient of loans and investments. Tesfaye (2017: 95) notes an "expansion of the sectoral distribution of the services sector by 7 per cent to nearly 45 per cent from 2005 to 2010, due to rapid expansion in financial services, real estate, and retail trade". The service sector has been the most dynamic economic sector, representing almost half of Ethiopia's GDP. Its contribution to the GDP was 36 per cent in 2001 and 47 per cent in 2015 (Tesfay 2017). While agriculture and industry lagged behind, leading sectors have been construction, electricity, and water resources development (Tesfaye 2017). As Hardy and Hauge (2019: 4) succinctly put it, "state-funded infrastructure projects have been driving the economic boom". They add, more than 50 percent of the federal budget has been spent on infrastructure projects, primarily transport and power generation (Hardy, Hauge 2019). One of my interviewees, who has a centre-stage role in the Ethiopian private sector, contended that "the new rich in the country only opt to put up buildings in the cities and collect rents from its commercial malls".[6] *Africa confidential* has also captured this trend, pointing out that "the most obvious sign of growth is the building boom in Addis Ababa".[7]

To sum up, it is evident that the sub-sectors that drove economic growth figures in Ethiopia have been "commerce (wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants) and public services (public administration and social services, education, health and social work)" (Gebregziabher, Hout 2018: 502). Construction, especially roads and other public works recorded particularly significant rates of growth (*ibid*). Though there are inconsistencies in, and contestations around, the growth and poverty statistics of

Ethiopia (see Cochrane, Bekele 2018; Mandefro 2016), the emergence of the service sector as an important driving force of the economy is quite clear. A number of reports and studies underscore the existence of real growth and the pace of dividends in EPRDF's Ethiopia. The question is, all things considered, how much does the booming service sector contribute to a shared growth and economic development. According to the World Bank (2020: 139), "poverty reduction due to the sectoral shifts has been negligible in urban Ethiopia, in line with the familiar "growth without structural transformation" narrative". The level of absolute poverty, and the precariousness of jobs in the low-paying growing service sector is staggering. According to national and international poverty lines, "30% of the population (25.1 million) were considered extremely poor in 2010–11" (Moller, Wacker 2017: 210). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), while lauding the country's economic achievements, warns about possible pitfalls in the growth model: "That Ethiopia achieved fast economic growth while reducing poverty significantly and maintaining inequality at a low level is commendable. However, *due attention should be given to rising inequality observed recently*, especially in urban areas. Inequality in rural areas is still low and that is the reason why national inequality is also low" (UNDP 2018: 40, emphasis mine).

The UNDP report points to rising urban inequality. Reasons behind this may be related to the nature of growth. Some authors have already indicated that headline statistics conceal shortcomings.[8] As far as rural Ethiopia is concerned, the World Bank's poverty assessment report concluded that the level of consumption of the poorest section of rural Ethiopia has not increased in a long time. Rather, rural poverty in 2016 was higher than in 2005 (World Bank 2020: 61). The industrial sector has not achieved what the country's transformation targets, which expected to radically change the structure of the economy (UNDP 2018). Here, some of the challenges include: "Limited performance of the manufacturing sector and poor growth performance of micro- and small-scale manufacturing industries (...), challenges in attracting new and high-quality export-oriented private investments into the manufacturing sector (...), limited management, technology and capital capacity leading to poor quality, inefficient and low productivity and challenges in competing in global markets. Unreliable energy supply and inadequate financial services" (UNDP 2018: 7-8).

Considering the multiple challenges of the industrial sector and the lack of structural transformation, GDP growth has been largely driven by international aid, diaspora remittances and the national budget (Tesfaye 2017). As mentioned above, concessional and commercial debt has also increasingly contributed towards economic growth. Tesfaye (2017: 97) has emphasised that "the growth also produced inflation, large income gaps in society, increases in the cost of living and more demands for basic services". Ultimately, the sector that contributed to economic growth the most is service, a sector that does not necessarily capture the overall structure of employment. It is agriculture, not the service sector, that is "the mainstay of employment in Ethiopia as

a whole, it is particularly important for the livelihoods of the poor" (World Bank 2020: 72). According to Lie and Mesfin (2018: 26), Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world and growth did not serve the poor majority. As shown in the World Bank's 2015 poverty assessment report "national inequality has increased steadily from 2000 until 2011 and some 80% of rural households and two-thirds of urban households still experience deprivation" (*ibid*). The position taken by government after the emergence of a reformist group within the ruling coalition illustrates this point further. In a letter addressed to the World Bank, the Ethiopian government admitted that "in spite of the impressive progress in economic growth and [sic] poverty and unemployment remain high causing growing discontent particularly among the youth" (World Bank 2018: 56-57). In a nutshell, publicly financed infrastructure projects (undertaken mainly through party and military businesses) as well as growth in the service sector characterise the nature of Ethiopia's GDP growth. I will now turn to the thorny issue of debt and borrowing in Ethiopia's GDP growth.

Economic growth and debt

Summarising the complex issue loans in EPRDF Ethiopia is a difficult task. In the following discussion I will attempt to show the nexus between financial sources and the public projects that underlie the sector that is responsible for GDP growth. The task is difficult in view of the various actors involved and the level of confidentiality of financial dealings beyond the headlines. First of all, it is crucial to point out that in post-1991 Ethiopia decision-making has been highly centralised in the hands of the Prime Minister and the central committee of the ruling party (see for example Furtado, Smith 2009: 139). According to Altenburg "This growth has been fuelled by inflows of official development aid, including soft loans from China and India, by remittances from the diaspora, and by foreign direct investment (FDI). Furthermore, Ethiopia has recently benefited from a series of good harvests. As a result of development aid and other inflows, public investment – primarily in roads, dams, education, and health – has grown much faster than private investment. This has spurred employment growth, but also provoked a foreign-exchange crisis" (Altenburg 2010: 5).

Concessional and commercial borrowing has increased, including borrowing from the international bond market. The country's external debt increased ten-fold in ten years (from 2.3 billion US dollars in 2006 to 23.1 billion US dollars in 2016) and Ethiopia is categorised as a "High risk of debt distress" (Cochrane, Bekele 2018: 10). A key informant in the finance sector pointed out that "the TPLF has been burying the country under heavy burdens of borrowing that even our grandchildren wouldn't be able to pay back".[9] As Cochrane and Bekele (2018: 10) point out "An emerging narrative, raising concerns for many, is the level of debt in many African nations, particularly, as new forms of financing have emerged, with many reports focusing on the role of China". In Ethiopia, the reconstruction of the Addis-Djibouti and the Addis Ababa light-railway lines have

primarily been funded by Chinese investments (Rode *et al.* 2020). Under the EPRDF regime, the country's indebtedness has grown tremendously. After a reformist group within the regime took power in April 2018, the Ethiopian government has openly declared how serious the problem has become.

Other studies have pointed out that "in the mid-1990s donors provided substantial increases in aid to support an agreed set of sector programmes, most notably in the health and education sectors" (Furtado, Smith 2009: 133). These highlight that "Ethiopia is one of the few countries in the world still consistently receiving substantial quantities of food aid, and this somewhat distorts the aid picture. Such humanitarian relief has averaged about USD 330 million per year in the recent past and accounts for almost a third of all donor inflow" (Furtado, Smith 2009: 132). The multilateral aid that Ethiopia receives from sources like the World Bank, the European Union and the African Development Bank has been greater than bilateral aid. As a result, international aid has contributed to growth in addition to borrowing. Here, two important points should be noted. The first relates to the party-state's tight grip on major economic activities that took place through endowment companies. Secondly, the flow of money and decisions is tightly controlled by central committee members who chair the boards of banks like the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. The discussion on the nature of rising GDP and subsequent debt-burden offers a different perspective on what role rent-centralisation played in Ethiopia's developmental trajectory.

EFFORT and others: development vehicles?

Going back to EFFORT, the analytical object of developmental patrimonialism in Ethiopia, it is important to highlight that its economic role and associated rents is murky (see for example Gebregziabher, Hout 2018). It has been clear from the onset that, in post-1991 Ethiopia the "relationships, especially those between government, ruling party, state-owned enterprises, and endowment-owned enterprises, are quite opaque" (Tesfaye 2017: 104). Altenburg summarises this as follows: "The government deliberately employs a carrot-and-stick approach that differentiates between economic activities and firms, up to the point where targets for individual firms are sometimes negotiated on a case-by-case basis in exchange for public support. At the same time, resource allocation for industrial policy is not fully transparent, e.g. it is not clear when firms are eligible to get preferential treatment in terms of access to licenses, land, credit and foreign exchange, on what condition ailing firms will be bailed out, and whether these conditions vary between state-owned enterprises, firms affiliated with the ruling political parties, and independent private firms" (Altenburg 2010: 2).

The above discussion illustrates the lack of transparency in policy decisions. Beyond the secrecy, the nature of business capture by the party-state has been clearly identified in the literature. According to Abegaz (2011: 1-2), party-owned businesses "are politically embedded, profit-seeking, and patronage motivated". He contends that a party-owned

business "much like military-controlled businesses, is an integral part of the drive for a total "capture" by an insurgent vanguard party, of key state and societal institutions in weak market economies". Furthermore, "The party, having captured the state, subsumes the latter instead of governing through it. Key private sector allies are also embedded in the party and its business interests" (Abegaz 2011: 9). Indeed, the political control of EFFORT is clear to APPP researchers who point out: "EFFORT's leadership, all still senior members of the leadership of the Ethiopian ruling party, continue to see themselves as playing a key role in contributing to Ethiopia's economic transition, not least in helping alternately to boost, inspire, rein in, discipline, and control an entrepreneurial sector regarded as weak, conservative, mercurial and politically unreliable. As such EFFORT and the companies it owns are increasingly integrated into the wider fabric of economic, political, social and developmental actors involved in promoting the economic agenda of "revolutionary democracy". This is an idea and a strategy with long-horizon resilience" (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011: 52).

The party business of the EPRDF regime was made up of four large umbrella endowment holdings that constituted a "complex of companies which also includes for-profit entities owned or co-owned by allied regional elites and politically-connected associations" (Abegaz 2011: 38-39). The largest in terms of assets, number of subsidiaries, sectoral coverage and supra-regional orientation, as discussed above, is EFFORT.[10] Beyond government subsidies and protection, Abegaz summarises the privileges of the party businesses as follows: "The menu of policy instruments for tilting the playing field by providing a soft budget constraint for politically linked enterprises is quite expansive (...) directing business toward Parbus [party-businesses], preferential allocation of public tenders and contracts (including supplies during inter-state conflicts), preferential access to government credit facilities, preferential treatment in obtaining licenses and customs clearances, manipulation of privatization and other state property sales, tailoring public sector infrastructural investment to the needs of the Parbus, directing aid-generated business to them, and targeting high-profit and easy to enter private-sector activities in order to displace the latter" (Abegaz 2011: 43).

In addition to the party businesses mobilised through EFFORT, there is the military conglomerate of the Metal and Engineering Corporation (METEC). METEC's stated mandate is to industrialise the Ethiopian developmental state (see Gebregziabher 2019b). This military conglomerate was given privileged access to various mega projects including the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam, ten sugar factories, as well as several fertiliser and thermal energy projects (Gebregziabher 2019b). According to legal documents,[11] METEC's mandate relates to developing the manufacturing industries, including industrial machineries, capital goods and industrial spare parts, as well as to enhance engineering and technological capabilities by creating partnerships for industrial resources. Additionally, METEC's focus includes the manufacturing and upgrading of weapons and equipment for defence and security forces at home and

abroad. It is interesting to see how the creation of party and military companies distorted the application of the developmental state model which plays a significant role in sustaining the power of political elites. Liberal freedoms aside, the nature of economic control is clearly concentrated at the party-military level. I will explore this issue further in the next section.

What is in a centralisation?

The fundamental question about a model that deals with rent centralisation, and its long-term deployment, concerns *how* rent is centralised and for what purpose.[12] For developmental patrimonialists, EFFORT and other endowment companies are set to be exemplary economic entities of rent centralisation for long-horizon orientation. However, endowment companies helped concentrate power in the hands of party elites and have been an instrument of economic dominance by the EPRDF/TPLF, rather than aiding in the development of Ethiopia's economy. In other words, endowment companies contributed to amass economic power in the party and to configure the economic structures that sustain political power, which are not necessarily geared towards long-term growth. To understand this further we need to look at the material basis and systemic scope of oligarchic minority power (Winters 2011: 3-5).

The underlying mechanisms that facilitated and sustained the emergence of party and military businesses in Ethiopia, in the context discussed here, seem to be political insecurity and economic control for the few (rather than shared growth for all with an eye on long-term economic development). Maintaining economic power for purposes of political power is different from concentrating rent for genuine long-term development. The political insecurity characterising EPRDF Ethiopia relates to the lack of legitimacy of the core party (i.e. TPLF) within the coalition that has historically employed ideological justifications and held a monopoly on the coercive apparatus (see for example Gebregziabher 2019a). From 2010, the monopoly was further advanced by giving the military a stake in the Ethiopian economy (see Gebregziabher 2019b). In post-1991 Ethiopia, the origins of political inequality can be traced back to the emergence of a small clique of young revolutionaries within the TPLF. This clique emerged as a result of the establishment, in June 1985, of a communist core under the Marxist–Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT), wherein Meles Zenawi played a central role. The late Prime Minister Meles and a few fellow revolutionaries in the TPLF used ideological rationales and harsh measures to guard their political power.

What is at stake here is "the power of actors who deploy material resources *politically* with important economic effect" (Winters 2011: 9, emphasis in original). The booming service sector as the main source of economic growth has been driven by interlocked party conglomerates and was steered by party-state elites. Indeed, there are other firms in the economy that survived as a result of their close ties with the party-state. When studied from the standpoint of who concentrated economic power during the

EPRDF era, three broad categories emerge: the political nomenklatura, the Sheik, and tiny oligarchs.[13] I have focused my discussion on the first oligarchy, that is, *the political nomenklatura* whose main economic basis are corporations such as EFFORT and METEC. When viewed as an oligarchic concentration of economic power through inherent political backing these two economic giants played a significant role beyond their economic intent. The way these conglomerates were established and sustained speaks to how they were able to concentrate significant economic and political power. As a result, since 1991 "the ruling party is the major arm of the executive branch with the cabinet and party's executive indistinguishable", and the two houses of parliament as well as the judiciary serve as extensions of the TPLF (Milkias 2010: 363). Economic decision-making was mainly in the hands of the Prime Minister and his confidants. Legesse (2016) recaps how the various activities of EFFORT were conceived and executed by the central committee of the party and how critical economic decisions boosted the role of the economic arm of the party, including the provision of loans to EFFORT, debt cancellation, and the issuing of shares of party businesses. For Lefort "the functions of political leadership, economic decision-making and the management of public and para-public enterprises are concentrated in the hands of the same people at the summit of the party-state" that "led to the creation of a tentacular and increasingly voracious and arrogant oligarchy".[14] It is these same people that "have destroyed free business competition by running a lucrative party enterprise" (Milkias 2010: 364). The executive-legislative dominance also extends to the judiciary. The nomenklatura appoints judges that are loyal to the party by finding "incentive-compatible" individuals and other mechanisms that restrain the judiciary.[15]

Party endowment firms were compounded by METEC, the state-owned enterprise and military corporation that provides civilian and military goods and services. METEC remains a vivid example of the EPRDF's ambition to capture developmental efforts in the hands of trusted soldiers. Obviously, different questions can be raised as far as the centralisation of political power and the concentration of economic power are concerned. Firstly, METEC is hugely influential. The military conglomerate took over ninety-eight state-owned enterprises, organised them into fifteen semi-integrated businesses that combine two huge sectors, including basic metal and engineering industries. METEC was bound to re-shape the economic might of the military and the civil-military relations of the country (Gebregziabher 2019b). As a result, with its special economic status the corporation indulged in mega projects and provisioned diverse goods and services, often with no prior sectoral expertise. Secondly, the military is inextricably linked to the political leadership of the party – the (ethnic) tie goes back to the civil war period. The fifteen industries are headed by middle to high-ranking military officials (from Major to Colonel) coordinated by a Director General (a Major General).[16] These are connected to the EPRDF through a board composed of military and political officials.

The creation of party and military business empires generates by-products. Specifically, intentional or otherwise, this resulted in the intensive expansion of infrastructure and the implementation of mega-projects, which were presented as evidence of the "developmental" nature of the EPRDF regime. Giving the military and trusted officers an interest in the economy is an important aspect behind the creation of military corporations in Ethiopia. As the varied involvements of METEC in mega-projects show, soldiers have no skill to run sophisticated mega-projects, this often leading to their failure and generating an unprecedented level of corruption.

Following this economic logic, various sub-contracting opportunities in the mega-projects, government procurement contracts, civil service positions at federal and regional levels, and many more micro-level opportunities were given to party loyalists, sometimes only based on ethnic considerations. Key informants,[17] especially those from the legal and business professions, detailed stark reports of how the party directly interfered in legal processes and undermined family businesses that were not particularly supportive of the regime or perceived to be from a different ethno-religious identity. The control of economic processes has important political outcomes. In Ethiopia, the vision of the ruling EPRDF "favors continued government ownership of all land; restricting foreign investment in public utilities, defense-related industries, and banking and insurance; interventionist trade policies with a view to maximizing foreign exchange earnings; and directed currency and credit allocation" (Abegaz 2011: 38).

Ultimately, it is clear that in Ethiopia the ruling EPRDF created party businesses and military conglomerates, and channelled public project works towards these businesses. This is by no means indicative of a long-horizon rent deployment geared towards a rational development effort.

Conclusion

In this article I have critically examined the emergence of party and military business corporations, in terms of endowment and state enterprises, in EPRDF Ethiopia. I have attempted to locate the circumstances and the factors behind the emergence of party and military businesses and the way they undertake their business. I have argued that the "developmental patrimonial interpretation" tends to obscure key aspects of the EPRDF's political economy. To analyse the emergence and entrenchment of party endowment businesses as patrimonial-developmentalist is analytically misleading. The paper engaged with the analytical framework of developmental patrimonialism and the APPP researchers" analysis of Ethiopia's political economy. It is reasonable to conclude that EPRDF's political economy could be defined as clientelist in terms of rent-centralisation. However, this does not mean that it resulted in long-horizon rent management geared towards changing the lives of millions of Ethiopians, as well as transforming the structure of the economy. It is very difficult to contend that the EPRDF regime has taken the long road to development, especially through its endowment companies. The underlying mechanisms behind the emergence of

economic conglomerates run and owned by party and military elites, relate to the political insecurity and the use of business to preserve political power.

Moreover, the labelling and explanation of economic processes and associated political motives as neopatrimonial-developmentalist obscures the analytical focus concerning the nature of the economy. This paper demonstrated that economic growth under the EPRDF has been mainly driven by infrastructure development and the service sector, as well as by international borrowing and aid. A nuanced investigation of the developmental aspect of the EPRDF regime requires a detailed assessment of the intersection between political and economic networks and ethnic politics, as well as how these have been mobilised through economic and political decision-making.

The most worrying finding that came out of the analysis does not necessarily relate to the recognition of oligarchic tendencies in politics and the concentration of economic power in the hands of political parties and military establishments. Rather, it is the justification by elites, supported by some research projects, that these phenomena are signs of capitalist development and that it even makes sense to emulate them in other contexts. In Ethiopia, these phenomena have brought about a general mistrust in the economic system and have led to youth protests. Meanwhile the ruling TPLF party has experienced a historic defeat within the ruling coalition. As indicated by the International Monetary Fund (2018: NA), "in 2017/18, Ethiopia's economic growth dipped to 7.7 percent due to reduced government public expenditure aimed at tackling the growing current account deficit and indebtedness". This report adds that "despite positive developments, the large external imbalances and the public debt burden are constraining future growth and pose risks to the medium-term outlook" (*ibid*). The ideological justifications and public relations exercised by political elites clinging to state power have taken many forms. The most daring one, so far, is the justification of the channelling of state assets and state loans to party-businesses and military conglomerates. As argued by Behuria, Buur and Gray (2017: 521), "scholarship that has emphasized "developmental patrimonialism" - arguing that rents derived as outcomes of clientelism can be used in productive ways - continue to emphasize a "modal pattern" of rent-seeking in relation to economic development".

Ethiopia's economic growth was led by infrastructure projects and other activities that fundamentally related to the party-state. This "miraculous economic growth" has been fuelled by state projects, next to development aid and commercial loans. While this has been beneficial to political elites in the short term, it is likely to become potentially devastating in the long run. Ethiopia was declared near to insolvency by the reformist group that came to power in April 2018. The economic sectors that have shown significant growth have been captured by politically connected individuals and party-military businesses. The political economy dynamics that have characterised EPRDF Ethiopia (1991-2018) require particular attention. Ultimately, the EPRDF's political economy reflects a case of oligarchisation that has created a timid business class on the one hand and a totalising party-military elite on the other.

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NOTES:

1 - There are several scholarly works that dealt with the developmental state in Ethiopia which depict the developmentalist character of the regime, see for example Clapham (2018) and Chang and Hauge (2019). Yet, it is also useful to critically evaluate what informs the emergence of the developmental state rhetoric in the country and its political accomplishments. According to Gebregziabher (2019a), the developmental state rhetoric begun in Ethiopia after a political split within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 2001 and was used to purge dissidents and recalibrate an ideological upper hand by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his camp in the split. Furthermore, the rhetoric and practice of developmental state help engineer control to the village level by the regime through the securitization of poverty.

2 - *Expert interview*, Ethiopian chamber of commerce, 16 November 2015, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

3 - For Kelsall (2011b: 76), "Most African political economies, it is well known, are characterised by high levels of clientelism, corruption and rent-seeking – a constitutive feature of systems frequently called 'patrimonial' or 'neo-patrimonial' in development literature".

4 - See Richard Joseph's lecture titled "Development without Democracy: Confronting the Revisionist Paradigm", Ghana Center for Democratic Development, 13 March 2014, Accra. Found at https://www.effective-states.org/richard-joseph-argues-against-development-without-democracy-in-africa-cdd-ghana/.

5 - I owe this emphasis to one of the reviewers of my paper.

6 - Kibur Genna, *interview*, 28 April 2015, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Kibur Genna is a renowned Ethiopian economist and businessman, who held various leadership positions including president of African chamber of commerce.

7 - *Ethiopia: Counting on growth*, «Africa Confidential», 22 October 2010.

8 - *Ethiopia's Imperfect Growth Miracle*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 20 October 2011.

9 - Mushe Semu, *interview*, 21 March 2016, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Mushe Semu is a businessman and politician.

10 - The junior partners of the ruling coalition also own for-profit companies of lesser importance, again overseen by holding companies registered as endowments. They are Endeavour (Tiret) of ANDM, Tumsa Endowment (formerly Dinsho) controlled by OPDO, and Wondo Group controlled by SEPDM.

11 - «Negarit Gazeta», 9 June 2010.

12 - Rents are taken as excess income. A nuanced analysis is required to distinguish between "bad" and "good" rents in developmental terms (Vaughan, Gebremichael 2011).

13 - See detailed exposition of the three oligarchs in Gebregziabher (2019c).

14 - René Lefort, *The Ethiopian Spring: Killing is not an answer to our grievances*, «Open Democracy», 9 September 2016.

15 - Dagnachew Assefa, *interview*, April 2016.

16 - When the reformist group led by Abiy Ahmed took the political upper hand in April 2018 the Director General, Maj. General Kinfe Dagnew left METEC after eight years of service and subsequently jailed for grand corruption charges along with his former colleagues.

17 - Key interviews undertaken during fieldwork included discussions with lawyers and businesspersons in Addis Ababa.

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The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Media Narratives and State Building

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Abstract

This article explores how Ethiopian mainstream media portray the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), perhaps the most relevant materialisation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s developmental state approach. Through critical discourse analysis of a sample of articles from private media outlets from 2013 to 2020, we map the plurality of narratives employed by the media to represent the GERD and the Nile river. We analyse how changes and continuities in these narratives are related to the process of state building in Ethiopia, and to the unfolding of political events in the Easter-Nile basin. We conclude by pointing at how the continuity in the narratives about the GERD resonate with state-building discourses and strategies under different political regimes.

Keywords: GERD, state-building, media, Ethiopia, Nile, hydropolitics.

Introduction[1]

On 6 February 2011, the cover page of *Fortune*, one of the longest running English newspapers in Ethiopia, opened with the headline "Project X: Turning the energy tide". It conveyed the plan to construct Africa's largest hydroelectric power dam on the Blue Nile, the main tributary to the Nile River. The official inauguration of the project, which later came to be known as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), was televised live by the state-run Ethiopian Television (ETV) on 2 April 2011. Since then Ethiopia has been through some of the most transformative events since the Ethiopian People

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991: the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012; the relatively smooth transition of power to Hailemarian Desalegn, apparently consolidated by the almost uncontested elections of 2015; the eruption of protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions in 2016; the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed; and the downfall of the system erected by the once TPLF dominated EPRDF, eventually spiralling into open conflict between the TPLF and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) in 2020. And yet the GERD, perhaps the most imposing symbol and materialization of Meles' developmental state ideology, has continued to attract national support and consensus, in an otherwise increasingly polarized political confrontation between competing ideas of Ethiopia, and its future.

Rivers have been used as metaphors, symbols, or key storytelling elements to define and illustrate the idea of national identity (Cusack 2010). Water infrastructures like dams play a key role in governments' strategies of state and nation building, enforcing both the symbolic and material presence of the state on its territory, often in the name of modernity and development (Swyngedouw 2015; Menga, Swyngedouw 2018). The media are one of the most relevant spaces where such strategies are crafted, presented, and legitimated (Menga 2017). Media influence goes even beyond the domestic sphere, perpetuating "the view that water is an increasingly likely source of violent conflict" (Zeitoun, Mirumachi 2008: 298) and, in the case of the Nile basin, contributing to the securitization of water issues and to diplomatic tensions among riparian states (Hussein, Grandi 2017). In spite of those claims, comprehensive studies on media narratives and roles in hydro-nationalism and hydro-politics are still at an infant stage. For instance, one of the most exhaustive and multi-disciplinary collections of studies on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, Cascão 2018) does not include such analysis.

We wish to contribute to fill this gap by exploring how the media contribute to reproduce or contest the state's official discourse on the GERD and the Nile in Ethiopia. Our research builds on and expand previous studies on GERD representation in the Ethiopian media: Filippo Menga has argued that the GERD has been framed as a foreign policy issue by Ethiopian leadership to escape from the national debate of its negative consequences in terms of social and environmental impact (Menga 2017); one of the authors of this article, Yeshiwas Degu Belay, has previously analysed the framing of the GERD by one Ethiopian newspaper, *The Reporter,* in the period 2013-14 (Belay 2014).

This article analyses media narratives about the GERD and the Nile in two private print media outlets from 2013 to 2020, to explore changes and continuities across different governments, within the broader context of Ethiopian domestic politics, as well as of legal, political, and technical developments in the Eastern Nile basin (composed by Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt). We identify four main narratives: (1) the GERD as an engine for development (developmentalism); (2) Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam (nationalism); (3) Ethiopia as the victim of colonial water use arrangements

(Pan-Africanism); and (4) the GERD as a regional project (regionalism). We argue that, in spite of their plurality, these media narratives and their interplay resonate with, reproduce, and legitimize official political discourses on the GERD and Nile River, or *Abay* as it is called in Amharic. Since 1991, mainstream national media has been among the favored spaces for Ethiopian elites to articulate and negotiate their ideas and projects on state building (Stremlau 2011). In the case of the GERD, media narratives and political discourses show continuity across different governments and leadership (Meles Zenawi, Hailemariam Desalegn, Abiy Ahmed), cementing the image of a unanimous support to the project among the Ethiopian public opinion and political elites. Thus, public conversations on the GERD, at least on mainstream media, seem to have escaped the polarised, often vitriolic, nature of media debates in contemporary Ethiopia (Skjerdal 2011; Bonsa 2002): a remarkable feature when considering the recent process of 'ethnification' of the media, with increasing plurality resulting also in its polarization along ethno-political cleavages (Skjerdal, Moges 2020).

After presenting our methodology, we sketch a chronology of the GERD against the background of the main political events in Ethiopia, highlighting the official discourses on the dam adopted by different governments and political leaders. We then analyse the coverage of the GERD and the Nile River, presenting the four media narratives that we identified. We conclude by discussing the implication of our findings for the broader debates on state and nation building in Ethiopia, as well as hydropolitics and water diplomacy in the Eastern Nile basin.

Researching media narratives on dams

Often the (re)production of state politics and policies occur behind closed doors, and the general public is distant from getting access. However, as "mediatised politics is an important part of contemporary politics" (Fairclough 1998:147), its "presentation takes place on the public stage that the media provide", mostly through televised transmissions or published outlets (Sarcinelli 1987, cited in Lauerbach, Fetzer 2007: 5). The traditional media, as Berge (2013: 3-4) indicated, "are full of narratives" and hence they are the key in mediating the communicated message. They "can transform its readers [and audience] into travelers in the backstage of the social [political] world" (Neveu 2014: 538), but "the media has to ensure that it owns the narrative[s]" that it provides to the audience/ readership (Kurum 2018: 6).

Media helps to understand the material interests of the state and other complex political, social and ecological aspects of dam constructions (Wu *et al.* 2017: 2). It provides a simplified account of discourses and narratives, and representations of different actors (Flaminio 2016), frames narratives and sets the agenda aimed at influencing both the leadership and public views (McCombs, Shaw 2017; Lundberg *et al.* 2017). Studies on media coverage of dams, though limited, are generally focused on certain important themes and methodologically diversified. Some studies focus on a

cross sectional analysis of media framing of dam constructions in Ethiopia (Belay 2014) and discourse analysis of debates on dam removals in Sweden (Jørgensen, Renöfält 2012). Others move beyond and analyse the spatial and temporal changes in public perceptions of environment in France through interviews, textometry and content analysis of dam related news articles (Flaminio 2016); the role of the media narratives in shaping and influencing public awareness of the dams in Canada using a systematic content analysis (De Loe 1999); a linguistic-discourse analysis of the national media representations of social movements that run against dam infrastructures in Brazil (Da Silva, Rothman 2011); and local media's role in promoting the construction of dams in the US (Daws, Brinson 2019). There are also studies that applied a longitudinal content analysis of foreign media coverage of the dam developments in China (Wu *et al.* 2017), and a comparative and thematic analysis of national media coverage of dams across several countries in Asia (Delang 2019).

Longitudinal studies on media coverage of the GERD using multiple analytical frameworks, however, remain scarce. This article seeks to address the lacuna by placing Ethiopian national media at the center of scholarly discussions. For this purpose, we focus on three private newspaper outlets, *The Reporter, Reporter Amharic* and *Fortune*.[2] The Reporter, owned by Media and Communications Center, was founded in 1995 and publishes *The Reporter*, a weekly English newspaper, and *Reporter,* a biweekly Amharic newspaper.[3] *Fortune*, an Independent News and Media Plc established in 2000, is dominantly a business affairs weekly English language outlet. Both are based in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, but they have a national circulation and are available in print and online forms. Fairly, they carry open criticism of the government. The choice of these outlets was motivated by different factors. The press in Ethiopia has been characterized by high volatility, with numerous newspapers, especially those critical of the government, ceasing to operate after a few years, in some cases even a few months since their launch (Bonsa 2002; Gagliardone 2016). Our interest in covering a relatively long temporal arc required focusing on outlets that offered a high chance to continue publishing for the whole period covered by the research. Also, the findings presented here emerge from a larger project aimed at studying narratives on the Nile rivers across multiple countries, including Egypt, Sudan, and Uganda, and the selection of outlets in Ethiopia was informed by the possibility of comparing them with outlets following similar editorial policies and goals in those other countries.

We used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of newspaper articles, considered as a unit of analysis. Articles were retrieved from each outlets' online databases using the key word 'Nile' and 'ዓባይ' (*Abay*). The acquisition of articles from *Reporter Amharic* required additional archival research in the media house in Addis Ababa, as some of the articles for the first three years within the selected period were not available online. This process generated a total of 3710 articles containing at least a word Nile/*Abay.* After a preliminary assessment of their relevance and elimination of duplications, 250 articles

constituted the analysis. To ensure fair representation of voices, within and outside the media organization, the sample articles were delimited to news, editorials, journalist contributions, interviews and commentary and opinion pieces. Following Fairclough's exhortation to use CDA to "systematically explore often opaque relationships between discursive practices, events and texts" (Fairclough 1995: 132), the analysis was conducted both at the article level through close examination of the content of messages communicated and at the newspaper level emphasizing the position of the newspapers and how events positioned them in the debate about the Nile and the GERD.

This process led to identifying four, not mutually exclusive and often overlapping, narratives - summarized in Table 2. Similarly, to other attempts to map and analyse tensions and conflicts around environmental issues (Benjaminsen, Svarstad 2008; Roe 1989), our approach did not look for specific narratives, but let narratives progressively emerge by comparing and connecting emerging patterns. Given our focus on the politics of the Nile, the definition of narratives we adopted was not simply as discourses characterized by a greater or lesser degree of coherence, and seeking to attribute meanings to social phenomena, but, in resonance with Roe's definition (Roe 1994), as stories that underwrite and stabilize assumptions in situations that persist with unknowns and a high degree of interdependence. Differently from Roe, however, and as it will become clearer from the discussion of the specific narratives we identified, narratives emerging around the Nile were not meant as much to inform policy, or to support a specific policy over another, but to connect a policy which allowed limited room for negotiation to a constellation of meanings that emphasised its relevance from different perspectives. This is reflective of another of Fairclough's key tenets, about how texts are "ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles overpower" (Fairclough 1995: 133), indicating in this specific case how media outlets that have been allowed to publish for an extended period of time, despite their intermittent criticism of the Ethiopian government, had to operate within a discursive space that was delimited by power, while being allowed greater freedom to make use of that space.

A dam for two leaders

Built in the western Benishangul-Gumuz region, close to the border with Sudan, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam stands as the flagship project of the Ethiopian developmental state (Lavers, Terrefe, Gebresenbet 2021). With a 74 billion cubic meters water storage capacity, a 1.8 km length, a 155 meters height, and an installed capacity of 6,450 megawatts, once completed it will be the biggest hydropower plant in Africa (Whittington, Waterbury, Jeuland 2014).

The project is led by the state owned Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCo). The main contractor for the civil works is Salini Impregilo (since 2020 called WeBuild),

a global player in the sector, with Italian origins and strong ties in Ethiopia, where it has been working since the 1960s, and notably in the past twenty years at the implementation of the cascade dams of Gilgel Gibe in the Omo valley (Hailu 2018). The electro-mechanical works, initially allocated to the state-owned Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), were later contracted out to other foreign companies.

The mere cost of the dam – 4.8 billion of US dollar as per the contract awarded to Salini in 2011 without competitive bidding– represents a considerable quota of the national GDP, that according to the World Bank was around 30 billion USD in 2011, and later grew to 107 billion USD in 2020.[4] Remarkably, the construction of the dam was financed only by domestic funds, including private donations, compulsory withdrawals from public officers' salaries and *ad hoc* state bonds that have been massively bought by all Ethiopians including those in the diaspora. This endeavor has been promoted through a vast mobilization campaign that by means of all available media – e.g. TV and press, arts, sport, and lottery – made the dam omnipresent in Ethiopian public spaces (Menga 2017). Such mobilisation was also possible because of the unique place that the Nile holds in the Ethiopian culture, religion, history and identity (see for instance Oestigaard 2018; Erlikh 2002). The GERD benefited from this bond, and at the same time contributed to change the Ethiopian public imaginary about the Nile: from a river flowing away without fertilising the country, to a symbol of development and renaissance (Ayenalem, Fantini, van der Zaag *forthcoming*). The idea of building a dam on the Blue Nile was already developed under Haile Selassie's reign (1931-74) (McKinney 2011; McCann 1981).[5] However, it was only in 2011 that the Ethiopian government was finally able to overcome the traditional Egyptian opposition and start building such a dam (Cascão, Nicol 2016).

Thus, being at the centre of the development strategy of the Ethiopian state and of the hydropolitics in the Nile basin, the construction of the GERD has been shaped by the unfolding of political events at national and regional level, also influencing some of them (see Table 1).

Table 1: Main domestic political events and GERD chronology since 2011

Domestic political events	Month/Year	GERD chronology
	April 2011	Beginning of the construction of the GERD
Prime Minister Meles Zenawi died	August 2012	
Hailemariam Desalegn became the Prime Minister	September 2012	
	May 2013	Diversion of the Nile river
	March 2015	Declaration of Principles signed between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt
Hailemariam Desalegn re-elected	May 2015	
Protest across Amhara and Oromia regions	August 2016	
	January 2018	Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn met with El Sisi in Cairo
PM Hailemariam Desalegn resigned	February 2018	
Abiy Ahmed came to power	April 2018	
	November 2018	Kinfe Dagnew, a Brigadier General and former Chief Executive of METEC, arrested
	June 2018	Prime Minister Abiy met with President El-Sisi in Cairo
	July 2018	Simegnew Bekele, former GERD Chief Engineer, found dead in Addis Ababa
Sidama Regional State established through referendum	November 2019	
EPRDF officially dissolved	December 2019	
	October 2019	The US led talks on the GERD in Washington between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt
	February 2020	Ethiopia refused to sign the US sponsored agreement
The House of Peoples Representatives postpones the sixth national election - initially scheduled in August 2020 - for an unspecified time	April 2020	Negotiation resumed under the AU chairmanship
	June 2020	GERD discussed at the UN Security Council upon request of Egypt
	July 2020	First filling of the dam completed
Tigray Regional State holds elections in disagreement with the Federal Government	September 2020	
The war between TPLF and the federal government started	November 2020	

Source: the authors.

In laying down the first stone of the dam, in April 2011, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi encased the dam as an essential component of a larger project of state and nation building. Initially called the Millennium Dam, resonating with the celebration in the Ethiopian calendar of a few years earlier, the project was presented as a turning point in the history of the country.

In a country of more than 120 million people of which less than 45% have access to electricity,[6] in Meles view "this project will play a major and decisive role in realizing the five-year Growth and Transformation Plan and the consequent advance towards the eradication of poverty".[7] Considering that the benefits in terms of improved water management for development and economic growth "will clearly extend to all neighboring states, and particularly to the downstream Nile basin countries, to Sudan and Egypt", Meles even argued that "one might expect these countries to be prepared to share the cost in proportion to the gains that each state will derive".[8] While calling for a turning point in transboundary cooperation in the Blue Nile basin, Meles also reasserted the Ethiopian people's will of "paying any sacrifice" to build the dam,[9] as well as "the capacity to assert our rights", ending the epoch in which "centuries of impoverishment curtailed our development and restricted us from exercising our right to use the resources of our own rivers".[10] During his rule Meles was a controversial figure,[11] with strong opposition both internally in his party (Tadesse, Young 2003) and outside, in spite of a general appreciation by international observers and donors (De Waal 2013; Lefort 2013). The cult of personality that followed his death, attempted to remove such controversy, celebrating a leadership and legacy that has often been visualised by public portraits of Meles standing beside the dam.

The leadership of Hailemariam Desalegn, who served as deputy PM and Foreign Minister in the last cabinet led by Meles, stands in continuity with Meles' political discourse around the GERD. For instance, Hailemariam referred to the dam as a turning point in history that could be compared to the victory of Adwa in boosting "Black people pride".[12] On the international stage, Hailemariam signed with the leaders of Egypt and Sudan the Declaration of Principles that constitutes so far the only legal documents recognised by the three parties to regulate the negotiations over the dam.

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018, he received a huge attention because of the implication for state policies, approaches and responsiveness to domestic and international affairs. The change and rupture brought by Abiy seems to reverberate also in the less triumphalist tones on the GERD that he initially adopted. In his first media brief, he expressed that "the GERD bears the fingerprint of each one of us… and provides a ground to demonstrate to the world that we Ethiopian can dream and execute our project. So, if we fail to finish the GERD, it is a disgrace for us".[13] He also acknowledged that the completion of the dam would have been taking years more than planned with the pace of the time. Among others, he said: "When we started the mega dam like *Hedassie* ["Renaissance" in Amharic], it is difficult to think that we had

full preparation. It is not only with GERD that we have had the problem of finishing our projects on time".[14] It was the first time that the delay of the nation's centerpiece project was officially acknowledged.

The military run company Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), EPRDF's developmental state symbol and key strategic player, was mentioned as responsible for the delay of the installation of the electromechanical part of the dam, and as the result a delay to the filling of the water reservoir according to the plan. The Director-General Major-General of METEC Kinfe Dagnaw was charged with corruption. When he was arrested in April 2018, it was breaking news on state-run EBC. The corruption case was also exposed by a video documentary produced and broadcasted by the state-run media company FANA.[15] The documentary indicated METEC leadership of abusing their position and power to influence decisions for personal gains, to divert public resources for private benefits, to trump official norms in contracting and bidding, and to fail in delivering all the mega projects in which they had been involved, like the GERD and several sugar factories. These allegations and the media reports contributed to the revoking of METEC's contract. Through this move, together with the confirmation or appointment of key figures, like the "technocrat" Seleshi Bekele as Minister of Water and Resources and several other water diplomats, or Aregawi Berhe, a leader of opposition leader/Tigray Democratic Coalition Party as Director General of the Office of the National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation to the Construction of the GERD, Abiy was able to affirm his influence on the GERD management, ousting the leadership like the head of the GERD National Council and METEC, loyal to the previous regime (Gebregziabher 2019).

In spite of such a deep material rupture, the official discourse of the dam did not drastically change. In his briefing to the Ethiopian parliament on 22 October 2019, televised live, Abiy expressed Ethiopia's national interest, pride and willingness to complete the dam at any cost, including "If there is a need to go to war, we could get millions ready". At the same time, he tempered the tone, recalling that "Ethiopians have no intention to hurt Egyptians. They only want to use the water" and "No one would benefit from war".[16] In a discussion with national experts, the top management and member of the Board of the GERD on the progress of the project, broadcasted in national news, Abiy stressed the continuity in the project and its uncompromising nature: "[...] a demonstration to the world that despite changes in government or individual leadership in anytime Ethiopian national interest and sovereignty, for the government and the people, today is the same as yesterday".[17]

More recently, as a reaction to the Egyptian attempt to transform the GERD into an issue of global security, involving first the USA and later the UN Security Council, Abiy reasserted the Ethiopian request for an African solution, mediated by the African Union.[18] Such emphasis on Ethiopian national sovereignty and independence - "No force can stop Ethiopia from building dam" -[19] was clearly illustrated by the first two rounds of unilateral filling of the dam reservoir, undertaken during the rainy seasons of July 2020 and 2021. Such stands dovetails with the Ethiopian government's rebuttal of international criticism and allegations of mass human rights violations in the war in Tigray.

Plurality of narratives on the GERD

This section presents the narratives on the GERD/the Nile that have emerged from the analysis of the two media houses. They are: (1) the GERD as an engine for development; (2) Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam; (3) Ethiopia as the victim of colonial water arrangements; and (4) the GERD as a regional project. As summarised in table 2, these narratives are not necessarily exclusive, rather they often intersect and reinforce each other, and may appear within the same media outlet and within the same article at once.

Table 2: Summary of the main media narratives on the GERD

Narratives	Claims	References	Main actors/ issues representation
Developmentalism	GERD as an engine for development: • Economic growth • Human development	• Epistemology of dams as development • History of dam in big economies • Ethiopian Renaissance • Poverty as an existential threat • The right to development	• State economy and social services presented to grow • Human development expected to improve • National energy demands conveyed to be satisfied • Foreign exchange from power trade
Nationalism	Ethiopia a nation united behind the dam • GERD as a symbol of unity • GERD as history in the making	• State discourse of Unity in Diversity • The history of the Battle of Adwa	• State and society as united • Public ownership of GERD • Ethiopians as heroic and patriotic • Battle of Adwa as an example
Pan-Africanism	Ethiopia as a victim of colonial water arrangements: • Decolonizing the Nile • Advancing a new Nile order	• Colonialism/ Neo colonialism • The 1929/59 Nile agreements • CFA and NBI	• Ethiopia as a key actor • Sudan, Egypt, WB and US are problematized • African solutions to African problems as a wayout
Regionalism	GERD as a regional project • A genuine vehicle for mutual benefit • A source of electricity to African states • An emblem of regional progress and prosperity	• Energy led integration • African Renaissance • Principle of no significant harm	• Ethiopia as Africa's energy hub • Sudan and Egypt as beneficiaries of constant water flow • Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and other African countries as beneficiaries of electricity

Source: the authors.

The GERD as an engine for development (Developmentalism)

Development is the dominant narrative in the media coverage of the GERD invoking the instrumentality of hydropower dams in generating economic growth, and it is legitimised by placing "the right to development" at the center of the Nile debate – for example, for *Fortune* the GERD stands as "an affirmation to the rights of Ethiopia to use the waters of the Nile".[20] Using an "engine" metaphor, GERD is communicated as a "special project" to accelerate Ethiopia's economy and meet the energy demand of its population. Published on 5 April 2016 the *Fortune* article – Journey to a Hydro-dollar Nation – frames the dam "as a source of foreign exchange" through transnational power trade. A commentary by Mekdelawit Messay (a PhD researcher) emphasizes how the GERD will improve the wellbeing of women, free them from travelling several kilometers to fetch water and collect firewood, and from fear of gender-based violence.[21] Similarly, *The Reporter* editorial conveys: "[...] It's not because the dam is being built on the Blue Nile that we attach special importance to it; it is because of the significant benefits that can be derived from the dam. The dam will be a dependable source of energy. [...] It will play a crucial role in the growth of industry, agriculture, transportation, technology, and a host of other social services".[22]

Development narrative is constructed in reference to other examples of hydropower dams that "produced economic miracles" and that are portrayed as icons of modernisation in countries like the United States, Canada, China, Turkey and, of course, Egypt.[23] This account conveys hydropower dams as symbols of progress and common global practices to sustain economic growth, subscribing to the dams–development epistemology which is commonly adopted to legitimise mega-hydraulic projects (see also Boelens, Shah, Bruins 2019). In addition the narrative is inspired by a more inward looking reference to the Renaissance of Ethiopia, striving for an imagined state, or its rebirth.[24] The latter notion is linked with Ethiopia's past glory, citing its historic civilization, as a crossroads of world's trade, and architectural achievements like the construction of Axum obelisks and Lalibela rock-hewn churches. The GERD is represented as a bridge between the past and the future so as to maintain continuity of the civilisation.

The media has also recounted the history of famine and drought to signify the importance of dam infrastructures to break with the painful experiences of the past. Citing the global environmental problems, Ethiopia remains categorised among the countries that could relapse into a famine trap, which poses an existential threat. This is illustrated as follows by *The Reporter*: "The threat of rainfall scarcity has not disappeared. Nor have its linked repercussions which can include food insecurity, land degradation, overgrazing, drought, [...]. Ethiopian farmers along the tributaries of the Blue Nile and in the gorge, itself can still face such dangers which can have such a huge impact on their lives and even threaten the survival of Ethiopia as a nation".[25]

The above excerpt suggests a moral reasoning that the people who live along the source

of the longest rivers in the world shouldn't be experiencing famines and droughts. It also provides the ideational content to see the GERD as vital to prevent such catastrophe from reoccurring and to address Ethiopia's existential threats. Hence, the symbolic and material importance of the dam is, therefore, both informed by the current developments needs of the nation and significantly linked with historical experiences of both glory and shame – of poverty and famine– and projection of Ethiopia's future.

Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam (Nationalism)

The narrative of Ethiopia as a nation united behind the dam spans across political regimes. Ethiopians are often represented as supportive of the state project and united in terms of financial and ideological engagements. Domestic opposition parties, as *The Reporter* writes, "[...] believe that the construction of the GERD is in the national interest and have not stooped to acting as instruments of the country's enemies".[26] The appointment by Abiy's government of opposition leaders as part of the GERD management team was topical. On a similar tone, *The Reporter* editorial – The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: a monument being erected by all Ethiopians for the edification of Ethiopia (05 April 2014) – writes: "Seeing through the construction of the Renaissance Dam is not an agenda of politicians, the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) or the government alone. Neither is it something which the people of Ethiopia are coerced into supporting. It is a feat which politicians, the public and the government alike are willing and determined to achieve through a collective effort".[27]

To represent this united front, journalists usually employed words like "we", "all Ethiopians" and "the people of Ethiopia" in GERD stories downplaying the volatile internal politics and public discontent against the government. In addition, they portrayed the GERD as "a collective feat" and "a national agenda" demonstrating the agency of the infrastructure in bringing national unity, even at the time of controversies on the outset of METEC for its scandal as *Fortune* article echoed on 13 April 2019. *Reporter Amharic* headline – **የህዳሴው ግድብ የአንድነታችን አዲስ ምልክት** (15 March 2020) – fully captures this narrative conveying the GERD as a new symbol of Ethiopian's unity.

The narrative of unity is infused with Ethiopia's historical-cultural account and presented as a reason for victory, sovereignty and nationhood exemplified by Adwa victory against the Italian colonial army in 1896. The media has conveyed that this national pride has been replicated at Guba, where GERD is located, – for example, *The Reporter* headlined as "Rewriting Adwa in Guba". The article writes: "in the face of international refusal to help finance GERD and any projects on the Nile River, as well as Egypt's incessant campaign and lobby to block funds to these projects, Ethiopians should harken back to the lessons of not the military side of Adwa but rather the intellectual, political and developmental facet of the battle. Ethiopians have won the battle [...] through the employment of domestic resource mobilization".[28]

To demonstrate Ethiopian's achievements, the physical environment of both Adwa and Guba is described as extremely challenging. For example, Adwa's chain of mountains was the test of Ethiopia's fighters in the battle against the Italian well militarized army. Similarly, dealing with the very harsh weather and diverting the Nile River, which has long been seen as mysterious and untouchable, has been incredibly challenging. Adwa has been echoed for its "historic and heroic pan-Ethiopian unity" and mediatized to serve as a historical, cultural and ideological tool to deal with such challenging endeavours and to accomplish the development needs of contemporary Ethiopia. Using a battlefield metaphor, the GERD is portrayed as a "new" or "second" Adwa perpetuating a narrative of victory.[29] On 15 December 2013, *Fortune* headlined "Like the Adwa victory, the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) will be venerated for generations".

Ethiopians are represented as "heroic people'' and "fiercely patriotic" and they are expected to accomplish "this proud chapter [...] with victory".[30] They are also depicted as history makers. *The Reporter* article– History in the Making– covers how Ethiopians are making another embodiment of history by building "the largest and most complicated construction project to date".[31] Like the heroes and heroines of the battle of Adwa, Semegnew Bekele, the late chief engineer and project manager, has been repetitively presented as the human face of the GERD. When he was found dead at the heart of Addis Ababa, *Fortune* expressed that Ethiopians were in shock and in a state of disbelief.[32]

In sum, Ethiopia's unity and patriotism in defense against colonialism has been given primacy over the recent past. It is placed at the center of media conversations and has become a powerful tool for contemporary development endeavours. Though this narrative continued throughout all the time, the media has provided extensive coverage on Ethiopians' unity behind the GERD around the commemoration of the Adwa Victory in March capitalizing on nationalism and pride, emotional politics, of the past.

Ethiopia as the victim of colonial water arrangements (Pan-Africanism)

Colonialism and asymmetric power to utilize the Nile among the riparian countries is another central theme in Ethiopian media coverage of the GERD and the Nile River. The story goes back to the early XX Century when Britain water imperialists imposed a treaty preventing upstream countries from using the Nile. For example, *Fortune* writes: "[...] the treaty of 1929 between Britain, which controlled Egypt at the time and needed Egyptian cotton as a raw material for its textile industry, and the British colonial governments in the upper Nile basin colonies of Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika. The treaty prohibited the upstream British colonies in the Nile basin from building water infrastructure on the Nile without Egypt's permission".[33]

This arrangement was solidified by the 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan for the *Full Utilisation* of the Nile allocating the entire river to Egypt (55.5 billion cubic meters), Sudan (18.5 billion cubic meters) and evaporation at the Sahara Desert (more

than 10 billion cubic meters). The remaining riparian countries were allocated zero drop of water. *Fortune, The Reporter* and *Reporter Amharic* have communicated the agreement as "unfair" and downstream countries as victims. In multiple newspaper articles these figures appeared conveying a negative representation about the agreement. *The Reporter* entitled – On the Nile and the GERD: O Egypt, O shame, where is thy blush? – criticizes the agreement for ignoring the other's interest and blames Egypt.[34] Reflecting on public emotions, another article from the same newspaper informs how the treaties deprived Ethiopia "worthy of drinking water from the Nile", "prohibited from using the Nile" and created "a deep feeling of betrayal and animosity in the hearts of generations".[35] The 1929/59 arrangements are depicted as colonial treaties suggesting to locate the current Nile debates not simply as part of a recent confrontation initiated by the GERD, but in the broader context of decolonization, and of the need to redress injustice created by the colonisers. Colonialism is problematized for creating asymmetric water use arrangements by granting some riparian countries exclusive power and privilege. *Fortune* presents the arrangement as the main challenge to reorder the Nile governance in post-colonial Africa due to, as a commentary by Dejen Yemane (a PhD student at Addis Ababa University) writes, Egypt's fierce position to maintain the treaties for justifying claims of prior use and "ownership" of the Nile.[36] Similarly, *The Reporter* presents the Nile as a place where competing interests of "Pax Britannica" and "Pax Africana" exist: "The main goal of Egypt's strategy [...] has been to sustain the colonial treaties of Pax Britannica and its 'water imperialism'. This meant that the strategy is also directed against any efforts by other upstream countries to develop and use the Nile waters as part of the decolonization process and their own development".[37] A *Fortune* article by Nurye Yassin (a diplomat at the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MoFA) further emphasizes the need to change "the mindset of the colonial era agreements" because it "prevents an understanding of the logic of Ethiopia's natural rights to rescue its citizens from poverty, along with the interests of other riparian countries".[38]

Pan-Africanism is presented as a solution for inclusive water use and more broadly for re-shaping Africa's political economy and identity. Institutions like the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI, an intergovernmental platform for political and technical cooperation among Nile basin countries, established in 1999) and the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) adopted therein in 2010, are framed as key elements in this Pan-African reading of the GERD, with Ethiopia represented as leading the interests of upstream countries. *Fortune* communicates that "by denying the 1929 and 1959 colonial era treaty, which gives rights over the Nile to Egypt and Sudan, the six countries have reached an agreement, which Ethiopia has become the first to ratify".[39] *The Reporter* further suggests downstream countries to abandon the colonial treaty and join the CFA as it is in the common interest of all basin countries.[40] Yet, because Egypt and Sudan are against the CFA, they are often problematized as a challenge to Pan–Africanisation of the Nile.

Colonialism, however, is not simply framed as a distinct historical phenomenon. It is also evoked as a process seeking to impose the interests of foreign powers over African nations. When the United States stepped in more aggressively into the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt, Ethiopian media reacted denouncing President Trump's interference. An article in *Fortune* questions: "Why are they pressuring a poor African country to relinquish its sovereign rights to manage its dam and use its fair share of the river in accordance with international rules and norms?".[41]

Sovereignty has become a more topical issue and a large volume of commentary and opinion pieces were published by Ethiopian experts, students and even diplomats advising the Abiy's government not to fall under the US and WB trap, otherwise – as Jesse Jackson (a prominent American civil rights activist) wrote to *Fortune* – "Ethiopia could become 21st Century colony of Egypt".[42] Instead, the media has been poured in with the idea of a Pan-African solution – 'the need to solve an African problem within Africa' – and the media like *The Reporter* (30 May 2020) questioned "Why is the AU eying the ominous GERD row from a distance?"

The GERD as a regional project (Regionalism)

Ethiopian media coverage of the GERD is also broadly linked with transnational flows of goods and services across the region carrying another narrative in the positive representation of the dam, which is depicted as "a genuine vehicle for mutual benefit" and "an emblem of regional progress and prosperity".[43] At the basin level, the GERD is described as an important infrastructure to better regulate the flow of the Nile to downstream countries and as a technical solution to the recurring problem in the downstream countries. *The Reporter* writes: "According to hydrologists, the Dam will indeed prevent the detrimental effects of flooding that afflicted Egyptians and Sudanese in 1964, 1973 and 1988, and promote the consolidation of the navigation sector in lower streamers, which in turn contributes to the development of the tourism and fishing industries, when completed. They also say that the Dam on the Ethiopian highlands will reduce evaporation, sedimentation and siltation in downstream basins like those of the Aswan or the Merowe dams. The reduction in sedimentation and siltation at Aswan will enable Egypt to avoid the increasing coastline erosion (125–175m [410–574ft] per year) encircling the Nile Delta. When the GERD is completed, the evaporation loss at Aswan Dam will be 9.5 percent instead of the already 10.8 bcm per year".[44]

The deployment of scientific/expert position in the above excerpt helps to "convey authorial stance by proxy", in the words of Catenaccio (2017: 137), communicating benefits of the dam to downstream economies, hydrology and ecology of the Nile, which is clearly presented in the article as relevant to the ongoing discussion between the three states.

This narrative has emphasised the principle of "no significant harm". On 8 June 2013,

the editorial of *The Reporter* wrote that while the right to water development of upstream basin countries is internationally recognized, they cannot exercise this right in a manner that affects other's interests significantly. The newspaper published the official account on this topic by interviewing Alemayehu Tegenu, the then Minister of Water, Irrigation and Energy, who mentioned that the international panel of experts (IPoE) confirmed the dam does not inflict any significant harm against downstream countries.

At the regional level, the GERD is presented as a source of "a cheaper and greater supply of electricity" to African countries.[45] Ethiopia, with a potential of 45,000 MW of hydroelectricity to meet Africa's current demand, has been constructed as an energy hub and center of regional connectivity. To exemplify this narrative, *Fortune* article –"Ethiopia, Sudan Negotiate Pact for 1,000MW Electric Export"– communicates the bilateral agreements for the installation of the second power interconnection line to export 1,000 megawatts of electric energy to Sudan.[46] The newspaper also covered the benefit of Ethiopia's hydropower energy to reach Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and other African countries. The materialisation of energy connectivity is conveyed to be transformative and to improve the resilience of many communities beyond borders and reinforce mutually cooperative partnership and fast track regional economic communities.

The Reporter article emphasizes that the GERD "will inspire the entire African continent to realize the ideals of Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance [...]. Hydropower generation and trade will open a new horizon for Ethiopia's industrialization and African economic transformation".[47] Such representation of the dam will also contribute "to end Western portrayal of apocalyptic vision of the African experience as a famine overwhelmed, hopeless continent, sociopolitical traumatic field, and many other distressing words in their visualization of African past, present and future".[48] Thus the GERD is framed as a project for "inclusive regional prosperity" and "a symbol of regional integration",[49] with Ethiopia as the material and symbolic base through which Africa is being constructed.

Conclusion

Concocted as a national flagship project launched by EPRDF developmental state, and built on a highly symbolic river like the Nile, the GERD has occupied a central place in Ethiopian public spaces and debates since its inception. Despite a polarized and ethnificated media, the change in political leadership, and an increasingly divided and conflictual political space, the GERD stands out as a symbol of national unity, sovereignty and pride. Stunningly no critical opinions and narratives on the dam can be detected in Ethiopian mainstream media and public spaces.

The plurality of narratives developed to represent and legitimise the GERD have certainly facilitated the consensus around this infrastructure: a dam at the same time for

sustainable development, national unity, Pan-African revival, and regional integration. These narratives resonate with the framing of the GERD that Meles advanced at the inauguration of the project. They have later been blended and combined in different ways, to respond to the unfolding of domestic and international events, as well as to legitimise the agenda of successive political leadership – Hailemariam and Abiy.

Such consensus of discourses and positions on the GERD, at least in mainstream media and public debates, seems astounding when confronted to the fact that all around the world, large scale water infrastructures and mega-hydraulic developments are usually highly contested projects, in terms of technical approaches and material interests (Crow-Miller, Webber, Molle 2017), as well as meanings, knowledge and epistemologies mobilised to make sense of these infrastructures (Boelens, Shah, Bruins 2019). With this in mind, the findings of our research can engage with two broader debates: on the process of state and nation building in Ethiopia, and on the hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile basin.

In relation to the former, the official unity of the political discourse and media narratives on the GERD should be scrutinised against two main events: the recent developments in the implementation of the project, with the removal by Abiy of one of its main stakeholders, the military controlled construction company METEC – arguably, once presented as the industrial champion of EPRDF developmental state, and the dramatic unfolding of the conflict in the North of the country. These developments point at the need to reflect on the extent to which an infrastructure can effectively inform and shape strategies of state and nation building. Notably the ongoing armed conflict, with the recrudescence of ethnic based violence, seems to indicate that, while successful in cementing consensus on the dam, these narratives alone cannot legitimate the state and the political leadership that promote them. In this respect, further research is needed to explore discourses and narratives outside the mainstream, for instance in social media or in languages other than English and Amharic. Large scale development projects like dams have historically been – and still are – contentious elements of state-building strategies aiming at incorporating the peripheries into the core of the Ethiopian state (Markakis 2011; Mosley, Watson 2016). Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the representations of the Nile river and the GERD by the groups living at the geographical and political frontiers of these state building projects.

In relation to ongoing debates on hydropolitics and water diplomacy initiatives in the Eastern Nile basin, the findings of our research subscribe to the call for further attention to the interplay between the domestic and the international level in transboundary water conflicts (Menga 2016). The seemingly unanimous consensus around the GERD in the Ethiopia public opinion, reflected in the unity of media and political narratives, represents both a strength and a limit for the Ethiopian negotiators sitting at the international diplomatic table with Egypt and Sudan. Once the dam is framed in high and cherished symbolism, even a small concession on seemingly technical issues like

the filling of the dam reservoir and its operation, risks to appear as a political defeat in the public opinion's eye, – and perhaps delegitimise the ruling leadership. Therefore, scholars and diplomats should not overlook the role of national media and narratives in shaping the contours and the conditions of water conflict and cooperation in the Nile basin, like elsewhere.

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2 - As this article is part of a larger ongoing project on media, science, and water diplomacy in the Nile River basin, it was important to ensure comparability of newspaper outlets across countries.

3 - For this study we call it *Reporter Amharic* to eliminate confusion with the English version of the newspaper, *The Reporter.*

4 - See also *Ethiopia: Country Profile,* "The World Bank", 2021: https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=ETH.

5 - The vision of strategizing Guba's, where the dam is located, lowland peripheral area through large-scale hydropower development dates back to the period of Emperor Haile Selassie (1931-1974) when Ethiopia invited US experts to conduct a Blue Nile survey to identify a location. See also McCann (1981) and McKinney (2011). In 2009 and 2010, national experts accomplished substantial work including detailed analysis of the actual project site.

6 - See also *Access to electricity (% of population) – Ethiopia*, "The World Bank", n.a.: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS?locations=ET.

7 - The speech made by the late PM Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia at the official commencement, groundbreaking ceremony of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project, Guba, Benishangul Gumuz, *Ethiopian PM Meles Zenawi Speech on Launching GERD (Text and Videos)*, "Meleszenawi.com", 02 April 2011: https://www.meleszenawi.com/ethiopian-pm-meles-zenawi-speech-on-launching-gerd-text-and-videos/.

8 - *Ibid.*

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The Expansion of Social Protection Systems in Ethiopia: Continuity or Rupture of Citizen-State Relations?

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Abstract

During the era of the EPRDF in Ethiopia (1991-2019) social protection developed in specific ways, in design and implementation. This article reflects on this period to explore how these manifestations occurred, within the context of broader state building efforts. While rapidly increasing in type and coverage, social protection benefited some and excluded others, consistently across different social protection interventions. The expansion of social protection served different purposes, with scaling services supporting political settlement and while implementation entrenched local power structures. We reflect on why these expressions took place by critically analyzing the problematization narratives in policies and strategies as well as implementation (funding, design and experience). We evaluate social protection during this era in three periods: responsive (1991-2004), donor-driven (2005-2013) and re-orientation (2014-2019). The re-visiting of the history, practice and research of social protection enables us to explore how little the expansion of social protection has altered the expected role of the government and the rights of citizens, and instead how these initiatives acted as a tool that entrenched political power and disenfranchised any form of dissent or difference.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Social Protection, Public Policy, Governance.

Introduction

Social protection developed and expanded in specific ways during the years that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led Ethiopia (1991-2019). With the dissolution of the EPRDF in 2019, it seems an apt moment to reflect on the

social protection policies (and their implementation) of this era. Was this, as this issue of *afriche e orienti* seeks to explore, an era reflective of an intentional continuity or one of transformative rupture? Given the years of protest and unrest that led up to the political changes in 2018 as well as the instability and conflict that followed, we also think it is an opportune moment to critically reflect on the role of social protection policies and systems, which (at least theoretically) seek to foster positive transformative change, such as the elimination of hunger and extreme poverty. Based on our research on social protection during the EPRDF era, we have witnessed positive outcomes, but also that these changes do not necessarily imply system transformation. We seek to explore if the policies were indeed transformative, such as in advancing or positively redefining citizen rights via social protection rooted in enhanced citizen rights. If so, in what ways and for whom. If transformation did not occur, we explore what objectives social protection served; one alternative being a form of political settlement within a vision of the EPRDF that the people are unable to determine what is best for themselves and that an elite political vanguard ought to do so on their behalf. This broader view of social protection allows for a critical analysis not only of target improvements resulting from social protection but also of the systems they operate within and modalities of implementation that can protect or stifle freedoms and rights. Due to the consistent demands of citizens for the advancement of rights and freedoms throughout the EPRDF period (e.g. Pellerin, Cochrane forthcoming 2022), this research question continues to be relevant for understanding social protection and governance in Ethiopia.

Contributors to this issue of *afriche e orienti* explore other government decisions (e.g. ethnofederalism and the developmental state, economic liberalization and land deals) and governance (e.g. the curtailing of democratization). This article explores the specific role of social protection (broadly defined), which we organize into three phases within the EPRDF era. As we discuss below, while recognizing the positive outcomes that social protection offered, the design and implementation also have political functions, which may strengthen rights and freedoms or stifle them via political patronage as well as exclusions. For example, as we note below, Ethiopia's flagship social protection program was not implemented in all regions (nor was the coverage aligned with the areas of most need of such a program), reflective of systemic marginalization of livelihoods, geographies and ethno-linguistic identities. Based upon this, we posit that while advancements were made in social-development indicators, the experience of social protection was one of continuity in its government-citizen relationship. Furthermore, while providing goods and services, social protection contributed to discontent that eventually demanded political rupture.

As we reflect on social protection during the EPRDF era, we do not aim to offer any form of final word on the matter. Reflections are largely a critical self-assessment, which we acknowledge may be incorrect or incomplete. We draw on particular experiences, backgrounds, disciplines, while others may approach these same questions

from different vantage points and see a different horizon. While different, that does not necessarily mean such divergences are contradictory. We view this article, and the journal issue that it is a part of, as a contribution to a reflexive exercise of a contested era, one which was experienced in varied ways relating to identities and geographies, and one which was experienced differently.

In engaging in this critical reflection, we first begin by exploring the linkages between social protection and state building, which contextualizes the broader milieu within which policies and systems existed. After which, we briefly turn to the context of why social protection was so important for this era. We then examine the EPRDF era by periods of social protection policy implementation (1991-2004, 2005-2013, 2013-2019), making explicit what the "problems' were that the government was responding to. We also reflect on what was not considered to be a priority issue, implicitly, by it either being unaddressed or unfunded. We draw upon literature in this exploration, but we do not offer a systematic assessment of all research available on all policies (doing so for all social protection policies is beyond the scope of a single article). The purposive selection approach of the literature we draw upon presents some limitations. Nonetheless, we hope these reflections spur conversations and new research questions, including contributions that provide alternative perspectives to those presented here.

Social protection and state building

The EPRDF political coalition, having Marxist-Leninist roots, dominated Ethiopian politics for 27 years (1991-2019). It governed with a repressive hand, silencing dissent and opposition, especially after the 2005 election. This governance approach was not limited to the political and civil society spheres, but was entrenched in everyday social and economic lives (for example, see Kassahun, Poulton 2014; Labzae, Planel 2021). Other contributions in this journal issue address this political context in great detail; what is worth emphasizing here is that the same ideological roots that drove the political decision making were also responsible for designing and implementing social protection policies and systems. Some researchers have argued that there were indications that social protection policies were not designed (or implemented) to be transformative, but rather used as political tools to entrench power. Devereux and Guenther (2009) observed that the early years of the EPRDF were marked with ideological stances, which influenced policy formations as well as the conceptualizations of social and economic challenges, such as food insecurity and poverty. The resulting policies, such as those relating to land, did not protect rural residents nor enable a transformation of the agricultural sector. The political role of these policies was consistent and was communicated with each government contact. For example, the EPRDF effectively controlled the distribution of seeds and fertilizers, creating a situation of dependency that fostered its grip on the livelihoods of the majority rural smallholder farmers (Kassahun, Poulton 2014).

Like the agricultural policies and support services, the implementation of other internationally celebrated policies, such as the land certification scheme, had parallel objectives of entrenching government control and extracting rural resources (Cochrane, Hadis 2019). Kassahun and Poulton (2014) argued that along with promoting economic growth, one of the motives of such services was extending and deepening political control. This strategy was also apparent in social protection, and was not limited to planning agencies or political offices; local level implementers of social protection were fully aware of the political imperatives (Cochrane, Tamiru 2016; Berhane *et al.* 2011). As an example, in an area where the safety net was being implemented, if someone expressed political opposition they might be excluded, or less controversially "graduated", and thereby removed from the program. In one case, a female client of the safety net was "removed from the program because she supported the opposition political party", and when she complained to three levels of government (*kebele*, *woreda*, zone), each "accused her of engaging in anti-government activity and denied her request to re-join the program" (Cochrane, Tamiru 2016: 653).

Many evaluations of social protection policies and programs, including of the safety net, have been positive and promoted the efficiency and impact of the EPRDF. One of the reasons that the politicization of them was invisible was the high number of people who met the inclusion criteria within implementation areas. For example, if two-thirds of the community met the criteria but funding only allowed for one-third to be included, the politicization of selection may not be apparent when validation exercises are conducted to see if the "right' people (who met the inclusion criteria) were indeed included. Alternatively, if "graduation' occurred in a questionable instance, authorities could quickly point to many other people who meet the criteria and need the opportunity. For some donors, the political role was explicit and they implicitly agreed with and/or accepted the trade-offs of the governance approach. One of the pending questions, however, emanating from these tacit or explicit approvals is if these same policies sowed the seeds of protest from 2012 onward that eventually forced the political ruptures due to mass discontent with the government. Or, more critically, had these policies and programs not been funded by donors for so many years, while concerns were apparent, it might not have required such a confrontational process to force political transition – one that resulted in the loss of thousands of lives. While these questions require broader analysis, we argue, at least tentatively, that the public discontent that ignited the massive uprisings that swept across the country, especially in Oromia and Amhara Regional States since 2015, were partly due to the political functions played by social protection.

Justifying this argument requires rereading the history of social protection, one that begins with the rights of citizens as opposed to the pragmatism of trade-offs. This approach may provide a new explanatory framework for social protection during the EPRDF era. As Dejene and Semela (2020) argued, such an endeavor starts with

understanding the "problematisation' of policies. In other words, not by starting with an analysis of implementation but with the narratives that informed and shaped the design of policies. This broader view allows for an assessment of systems, alongside the outputs and impacts of specific policies and programs.

Before proceeding to analyze social protection, we want to clarify that criticism of social protection is not necessarily opposition to it. We have experienced the vital role that the safety net has played in the lives of Ethiopians throughout the country. Our criticism, however, is put forward because we believe that the potential of these programs is limited and limiting in their design and implementation, thereby constraining the opportunities people experience. Social protection has the potential to help ensure basic needs are met as well as expanding opportunities; the trade-offs experienced were not the only available option. At the risk of appearing to be arguing against social protection, we seek to trod along a narrow path of critical engagement rooted in our interest to see social protection expanded, but in different, more transformative, ways. Indeed, the rights-based commitment reflected in the social protection policy, and especially that of the social protection strategy, is commendable. Similarly, the call for a national level registry system is vital in seeking to design a social protection system with policy and implementation coherence. When we offer criticism of aspects of social protection, it is not criticism of everything that has been done nor a case against it.

Social protection context

According to World Bank data,[1] which largely draws upon government sources, when Meles Zenawi became Prime Minister (after having led the EPRDF since it came to power in 1991), the economic situation in Ethiopia was bleak: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (in current US dollars, as of 11 February 2021) was 134 dollars and 45.5% of the population lived below the national poverty line. Anthropological and ethnographic research around this period outlined how the experience of these levels of poverty were entrenched and severe (as in the works of Alula Pankhurst, Harald Aspen and Svein Ege). By the end of the first period of social protection outlined below (1991-2004), GDP per capita remained as it was (137 dollars, as of 11 February 2021) while the national poverty rate was reported to have declined to 39% (World Bank 2020). Between 1991 and 2004, improvements were made in some areas, such as life expectancy, which rose from 47.5 in 1991 to 55.2 in 2004, and gross primary school enrolment, which rose from 32% in 1991 to 68% in 2004 (while expected years of schooling rose from 2.8 years to 5.8 years). However, vulnerability to shocks was pervasive, as seen in the droughts that affected millions of people, on multiple occasions, and a serious famine event result in the loss of an estimated 100,000 lives (in 1999-2000, see Cochrane 2017).

During the second (2005-2013) and third (2014-2019) social protection periods, GDP per capita rose substantially, to 856 dollars in 2019 (as of 11 February 2021). However, these increases are aggregate and averaged figures, the benefits of which

were disproportionately experienced by a minority. Demonstrative of this was that in 2017 the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative reported that 71% of Ethiopians lived in severe poverty, despite the government reporting in 2015 that only 24% of the population lived below the national poverty line (World Bank 2020). This divergence is partly due to differences in the metrics utilized, but it is also related to the way evidence is employed. With regard to some of the regularly reported human development metrics, gross primary school enrolment increased to 100% (and expected years of schooling increased to 8.8 years), life expectancy rose to 66 years, and while droughts continued to be experienced (including events that affected tens of millions of people), none turned into famine.

The human development figures mentioned above, which are reported on the country page of the World Bank and in the reports of the Government of Ethiopia, do not as prominently present other aspects of social protection needs. Examples of this include high levels of youth unemployment (28%), millions of orphaned children (3.8 million as of the last census in 2007), depending on the source, anywhere between a million and 14 million people are living with disabilities, that there is no universal old age pension, and in tandem that restrictions were increased on civil society as well as on freedoms of speech, the press and political participation (Dejene, Cochrane 2019a, 2019b). The much celebrated high and sustained economic growth (e.g. UN 2015) occurred alongside rising inequality, which negatively impacted life expectancy, education and income for those in the bottom economic quintile, but these are largely made invisible in the reporting of national aggregate data.[2] For those oriented to modernization and neoliberal theories, the rise of inequality is an expected destination of the growth trajectory, and thereby not of fundamental concern per se (but a transition to be managed). From the perspective of critical and dependency theories, the rise of wealth alongside inequality in the globalized economy signals a new trajectory entirely, of structures that are enabling the rich to disproportionately accumulate and protect wealth, a path dependency that requires rupture to break with.

Expansion of social protection systems

History of social protection

Forms of social protection have roots in the Imperial (-1974) and Military (1974-1991)[3] governments, such as in pension schemes, as well as in social assistance, such as emergency relief programs. Some of that history has been detailed elsewhere (e.g. Woldemariam 1989; Woldegiorgis 1989; Hancock 1985; Haile 1989; Haile 1996; Lautze *et al.* 2003; Kiros 2005) and will not be covered in detail here. As an example, however, the Public Servants Pension Scheme came into effect during the Imperial regime, in 1963. This program has been modified over time, including being amended at least three times during the EPRDF regime in 2003, 2011 and 2015. At the outset, this initiative focused on providing pension coverage for retired public servants. The 2011

proclamation formalized a pension scheme for private sector workers, which gave rise to the establishment of the Private Organizations Employees' Social Security Agency (POESSA; Dejene 2019; Dejene, Cochrane 2019).

As we explore in detail below, the original design and amendment of policies were crafted in specific ways, with particular problem narratives that excluded many from inclusion or consideration. In the example of the pension scheme, despite an expansion during the EPRDF period, those working in the informal sector remain not considered nor included. We do not argue that all conceptual exclusions are politically motivated or serve the purpose of entrenching power. Rather, assessing the conceptualization of "problems' allows for an understanding of the logics of social protection, and thereby an analysis of the design and implementation. For pension schemes, these initially served public sector workers, which rewarded an inner-circle of non-elected, unrepresentative officials often hired on patronage grounds. When the pension scheme was expanded to the private sector, the expansion might be better understood as a form of political settlement, whereby political stability requires a broader distribution of resources and services. The exclusion of the informal sector, however, seems less of a political exclusion and rather more of pragmatism, as private sector companies register their workers via POESSA and have a mechanism for payment collection and pension distribution, while no such entity exists for the informal sector (and multiple demands exist for limited resources, if the government would have had to create such an entity). However, had there been an organization covering the informal sector, the political settlement might have also included the informal sector and been universal in nature. That is to say, there are political motivations for some decisions, but these do not necessarily explain all decisions; nor are we interested to re-write history such that every decision is only made to serve a political agenda.

Other forms of social protection also took formal shape in the Imperial era. According to Lautze *et al.* (2003), official disaster response started around the mid-1960s, after a prolonged call for a response to the disasters of the Wollo and Tigray famines of the 1950s and the 1960s. No institutions were present at that time to facilitate relief and disaster response efforts, which was the institutional situation until the establishment of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) in 1974 (see Woldegiorgis 1989; Seifu 2013; Adugna 2014). Efforts before the establishment of the RRC were fragmented and were led by small ad hoc committees. Other policy responses took shape during the 1970s as well, such as those related to food security, including the sanction on grain export in April 1973. This was followed by the resettlement of people from famine-hit areas, as stipulated in the founding document of the RRC (Adugna 2014). With regard to the narrative shaping these responses, politics and governance were not considered. The founding document of the RRC, which Woldegiorgis (1989) suggests was the last decree signed by the Emperor before the demise of his reign, conceived famine only as a natural disaster. The preamble of the founding document states, "Whereas the

recent drought and other natural disasters in our country have occasioned hardship in our beloved people [...] The commission was founded to identify and make known the problems and their degree in the area of the country that are affected by natural disaster [...]" (quoted in Wolde Giorgis 1989: 121). Like the pension schemes, the absences highlight what is not seen, or what is made invisible.

During the Imperial period, some of the barriers to change were explicitly institutional. For example, some political aides blocked the reports of the Wollo famine from reaching Emperor, for "the sense of the Emperor" not to be affected with such "bad news". This also included downplaying the efforts of parliamentary representatives from the respective areas appealing for a government response to tackle the disasters (Woldemariam 1989). Haile (1989, 1996) blamed the Imperial regime for being opaque and irresponsible in its handling of the famine disasters and in its failure of protecting citizens. The blame of the Imperial regime's unresponsiveness also came from the international media, especially that of Jonathan Dimbleby's exposé (Adugna 2014). For some observers, these mishandlings of disaster response emanated from institutional hypocrisy and rigidity (Woldemariam 1984; Wolde Giorgis 1989). Reflective of these political causes, protest against the Imperial government began in the 1960s, driven particularly by the student movement, who called for political changes – notably that land be given to those who worked on it. These events, particularly famine and vulnerability to it, were key factors that contributed to the eventual downfall of the Imperial government in 1974.

The Military regime, also known as the Derg, took power after the Imperial government extended the role of the RRC and launched massive resettlement campaigns, which many observers reported as a failure (Rahmato 1989; Hancock 1985; Woldegiorgis 1989). In some instances, the Military regime employed emergency food aid as a coercive tool to force people in situations of extreme vulnerability to agree to participate in resettlement schemes (Terry 2002). Rahmato (1989) described the results of the resettlement programs as fostering a crisis, pointing to failures of institutional capacity, mismanagement, and poor planning. The crisis was compounded by resource shortages and infrastructural issues, including the lack of roads, which made disaster response operations difficult, and delayed at best (Adugna 2014). The lack of political and institutional responses, and/or the misguided or poorly planned ones, contributed to significant loss of life, resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives in the mid-1980s (Woldemariam 1989; Woldegiorgis 1989). While scholars during the Imperial period had yet to identify the key governance role in famine, during the Military Derg period, and specifically in the 1980s, this was recognized by Ethiopian scholars, notably Mesfin Woldemariam. Internationally, Amartya Sen was making similar arguments.

We present this brief history to situate the context that the EPRDF arrived in, which we use to analyze the decision making regarding social protection. Having a brief background also reduces the potential to present an ahistorical assessment, which

neglects the inherited challenges as well as the lessons learned in implementing social policy up until that point. The following sub-sections focus on the EPRDF era beginning from 1991, and we divide the EPRDF era into three social protection sub-sections, based largely on social protection implementation shifts we view as significant. During the first period (1991-2004) the new government was dealing with a range of pressing needs, from the impacts of drought to the continued ramifications of the Military government policies, such as in the large-scale resettlement and villagization schemes. We view social protection during this period as largely being reactive, often responding to address issues after they had emerged. The second period (2005-2013) is one wherein donors played an outsized role in designing and funding new social protection programs, most notably the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), which was designed to be more proactive, in providing longer-term predictable transfers. This was also a period wherein political shifts highlighted threats to the EPRDF and when the government aimed to fashion itself as a government focused on "development'. The flagship social protection program that was launched not only served in meeting needs in more planned ways, but it also served the political needs of the ruling coalition. We view the final period (2013-2019) as an attempt at re-orientation, wherein new priorities were identified and locally-developed plans and strategies were put in place, but were selectively funded. We cover these three sections in turn, alongside some analysis of the academic discourse respectively.

Reactive policy: 1991-2004

When the EPRDF came to power, famine remained one of the most pressing challenges for people and threats to political stability. In the first years of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1995), leading voices described the causes and experiences of famine and called for the new government to act (e.g. de Waal 1991; Rahmato 1991; Pankhurst 1992; Hurni 1993; Webb *et al.* 1994). This emphasis was well understood by the leaders of the revolution against the Military regime, the Derg government, as they experienced how famine was a critical contributing factor to turning of the tide against both the Imperial and Military governments. The TPLF (later the EPRDF with the TPLF as the coalition leader) explicitly utilized food aid as a way to win the war (and was supported to do so by external actors; see: Cochrane 2017; Gill 2010). While the new constitution of 1995 outlined economic (Article 89:2-3) and social (Article 90:1) objectives and responsibilities, these were limited by the phrase "to the extent the country's resources permit", resulting in limited (or contestable) citizen rights as well as subjectivity about how resources are utilized (FDRE 1995). This limitation impacted social protection provisions, with resource limitations given as justifications for partial commitments (Dejene, Semela 2020), and the pushing of further developments to yet-to-funded future or subsequent initiatives. The constitution did create avenues for new forms of citizen engagement and activism, but also granted the government power to disregard

citizen demands based upon this clause. The resource limitation – while a real and legitimate challenge – was operationalized as a justification for some of the exclusions that we highlight throughout the EPRDF era.

The first major social protection policy of the EPRDF was the Developmental Social Welfare Policy (DSWP) (1996-2013/14). This policy was in place for 17 years until the incumbent Social Protection Policy replaced it in November 2014. The objectives of the DSWP were three: "1) expand participatory developmental social welfare programs and services; 2) Study the causes of social problems and develop preventive measure based on knowledge generated by such studies; 3) Rehabilitate members of society who are already suffering from various social problems and require special treatment and attention" (MoLSA 1996: 65). The DSWP's focus was mainly limited to preventive and rehabilitative programs (Dejene 2019; Dejene, Semela 2020). The essence of developmental social welfare programs lacked clarity in the policy, and largely went under-funded in terms of implementation. In practice, reactive emergency response predominated the activity of social protection, and often was reliant upon the support of external partners (Devereux, Sharp 2003). It was not until the 2002/03 drought and food insecurity crises that social protection began to take a more proactive form (Lavers 2016a). The implementation shift followed the 2002/03 drought, but it is also worth noting that the organizational and ideological shifts preceded this point, so as to enable these outcomes. It is for this reason that Lavers (2016a) points to 2001/02 as a key point for categorizing social protection shifts, as in that period political power was centralized (and opposition pushed out), alongside which government agencies were reorganized and sectoral strategies developed. We see these as similar categorizations, with Lavers focusing on the ideological and internal shifts while we have focused on the outcomes and implementation emanating from them.

The limitations of the first manifestations of social protection in the EPRDF era, though the degree varies from one intervention to the other, relates to the "problematization' of issues and "subjectification' of beneficiaries; limiting the policy direction towards rehabilitative issues, and paradoxically pushing the responsibility of providing social services to the community, especially in the case of the DSWP. This increasingly came into contestation with the political re-orientation to a developmental state theory, which the EPRDF-led government increasingly subscribed to (or selectively, in combination with the ethnofederalism). The Ethiopian developmental state proved to be highly interventionist (Dejene, Cochrane 2019a; Dejene, Semela 2020), but the policy confined social protection to short-term instrumental goals. According to Humphrey (1999), the 1993 disaster response policy limits, in strong terms, any able-bodied persons from receiving benefits – an explicit fear the government held of fostering dependency. The assumption in this framing was that "able-bodied' people would be able to work themselves out of any situation. This extended itself into the provisions of the DSWP, which listed categorical, rehabilitative schemes for limited groups of the community,

focusing on the disabled and other vulnerable groups (see Dejene 2019; Dejene, Semela 2020). Subsequent disasters, in the form of the 2003 drought (Kiros 2005), and more recent ones like the 2015, 2016 and 2017 drought-induced food insecurity crises (Dejene 2019; Dejene, Cochrane 2019) made it evident that the embedded assumptions regarding the causes of vulnerability were ill-conceived. For example, the problematization missed temporal aspects, such as the impact of seasonality (Dercon, Krishnan 2000) as well as the differential poverty alleviation impacts of economic growth on rural and urban areas (Bigsten *et al.* 2003). Although the evidence-base is not robust, there are indications that implementation politicized, with forms of support being aligned with explicit political party affiliation (de Waal 2015).

Donor funded policy: 2005-2013

Although the DSWP was still in effect, we outline the post-2005 period as a new period of social protection policy. This is for two reasons. First, the PSNP, which is Africa's second largest safety net program that has benefitted over eight million people in rural Ethiopia, was launched, largely being designed and funded by foreign donors. The donors involved were not only active in Ethiopia, but were part of a broader trend of supporting the expansion of social protection across the continent (Ojong, Cochrane 2021), replicating best practices and importing modalities. While we have characterized this period as being donor funded, which it primarily was, donors can only effectively act with the approval of the government, and in this case the motivations of the period can be explained, as outlined by Lavers and Hickey (2016) as motivated by political settlement in response to contestation. The second reason that 2005 stands out was the 2005 election, within which the EPRDF lost some urban areas, which resulted in a significant shift in governance direction (explicitly moving away from democratization). The shift in governance had direct implications for social protection implementation.

Famine has attracted much attention in Ethiopia due to its severity and potential for large losses of life. Most of the interventions that aimed to tackle the famine crises, however, tended to be responsive (and costly) or seasonal/temporary (and not addressing root causes of vulnerability). Following the 2002 food insecurity situation and cognizant of the limitations of a responsive system, the Government of Ethiopia issued the 2002 Food Security Strategy (FSS). The policy was guided by targeting, stated as being "mainly to the chronically food insecure moisture deficit and pastoral areas" (FDRE 2002: 1). The need for a predictable transfer rather than a reactive relief approach was realized in the PSNP in 2005. In its approach, however, the PSNP furthered the conception of the food insecurity challenge as a "geographical' phenomenon, as reflected in the FSS. Retrospectively, the practice does not align with this plan. Notable in the geographic exclusions are the overlaps with politics; Afar and Somali, wherein pastoral livelihoods are common and moisture deficit areas, had political parties that were not members of the EPRDF coalition, and remained neglected from social service provisions (Berhane

2020, Cochrane, Rao 2019). Conversely, a disproportionate number of PSNP clients were based in Amhara, Oromia, Tigray and SNNP, which are not necessarily reflective of demographics or severity of need (Berhane 2020), but were reflective of the coalition of political parties comprising the EPRDF.

The PSNP has two major components: (1) direct support (DS) and (2) public works (PW). The PW targets vulnerable households with able-bodied members who are expected to participate in infrastructural development activities, like the construction of feeder-roads and environmental protection activities. The DS targets the old-age, disabled and labour-constrained households, who are not required to contribute labour to receive the safety net support. Lactating mothers and pregnant women in the PW stream are temporarily placed in the DS component, who are not required to work during that time period. The PSNP is designed as a predictable transfer modality to address periodic drought-induced shocks (Devereux, Guenthe 2009; Berhane *et al.* 2016).[4] The fourth phase of the PSNP ran from 2015-2020 and had an estimated cost of US$4 billion (World Bank 2013). While this is demonstrative of a significant investment into social protection, and specifically in the area of food security, the PSNP has not stopped the need for additional annual emergency food support due to production failures, which is usually blamed on weather fluctuations by the government (Prášková 2018).

The PSNP aimed to provide an alternative to the expensive and re-occurring emergency relief operations, particularly in response to drought. Rahmato (2013) noted that since the 1970s relief operations have cost billions of dollars, with little impact in curbing the periodic famine events. According to Devereux et al (2006: 1), the opposite happened; "dependency on food aid has steadily increased over time, as has the number of chronically food insecure Ethiopians". Writing shortly after the establishment of the PSNP, Devereux et al (2006: 1) outlined its purpose as "a gradual shift away from a system dominated by emergency humanitarian aid to productive safety net system resources via multi-year framework". The two principles that guided the PSNP were predictability and avoiding aid dependency (Devereux *et al.* 2006: 2). In addition, the PSNP was designed to support clients beyond rehabilitative and responsive interventions with the introduction of components that included the Household Asset Building Program (see Berhane *et al.* 2011), which was later subsumed under the livelihood promotion component of PSNP IV (see Dejene 2019). These aimed to address vulnerabilities and enhance the ability to graduated clients to be resilient to shocks.

Ethiopia launched the Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) in 2012 as a pilot program in 13 Districts in four regions (again, within the regions of Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region - SNNPR and Tigray), notably making similar exclusions as was done with the PSNP. While this paper is not able to cover all the available evidence on these social protection initiatives, the CBHI is reported to benefit nearly one million people (Berhane 2020). Service provision for the CBHI is done via health extension services within communities, but can be accessed at

district and zonal hospitals following referral. A recent study indicated that enrollment in CBHI in one of the regions that piloted the program (SNNPR) is at 12.8% (Nageso, Tefera, Keneni 2020). This suggests that while outcomes appear positive (Berhane 2020), the inclusions/exclusions that are seen in other social protection programs may be replicated in CBHI, but more research is needed to better understand its implementation. For Lavers (2016b), as we noted in the PSNP, alongside the provision of a needed service, there are important political drivers, which aim to maintain support via service provision (notably in politically and demographically important regions).

While many of these programs were donor-funded and served political objectives at the federal level, the interaction that people had with these initiatives at the implementation level were heavily regulated and controlled by local elites (e.g. Cochrane, Tamiru 2016; Lavers, Mohammed, Wolde Selassie 2020). This process influences who, at the local level, benefits from these services, while in tandem acting as a means to entrench political power (e.g. Berhanu, Poulton 2014; Lavers, Haile, Mesfin 2020). As the state expanded its distribution of goods and services as a means of securing broader political stability, local level implementation often entrenched other forms of political power and control, both of which the donors supporting and funding these initiatives either implicitly supported or were selectively silent about.

Also during this time period, Ethiopia implemented a National Plan of Action for the Elderly (2005-2015). This specific policy document promised welfare provisions for the old-age population. However, it relied on community contributions to accomplish its goals and was not funded by the government nor donors. A great majority of the old-age population do not have a sustained social protection system (85%), the exception being those who are covered through the formal pension system (15%; Berhane 2020) or as direct support beneficiaries of the PSNP. This includes the old-age population with disabilities and/or who are caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. In the following policy period (2014-2019), the needs of the old-age population were acknowledged (Dejene 2019), but no funding was allocated for new programming.

In the post 2005 election era (a greatly contested election wherein the EPRDF lost many urban areas), there were instances of displacement in the name of investment and development in urban areas (particularly in Addis Ababa) and peripheries (particularly for foreign investment; Rahmato 2019). These were top-down decisions of the EPRDF-led government, made with questionable consent of the public affected by those measures. These are not social policies; we highlight them as demonstrative of the governance shifts taking place within the broader societal realm. With regard to freedoms, this period saw significant restrictions on civil society, political participation, freedom of speech and the press. Many of these changes were done in the name of development, which draws the connection to social protection: some of the social protection initiatives that aimed to support the urban poor- and middle-income citizens in the form of subsidized condominium housing displaced peri-urban inhabitants from

their land and livelihoods. While the donor supported PSNP was handing out food and cash to selected clients, other "developmental' decisions worked to dispossess and silence. These present examples of policy (in)coherence through which new social challenges were created while others were alleviated (Dejene, Cochrane 2019). Serving the urbanites (e.g. with housing), in politically contested geographies, provided support to those the government needed to win support from, which could be viewed as a form of political settlement as in the expansion of pensions.

Reorientation of social policy (2014-2019)

In 2014, the Government of Ethiopia issued the incumbent social protection policy that, among others, included "promotive' and "transformative' dimensions (MoLSA 2012). The incumbent social protection policy has five focus areas. These are: 1) Promoting Development Safety Net; 2) Promoting Employment Opportunities and Improving Living Conditions; 3) Promoting Social Insurance; 4) Promoting the Fair Enjoyment of Basic Services; and 5) Providing Legal Protection and Support for Citizens Exposed to Violence and Oppression. Many of these focus areas were continuations of practices that had emerged, as in the safety net and social insurance. This policy was supported in 2016 with a social protection strategy. The 2016 National Social Protection Strategy elaborated on new additions to social protection, such as outlining the legal protection and support for citizens exposed to abuse, exploitation and violence.

The social protection strategy outlined three rationales for social protection in a progressive manner: the constitutionally enshrined citizen rights for social protection, Ethiopia's responsibility, as party to UN and AU documents, to formulate social protection policies and strategies, and the importance of social protection for overall human development (MoLSA 2016: 7). The social protection strategic document is foresighted, with aspirations to build "a sustainable system", aligned with the emergent Sustainable Development Goals and 2030 Agenda. According to the strategic document a "sustainable social protection system requires new institutional arrangement that will enhance co-ordination; strengthen capacities for implementation; and develop systems and tools, such as the Single (National) Registry System (SRS) also known as the Common (or National) Beneficiary Registry System (CBRS)" (MoLSA 2016: 8). These coordination aims were not realized during the EPRDF period. In the new policy and strategy era, what we find of particular interest is not who or what is missed per se, but what is funded (and what is not). This, we argue, identifies the priorities of the government whilst they participate in the international conversations of broader and more inclusive social protection (and provides insight into the logic of its decision making in its final years).

The siloed practices of emergency relief pursued prior to the PSNP manifested themselves in periodic appeals for aid on an annual basis and organizing ad hoc distributions (see Berhane *et al*. 2016). The PSNP continued and developed during this time period, as

articulated in the PSNP IV (2015-2020) implementation manual (PIM). It included an objective to improve rural society's resilience to shocks and enhance their food security status. The PIM promised to regularly measure the achievement of the program goal using indicators that among others include, "household dietary diversity and number of different income sources" (MoA 2014: 2-3). With a decade of PSNP implementation passed, in this time period it began to be possible to assess the long-term impacts of the PSNP. Evaluations of the program suggested mixed results; for example, positive contributions were seen in the food security situation of client households (Berhane *et al.* 2011, Berhane *et al.* 2013; Dejene 2019) but minimal impacts on asset accumulation (Devereux 2006; Berhane *et al.* 2011). One of the aims of the PSNP was diversifying income sources of client households towards minimizing vulnerability to shocks with the resources provided through the program, which seemed less realized (Berhane *et al.* 2011; Dejene 2019).[5] Additionally, diversification has been noted as much more complex (e.g. Cochrane, Cafer 2018), and is not always a signal of resilience, as was being assumed.

One notable expansion in social protection was the inclusion of urban areas in the safety net. The urban poor had not been included in the safety net until the introduction of the Urban Productive Safety Net Program (UPSNP) in 2016. In the EPRDF years, the UPSNP remained in its beginning stages, with pilots implemented and expansions planned. The UPSNP pilot programs were operational in all of the regional capitals, targeting about 604,000 people, with three quarters of resources in the UPSNP pilot phase directed to Addis Ababa (MoLSA 2016). The UPSNP is planned to expand to 83 cities, with the support of a World Bank 400 million dollars grant.[6] Given its relative newness and limited implementation scope, limited evidence is available to assess if the politicization of inclusion and exclusion are manifesting themselves within the UPSNP.

Another initiative revised during the final years of the EPRDF was the National Nutrition Program (NNP). The government introduced a revised version of the NNP, an extension of the previous version that had been in effect since 2008. The new NNP (2013-2015) restated the Government of Ethiopia (GoE)'s commitment towards "accelerating implementation of the multisectorally harmonized National Nutrition Program to have a positive impact on nutrition and on the overall wellbeing of the nation". This revised NNP (2013-2015) was designed to address both long-term and short-term nutrition goals in Ethiopia. The program outlined the plan for a package of proven, cost-effective nutrition interventions that would break the cycle of malnutrition and ensure child survival and health. The document, however, also identifies the shortage of resources as a challenge towards fulfilling its goals. The resources that were available, were utilized in specific ways – similar to the experience of the PSNP, agricultural extension support services, CBHI, amongst others. As of a 2019 assessment by the World Bank, the NPP selected inclusion areas by district, but only in four regions: Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR,

Tigray (World Bank 2019). Again, these reflect the political coalition members of the EPRDF, to the exclusion of others. Despite these explicit exclusions the government's commitment to the program was praised with its progressive growth in contributions amounting to 1.1 billion dollars for the period 2016-2020 (World Bank 2019: vi).

During the final years of the EPRDF, social protection did undergo changes: the safety net expanded to urban areas, nutrition services were expanded, and a new National Social Protection Strategy was developed. While multi-sectoral and problem-based approaches were not new, the National Nutrition Plan did present a new way of working, which had the potential to mitigate some of the policy incoherence that was experienced in the previous period. At the same time, many of the experiences of social protection continued the status quo: food insecurity remained as a political threat and a focus in social protection, while demographically and politically important allies were prioritized over those in most need. The rise of protest throughout these years deepened the political purposes of social protection; with implementation staff tasked to collect votes, and make explicit threats that services would be cut if votes were not cast for the ruling party (e.g. Cochrane, Tamiru 2016). The lack of funding for certain populations, such as those living with disabilities and elders, remained noted but unfunded. In its final years, political repression increased, such as in the form of mass arrests, until the political transition of 2018, and then the ending of the EPRDF in 2019. While we do not suggest that the politicization of social protection was a direct cause of these protests, we do argue that they were one of the many ways of governance that fostered discontent and resulted in demands for change.

Conclusion

The Government of Ethiopia and its partners negotiated and re-oriented social protection focus areas during the EPRDF era. We explored these shifts in three periods: (1) a responsive and costly activities, (2) donor-led expansion of proactive programming, and (3) attempts at reorientations, albeit ones that largely continued the political orientation of social protection which restricted freedoms and opportunities. The priorities and absences identified in each period highlight the ways in which social protection goals can be met (e.g. as in preventing famine) but also serve parallel objectives. These parallel objectives are not, however, consistent. At the federal level, funding prioritized demographically and politically important regions, while at the local level inclusion and exclusion entrenched political power and stifled opposition. We do not argue that all social protection activities are politicized to the same extent, in some instances we highlight how the logic of political settlement explains why the EPRDF was motivated to invest in social protection programs.

Reflecting on the EPRDF era, one of the key lessons for the future is that short-term gains might be achieved through authoritarian means, but these will not be sustained nor will they be effective in the long-term if they work to restrict freedoms and constrain

opportunities. The fall of the EPRDF is demonstrative of this – it enabled significant positive economic and social gains, but mass discontent forced political transition that would result in its dissolution. We encourage researchers to draw upon this point of our reflection and to further consider the linkages between social protection in democratizing authoritarian regimes. This reflection suggests that in order for social protection to have positive transformative impacts there needs to be a re-visioning and re-conceptualization of the root causes of vulnerability, which point toward the realm of governance. The need for re-orientation is crucial especially for post-EPRDF Ethiopia, should the government be committed to pursue a pathway that could support the poor to live to their full potential and have the required supports to do so. In parallel, universalizing social protection services, such as for those living with disabilities and the old-age population, who are not covered in the formal social protection/pension services as they currently exist, requires bold political leadership and commitment. The policies, funding choices, and modalities the new government implements have the opportunity to enable transformation. However, this will require significant shifts of the entire system within which social protection exists.

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NOTES:

1 - *World Bank DataBank – Ethiopia*, "World Bank", accessed 11 February 2021: https://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia.

2 - *Ethiopia*, "HDR", 2020: http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ETH.

3 - We include the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which governed from 1987 to 1991 in this grouping, as the leader of the two were the same and for our purposes of analysing social protection policy do not see any divergence of policy specific to this era that would necessitate it being separated.

4 - See also S. Devereux, R. Sabates-Wheeler, R. Slater, M. Tefera, T. Brown, A. Teshome, *Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP): 2008 Assessment Report,* "Cashdividend.net", December 2008: https://www.cashdividend.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Devereux-et-al.-2008.pdf.

5 - See also S. Devereux, R. Sabates-Wheeler, R. Slater, M. Tefera, T. Brown, A. Teshome, *Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP): 2008 Assessment Report,* cit.

6 - *World Bank Group Boosts Support for Improved Livelihoods of Ethiopia's Urban Poor and Disadvantage Youth*, "World Bank", 30 September 2020: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/09/30/world-bank-group-boosts-support-for-improved-livelihoods-of-ethiopias-urban-poor-and-disadvantage-youth.

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Manufacturing and Labour Mobilisation in EPRDF Ethiopia. A Household Perspective on the Rise and Uncertain Prospects of the Textile Industry in Tigray

Davide Chinigò

Abstract

This article explores the relation between industrialisation and labour mobilisation in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Addressing the recent history of the textile and garment industry in Tigray, the article discusses key moments of continuity and rupture in the way the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership attended the historical question of how to diversify employment out of smallholder agriculture. Based on fieldwork conducted in Tigray's capital city Mekelle between 2015 and 2018, I argue that in the course of the 2010s rapid industrialisation under the impulse of the Ethiopian "developmental state' generated the question about how sourcing industrial poles with workers that were dispersed across the countryside, and with the prospect of initial salaries below reproduction. This generated a paradox: the coexistence of labour shortage and a large population seeking employment. This paradox reflected a situation in which industrial labour was inscribed in complex reproductive dynamics which had the rural household at its centre. The article engages with discussions about the role of global production networks in supporting the transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism in Africa. It suggests that rapid industrialisation under the impulse of global value chains leaves open an agrarian question of labour which reproduces significant dynamics of exploitation and subordination of young female workers.

Keywords: textile industry, developmental state, Tigray, labour mobilisation, household reproduction.

Introduction

In the last two decades, trends of economic growth in Africa have revitalised discussions about the potential of industrialisation to drive the structural transformation of the economy away from agriculture (for instance Busse *et al.* 2019). Mainstream views usually cast structural transformation as a linear, and to some extent teleological process whereby the dualism between agriculture and non-agricultural sectors progressively dissipate over time (for instance Timmer *et al.* 2012). However, these interpretations fail to address the complexity of labour dynamics in the context of incipient, or largely incomplete structural transformation (Bernstein 2007). This article critically scrutinises questions about labour mobilisation in the context of manufacturing development in Ethiopia putting in sharp focus the significant interdependence between the agricultural and the industrial economy. I argue that current global production networks require a critical perspective that inscribe industrialisation within complex and uneven transformation of labour which have the household at its centre. Rapid industrialisation under the impulse of global value chains leaves open an agrarian question of labour (Bernstein 2010) which reproduces significant dynamics of exploitation and subordination of young female workers seeking reproduction at the intersection between the industrial and the rural economy.

The article draws on a fieldwork conducted in and around Tigray capital city Mekelle between 2015 and 2018. A core sample of ~40 semi-structured interviews was collected with staff of industrial actors, government offices, trainees, and workers operating in the Textile and Garment sector (T&G). Additional methods included field visit of textile companies and informal discussions with civil society and advocacy organisations, and trade unions working on issues around labour and workers' rights.

In the course of the 2000s and 2010s no country in Africa epitomised expectations about rapid economic development as Ethiopia. Dubbed a clear example of "Africa rising" (Arkebe Oqubay 2015), Ethiopia experienced a yearly average growth of 10.8% between 2003–04 and 2012–13, compared with an African average of 5.3%.[1] Although this growth has been largely driven by expanding services, construction, and the agricultural sector, under the impulse of a self-declared "developmental state' the EPRDF leadership posited significant efforts in supporting manufacturing industry towards making Ethiopia a "middle-income country by 2025" (FDRE 2016). The T&G industry has been among the sectors prioritised for its potential to rip the country's comparative advantage in terms of market access, natural resource endowments, and, most importantly, low cost of labour and the availability of a large workforce seeking employment.

Under the impulse of the Growth and Transformation Plans I and II (GTP I and II), the country's strategic documents for economic development, sectoral policies were designed under the Ministry of Industry (MoI), and newly established government agencies such as the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC) to attract international

capital. In just a few years, the T&G sector experienced a remarkable expansion. By 2014 at least thirty-six internationally funded projects were licensed for a total capital investment of over 140 million US dollars (ETIDI 2016a). The T&G compartment was thus indicated as a priority area of investment in the design of fifteen Industrial Parks (IPs) that government commissioned in the course of the 2010s with the support of international donors, particularly China. By 2016 over 130 medium and large-scale companies were operational in the segments of ginning, spinning, weaving, finishing and garment (ETIDI 2016b). The entire T&G compartment recorded a remarkable growth in the number of people employed from 72,000 in 2013 to 250,000 in 2016 (UNIDO 2017).

Tigray region has been at the forefront of this development. Mekelle Industrial Park was officially inaugurated in July 2017 and by then a number of international textile companies and brands from India, Bangladesh, and Italy, were either operational in the park or had established stand-alone factories. The textile compartment rapidly took roots in the course of the 2010s, generating expectations for a structural transformation of the regional economy towards manufacturing industry. The most apparent reason for the significant growth of textile was the low cost of labour comparing to other textile hubs, such as China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Bangladesh,[2] where international brands had operated in the past decades. The availability of cheap water and electricity, two essential assets to textile operations, and preferential trade agreements with Europe and the United States were additional issues gearing momentum towards the delocalisation of international companies to Ethiopia. Reasons more specific to Tigray included the proximity to the Red Sea, and significant investments by regional and the federal governments to support textile and improve infrastructure, such as an additional railway line connecting the regional capital Mekelle to the port of Djibouti. Perception of political stability by international corporate capital was another factor. Especially after 2016, when country-wide anti-government protests gained traction, international investors regarded Tigray as the region facing lower risk of political instability and the TPLF leadership a reasonable guarantee to their investments. This is quite remarkable considering the sudden turn of events in the region in late 2020, when violent conflict between the TPLF and the federal government rapidly escalated and brought the entire country into a deep political crisis, which is uncertain and beyond the scope of this article.

In the course of the 2010s, the Ethiopian government regarded the rapid development of the textile industry as a flagship policy of the developmental state – a model that draws on the Asian way to capitalism and relies on strong state intervention and selective liberalisation of the economy (Clapham 2017). Manufacturing was expected to promote a structural transformation of the economy away from agriculture and towards sustaining high rates of economic growth by uncapping export market opportunities (FDRE 2016).

To attract international capital the Ethiopian government took a number of investor-friendly measures, including tax breaks and controlled devaluation of the currency. In the long run international investment was expected to create domestic capacity through technical and technological spill-over, and the progressive consolidation of Ethiopian textile firms that compete on the regional and global scene (Arkebe Oqubay 2015). More immediately, by the mid-2010s the development of the textile industry in Tigray intersected existing trends of urbanisation and transformation of labour from agriculture to manufacturing. From the perspective of textile corporations one specific challenge was how to capitalise the comparative advantage of cheap labour into a competitive advantage for the industry, considering that productivity of the average worker was significantly lower than in other Asian textile hubs. The Ethiopian government regarded the textile sector as a potential important source of job creation: since the 2000s youth unemployment was considered as a significant threat to political stability which the rise of manufacturing was expected to attend. The transition from agriculture to manufacturing would represent not only a radical recalibration of the regional economy, but also a major departure from a rural way of life in cultural and social terms. These set of transformations, and the tensions they came with, are the empirical object of this article.

This article reconstructs the recent history of manufacturing industry in Tigray, addressing key moments of continuity and rupture in the way the TPLF leadership attended the historical question of labour, i.e., how to diversify employment out of smallholder agriculture. By the time it took power in the course of the 1980s, the TPLF understood the labour question in terms of how creating job opportunities out of agriculture through the structural transformation of the regional economy (Young 1997a). I argue that the rapid consolidation of manufacturing industry in Tigray in the course of the 2010s generated an important shift. The new question was about how sourcing industrial poles with workers that were now dispersed across the countryside, with the prospect of initial salaries below basic costs of reproduction. This generated two main effects. First, the coexistence of labour shortage in the newly established industrial poles and a large population seeking employment. Second, the textile industry of Tigray generated a new agrarian question of labour inscribing young female workers in complex reproductive dynamics which had the rural household at its centre.

Although the recent conflict in Tigray is likely to have a significant impact in the way these dynamics will unfold in the future, this-case study shows that the agrarian question of labour remains a key tension of the Ethiopian industrialisation policy under the developmental state. This casts a shadow on the developmentalist scope of industrial policy in Ethiopia, urging a more careful analysis of the much more complex relation between structural transformation and labour dynamics in the context of the transition from a predominantly agricultural to an industrial economy.

Global production networks and the agrarian question of labour: a household perspective

Recent years have seen a growing body of literature addressing the impact of global value chains on labour-intensive industries in the global South. As an increasing proportion of global trade is today channelled through vertically integrated value chains dominated by transnational firms, this has prompted the expansion of agro-industries, manufacturing, and services in new markets. Ensuing global and regional production networks are characterised by significant opportunities for the firms involved, including higher value production and diversification of supply chains, but also challenges, such as meeting the quality standards and commercial demands required by international buyers. Global Value Chains (GVC) analysis has focused on questions around the governance of these value chains – for instance a focus on value creation, differentiation, and capture in production and distribution processes (Bair 2009). Parallelly, a growing strand of studies, known as Global Production Networks (GPN) theory, has focused on the social aspects of increasingly connected commercial operations, particularly mapping the wide range of stakeholders across the value chain that prompt global production (Gereffi 2006; Gereffi, Kaplinsky 2001). Critical studies addressing the impact of GPN in the global south have thus emphasised questions around power relations between the actors dispersed across the value chain, and particularly a focus on work and labour relations (Reinecke *et al.* 2018; Barrientos *et al.* 2011; Dunaway 2014).

This article engages with GVC/GPN literature from two perspectives. First, I put into sharp focus how global and regional production networks intersect discussions around the "agrarian question of labour' in the global South. Following Henry Bernstein (2007, 2010), current waves of industrialisation in the global South are characterised by very different dynamics than earlier transitions in the global North because they leave open an "agrarian question of labour', which is about the inability of armies of labour to reproduce themselves under current configurations of global capitalism. A focus on the agrarian question of labour is meant to problematise the ways in which we scope the impact of global production networks to support the transition to industrial capitalism and, crucially in the case of Ethiopia, the role of the state in mediating such process. In particular, the condition of young female workers entering the textile industry in Tigray can be productively discussed with what Bernstein has defined "classes of labour' (2010: 110), which describes the pursuit of livelihoods through complex combinations of scarce and poorly remunerated wage employment, self-employment, and other survival activities in the domain of the "informal economy". For Bernstein these working poor are entrenched within capitalist relations to the extent that their reproduction depends fully, directly and indirectly, on the sale of their labour power. In fact, they inhabit a social world of "relentless micro-capitalism" (Davis 2006: 181). Their reproduction reflects a condition "of growing income insecurity and "pauperization' as well as

employment insecurity and the downward pressures exerted by the neoliberal erosion of social provision for those in "standard' wage employment" (Bernstein 2010: 111).
Second, in order to situate the agrarian question of labour within GVN/GPN I take household reproduction as a central unit of analysis. As noted by Elena Baglioni (2021), the household's key role in social reproduction remains a largely unexplored theme in GVN/GPN theory. Household relations are usually an overlooked aspect of the labour process in global production networks, as these are usually regarded as not pertaining to the production process and relegated to the private sphere. However, as demonstrated by Bridget O'Laughlin (2013), households usually play an important role in filling the gap of hampered transitions in which workers remain unable to make a living through wage labour. Discussing the case of horticulture in Senegal through a class relational approach, Elena Baglioni (2021) adds that global production networks systematically externalising the cost of reproduction to the workers reflect specific gender dynamics: the inherent conflict between production and reproduction at the bottom of the value chain results in the further fragmentation of women in classes of labour. This is thus in line with studies within the field of feminist political economy showing that the externalisation of the cost of reproduction to gendered and racialised workers is a key component of surplus value extraction and capital accumulation (Dunaway 2014; Mezzadri 2016).
The case of Tigray analysed here shows that the household not only plays an important role in the reproduction of young female workers, but also that the viability of the textile industry in the period under review relied heavily on the household via the subsidisation of industrial wages below the cost of reproduction. This has two important implications. First, global production networks must be inscribed within broader dynamics at the intersection between the rural and the urban economy, beyond a view of the transition to industry as a linear process whereby wage employment substitutes agriculture. This reflects new labour regimes emerging along complex strategies of diversification in which the household remains a central unit of analysis to understand the aspirational and material scope of the transition to industrialisation. Second, in Tigray, industrialisation efforts relied substantially on cheap female labour mobilisation. Young female workers employed in the garment sector embodies the tension between the productive rationale of global capital and the reproductive logic of the household (Fraser 2016). This reflects labour regimes emerging along the complex interplay between dynamics of labour exploitation and discipling (Baglioni 2018). Lacking claims to land and vesting a subordinate position within the household, young female worker become a disposable pool of industrial labour, the ideal workers to be exploited below their cost of reproduction. As result, far from providing opportunities for social and economic enfranchisement, the exploitative logic of global production networks further reinforces gendered dynamics of subordination within the household. It is precisely against the multiple strategies through which female workers struggle

to reproduce themselves at the intersection between the industrial and household economies that one must read the challenges confronting the transition to industrial life under the textile industry in Tigray.

The historical question of labour in Tigray and the rise of manufacturing

The policy emphasis on industrialisation to sustain the structural transformation of the economy away from agriculture in Tigray is deeply entrenched in the political history of the TPLF political leadership. Particularly, it can be traced back to the late 1980s, when the TPLF progressively consolidated power playing a leading role in the coalition of ethno-nationalist movements which eventually overthrew the Derg regime in 1991. Despite political transition came with a commitment to a capitalist economy, the TPLF leadership was deeply imbued with a Marxist-Leninist ideology understanding the revolution in terms of class struggle and regarding the business community with profound suspicion (Medhane Tadesse, Young 2003). At the same time the transition had emphasised the contradictions of a regional economy relying on peasant agriculture and characterised by a steadily growing, and land hungry population. Although land redistribution was a key mechanism the TPLF adopted to consolidate its authority during the liberation war against the Derg, further redistribution had already been ruled out in the late 1980s for fear that plots would rapidly become too small to be economically viable (Young 1997b). This became a source of tension for a growing number of young landless peasants in the aftermath of liberation.

The political transition came with significant expectation for economic alternatives. However, the way ahead was not straightforward. Departing from a system of state ownership of land was out of question for fear of land accumulation among few wealthy and "rent seeking' commercial farmers (Paulos Milkias 2001). This configured the contour of the historical question of labour: with the rural economy overtaxed by a growing population and few potential avenues for diversification, the TPLF leadership was demanded to seek new avenues in the urban economy, despite its traditional aversion for the private sector and suspicion for middle class development. It is with this in mind that the TPLF leadership started regarding industrialisation as the solution to provide stable employment for the region's growing and land-starved population (Young 1997a: 85).

Nonetheless, the long liberation war and the post-socialist transition from a planned to a market economy generated a number of additional problems. First, although the service sector in the early 1990s was making some significant progress, the few and cautious private investors regarded agro-industrial development as a risky enterprise, requiring significant capital inputs which were not readily available anyway. Second, federal state investments in industrial development were regarded with profound scepticism after the unsuccessful experience of 17 years of planned economy under the Derg. Although the TPLF now played a prominent role in federal government, in

the years immediately after the transition a sense of economic self-administration was still prevalent in a majority of the TPLF political leadership (Young 1997a). This was accompanied by a generalised sentiment regarding a largely Amhara-dominated central bureaucracy as an obstacle, or even a threat, to Tigray national interest. Third, peasant farmers in Tigray could only produce minimal savings and the countryside was unable to create the capital accumulation required to sustain rapid industrialisation. For all these reasons a consensus emerged in the TPLF central committee to follow a different model, relying on the private sector but under tight control of the party leadership. This resulted in the creation of a community-based organisation, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT). EFFORT, a parastatal entity, was meant to support industrial development, producing profits for further growth, and sustain war veterans and their families.

As noted by Young (1997a: 85), EFFORT started operating in Tigray in 1995 with a significant amount of capital drawn from equipment captured from the Derg, companies and funds mobilised by the TPLF, and contributions from non-governmental organisations, private companies, and financial institutions. Expression of the TPLF central committee, with seven of its members initially appointed as managers, EFFORT was premised by an understanding of the failure of many state-owned companies as residing in their complete alienation from market logics and demands. Because of this EFFORT was designed as a constellation of private enterprises, responding to market rationality, whose priorities had the socio-economic transformation of Tigray at their best interest. The logic underpinning EFFORT was not dissimilar from the approach to economic transformation that the country later on embarked under the developmental state. In fact, EFFORT can be regarded as a microcosm of the developmental state's approach to the relationship between the state/party structure and the private sector.

By the time of fieldwork EFFORT controlled a number of companies operating across the country, including in the field of construction, shipping services, transportation services, pharmaceutical products, commercial farming, and tourism. As far as specific plans for Tigray were concerned, soon after its creation EFFORT started investing in several projects, establishing a number of corporations which then became leader in their respective sub-sector in Ethiopia. Most importantly to our discussion EFFORT established a textile and garment factory in Adwa called Almeda Textile PLC, which became operational in 2000. Young (1997a: 88) contends that the initial decision to locate the textile industry in Adwa was at least partly motivated by the fact that a large population in the area suffered land shortage. Developing the textile sector was expected to reduce the traditional migration of peasant farmers to Eritrea, Addis Ababa, and southern Ethiopia in search of seasonal and permanent work.

In two decades, the EFFORT galaxy expanded steadily across the country benefiting from a flexible approach to business, a dynamic management, and foremost by significant government support. Critics emphasise how the rapid growth of EFFORT was largely due

to the next-to-monopoly economic position which the conglomerate enjoyed alongside few other corporations (Vaughan, Mesfin Gebremichael 2011). One example is MAA Garment and Textiles, a fully integrated textile factory established in 2004 at Qwiha, a locality in close proximity to Mekelle airport where in the course of the 2010s other international textile investments established their plants. MAA garment, controlled by the Kebire Enterprises PLC, is a company owned by the Saudi/Ethiopian billionaire Sheik Mohammed Hussein Al Amoudi. Like EFFORT, Al Amoudi benefited from its privileged position within the political leadership to build a vast cluster of companies operating across Ethiopia, which for instance include MIDROC and the Sheraton Hotel in Addis Ababa.[3] Other private sector companies not connected to the political leadership faced significant difficulties. Challenges included access to foreign currency, internet and communication services, loans and other forms of credit (Sutton, Kellow 2010; Vaughan, Mesfin Gebremichael 2011). Arguably, until the 2010s, the EPRDF/TPLF control of the economy hindered the growth of industry and services significantly. Lack of transparency and genuine competition between companies reduced the ability of private actors to get government contracts assigned, contributing to create a difficult business climate for potential domestic and foreign investors. Sutton and Kellow (2010) argue that lack of competition generated significant inefficiency and disfunction in service delivery and provision, because the ability of private companies to stay on the market was determined by the extent to which they enjoyed state/party support.

This context of relative adverse conditions to private investments changed suddenly in the course of the 2010s when, under the impulse of the developmental state, the Ethiopian government opened the doors to foreign investors. Manufacturing industry was one of seven sectors prioritised by Ethiopia under the accelerated strategy for economic transformation elaborated in the strategic plans GTP I (2010-2015) and GTP II (2015-2020). GTP II set the ambitious objective "to make Ethiopia a leading manufacturing hub in Africa and among the leading countries in the globe" (FDRE 2016: 136). Manufacturing was expected to drive an annual growth in jobs created by 15%, from 380,000 in 2014/15 to 758,000 by 2019/20 at the end of the plan (FDRE 2016: 95). In the mind of the EPRDF/TPLF political leadership economic and political objectives were mutually reinforcing. Under the developmental state paradigm manufacturing was thus entrenched on a high modernist view of the country's future as lying on industrialisation and large-scale infrastructural projects (Mosley, Watson 2016). Wage labour opportunities in manufacturing was expected to sustain economic growth. Structural transformation was as much about economic development, as it was about the political project of the developmental state, expected to drive the transition of millions of rural smallholders to urban, wage-based, lifestyle.

Support to manufacturing relied on a theory of import-substitution in the context of the progressive consolidation and diversification of domestic industrialisation efforts (Arkebe Oqubay 2015). This strategy, known as Top-Down Pulling Strategy, was

elaborated already in the course of the 2000s in the circles of the MOI, and with the significant support of UNIDO, and then streamlined in GTP I and II (ETGAMA 2014). This strategy, which was expression of the vision behind the developmental state, was based on an approach to economic transformation casting a central role to strong state intervention to sustain industrialisation (Mekonnen Manyazewal, Admasu Shiferaw 2019). From a macro-economic perspective, the strategy focused first on developing more labour-intensive segments of the value chain to allow industry to take root through foreign investments, attracted by the low cost of labour and favourable fiscal environment.

Tigray, and Mekelle in particular, was indicated as a priority area for the development of T&G. By the mid-2010s government signed a contract with the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) to build the Mekelle Industrial Park some 5 km west of downtown. IPs drew on an economic model based on the principle of industrial clusters (Ceglie, Dini 1999). For late industrialisers like Ethiopia IPs were meant as aggregators and accelerators of industrial development by facilitating the clustering of individual enterprises that share infrastructure, minimise costs of utilities, and gain access to nearby skilled labour markets, educational facilities, research, and other critical inputs (Arkebe Oqubay 2015). Mekelle IP was officially inaugurated on 9 July 2017, and companies started production lines since January 2018. Rents for shed space was very attractive to investors. For the first four years rent was 2 US dollars per square metre/month, 2.5 dollars for the subsequent three years, 2.75 dollars on years eight to ten, and up to 3 dollars for the following five years. In 2018 Mekelle IP extended over 75 ha of land and was constituted by twelve sheds occupied for a vast majority by three international corporations: Strathmore Apparel manufacturing PLC, KPR Exports PLC, and SCM Garment Knit textile PLC.

Further to the development of the Mekelle IP a number of other international companies had established stand-alone, vertically integrated factories in the area of Mekelle since the mid-2010s. The first of these ventures was Velocity, a subsidiary of Dubai-based Vogue International Agency, which launched production lines as early as in 2016. The Italian Calzedonia Group, a global apparel manufacturer and retailer, created the subsidiary company ITACA Textile PLC in 2016, and completed the construction of its standalone factory in October 2018 at Ashegoda, near Mekelle city. Although data are not accurate, following the Bureau of Trade, Industry and Urban Development in Mekelle,[4] by 2018 over 10,000 micro and small enterprises in the field of weaving and garment were operational in Tigray. While officials also contended the sector was rapidly growing, a majority of these enterprises were individual or family undercapitalised businesses, often operating the traditional Ethiopian handloom. By the late 2010s the textile sector in Tigray was characterised by a significant disjunction between highly capitalised, large-scale, and fully integrated factories producing for export, and a magma of micro-businesses at the intersection between the formal and informal economy. Supporters

of government industrial policy argue that the growth of large-scale operations was expected to drive, in the medium run, the creation of new business opportunities for domestic companies in sectors such as accessories and complementary production activities (Arkebe Oqubay 2015). Critics of this model warned that vertically integrated factories were unlikely to generate know-how and technology spill-overs in the local and national economy (Whitfield *et al.* 2015). They rather pointed at the significant environmental and social costs of the textile industry and the negative externalities of global corporate investments as a significant configuration of contemporary financial capitalism.

While the conflict that erupted in Tigray since November 2020 cast a shadow to the future of the textile industry in the region, its rapid expansion under the impulse of foreign investments had radically changed, in the course of the 2010s, the question of labour as it was initially understood by the TPLF leadership in the late 1980s. Rapid industrialisation had finally come, generating a significant demand for labour. While by the time of fieldwork fluxes of people were still limited due to the fact that main industrial actors were still to produce at full capacity, industrial actors already lamented shortage of skilled labour as a main constraint to the rapid consolidation of operations. Demand for labour was expected to rise sharply in the next years. The new question of labour was then no longer about how creating job opportunities out of agriculture. It rather was about how sourcing industrial poles with workers that were now dispersed across the countryside. This call into question the intersection between the new industrial economy and agriculture, the topic of the next section discussing the experience of workers and prospective workers in the textile sector around Mekelle.

The new agrarian question of labour under accelerated industrialisation

As noted by Oya (2019: 670), "the process of building an industrial working class is uneven, protracted, and requires interventions and a range of important economic and social shifts over a sustained period". This captures well the transformation that the area around Mekelle was facing in the course of the 2010s under the impulse of accelerated industrialisation. A large potential workforce to be employed in industry was available across the region in the form of unemployed youth and landless (or land short) smallholders seeking alternative to agriculture. By June 2018 urban unemployment in Tigray was reported at 21.5%, with significant disparities between men (17.1%), and women (25.5%), and in a trend of growth, although marginal, since 2012 (CSA 2018). A similar gender gap was reported in urban employment in the informal sector (18.9%), significantly more prevalent among women (26.0%) than men (12.3%) (CSA 2018). According to several local officials interviewed, signs of significant labour movement to industrial poles from the neighbouring localities in the countryside were thus already evident since 2017. These included from the *wereda* of Degua Temben, Hintallo Wajirat, Enderta, Saharti Samre, Wukro Town, and Kilte Aewlallo. The textile industry

was thus attracting workers with a specific profile: young women employed as basic operators constituted over 85% of the workforce engaged by large textile corporations. In informal discussions, managers of these companies were quite open to admit that women constituted a more easily controllable pool of labour than men. Young women were regarded as more "adaptable' to sustain long shifts and repetitive tasks required by industrial sewing operations, as well as less prone to voice complaints.

By the time of fieldwork sustained industrialisation was constrained by shortage of labour. Manufacturer struggled to recruit the skilled manpower they required to run assembly lines and rates of absenteeism and turnover were alarmingly high. In the following pages I will illustrate two interrelated dimensions of the new labour question as emerged in a thematic analysis conducted through qualitative fieldwork in the area of Mekelle in the course of 2017 and 2018. These are the level of wages below reproduction, and the intersection between wage labour and household reproduction. I argue that these two issues reflected key tensions in the political project of rapid transformation to industrialisation under the Ethiopian developmental state.

Wages below reproduction

One of the most important factors explaining why Ethiopia in the course of the 2010s quickly became a recipient of international investments in the T&G sector was the availability of cheap labour. The T&G is among the most labour-intensive sectors in manufacturing requiring a large number of unskilled workers to be employed as basic operators (CSA 2015). By the time of fieldwork, entry-levels textile wages remained significantly lower than in other leading manufacturing countries. Barrett and Baumann-Pauly (2019: 9) found that textile entry salaries in the Hawassa IP were as low as 26 dollars/month, significantly lower than other textile manufacturing countries such as Bangladesh (95 dollars/month), Laos (128 dollars/month), Vietnam (180 dollars/month), China (326 dollars/month), and Turkey (340 dollars/month), and of other competitors in Africa such as Kenya (207 dollars/month) and South Africa (244 dollars/month). The same study explains that low salaries result from at least two factors: the lack of minimum wage legislation, and the fact that, as a result, the industry set the entry salary at the same level of the one typically paid to entry-level Ethiopian public employees (Barrett, Baumann-Pauly 2019: 12). The gender distribution of employment in the textile industry varied significantly depending on the size of companies. In Tigray, men dominated micro and small businesses whereas basic operators in large industries were largely women.

Low entry salary was mentioned in all interviews as the main concern of workers and prospective workers in the textile industry. Wages could be as low as 800 Ethiopian birr/month (less than 1 dollar/day) for basic operators, although with the prospect of marginal increases over time. Employers contended that salaries complied with Ethiopian law, and low entry levels were motivated by the lack of skills and low labour

productivity. In a context in which the cost of living in peri-urban Mekelle was rising sharply, interviewees lamented that wages were usually not even sufficient to cover immediate necessities. Industrial employment did not allow young employees to meet basic reproduction, from an economic perspective, but also from a social one. This had two important consequences. First, workers regarded industrial employment as a short-term strategy, and second, they remained dependent on their family/kin network for meeting basic economic reproduction. The following stories serve to illustrate these points.[5]

S.G.[6] is a young woman aged twenty-two who has worked as sewing operator for eight months in one large textile factory near Mekelle. Her monthly salary was approximately 800 birr/month and, in addition to it, she explained she was entitled to lunch at the factory canteen and use the health clinic. She relocated from her hometown, three hours away by bus from Mekelle, making daily commute impossible. For this reason, she rented a room closer to the factory together with two other friends originating from the same town. S.G. explained that with what was left after contributing 300 birr towards the accommodation rent, she was barely able to buy food. She contended that industrial employment was only a temporary step towards something else. "I want to acquire skills and experience to find a better job, hopefully closer to my family [...] this is my first work experience in factory [...] initially I was very excited, but then I realised that work is hard and with the money I make you can't do much".

Not much different was the perspective of G.F.,[7] a 19-year-old woman, living in Qwiha, a suburban area next to Mekelle airport hosting three large-scale textile manufacturers. G.F. earned a salary of 800 birr and was still living in her family house together with her three sisters and her mother. She explained that her salary, although was an important contribution towards family income, was remarkably low considering the tight schedule of factory life, even when compared to other activities in the informal sector. "When you run your own small business, no matter how small, you can do many different things while working [...] Working at the factory is hard to get time off even to go to Church or attend a funeral [...] Salary can increase after some time, but does this justify living in isolation every day for most of the day?". By isolation she meant that industrial employment limited her possibilities for cultural and social reproduction – isolation from her family, her network of kin, and her community – but also economic reproduction – inability to perform multiple activities at the same time. For people like G.F. industrial employment did not allow any form of saving, nor constituted an effective risk diversification strategy. G.F. perspective points at broader social and cultural challenges coming with the transition to industrial life: she regarded industrial employment as a short-term strategy that she pursued waiting to find better alternatives. She also explained that very rarely basic operators had a long-term perspective on industrial employment.

While industrial manufacturer required at least Grade 10 education as basic entry

criteria, many young workers had completed full secondary education (Grade 12). Absence of significant job opportunities led many recently graduated students to opt for industrial jobs whilst they were waiting for better alternatives. For instance, this was the case of Z.D.[8] a young woman from Mekelle, coming from a relatively wealthy, and urbanised, family. "Completing basic education is today not enough to secure a job [...] I decided to work as textile operator even though salary is very low [...] this is a temporary solution, the good thing about factory work is that shifts end early [...]. I enrolled at the evening class to pursue my diploma degree". Like in the case of Z.D. many recently graduated students took the opportunity to work in industry as a way to further their study. Workers enrolled in private colleges in Mekelle are offered evening classes for diploma and certificate. Z.D. contended that her salary was barely enough to cover the cost of her degree and had to rely on the support of her family for sustenance. She also explained that as work shifts were very heavy, studying and following class proved very hard, and she was wondering whether all that was worth for the little salary she earned. Industrial employment was regarded as a short-term strategy even by urbanised and relatively more educated young workers, although, the case of Z.D. shows that people tried to make the most of it in a context of limited opportunities.

Salaries were thus eroded by a spiking cost of living in the course of the 2010s. Several years of rapid GDP growth had generated a significant increase in import, putting pressure on the national balance of payments. To counter these pressures the Ethiopian government enacted several devaluations of the Ethiopian birr, which reduced even further the real purchase power of cash based industrial salaries. One of such devaluation was enacted by Ethiopia's Central Bank in 2017 at the time of my fieldwork in Tigray. In this occasion the Central Bank devalued the Ethiopian currency by 15% on 10 October in an evident effort by government to boost lagging exports. This was clearly welcomed by international industrial manufacturers, who saw labour costs dropping by 15% overnight. Conversely, the decision frustrated industrial workers who saw their already limited purchase power dropping even further. The devaluation was mentioned in interviews as yet another reason solidifying the view of industrial employment as a livelihood strategy with limited prospects. As the real purchase power of cash-based employment dropped, non-cash jobs, including agriculture and individual businesses, became more attractive because they allowed people safer risk diversification strategies. Many young women who approached the textile industry with expectations, and usually motivated by the lack of alternatives, soon after realised that factory work was much harder than initially anticipated and immediately sought alternatives.

The main takeaway point of this section is that people continued to seek employment in the textile industry despite wages below the cost of reproduction. None of the interviewees regarded work in the textile industry as a long-term strategy, nor expressed the will to settle in the industry permanently. It seems that lack of

alternatives was the main reason motivating many people to accept industrial jobs in the short run. Nonetheless, this did not mean that people disregarded the importance of industrialisation to their future and for the future of Tigray and Ethiopia. Like for those students using industrial employment to pursue additional education, people tried to make the most of the limited opportunities that industrialisation offered to them. Working in the textile sector was precisely seen as an investment in the future, one that entailed sacrificing immediate needs. Many young people thus saw this as a necessary step to approach adult life and making a better living later on. This had one crucial implication to the broader industrialisation strategy: young workers remained dependent in different capacities to other activities for meeting their reproduction. To capture the salience of labour regimes confronting young women at the bottom of the textile value chain, one has to take a broader household perspective.

The intersection between the industrial and the agricultural economy

Industrialisation in Tigray generated significant expectations in a context of limited opportunities. Young people attached to it individual and collective aspirations, including the search for economic independence, as well as social and cultural enfranchisement. Nonetheless, salaries below the cost of reproduction made it impossible for young workers to live an economically independent life. Young workers continued to depend for their sustenance on their household of provenance and other support, shaping new networks and relations of people and resources in the context of rapid industrialisation. A recurrent theme emerging in interviews is that employment in the textile industry paying minimum wages did not make much sense from the perspective of individual economic reproduction. Nonetheless, industrial employment took on material and symbolic value when regarded from the broader perspective of a household reproductive strategy.

This is particularly important for those workers coming from households with an agricultural background. For instance, this emerged in the story of K.L.,[9] a 22-year-old woman who had worked in one textile factory near Mekelle for the past nine months. K.L.'s father is a smallholder farmer and before finding job as textile operator she spent her life helping with the farm, while attending school up to grade 8. "Working as textile operator is important because it gives my family a cash salary, and allows us not to rely on agriculture only [...] sometimes you need cash to pay for things in advance, like seeds and fertilisers, and you have to get indebted if you don't have cash at the right time of the year".

The story of K.L. is an entry point to a more nuanced perspective on the meaning and value of industrial employment, and the small salaries coming with it. Like other young workers her salary would not be enough to cover her basic sustenance, and yet it played an important role from the broader perspective of her household reproductive strategy. K.L. explained that to avoid paying a rent she found hospitality at some relatives' who

live in the factory's surroundings. In exchange she performed a number of different tasks after work, including cleaning, preparing food, and babysitting. In this way she entered a new relation of exchange with her household in the countryside. She sent money back to her father when he was cash-short to purchase fertilisers and making some other investments in the land, and then received back later on some money after the harvest when agricultural produce could be sold in the market. K.L.'s cash income was an important component of the predominantly non-wage, and agriculture-based sustenance strategy of her household. This also shows how, in a context of uncertainty and rapid transformation, people valued the diversification of income sources as a risk aversion strategy. K.L. concluded her interview contending that, despite mutual exchange, ultimately without the support of her family and network of kin, working as a textile operator would have been unsustainable.

In a similar way B.G.,[10] a woman in her early twenties, explained that while depending significantly on her family assistance while employed as a textile worker, her hope was that such effort was going to eventually pay off in the future. "My father [a farmer] encouraged me to find employment as textile operator, he said it was an investment in the future [...] he wanted me to learn and open a business so that all our family could benefit. [...] Reality is very different, I am not sure I will ever make enough money to send back to my family".

The story of B.G. is again illustrative of the extent to which industrial employment takes on an important value when regarded as part of broader household planning – particularly an investment in the future. However, it also shows that young women with wages below reproduction are often subsidised by their household of provenance. This points at an apparent paradox, that is, industrialisation policy in the course of the 2010s, while it was intended to generate the structural transformation of the economy away from agriculture, it relied on rural accumulation to make up for wages below reproduction. This has precedents in the literature. Evidence from Bangladesh (Kibria 1998) shows that migrant workers employed in the garment sector remained dependent on their rural households supplementing their low factory wages with resources such as rice. In a seminal article, Wolpe (1972) has argued that in the case of apartheid South Africa the wages of rural out migrant were subsidised by the non-wage activities of the household in the *bantustans.* As result, the rural areas performed a social security function providing welfare for young workers which were living at the intersection of urban and rural life.

Some of these issues clearly resonate the case of the textile industry of Tigray. To illustrate this point further we can look at risk diversification from the perspective of the broader transformation that transition to industrial life entails. Experiences of women seeking employment in the textile industry of Tigray were seldom the result of individual decisions. Rather, they were often part of broader household reproductive strategies to diversify risk and to make the most of limited opportunities

coming alongside industrialisation. This was partly due to the gender profile of the industry, which largely privileged employing young women,[11] but also to a context of increasing land pressure in agriculture and limited opportunities for young people to meet reproduction through farming. Industrial employment opened up opportunities for young women, who usually held weaker claims to land than men, to become an important asset for the household's income diversification.[12] Young women taking industrial employment, no matter how low the salary, allowed a household to maintain a claim to the land via the men working it, while generating an additional source of cash and, most importantly, keeping open opportunities that in the future could arise from industrialisation and increased urban-rural interactions. It is in this way that young women employed at the bottom of the textile value chain were part of broader reproductive strategies which had the household at their centre.

For instance, this was the case of F.R.,[13] a 23 years old woman coming from an agricultural background and who had been employed in one textile factory for the past fifteen months. She explained that for generations her family relied on farming as the primary source of sustenance, although in a context of increasing land shortage. She explained that by the time we meet, her father had 0.75 ha scattered across three different plots, which he was farming, alongside some other land leased from neighbours, together with her three brothers. F.R. explained that her household relied on a combination of production for direct consumption and for the market. It is against this context, she explained, that availability of cash was important to allow investments in advance to the agricultural season, as well as the ability to retain important assets such as oxen. "Working as a textile operator is very challenging [...]. I hope things will change in the future, but right now I have no alternative [...]. Cash income is important because to grow food you need cash in advance if you don't want to get indebted".

A crucial aspect of the transition to industrial life in the course of the 2010s in Tigray was the fluctuation of agriculture commodity prices in different times of the year. Like in the case of F.R., many agricultural households relied on a combination of agricultural production for internal consumption and for the market. Normally, households were relatively wealthy when they were able to store and sell high value cash crops, such as *teff*, at the right time and were able to avoid distress sales when prices were low, particularly right after harvest. The important point emerging from interviews is that, in this context of significant fluctuation of agricultural produce prices, industrial wages had an important value symbolically – pursuing future alternatives – and materially – as a coping strategy to meet immediate needs. As households were normally large, and farming dominated by men, wages earned by women, no matter how little, were regarded as an opportunity to facilitate capitalisation in a context of partial and incomplete transition to a cash-based economy. By forcing young workers to seek reproduction both through wage labour and through their broader kin network, industrialisation rarely constituted a pathway to socio-economic enfranchisement: more often it reproduced

existing dynamics of subordination of women within the household. A focus on the household illustrates a broader agrarian question of labour that global production networks leave open, one that compels young female workers to reproduce themselves through their labour but without extinguishing their subordinated role completely.
The rapid expansion of the textile industry in Tigray was therefore inscribed in a number of socio-economic interactions, flows of resources, and migratory processes reflecting the complexity of the transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism. As young women could not become entirely independent through industrial employment, these patterns were never unidirectional from rural areas to industrial poles, but they were rather inscribed in multiple movements of people and resources back and forth to their place of origin.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most evident expression of the tensions entrenched in the relation between industrialisation and labour mobilisation outlined in this article is that, by the time of fieldwork, all the textile companies surveyed in Tigray were experiencing alarmingly high rates of labour turnover, absenteeism, and tardiness. While a comprehensive discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, at the time of this writing the eruption of violent conflict in Tigray since November 2020 had already radically impacted the overall framework and prospects of the textile industry in the region. News reports documenting the destruction of EFFORT controlled companies, including Almeda Textile in Adwa,[14] and, more broadly, the disruption that came with a violent conflict between the TPLF and the federal government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in office since April 2018, are likely to have long lasting impact on the future of Tigray. As far as the scope of this article is concerned, the Tigray conflict is likely to have affected those labour dynamics and tensions that were evident during fieldwork up to 2018, marking in this a potential new discontinuity in the relation between structural transformation and labour mobilisation in Tigray.
While the future remains uncertain, in this article I have shown that the model of rapid industrialisation embarked on by Ethiopia in the course of the 2010s has been rich in tensions and contradictions. This article has pointed out the centrality of the labour question in the ways in which the scope of the policies promoted under the developmental state have had practical implications to the life of young people seeking employment in their pursuit for a better future. Future research will have to put in sharp focus the mutual imbrication of rural-urban interactions in the context of industrialisation efforts. That early industrialisation relies on rural capital accumulation to subsidise industrial wages below the cost of reproduction is not a novelty in itself but is one that needs to be acknowledged and taken into account at the level of the design and implementation of policies and reforms for the future of Tigray and of Ethiopia.

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NOTES:

1 - *Ethiopia Overview*, "World Bank", 2015: http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview, retrieved on 4 November 2019.

2 - At the time of fieldwork an Ethiopian basic textile operator's salary averaged one fifth of China's and half of Vietnam's. For a critical approach see also the report by the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC 2018).

3 - For more information about MIDROC see http://www.midroc-ceo.com/.

4 - Interview conducted on 18 January 2018.

5 - Names of interviewees are not disclosed here to protect their identity.

6 - Interview with a textile worker (female, 22 yrs.) in the area of Mekelle, September 2017.

7 - Interview with a textile worker (female, 19 yrs.) in the area of Mekelle, December 2017.

8 - Interview with a textile worker (female, 23 yrs.) in the area of Mekelle, February 2018.

9 - Interview with a textile worker (female, 22 yrs.) in the area of Mekelle, October 2017.

10 - Interview with a trainee (female, 21 yrs.) in the area of Mekelle, September 2017.

11 - Available figures show that 85% of employees in textile are women aged 18-25 with a low socio-economic profile.

12 - In Ethiopia, all land is formally state property, and households retain limited tenure in the form of usufruct rights for the purpose of sustaining a livelihood. Despite a programme of rural land registration, implemented in Tigray region in the late 1990s, aimed at reducing gender-based imbalances, several studies show that access to land remains characterised by significant disparities between men and women (Dokken 2015, Adal Yigremew 2006, Bereket Kebede 2008).

13 - Interview with a textile worker (female, 23 yrs.) in the area of Mekelle, January 2018.

14 - *Tigray: The looting of the Almeda textile factory in Adwa,* «Eritrea Hub», 26 December 2020.

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"Things Change, but the Situation is Always the Same". Continuities and Ruptures in the Border between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Aurora Massa

Abstract

In the last decades, the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been characterized by deep transformations, which have changed the local regimes of mobility and reshaped the symbolic boundaries between Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Northern Ethiopian region of Tigray. Drawing from ethnographic research conducted in Mekelle, the main town of Tigray, this article aims at exploring the repercussions that some "critical events" (Das 1997) related to that border (Eritrean independence in 1993, the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war, and the 2018 peace agreements) have provoked in the biographical trajectories of those people who crossed it from 1991 onwards, namely the Ethiopian returnees and Eritrean refugees. While these historical watersheds have brought about critical changes for the people and the communities involved, such as economic failures, forced mobility, an increase in feelings of insecurity and the reshaping of feelings of belonging, the ethnographic data highlights a number of elements that endured in time and in space. By combining the study of the event with a focus on space, and by focusing on the narratives and everyday lives of ordinary people, this article intends to contribute to current debates in the social sciences and Horn of Africa studies both on social changes and on political and symbolic borders.

Keywords: event, border, forced migration, social change, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Introduction

When I first arrived in Mekelle, the main town of the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, at the end of 2007, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was still in operation. Established on 31st July 2000 as part of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea, amongst the Mission's mandates were monitoring the end of the fighting that had erupted in June 1998 between the two countries and the completion of the process of the demarcation of their shared border. Although the UNMEE's main field of activity was not in Mekelle, the recurring military convoys passing through the town and the occasional noise of warplanes in the sky revealed the closeness (in time) of the violent clashes and the proximity (in space) of a disputed border. However, I was not fully aware of this proximity and closeness until I decided to focus my doctoral research on migratory movements from Eritrea to Ethiopia that occurred after the watershed events of Eritrean independence in 1993 and the Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998-2000. When I went back to Mekelle in 2013, the UNMEE was no longer operating, having interrupted its activity in July 2008,[1] but the border was closed, as it would remain until the peace agreements signed by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki in 2018.

In this article I do not intend to retrace the intense and polarized debate about the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea and its history. Rather, I am interested in exploring the experiences of those people who crossed it in a specific period of time (1991-2019), moving from Eritrea to Tigray. By using a biographical approach to my long-term ethnography, my aim is to contribute to the reflection about the processes of transformation in Ethiopia at the core of this issue of *afriche e orienti* from an anthropological perspective, in the light of the continuities and ruptures that some "critical events" (Das 1997) related to the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia have provoked in the lives of the people and communities who were deeply embedded in them.

Combining reflections on the concept of the "event" with the study of a border means connecting a historically sensitive approach with a focus on space: while an event is a break in the flow of time, a border implies discontinuities on multiple levels, including at a geographical level. Moreover, looking at the critical events of a border suggests going beyond so-called methodological nationalism (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002) to consider the effects of an occurrence on both sides of a frontier. Likewise, in this article I take into account not only the experiences of the nearly 180,000 Eritrean citizens (UNHCR 2021) who, in the last two decades, due to the repressive drift of the government of Isayas Afewerki, have been accepted by Ethiopia as refugees, but also of the thousands of Ethiopian citizens living in Eritrea who "returned" to Ethiopia during the 1990s and the 2000s. Despite their different legal status, these border crossers share a similar migratory trajectory and have been involved in the events under consideration.

However, both the journey and the events have different meanings for them.
The critical events which I take into account are: Eritrean independence, which was achieved in 1993 (*de facto* 1991) after a thirty-year war against Ethiopia won by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and which turned a regional borderline into a border between two states; the 1998-2000 war, which resulted in the closure of that border; and the above-mentioned peace agreements of 2018. These events have dramatically changed the local regimes of mobility, introducing new legal statuses (e.g., Eritrean refugees and Ethiopian returnees), defining the possibilities, methods and routes of border crossing, and influencing the daily life of people moving from Eritrea to Ethiopia. They have also reshaped the symbolic boundaries between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Tigray, which has had consequences on people's social and family ties and feelings of national belonging. Moreover, the independence of Eritrea and the recent peace agreements mark the beginning and end of the political hegemony of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which was the political party that ruled the country for almost two decades (1991-2019), under the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the movement that had led the liberation war (1975-1991) against the authoritarian government of the Derg (1974-1991).
Although the selection of these events may seem obvious to the reader who knows local history, as social scientists we should not forget that events are not natural phenomena. The basic definition of an event is "something that happens"; yet what differentiates one moment from another or makes a certain occurrence remarkable are the social processes through which a fact acquires a specific meaning, that is, through which it becomes an "event" (Alexander 2003). From this perspective, the three events I selected are both "socially meaningful" for my research participants, and "meaningful to the social" (Hoffmann, Lubkemann 2005), in the sense that they are able to speak to larger social issues. On the one hand, I intend to explore these caesuras by shedding light on how they have changed the lives of ordinary people by bringing about economic failures, forced mobility and marginalization, shattering family and neighborhood relationships, and reshaping experiences of home and modernity. On the other hand, I try to show how the repercussions of these events went beyond the moment in which they occurred as they penetrated the biographies, social experiences, fantasies, and the moral and interpretative frames through which people navigate their daily life in the here and now.
This article is based on an ethnography I conducted in 2013-2014, two follow-up visits in 2016 and 2019, and ongoing conversations with some of my research participants through social media and telephone. The empirical data I collected is composed of in-depth interviews and informal conversations, as well as home visits, go-along talks and participation in celebrations and everyday activities. Here I particularly take into account the life stories of Henok,[2] an Ethiopian returnee, and Solomon, an Eritrean refugee, two young men born in Asmara who moved to Mekelle in the 2000s. The two

men share an urban background and are both Tigrinya-speakers, a linguistic group that predominantly inhabits the central Eritrean plateau and the adjacent Northern Ethiopian region of Tigray.[3] Both stories show some of the consequences of the above-mentioned critical events, and the ways in which the two men have differently experienced and codified them in the light of their political stances and affective backgrounds. The first case illustrates how Henok's experiences and uses of "modernity" – herein understood as a discourse about oneself and others – have changed following his spatial movements and the events under investigation. The second case explores how the 1998-2000 war has influenced Solomon's daily life in Mekelle, becoming a lens for interpreting his present conditions and elaborating his desires for the future. Before focusing on Henok's and Solomon's life stories, however, it is important to clarify how I conceptualize the notions of event and border and to give some background information.

Looking at events and borders

The study of events has long been part of the anthropological toolbox; nonetheless the relationship of anthropology with "continuities" and "fractures" has been intricate. While disciplines such as history and sociology have principally focused on moments of shifts in social processes, for decades anthropology was interested in structural continuities and their social reproduction, devoting its attention to those considered "people without history" (Fabian 1983). Struggle and conflict began to receive systematic consideration only in the 1950s, when scholars from the Manchester School and the related Rhodes Livingstone Institute of Lusaka opened up to the analysis of social change and situated practices. However, despite their methodological worth, events were mainly considered by Gluckman (1940) and his colleagues for their contributions to the equilibrium and production of the social realities within which they irrupted (Kapferer 2010). Even in the following decades, when changes and processes became central to anthropological interest, widespread styles of ethnographic representation continued to analyse events in so far as they were supposed to allow ethnographers to disclose hidden social patterns or to capture the meaning of social life. Thus, the tension between events and processes, ruptures and permanence has characterized the history of the discipline, interlacing with "the never-ending debate about the continuity and reproduction of society" (Berliner 2005: 203).

Recently, the analysis of the nexus between events and transformations has received renewed attention. For example, in her book on collective violence in India, Veena Das (1997) insists on the value of "critical events", which are those events that are able to modify people's conception of the world, to redefine pre-existing moral and symbolic frames, and to inspire new modes of action. Das argues that the partition of India in 1947 and the Bhopal disaster in 1984 introduced new actors and logics, thus provoking a break in history from which there was no going back. In a more recent article, Bruce

Kapferer (2010) uses the work of Deleuze and Guattari to argue that the reason to analyse events is not to explore a closed and static system, but to look at the "potentiality of a becoming that is always not yet" (*ivi*: 16). The emphasis on cultural creativity is also part of Danny Hoffmann and Stephen Lubkemann's (2005) conceptualization of events in their studies on the Mano river region in Western Africa, a context where violence and crises are parts of social life. Where unpredictability and uncertainty have become an everyday reality, and life is so "event-full" (*ivi*: 318) that social actors have to develop new abilities to navigate it (cf. Utas 2005), continuity and transformation, change and stability appear as deeply interlaced. From this vantage point, the authors suggest a broader approach to events that aims at combining those conceptualizations that highlight ruptures and those that stress continuities and connections.

A similar imbrication of fractures and continuities characterizes the critical events on which I focus in this article. Although Eritrean independence, the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the peace agreements can be considered as watersheds in the recent history of the border, they call into question long-lasting dynamics, thus suggesting the need to look beyond the timeframe in which they took place. As is well known, the borderline was drawn during Italian colonialism (Guazzini 1999), partitioning an area that the Ethiopian rulers considered part of their domain, and whose inhabitants were bound together by political and economic relationships, linguistic and cultural similarities and family and social ties. However, since its demarcation, the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea has never been erased. As elsewhere in Africa (Nugent 2002; Brambilla 2009), although imposed on local communities by foreign political leaderships (the Ethiopian empire and Italian colonialists),[4] this border became part of the lives and the imagination of those who experienced it and moved across it. Indeed, just like events, borders are "created" and "creative" settings, which, beside their physical dimension, convey symbolic, cultural, historical and religious meanings, and can open up resources as well as constraints (Asiwaju, Nugent 1996; Dereje, Hoehne 2010). Borders are embodied by people and groups in many ways, such as in the bureaucratic and political systems that distinguish between citizens and foreigners and establish rights and duties (Donnan, Wilson 1999). Bureaucracies and regulations also contribute to the construction of mobility regimes (e.g., visa systems, border patrols, and legal status for people on the move) that establish the possibility of crossing borders for different categories of people (Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013). Moreover, drawing borders means activating processes of "othering" that distinguish the Us-group from the Others through the construction of narratives and feelings of national belonging and social boundaries that foster practices of distinction and identification (Barth 1969; Van Houtum, Van Naerssen 2002).

A contested borderland

After colonialism had ended, the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea had several

institutional functions, which reflected different views and political projects regarding the relationships between the two countries. The British Military Administration of Eritrea (1941-1952), the federation of Eritrea to Ethiopia (1952-1962), the forced annexation in 1962 of Eritrea by the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, Eritrean unionist and separatist movements and "Greater Tigray" projects (Calchi Novati 1994), all represent different incarnations of the swing between continuities and discontinuities, and between similarities and divergences across the border. This tension also characterized the academic debates on the subject, in which, as Richard Reid writes (2007: 239), the EPLF and TPLF's tense and intense relationships, the colonial period, and even the pre-colonial era were used "either to demonstrate Ethiopia's legitimate historical control of much of what is now Eritrea, or to refute this older, more "traditional", perception and to prove that Eritrea was at no time an integral part of a "greater Ethiopian/Abyssinian empire". Both readings capture only part of the historical relations between the Ethiopian kingdoms and the current Eritrean central highlands, which were characterized by commercial relations and conflicts, proximity and distances, and domination and autonomy (Smidt 2012). Furthermore, in the last century the relationships between the Tigrinya-speaking communities on both the Eritrean and the Ethiopian sides of the border have been characterized by the constant fluctuation of alliances and enmities following historical and political contingencies. This influenced the ways in which Tigrayan and Eritrean communities alternatively represented each other as foes or friends, while always recognizing their intimate connections (Tronvoll 2009).

The emphasis on separation has been promoted by the Eritrean independent movements, including the EPLF that has identified Italian colonialism and Ethiopian oppression as the cornerstones on which its own "synthetic" and homogenizing version of nationalism is based (Bernal 2004; Hepner 2009; Bozzini 2011). After the defeat of the Derg, the distance between the two countries was institutionalized with Eritrean independence, and power was seized by the Fronts that led the war of liberation, namely, in Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi's EPRDF and, in Eritrea, Isayas Afewerki's People's Front for Democracy and Justice (the PFDJ, the successor to the EPLF). However, due to the historical, economic and cultural ties between the two countries, the presence of Ethiopian and Eritrean citizens on both sides of the border, and some unsolved issues related to citizenship and sovereignty, the border remained porous and the rhetoric of relatedness and alliance was widespread both in official statements and popular expressions (Iyob 2000; Negash, Tronvoll 2000; Tronvoll 2009).

The border was then strengthened with the 1998-2000 war, which can be considered to be part of the process of Eritrean nation-state building (Guazzini 2021; Tronvoll 1999). This conflict reinforced the separation between Ethiopia and Eritrea not only because for the following two decades it kept the border closed and practically impermeable, but also because it had deep and durable impacts on the symbolic boundaries between

the two countries. The violence, the government propaganda and the messages shared on the internet and other media by members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora (Sorenson, Matsuoka 2001; Triulzi 2002) crystallized the distance between the two countries and turned the language of friendship and alliance into a rhetoric of hostility and enmity without erasing the reciprocal language of siblinghood (Tronvoll 2009).
As the next sections will show, this event had a deep impact on people living on both sides of the border, and, due to their multiple ties, was particularly relevant among Tigrinya speakers in Ethiopia and Eritrea (Costantini, Massa 2016; Massa 2017). By taking into consideration these ties and people's biographies the border appears to be simultaneously porous and impermeable. For example, the refugees and returnees who took part in my research shared a bond with Asmara and with the positive symbolic imaginary linked to the city, shared the experience of forced migration and, in some cases, had relatives on both sides of the border. Yet their different legal statuses and the role of nationalism constructed them as different groups. I thus consider the analysis of people's everyday practices and narratives to be best suited for observing the interplay of the continuities and discontinuities behind these events. As Das (2006: 7) writes, there is a mutual absorption of the event and the ordinary "as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways". In other words, it is in the realm of ordinary life and in the narratives which frame an "event" that its effects can best be grasped.

Henok: fractures in time and space

When we met in 2013, Henok was 33 years old and owned a successful tailor shop in Mekelle. The shop was the setting in which most of our meetings took place and where, while sewing dresses, he wove the thread of his biographical trajectory. Henok was born in Asmara, to which his father Mebrahtu had moved as a teenager in the 1970s, in search of better living conditions than he'd had living in his village in Tigray.[5] Although Mebrahtu had arrived in Eritrea without money or work skills, in a few years he was able to improve his status to the point of opening a knitwear factory that, by the 1990s, had "more than 40 machines", as Henok proudly repeated to me. When discussing his life in Asmara, Henok talked about his best friends, his passion for cycling (the Eritrean national sport), and the festival his family celebrated with their neighbors. In this atmosphere, the independence of Eritrea was for him far from "critical", but was rather an event that he celebrated with his friends. He commented: "At that time, I did not know I was Ethiopian, I did not know what that meant". This sentence, "I did not know I was Ethiopian", was one I heard frequently from the children of those who had migrated from Tigray to Eritrea, through which they marked the discontinuities introduced by the 1998 events.
Indeed, Henok's family life was shattered by the outbreak of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, whose effects resonated far beyond the border and penetrated the lives of

those who found themselves on the "wrong side" of it. Both Ethiopian citizens residing in Eritrea and Eritrean citizens residing in Ethiopia suddenly became "enemies" and the victims of deportations, discriminations and other forms of violence. Targeting those who, by their very presence, contradicted the image of two distinct national communities, these actions can be interpreted as an attempt to purify the nation and reinforce its external social boundaries (cf. Appadurai 2006). In Henok's words, the two years of open warfare turned out to be a frightful and painful period. He told me about his younger siblings who were called "*agame*" at school, a derogative term referring to a stereotypical image of poor, backward and dirty workers from the countryside. While Agame is the name of an area of Tigray, its use as an insult dates back to colonial times (Locatelli 2009; Bereketeab 2010), covering a semantic area which the "clean" and "modern" Asmara historically emphasized its difference from. During the war, *agame* was a painful label, because it "constructed" a difference between Tigrayans living in Eritrea and Eritrean citizens. Henok told me his father was arrested, for reasons that he was not able to explain to me. And he also told me that he himself was so horrified by the rumours circulating of Ethiopian citizens being killed on the street by civilians that he used to sleep wearing clothes and shoes to be ready to escape in case someone would attack their house. Whether true or not, these stories amplified the effects of the violence he and other people suffered, shaping a shared and enduring atmosphere of terror (cf. Taussig 1995). Although not all the returnees I interviewed emphasized the dark sides of the war, stories about discrimination at school and arrests or attacks were quite recurrent, and can be understood as the result of a collective process which discursively turned the circumstances of the war into an "event".

These experiences did not break Henok's emotional bonds with Asmara. However, together with the institutional limitations imposed on Ethiopian citizens, they made it impossible for him to continue his previous life. In 2003 Henok's family decided to move to Tigray, a place he had never been to and that had not meant much to him. At that time, the repatriation of Ethiopian citizens was guaranteed by the humanitarian corridors opened by the International Committee of the Red Cross across the closed border, and was permitted after obtaining clearances from several Eritrean institutions. Henok and his family travelled by bus, taking with them nothing more than some personal belongings and a few hundred dollars sewn into the hem of their clothes, and leaving behind their 40 machines, the life they had chosen and built, and the only "home" Henok had hitherto known. As in the accounts of many other research participants, hope and sadness were intertwined in Henok's memories, giving multiple meanings to his journey to Ethiopia.

After a few weeks in a reception camp, Henok and his family moved to Mekelle where he felt like a fish out of water. He pointed out that their lifestyle changed and there were small but significant differences which made his relationships with the locals and the city difficult. These differences were often expressed by Henok through the language

of "modernity" and "civilization", interlacing spatial mobility with a progressive conceptualization of time. These differences included ways of speaking Tigrinya as well as certain positive attributes (food tastes, cleaning habits, open-mindedness, frankness and so on) that those who come from Asmara, the so-called *deki Asmara* (literally "sons of Asmara"), attributed to themselves to draw a symbolic boundary with the *deki Mekelle*. He told me: "The first day here, my siblings and I spent hours looking for a *macchiato*: in any café we visited we only got a glass of milk and a glass of coffee". Like other people I met, he mentioned the cold welcome they received from the local population - who sometimes accused the returnees of being too close to Eritrea - as well as the poor economic support provided by Ethiopian institutions (Massa 2021). Only when Henok received money from some of his relatives living abroad could he open a tailor shop to follow in the footsteps of his father and his famous knitwear factory in Asmara.

Henok was particularly proud of his success as an entrepreneur, and, following a widespread narrative, he attributed this to his Eritrean background. This was clarified one day in February 2014, when I was in the back of the shop with him and another returnee and we were discussing the effects that their arrival had had on Mekelle. "You know", the other man told me, "We *deki Asmara* are hard-workers and have skills that people from here did not have before we came. As soon as we arrived, we started working as carpenters, electricians, cooks, tailors... and we changed Mekelle". Henok added: "Until 20 years ago, Mekelle was little more than a village. When people from Eritrea arrived, things began to change, businesses were started, houses were built better... Before there was nothing, no clothes or shoe factory... Not even a *macchiato*", he concluded, referring to our previous conversation.

Like many other returnees, by emphasizing the "modernity" that he felt he embodied and that in his first years in Mekelle was the uncomfortable marker of his "diversity" as a migrant from Eritrea, Henok claimed to have contributed to the dramatic urban and economic development that had characterized the city in recent years. Talking about the urban and economic transformations of Mekelle was for him also a metaphorical register through which he described his personal changes in relation to the town. Indeed, these transformations reverberated with the ways in which he had reshaped his sense of self as a Tigrayan, an Ethiopian and as a *wedi* (son) *Asmara*, partially reversing the *agame* label. This interlacement also helped him to build his sense of home in Mekelle, turning it into a significant place for him. In other words, by playing with well-established markers of the border between Mekelle and Asmara, and between Tigray and Eritrea, Henok and other returnees managed to bridge the break - between their past and present life, between here and there, between Asmara and Mekelle – that was provoked by the war and their subsequent repatriation.

This is more evident when we read Henok's stress on "modernity" and "hard work" in the light of the development programs and narratives introduced by the EPRDF in

the 2000s (Hagmann, Abbink 2011; Vaughan 2011). Although they were accompanied by authoritarian and coercive modes of governance (Lefort 2012; Di Nunzio 2019), these narratives were able to penetrate people's subjectivities and instilled the idea of a circular relationship between individual responsibility and collective development (Villanucci 2014). In line with these political narratives, many returnees related their ability to change and improve Mekelle with the transformation and enhancement of their personal situation. In this way they set the basis for their social inclusion and personal redemption, and for building a bond with their new town and country.

When I returned to Mekelle in November 2019, this shift had become even more evident. "As soon as the border is reopened, I will be the first to cross it", was a sentence I had heard so many times during my previous fieldwork that I was not surprised to discover that almost all returnees I had met had gone to visit Eritrea when the border was reopened. However, my interlocutors" emotional tone about that journey, including Henok's, was different from what I had expected. They depicted Asmara and other Eritrean towns as old and abandoned places, a far cry from the lively centers that they had remembered and, above all, from the economic boom that had changed Mekelle. Here again, the journey across the border appeared as a sort of time travel both through their own personal stories and along a line of progress in which Asmara appeared as disconnected from those global flows that had hit Mekelle as a result of EPRDF policies. In the accounts of their journeys, the symbolic relations between Asmara and Mekelle did not disappear, but were rather overturned: in 2019 progress, development and modernity were used to connote Mekelle rather than Asmara, showing how, despite this partial reversal, this marker continued to be particularly relevant. Moreover, as their "return" to places now irremediably lost, these journeys also acted as a further step in their emotional and symbolic attachment to Mekelle. In fact, in their own words the sadness, disappointment and frustration for Eritrea had been reabsorbed into the pride of being *Tegaru* (Tigrayans), which, for some years, had become stronger in the city and the wider region.

Solomon: hoping for a change

Solomon was born in 1989 and was too young to remember when Eritrea became independent. However, he represented this event as a turning point in his life and in the history of his country. He was imbued with nationalistic rhetoric and feelings, which he absorbed through official discourses, public celebrations and school programs (Woldemikael 2008; Riggan 2016), as well as his family environment. Several of his close relatives had been *tegadelti*, guerrilla fighters during the liberation war against Ethiopia, and, thanks to their accounts, he knew many stories about the war as well as the atmosphere of the post-liberation years. At the beginning of 2013, when I met him in Mekelle where he lived as a refugee, his strong nationalist feelings coexisted with his firm opposition to the repressive drift of the current Eritrean government.

His memories were more personal when they referred to the second critical event at the center of this article, namely the 1998-2000 war. Solomon told me how proud he was of his father who, according to what he understood as a child, went to the front "to kill as many *agame* as he could". He told me about the anti-Ethiopian song he used to sing and quarrels that they had with their Ethiopian neighbors. But he also recalled the support he gave to his best friend, an Ethiopian citizen, when the latter was attacked by their schoolmates. Besides these occurrences, Solomon saw the war as the culmination of a longer history of oppression suffered by the Eritrean people, which dated back to the empire of Haile Selassie and the regime of the Derg, and which could be repeated in the future. In line with Eritrean government propaganda, especially before his departure, Solomon imagined Ethiopia as an aggressive enemy that could never be trusted.

The outcomes of the war also marked the years Solomon spent in Ethiopia. He left Eritrea in 2010 due to the repressive system that the Eritrean government had imposed on its citizens since the early 2000s, and to escape national service that forces young people to serve the government for an indefinite period of time. In order to avoid being caught, imprisoned or killed by the Eritrean military police and border patrols who try to prevent people from leaving the country, he crossed the border irregularly with the help of a smuggler, by foot and at night (Belloni 2019; Massa 2019). Once in Ethiopia, Solomon was granted refugee status in the identification center in the town of Endabaguna and then assigned to one of the four refugee camps in Tigray. According to the Refugee Proclamation of 2004, refugees had to reside in the place they were assigned by the Administration for Refugee Returnee Affairs (ARRA), and, with some exceptions, these were camps. Solomon lived in the camp for nearly a year, suffering from difficult living conditions, the boredom of having nothing to do and a lack of future prospects. Although his initial plan was to stay in Ethiopia for a short time and then continue his journey towards what he considered to be better destinations (e.g., Europe and the United States), due to the obstacles to mobility he remained "stuck in transit" (Brekke, Brochmann 2015; Massa 2021). His life in Ethiopia started to improve when, thanks to the out-of-camp policy introduced by the Ethiopian government in 2010, he was admitted to Mekelle University as a student in the accounting department. Solomon was positively surprised by the welcome he received after arriving in Ethiopia, and this feeling increased when he moved to Mekelle. One morning in June 2013, sitting in a cafe in his campus where we often had breakfast together, he told me: "I am wondering why they are treating us like this. I mean they suffered a lot! For example, if you were a Tigrayan and you lost your son or your brother because of the [1998-2000] war and I say "I am an Eritrean", I am expecting you to say: "You are the one who killed my son!". However, while being grateful to the Ethiopian government for the possibility of attending university, he felt a deep sense of insecurity and mistrust towards local institutions and people due to the lack of resolution of the 1998-2000 war (cf. Massa

2016). Like the majority of refugees I met, Solomon took the contradictions of being a refugee in an "enemy country" very seriously, and relied on the event of the war as a filter through which to measure and interpret his daily life. This feeling was particularly strong when he referred to his relationships with Tigrayans, who he expected to have greater resentment for the war.

Like many of his peers, Solomon understood the apparently benevolent attitude of the Ethiopian government as false, hiding "a secret agenda" aimed at increasing its international prestige and continuing its battle against Eritrea. In their view, by opening public universities the Ethiopian government was attempting to bring young Eritreans on side with the ultimate aim of annexing Eritrea or establishing a new federation, and thus finally getting access to the Red Sea and control over Badme - the village in which the war had erupted and that had long been disputed. In light of this, it is not surprising that mistrust, fear and insecurity were some of the principal feelings characterizing Solomon's life in Mekelle: like many others, he was afraid of losing his status, ending up in prison or, even worse, being repatriated, as had happened during the 1998-2000 conflict to many Eritrean citizens living in Ethiopia. These interpretations contributed towards fueling Solomon's desire for further mobility and represented some continuities with his past in Eritrea, such as the feeling of being constantly under siege, the lack of control over his own life and the impossibility of taking those steps (e.g., reaching self-sufficiency, getting married, helping his family) that would allow him to achieve the social status of adulthood (Treiber 2009).

The 2018 peace agreements between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President of Eritrea Isayas Afewerki partially reshaped this situation. As Solomon explained to me through social media at the end of 2018, when he had moved to Addis Ababa, he and his friends were suspicious about the relationship between Abiy and Isayas, and speculated on what the consequences might be for them. When it became clear that the peace agreement would not improve their present and their future in Ethiopia or Eritrea, he told me: "Things change, but the situation is always the same for us". Again, they were afraid that the agreement was the prelude to the end of Eritrea as an independent country and that they could be the victims of that. Moreover, while the situation of conflict had until then placed Eritrean refugees in an uncomfortable position with respect to the Ethiopian government, the peace made them feel vulnerable to possible interference by the Asmara government, increasing the fear of repatriation and deportation. Furthermore, although the Ethiopian government had adopted more inclusive refugee reception policies since 2019,[6] the implementation of these measures was slow. Finally, the repeated announcements of the closure of the Hitsats refugee camp and the suspension of the recognition of refugee status through the *prima facie* mechanism (which makes obtaining the right to asylum relatively easy) contributed towards maintaining a high sense of insecurity.

Conclusions

Through the lens of the event, in this article I have tried to explore some of the micro-social effects of the historical and social transformations involving the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea during the EPRDF period. Although Mekelle was at the core of the EPRDF establishment, my attention has focused on its "margins", namely on the biographies and everyday lives of those who, due to their migratory trajectories or their citizenship, were simultaneously inside and outside of the Ethiopian federation, and whose marginality was defined precisely by the historical caesuras under investigation. Rather than reconstructing the political and historical dynamics around these events, I have scrutinized how they were embodied in the personal experiences, migratory movements and social and intimate relationships of those people who migrated from Eritrea to Tigray in the 1990s and 2000s, both as Ethiopian returnees and Eritrean refugees. Following the anthropological scholarship on the event, I have taken into account both people's ordinary lives and their narratives. While it is in everyday life that events manifest their effects (Das 2006), it is through narration that occurrences are transformed from individual incidents into socially meaningful collective events (Jackson 2005). Moreover, since narratives are always contextual, this transformation does not occur once for all, and the period in which I collected these narratives (2013-2019) is crucial for understanding their structures and meanings.

A deep imbrication of continuity and rupture seems to characterize people's experiences of the events under consideration, that is the Eritrean independence, the 1998-2000 war, and the 2018 peace agreements. All of these historical watersheds have brought about critical changes for the people and communities involved, showing the generative power of events (Kapferer 2010). At the same time, my ethnographic research also highlights a number of elements which endured in time and space, demonstrating how continuity and transformation interlock in a complex reality (Hoffman, Lubkemann 2005). On the one hand, these events are part of the longer history of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, marked by connection and separation, alliance and hostility, and intimacy and estrangement. On the other hand, if observed from below, events cannot be confined within the historical periods in which they occur. In this article, I presented some of the ways in which these events and the border around which they occurred were inscribed in people's biographies, causing unexpected migrations, social fragmentation or economic collapse. By penetrating the emotional, moral and interpretative frames through which people navigated their daily lives, they went well beyond the immediate occurrence of the event, with their reverberations still felt years later.

Henok's story shows how, despite the fact that the war and his repatriation have radically changed his life course, both his daily practices and his job commitments revealed a strong connection with his past in Asmara and his sense of self as a *wedi Asmara*. His case also demonstrates how "modernity" represents a stable marker of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, maintaining this role even when the pole of the dichotomy between

modernity-non modernity was partially reversed in 2018. Solomon's story demonstrates the long-lasting effects of the 1998-2000 war from the perspective of a young man who did not directly experience the violence of those years, but who acknowledges it as a critical event, able to influence his present life and his desires for the future. Taken together, the two cases show differences and similarities, continuities and fractures in the ways in which the three events have been experienced by ordinary people.

The centrality of these margins has been reaffirmed by the turmoil that erupted in Tigray in November 2020 and is still ongoing at the time of writing (August 2021), despite the ceasefire proclaimed at the end of June 2021. Indeed, regardless of the historical and proximate causes of the war between the federal government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF, the conflict has been characterized by the participation of the Eritrean army alongside the Ethiopian National Defense Force.[7] As often happens during what Mary Kaldor calls "new wars" (Kaldor 1999), attacking and terrorizing civilians through killings, looting and other violence have not just been a side effect of the war, but one of the goals of the war strategy. According to many sources, some of these atrocities have been committed by Eritrean troops both on Ethiopian citizens and Eritrean refugees. Eritrean soldiers have been accused of perpetrating massacres and rapes in Tigrayan villages and towns and of looting their factories, private property, health facilities, universities and schools.[8] They also have been accused of attacking the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps, resulting in the death of humanitarian workers and refugees and the destruction of infrastructures to the point that the UNHCR decided to close them. Tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees have been suffering violence and insecurity and have been forced to flee to other refugee camps in Tigray and Sudan, to nearby towns such as Mekelle or Shire, or to Addis Ababa, for their perceived affiliation with one side or the other. Some were forcibly repatriated to Eritrea, confirming the fears that arose in 2018 with the launch of the peace process.[9]

Even though it is currently impossible to predict the outcome of the conflict, it is quite certain that it will have a profound impact not only on regional and global dynamics, but also on the everyday experiences of those who incorporate the border into their life and practices as well as on the social boundaries and collective representations that I have explored in this article. Eritrean refugees' insecurity and fears are certainly escalating, both among those living in the refugee camps located in the tormented region of Tigray, who have witnessed the presence of Eritrean troops for months, and among those in Addis Ababa and other Ethiopian towns. Due to the alliance between Abiy and Isayas, the latter has increased his ability to control Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, also through the bourgeoning presence in Ethiopia of spies loyal to the PFDJ government, if the rumours are to be believed. Moreover, some refugees are afraid of being mistaken for Tigrayans by non-Tigrinya-speaking Ethiopians. In continuity with what happened after the 1998-2000 war, violence seems to reinforce the rhetoric of the enmity between Tigrayans and Eritreans. The resentment of the former has particular

value among returnees, since it acts as a further step in their process of loosening symbolic ties with Eritrea and of strengthening homemaking in Tigray, which my visit in 2019 had already highlighted. "They took us back thirty years" is a sentence that many returnees in Mekelle used when commenting on the looting carried out by the Eritrean soldiers. Thirty years is the span of time in which the EPRDF was in power, fueling many people's dreams of well-being and progress. Once again, the rhetoric of development and modernity emerges as the social lens through which people look at events and construct their difference with the Other across the Eritrean-Ethiopian border.
However, as I have already mentioned, across the border between Eritrea and Tigray the categorization of friends and enemies is always shifting, and what appears to be a stable alliance or hostility can rapidly change following new wars and political events. As Tronvoll states (2009: 2), in order to understand politics and war in the Horn of Africa, the point is not "knowing at any time who are enemies and allies [...] but figuring out the patterns of transformations – how enemies shift to become allies, and vice versa". In this light we should not only take contingent political events into consideration, but also investigate how these events settle in people's biographies and narratives and reverberate with past events, that is, we should linger on the continuities that persist under the surface of change.

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NOTES:

1 - The UNMEE terminated its mandate due to some restrictions imposed by the Eritrean government and the cutting off of fuel supplies that made it impossible for the operation to carry out its tasks.

2 - To protect the privacy of my research participants, I changed their personal names and some details of their life stories. I am grateful to my research participants for sharing with me their time and their experience.

3 - Despite Tigray and Eritrea being home to a variety of languages, religions and ethnicities, this article is focused on people sharing a language (Tigrinya), religion (Christian Orthodox Church), and other cultural and social configurations.

4 - Borders were not unknown in the pre-colonial Horn of Africa, where different conceptions of the border competed (Clapham 1996). Before the colonial and post-colonial era the linguistic community of Tigrinya speakers was characterized by continuous processes of the construction and demolition of social boundaries related to geographical communities and political powers (Smidt 2010).

5 - The Eritrean towns and countryside have attracted workers from Tigray at least since colonial times (Chelati Dirar 2009; Bereketeab 2010). The returnees who participated in my research had moved (or their parents had moved) to the current Eritrea during the 1970s and 1980s.

6 - In line with the UNHCR's New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), the Ethiopian Refugee Proclamation of 2019 promotes refugees' self-reliance and social and economic inclusion.

7 - *Eritrea confirms its troops are fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray*, «Aljazeera», 17 April 2021, available at www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/17/eritrea-confirms-its-troops-are-fighting-ethiopias-tigray.

8 - *Dit is een humanitaire ramp in ontwikkelinghttps*, «VRT NWS», 20 December 2020, available at www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/12/20/vrtnws-als-eerste-in-oosten-van-tigray-in-ethiopie-het-geweld/. Summary with English subtitles available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkvOfC9q-n8.

9 - *Statement attributable to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia's Tigray region*, 14 January 2021. Available at www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/1/600052064/statement-attributable-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-situation.html.

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A Contested Internal Frontier: The Politics of Internal and International Borders in North-Western Ethiopia

Luca Puddu

Abstract
This article analyses the historicity of the process of state building at Ethiopia's north-western corner. The contemporary conflict for control of western Tigray is the by-product of a long-standing struggle for control of natural resources and trading flows between sub-regional centres of power that played a prominent role in the political arena of the Horn of Africa since the late nineteenth century. In turn, the outcome of this competition is critical to understand the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy toward its neighbours since the second half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Borders; frontiers; politics; Ethiopia; Sudan; Eritrea

Introduction

The rise to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 sanctioned a turning point in the political trajectory of the Ethiopian state. Not only did it put an end to the longstanding dominance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the ruling coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), but also paved the way to a historical peace treaty with Eritrea after the 1998-2000 conflict and the ensuing 18 "no-peace, no-war" years. The transition took a sudden turn in November 2020, when the federal government launched a military operation in Tigray after months of rising political tensions. The federal army was assisted by the Eritrean armed forces and by

the special police of the Amhara regional state. Amhara regional forces immediately took control and remained in charge of the western lowlands of Tigray, over which they advanced irredentist claims since the inception of ethnic federalism in 1995. The conflict in western Tigray, in turn, paved the way to the intervention of the Sudanese army in the contested borderlands between the Setit and the Atbara rivers, along the international boundary with the regional states of Tigray and Amhara. Khartoum's official purpose was to regain control of Sudanese land occupied by Ethiopian settlers and claimed by some Amhara officials as part of Ethiopian territory.[1]

Northern Ethiopia's descendance into civil war and regional conflict may appear a paradox for a country that, only a few years ago, was described as an island of stability in a region shaped by endemic violence and state failure.[2] From a domestic point of view, this sudden turn of events has been interpreted as the consequence of the centrifugal tendencies introduced by ethnic federalism or, alternatively, as the outcome of the return to power of nationalist forces determined to reinstate an updated version of "Amhara imperialism".[3] Accordingly, competing claims over western Tigray have been supported by the necessity to re-draw unjust internal boundaries or protect ethnic self-determination. The border conflict with Sudan, in turn, apparently confirms the assumption that regional politics in the Horn of Africa is a zero-sum game, whereby established states invariably pursue linear national interests and exploit the neighbour's weakness in times of political crisis in order to assert regional hegemony. These explanations, I argue, are based on two main weaknesses. In the first case, they overlook the historicity of the process of state formation in Ethiopia, assuming a net distinction between the imperial, socialist, and ethno-federalist political phases. In the second case, they focus only on formal actors and institutions, dis-embedding foreign policy making from social interests and political economy (Hagmann, Pèclard 2010: 545).

In this paper, I advance an alternative interpretation of the driving factors behind the current crisis. My argument is that a strict focus on ethnicity and inter-state rivalry is not a useful tool to grasp the different interests at stake in the conflict. The dispute over what is now known as western Tigray is not simply the result of the competition between primordial ethnic identities carved out of the post-1995 federal architecture, but reflects a long-standing struggle for control of a contested internal frontier between sub-regional centres of power that took part in the making of modern Ethiopia (Yates 2017: 106). In turn, the outcome of this competition is critical to understand the relationship between Ethiopia and its neighbours. The process of foreign policy making of different Ethiopian regimes toward Sudan and Eritrea can also be understood as a negotiating arena involving sub-regional centres of power (De Waal 2015) that manipulated the material and immaterial resources offered by border politics (Feyissa Hoehne 2010) in order to (re)define their position within the political hierarchy of the Ethiopian state.

Armed competition between powerful regional overlords for control of contested internal frontiers and external supply routes was a recurrent feature of the Ethiopian highlands politics during the so-called Zemana Masafent, or Era of the Princes (Crummey 1975). It remained an established pattern of political bargaining even after the re-establishment of imperial authority under Tewodros in 1855, shaping the Ethiopian state building trajectory in profound ways (Yates 2020). A turning point in the history of late XIX and XX century Ethiopia was the battle of Embabo, fought in 1885 between the regional powerhouses of Shewa and Gojjiam. The battle solved the stalemate for control of the agriculturally rich province of Kafa between the two fore-runners for succession to Emperor Yohannes IV, thereby setting the stage for Shewan hegemony over imperial institutions in the years to come. Indeed, the victory at Embabo offered to the Shewan *Ras* and then Emperor Menelik II an open door to the further conquest of the west and the south. This, in turn, brought him into more direct contact with external sources of firearms and provided a critical stream of revenue to strengthen his political and military position in the bid for imperial power (Yates 2020: 75). The rise of Shewa at the centre of national politics also sanctioned a radical shift in the Ethiopian empire's foreign policy orientations. The highlands beyond the Mareb river and the coastal shore of the Red Sea were at the centre of Yohannes IV's concerns. The Tigrayan Emperor promoted a complex strategy of military conquest, land reform, and marriages with local chiefs in order to integrate the Mareb Mellash within the power structure of the empire (Taddia 2009: 63). At the same time, he checked Egyptian and Italian ambitions in the coastal area in the quest for securing a direct access to sea and, therefore, a major gateway to firearms (Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2021: 36). The transfer of imperial power from Tigray to the southern section of the historical Abyssinian core decreased the economic importance of the Eritrean frontier at the advantage of other commercial routes, paving the way to the formal recognition of Italian sovereignty over Eritrea after Menelik's victorious battle against Italian forces at Adwa (Guazzini 2021: 134).

The contemporary dispute between Amhara and Tigray regional states for control of the north-western borderlands can be framed as another fault line in the trajectory of the Ethiopian polity and the broader regional system. To support my argument, I focus on the political and economic history of the Ethiopian north-western escarpment between the Setit and the Atbara rivers, at the intersection of the international boundaries with Eritrea and Sudan, which form an ecological system known as the Mazega. I look in particular at the web of state and non-state actors that insisted on this frontier area from the early XIX century to the present, as well as the implications that this struggle had on the political economy of frontier governance of the Ethiopian state. The case study reminds us that frontier zones in the Horn of Africa "are not peripheries, but have defined the very nature of the states and societies themselves" (Reid 2011: 20). The shifting geography of power in the

Mazega has been a major variable in the ups and down of the relationship between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea across the XX and XXI century.
Methodologically, this article relies on a set of primary sources collected in Ethiopia, Italy, and the United Kingdom. African sources consist of archival documents and grey literature from the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia (NALE) in Addis Ababa, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in Addis Ababa, and the Provincial Archives in Gondar (GPA), capital of the historical Begemder region. Italian sources are composed by business records from the historical archives of Banco di Roma (HABR), which provided credit lines to import-export traders in Eritrea until 1974. British sources consist of government records from the national archives of the United Kingdom (TNA) at Kew Gardens, London.

The north-western frontier, c. 1800-1941

The trajectory of the Mazega fits neatly with the definition of interstitial frontier described by Kopytoff in his seminal work on pre-colonial Africa. The north-western lowlands were an "open area nestling between organized societies, but internal to the larger region in which they are found", featured by the periodical in-migration of settlers who "disengaged themselves from their societies" and became the new rulers in a relationship of inter-dependence with the original inhabitants of the region (Kopytoff 1987: 9-13). In the late 1930s, the Italian anthropologist Ellero described the region as a place of in-migration ruled by outsiders from the nearby provinces of Hamasien – in contemporary Eritrea – and Tigray. One of them, Ayana Egzi, is supposed to have reached the Mazega in the XVIII century after escaping from his home province in Agame, north-western Tigray, becoming the founder of the local aristocracy of Wolkait (Ellero 1999). These frontiersmen periodically gave rise to small polities that interacted with the wider regional system, playing neighbours one against the other in order to survive the hostile environment of the Sudanese lowlands. Their chance of remaining in power depended on the ability to exploit the opportunities of the frontier, which usually consisted in engaging in violent forms of economic accumulation. The pillaging of long-distance trade routes offered the chance to increase surplus extraction in a context of low population density. The enlargement of the tributary base, in turn, was often achieved through raids in search of slaves from neighbouring territories, thereby creating new centre-periphery hierarchies at the local level (Kopytoff 1987: 30-33). Not incidentally, Donham describes the area as the archetype of the Abyssinian frontier and "a model, at least in part, for the one created in the south" (Donham 2002) during the imperial expansions of the late 19th century.
In 1861, the British explorer Samuel Baker depicted the area as a place of asylum for bandits and refugees from both sides of the frontier, "attracted by the excitement and lawlessness of continual border warfare" (Baker 1874: 305). At that time, the Mazega was ruled by Mekk Nimr, a former subject of the Sultanate of Funji who had settled around

Humera following the Egyptian conquests of the early XIX century. The relationship between Mekk Nimr and the surrounding centres of power was paradigmatic of the ambiguous nature of his rule. Nimr paid tribute to the Ethiopian emperor Tewodros, thereby recognizing Abyssinian authority over the area. At the same time, he provided intelligence information to his overlords in the highlands, to the extent that he was described as "a shield that protected the heart of Abyssinia" (Baker 1868: 300). The diplomatic protection accorded by Ethiopian rulers, in turn, was exploited by Mekk Nimr to accumulate booty and slaves from raiding activities against Egyptian garrisons and caravans on the western side of the Atbara river: when the Egyptian army counter-attacked, he would retreat toward the inaccessible mountains to the east. The tributary relationship with the highlands did not mean that Nimr was simply a faithful subject of the Ethiopian polity. Baker reported how the Sudanese ruler relied on the collaboration of the Jalyn Arabs, who acted as his spies in enemy's territory while paying tribute to the Egyptian government itself. The same ambivalent behaviour shaped the relationship between Nimr and the Hamran tribes, who "although nominally subject to Egypt, were well known as secret friend of Mekk Nimr" (Baker 1868: 299). British explorers framed the Mazega as an integral part of the sphere of influence of Gondar, the capital of imperial Ethiopia and, later, of the region of Begemder. In 1847, Mansfield Parkyns argued that the boundary of the Gondarine kingdom stemmed from the eastern side of the Atbara river to the western side of the Setit river. The two riverine systems thereby constituted the natural borders with the kingdoms of Sennar and Tigray (Mansfield 1966: 97-99). This territorial configuration is confirmed by the fact that Nimr himself also paid tribute to Ras Wube of Semien, who was subject to the ultimate authority of Gondar (Abir 1967).

The demarcation of the colonial border in 1902 sanctioned the partition of the Mazega between the Ethiopian empire, Italian Eritrea, and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Guazzini 2002; Wubneh 2015). The formal subdivision of spheres of sovereignty between Ethiopia and surrounding colonial powers did not change significantly the patterns of state building at the local level, however. At the beginning of the XX century, an epigone of Mekk Nimr settled again in the plains between the Setit and the Angareb river, establishing his own centre in the small village of Nuqara. Al Imam was a former soldier of the Mahdist state who had retreated into the Mazega to escape British repression after the fall of the Mahdi. The Sudanese ruler reproduced the frontier trajectory of his predecessor. He conducted regular raids in nearby territories under nominal Italian and British sovereignty. There, he recruited slaves that were employed in his own plantations in the nearby of the colonial border, such as in the settlement of Jebel Lukdi. While retaining a large degree of autonomy, Al Imam recognized the sovereignty of the Ethiopian empire in the lowlands, paying a tribute to the rulers of Wolkait and, later, to the Ras (king) of Gondar. In return, he enjoyed the protection of

his highlands' rulers against the complains of British authorities in Sudan, who accused him of disrespecting the colonial border (Garretson 1982).

The rise of Al Imam corresponded with an important shift in the patterns of commercial exchange at the regional level. In the XVIII and XIX century, the most important trading route between Gondar and the external world transited through the border town of Metemma and, from there, across Sudanese territory (Seri-Hersch 2010). This route gradually lost importance since the end of the XIX century, following the repeated wars between the Ethiopian Empire, the Egyptians and, later, the Mahdist. It would never recover from the past glory. Starting in the first decade of the XX century, trade with Sudan found a formidable enemy in the Italian economic expansion from Eritrea throughout north-western Ethiopia. The extension of Eritrea's trading network southward reflected the attempt to expand fiscal revenues for the colonial budget, but was also a tool to promote Italian economic influence over northern Ethiopia in preparation to potential territorial claims (Ahmad 1997). In 1903 the Italians started their plans for construction of a more reliable infrastructural network across the Setit river. New camel caravan roads were established between western Eritrea and Gondar via Nuqara, in the lowlands, while merchants were encouraged to shift their activities from the Sudanese route through a mix of gifts and fiscal incentives (Ahmad 1997: 417). Soon, traders from the Lake Tana region found the northern corridor more convenient than the western one through Metemma, where Indian and Arab buyers offered lower prices for Ethiopian commodities (Ahmad 1997: 424). The improvement of the road system to the port of Massawa was also welcomed by the regional administration of Begemder, which hoped to increase the already significant tribute extracted from Al Imam's plantations in the Mazega (McCann 1990:130). The Italian route was also instrumental in re-establishing the position of Gondar as the major trading centre in the region, placing the city at the intersection of the commercial flows between western Ethiopia and the northern route (Pankhurst 1964: 65-67). That the regional capital was taking advantage from the expansion of trading activities is indirectly confirmed by the fact that, up to the year 1936, Begemder resisted the central government's attempts to establish direct control over the regional custom office, whose head – the *Naggadras*, or head of merchants – remained under the direct authority of the regional administration (Garretson 1979). The flexible border policy adopted by Asmara and Gondar was crucial for the agricultural growth of the Mazega. Once the Italians terminated their policy of indirect subsidies to Al Imam, and the new overlord of Wolkait opted for closing the northern border to economic exchange for fear of the growing Italian influence, Nuqara's fortunes declined accordingly. In 1929, travellers described the Mazega as a sparsely populated area which had lost the commercial centrality enjoyed only a few years later (McCann 1990: 132).

The Italian occupation of 1936-1941 did not put an end to the overlapping territorial claims advanced by surrounding sub-regional centres on the Mazega. On the contrary,

colonial intervention added new layers to this struggle. In 1937 the lowlands between the Setit and the Angareb rivers were placed under the jurisdiction of the new *governatorato* of Amara, which included also part of the northern section of the Mazega around the village of Om-Hager. This administrative setting was going to change in 1939, when the presence of Ethiopian rebels in Wolqait convinced the Italian government of the opportunity to move the area under the jurisdiction of the Eritrean *governatorato* (Dore 2005). This arrangement was supposed to be temporary, but it had nonetheless the effect of reactivating the political links between the regional aristocracy of Tigray and local rulers in Wolkait and the surrounding, setting a precedent for the administrative incorporation of the area within the borders of Tigray in 1995.

A contested imperial borderland, c. 1941–1973

After liberation from Italian rule, the Ethiopian government re-established the pre-1936 administrative map that assigned control of the north-western plain to Begemder. This move was certainly resented in government circles in Tigray, where Ras Seyoum Mangesha was challenging the authority of Emperor Haile Selassie with the tacit support of the British military administration in Eritrea (Erlich 1981). The emergence of a cleavage with Addis Ababa became evident in 1942-43, when Tigray became the battlefield of the so-called *Woyane* revolt (Gebru Tareke 1996). The violent suppression of the uprising did not prevent some prominent Tigrayan officials from embracing the British project of a semi-independent Greater Tigray extended to the highlands of Eritrea. According to the ambassador to London Abebe Retta, who hailed from Tigray, this was the only way to "remove the province from the Amhara yoke" (Calchi Novati 1996: 31).

The territorial dispute between Gondar and Mekelle was also nurtured by the fact that the Mazega was going to experience a new cycle of economic expansion, which was based on the same conditions that had favoured the cash crop revolution of Al Imam fifty years earlier. Since the early 1950s the area began to attract a growing migrant labour force from the highlands of Eritrea, Tigray, and Begemder, which found employment in the cotton and sesame seeds plantations established by foreign investors. In the 1960s, Ethiopian investors followed the example of foreign entrepreneurs and opened their own commercial farms. The western plains between Humera and the Angareb river became one of the main cash-crop producing areas in the country, providing a significant source of hard currency for the government's coffers. This agricultural boom was favoured by the launch of an import-substitution policy that protected cotton growers from the competition of cheaper Sudanese cotton and, most importantly, by the enactment of the federation with Eritrea in 1952. Sesame seeds from the Humera area could now be exported through Asmara and the port of Massawa without additional fees, while cotton was sold to the recently established textile factories in Asmara and, to a lesser extent, Bahr Dahr, near Gondar. Sorghum, finally, provided an important

contribution to the subsistence economy of the highlands, though commercial profits were very low compared to the high transportation cost.[4]

The regional centres of Begemder, Eritrea and Tigray had different interests at stake in the Mazega. For Tigray, the area offered employment opportunities to migrant labourers from the over-populated highlands, while the importation of sorghum represented a safety-net in so far as it reduced the seasonal fluctuation of food prices.[5] The Tigrayan administration was eager to expand its economic influence over the western escarpment. This is confirmed by the fact that local authorities were making pressure on the central government for improvement of the Humera-to-Sittona road and the establishment of a new transportation network between Sittona and Sciré, in central Tigray. When Addis Ababa declined, Mekelle took the matter in its own hands. In 1972 a semi-paved road was opened from Shire to Sittona thanks to the work of the Tigre Development Organization, a parastatal entity headed by the governor general of Tigray, Ras Mangesha Seyoum.[6] The Eritrean administration also had various reasons to look with favour at the re-activation of trading networks with north-western Ethiopia. Not only the Mazega offered an alternative income to Eritrean peasants, but also provided exceptional opportunities for economic accumulation to prominent members of the local ruling class. One should consider that the main trading route to the port of Massawa was the all-weather road *via* Asmara-Barentu-Tessenei-Humera (Fig. 1), paralleled by a minor track built by the Italians from Humera to Sittona.[7] No doubt that the movement of goods and labourers along this trajectory was welcomed by the mayor of Asmara Haregot Abbai, whose bus company enjoyed a monopolistic position in the transportation of selected goods and people between Massawa, Asmara, and Barentu (Fig. 1).[8] The main beneficiary of the economic boom of the Mazega was Begemder. The regional administration in Gondar controlled – directly or indirectly – the process of land allocation, assigning the most valuable plots to members of the local aristocracy and armed forces. In addition, the regional administration was authorized to collect agricultural revenues from investors in the Setit Humera *woreda*, without sharing them with Addis Ababa (Puddu 2017). This explains why Gondar was also making pressure for expansion of the existing road network toward Massawa. The governor general of Begemder envisaged a new highway connecting the regional capital to Humera, the construction of a bridge across the Setit river and the improvement of the road from Tessenei to Asmara. All these projects were listed at the top of the central government's development agenda, at proof of the influence of Gondar in the making of the political economy of frontier governance.[9]

The expansion of Ethiopian farmers in the western lowlands added new strains to the relationship with Sudan, which had become independent in 1956. Relations between Addis Ababa and Khartoum were already tense for the support enjoyed by the armed secessionist movement of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the Sudanese province of Kassala, where guerrilla fighters had the protection of local authorities. In reprisal,

the Ethiopian government offered a safe heaven to southern Sudanese rebels. According to the Sudanese Major-General Hassan Beshir, interviewed on the newspaper *Al Ray* on 8 September 1964, Addis Ababa provided "assistance which enables (rebels) to earn a living [...] and do not pay attention to the purchase of arms by these outlaws".[10] The route between Port Sudan and the north-western flank of Ethiopia was a critical corridor for the supply of arms to Eritrean rebels. In 1965, for instance, a load of Czech arms was reportedly shipped from Damascus to Eritrea through Port Sudan.[11] Even though the two countries proclaimed their commitment to stop any hostile activity and Khartoum temporarily closed the ELF offices in Kassala in the summer of 1965,[12] rebels continued to enjoy the undercover support of Sudanese authorities on the ground.[13]

The turbulent bilateral relation partly explains why cross-border trade between the two countries diminished significantly since the late 1950s, the bulk of north-western Ethiopia's import-export being channelled through Eritrea. The business records of the National Bank of Ethiopia highlight that commercial exchange was mainly limited to the exportation of Ethiopian coffee by Arab merchants based in Khartoum, but these volumes were severely contracted in the following decade.[14] Another reason for the decline of cross-border trade was the dispute over demarcation of the international border between Humera and Metemma (Fig. 1). Addis Ababa argued that the original boundary traced by the British in 1902 – the so-called Gwinn line – was not valid in so far as it did not coincide with the official maps exchanged by the two governments at the time.[15] Khartoum complained that Ethiopian farmers were expanding in parts of the Mazega that, according to colonial maps, were under Sudanese sovereignty. The lack of bilateral understanding on where the international border was soon brought the two countries into direct confrontation. From 1965 to 1970, a joint consultative committee was established to bring forward the demarcation of the boundary line, but with no effect. In the meantime, occasional skirmishes between armed Ethiopian farmers and Sudanese soldiers became the norm. In January 1966, Sudanese troops were accused of illegal border-crossing near Humera, where they arrested one Ethiopian concessionary.[16] In reaction, Ethiopian troops were deployed three miles from the city.[17] The detainee was released after a meeting of the joint consultative committee in Addis Ababa, where the two countries declared their commitment to respect the *status quo* pending the demarcation of the boundary line.[18] Archival sources nonetheless highlight governments' difficulty both to enforce their official declarations and to control their agents on the ground, especially in the surroundings of Humera. This was particularly true on the Ethiopian side, where the governor of Begemder was encouraging the settlement of the lowlands for the purpose of expanding the agricultural tax base (Puddu 2017). The regional administration in Gondar and district officers along the border assigned land leases to former soldiers and police officers in order to provide protection to Ethiopian labourers during the planting and harvest season. In January 1967, for instance, the Police Commissioner in the Sudanese province of Gedaref denounced the

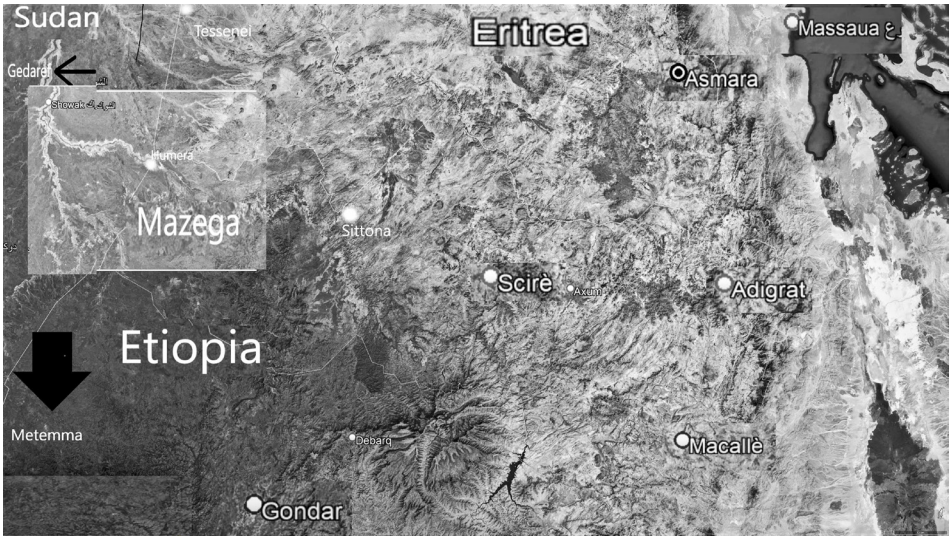
establishment of a new settlement near the locality of Basunda. District authorities in Metemma were accused of allocating plots of land to several individuals in preparation of the planting season.[19] The Sudanese press spread rumours of the encroachment of thousand hectares of Sudanese territory and the construction of a mill by Ethiopian investors in the area, Emperor Haile Selassie himself reportedly congratulating with his fellow nationals for this venture.[20]

The border dispute offered to local stakeholders the possibility to engage in violent forms of economic accumulation under the flag of the defence of national sovereignty. Sudanese troops, for instance, exploited the unclear position of the boundary to pillage Ethiopian farmers residing in contested territories. In December 1966, 300 Ethiopian individuals were arrested at the border point of Jebel Lukdi and 75,000 Ethiopian dollars of agricultural equipment were confiscated.[21] One month later, another 34 Ethiopian settlers were arrested and moved to Gedarif prison: when the Ethiopian ministry of foreign affairs complained for the event, the Sudanese response was that the area was part of the national territory and exclusively subject to Khartoum's jurisdiction.[22] The same happened on the other side of the border. In fall 1971, the Sudanese ambassador formally complained for the aggressive stance of Ethiopian militias against Sudanese farmers, accusing "vested interests [...] to scare the people in order to advance their own interests".[23]

The border dispute was apparently solved in 1972, when the two countries signed the Addis Ababa agreement. Not only did they convene to terminate their support to Eritrean and southern Sudanese rebels: the Ethiopian government recognized in principle the validity of the colonial border south of Humera and committed to re-activate cross-border trade through the border posts of Eredem and Kima, under strong pressure of the Sudanese government itself.[24] What happened in the following years highlights the divergence of interests between the central government in Addis Ababa and regional authorities in Gondar, as well as the latter's ability to impose their own agenda in the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy toward the western neighbour. The administration of Begemder immediately contested the legitimacy of the border agreement, under pressure of agricultural concessionaires in the lowlands who were supposed to be resettled east of the boundary line.[25] One of the reasons for this opposition was that the re-opening of cross-border trade threatened the profitability of cotton farming, which had been so far shielded from the competition of the cheaper Sudanese cotton. Détente was also resisted by interest groups involved in trade with Eritrea. In January 1973, the Ethiopian police was forced to stop Sudanese caravans from entering into Ethiopian territory, following large-scale protests from traders in the Wogera *woreda.*[26] According to the mob, Sudanese merchants were able to cross the border and buy whatever merchandise for re-export to Sudan. Ethiopian merchants who entered in Sudan, on the contrary, were harassed by Sudanese custom authorities who did not want to renounce to the extra-revenues offered by privateering on land.

In fact, the police reported of several cases involving Ethiopian traders arrested by the Sudanese custom police in Gedaref and spoliated of their goods while *en route* from Sudan to Ethiopia.[27] These accusations were readily appropriated by the regional police commissioner of Begemder, who argued that "if Ethiopians cannot trade, the same should apply to Sudanese merchants. We should boycott trade with Sudan".[28]

Fig. 1: Map of the region



Source: Author's elaboration based on Google Earth
Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO
Image Landsat / Copernicus – 2021

North-Western Ethiopia under the Derg, c. 1974–1990

The rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Khartoum over the delimitation of the international border was short-lived. The Ethiopian revolution in 1974 and the rise to power of the military government of the Derg added new strains to the bilateral relationship. Various armed incursions were reported in the contested borderlands since January 1974, with Sudanese soldiers harassing Ethiopian farmers and taking control of water wells and custom posts such as Embrega.[29] That Sudan was now perceived as a security threat for the stability of the new administration is confirmed by an internal memo of the ministry of the Interior, which accused Khartoum of taking measures that were "harmful to Ethiopian interests, especially in Begemder and Eritrea".[30]

No wonder that the north-western borderlands between Humera and Metemma became again a safe haven for the enemies of Addis Ababa. Rebel groups were authorized by Sudanese authorities to purchase firearms and other equipment, which were shipped through the route via Port Sudan. Armed movements from Tigray took the

lead: in 1976 the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) led by the former Ras of Tigray, Mangesha Seyoum, was able to take control of the Mazega and its sesame harvest, which was exchanged against rifles and ammunitions in preparation of a major military offensive. Once the EDU was defeated by the Ethiopian army, the area became one of the battlefields of the TPLF and, to a lesser extent, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The western lowlands were critical for the Tigrayan insurgency because they offered an external supply line to nurturing the military effort in the highlands. Khartoum was openly accused of allowing the movement of people, food, and military equipment across the international border, but also of shielding TPLF fighters against Ethiopian counter-offensives.[31] Control of the escarpment was also instrumental in establishing an informal siege against Gondar, whose regional governor was the main architect of the Ethiopian counter-insurgency campaign in the lowlands. In fact, the city depended on an aqueduct in the nearby of Abder-rafi for the supply of fresh water. Internal security reports dispatched to the administration of Begemder warned that the TPLF was planning an attack against the infrastructure, with the objective to cut this vital supply line.[32]

The competition between Begemder and rebels from Tigray was also focused on the control of labour. According to the governor of the Dabat *awrajia*, the TPLF was forcibly recruiting peasants to repair the transportation network built by Mangesha Seyoum in 1972 between Humera and Shiré. The up-grading of the road was probably aimed at facilitating the transportation of food and firearms into the highlands, because rebels were reportedly trying to build an additional branch from Shiré to Adigrat.[33] The quest for coercive recruitment of labour had direct consequences on the agricultural cycle of the Mazega, which could not be supported anymore by the unhindered flow of landless peasants from Tigray and Eritrea. In turn, this had far-reaching implications for Gondar's ability to perform counter-insurgency operations in the lowlands, because soldiers depended on local agricultural estates for the supply of foodstuff. Labour scarcity was also encouraged by the deterioration of working conditions in the recently established state farms: the provincial administration in the Wogera awrajia, for instance, reported that farmers employed in state plantations resented the terms of employment and were not receiving their regular salary. It was for this reason that many of them were fleeing towards Sudan, where they were able to find better employment opportunities.[34] For state farms to be maintained in an efficient status, it was thereby necessary to drain every available men from the highlands of Begemder. In October 1979, the governor of the Dabat *awraja* reported that his office had successfully recruited 3,000 individuals that were sent to the sisal state plantation in Humera "according to the quota set by the government".[35] This was not enough to offset the labour bottleneck generated by the activity of the TPLF. One month later, the ministry for State Farms wrote hastily to the Begemder administration, complaining for the fact that Tigray had been able to send only 700 labourers out of the 3,000 originally requested by Addis Ababa. Gondar

and the *awraja* under its jurisdiction were expected to fill this gap.[36]

The northern route with Eritrea remained the favourite venue for the import-export trade of Ethiopia in general and for Begemder in particular. In the 1980s, almost 90% of the country's external trade transited through the ports of Assab and Massawa, in light of the increased insecurity generated by insurgent groups along the route to Djibouti (Dias 2008: 55). The strategic importance of Eritrea for the commercial relations between Begemder and the external world might explain why, in spite of the growing activity of the ELF and the EPLF, regional authorities were careful not to harm the uninterrupted flow of goods across the Eritrean boundary: the only countermeasures to arms smuggling were limited to the imposition of a night curfew for cars and trucks in transit across Humera/Om Hager.[37] Insecurity was nonetheless exploited to justify the expansion of Gondarine sovereignty across existing administrative boundaries, thereby bringing the Eritrean section of the Mazega under direct regional control. The governor general of Begemder argued that, to check the activity of the TPLF and protect local Kunama in south-western Eritrea, it was necessary to redraw the internal border between Begemder and the former Italian colony, moving the Gash Setit province under the jurisdiction of Gondar.[38] This proposal is illuminating of the contested nature of internal borders as well. For the governor, the Mazega was a blank space open to legitimate intrusion, and the colonial boundary an illegitimate barrier that prevented reproduction of the settlement frontier in the north.

A different approach was adopted toward the international border with Sudan. According to the Dabat *awraja* governor, who acted under directives from the regional office, it was essential to restrict commercial exchange to a few custom points under government control.[39] It also appears that military authorities in Gondar exploited security conditions for the purpose of finding new sources of economic accumulation. Ethiopian soldiers deployed in the lowlands reportedly conducted anti-smuggling campaigns along the border, but without informing higher authorities. The reason was that seized goods provided an additional income to their meagre salary.[40]

North-western Ethiopia under the EPRDF, c. 1991-2018

The rise to power of the TPLF-dominated coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in 1991 and the institution of ethnic federalism paved the way to a radical restructuring of the balance of power in the Mazega. Begemder was incorporated within the larger Amhara region, encompassing also parts of the former historical regions of Gojiam and Wollo. Tigray, in turn, ceded territory in the east to the new Afar regional state, but incorporated Wolkait and the central section of the Mazega between Humera and Abder-rafi within its new regional boundaries. Officially, the rational of this choice was to redraw the map of the area on a linguistic basis, in line with the 1975 "Greater Tigray" manifesto (Reid 2003: 383). The legitimacy of this operation was also based on the administrative map introduced by the Italians after

the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, when the country's internal borders had been roughly re-drafted along ethnic lines (Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2009: 35).

The new Amhara establishment protested vigorously against the new territorial arrangement, sending their complains directly to the head of the provisional government in Addis Ababa Meles Zenawi. Local resistance was immediately repressed by federal authorities, which launched a military campaign to arrest the most vocal opponents of the plan (Kendie 1994: 94). This was not the only source of friction with Amhara regional authorities, which perceived ethnic federalism as a tool to deprive the region of the western lowlands' frontier. The first territorial re-organization envisaged by the federal government in 1992 assigned the area between Abder-rafi and Metemma to the new regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz, thereby isolating the Amhara region from the international border with Sudan. The hypothesis, however, was abandoned a few years later following a border agreement with the regional leadership of Benishangul-Gumuz (Adegehe 2009: 22). The Amhara regional centre's grip on the western lowlands was challenged once again in the 2000s, when a new ethnic constituency – the Qimant – obtained permission to establish several semi-independent districts in the nearby of Metemma (Kiha Gezahegne 2019: 22).

At first, the institutional allocation of the lowlands south of Humera to Tigray did not affect long-standing patterns of conflict and cooperation at the regional level. The collaboration between the TPLF and the new Eritrean government survived to the end of the war. The former Italian colony remained the main route for Ethiopia's import-export trade. In turn, this commercial flow nurtured a significant part of the Eritrean budget through the trading fees collected at the ports of Massawa and Assab (Dias 2008: 55). The relationship with Sudan, on the other hand, remained tense. The north-western border was closed in 1995 in reaction to Khartoum's decision to provide refugee to three men suspected of involvement in the attempted assassination of Egyptian president Mubarak in Addis Ababa. In 1996, according to local officials from Metemma, a Sudanese military camp was established in what was deemed to be Ethiopian territory, with the result that clashes over land increased in intensity (Kiha Gezahegne 2019: 22).

The deterioration of the relationship between Mekelle and Asmara changed these patterns. The trading flows generated by cash-crop agriculture in the western lowlands became a major bone of contention between party-owned commercial firms connected to the TPLF and the ruling party in Asmara. The regional administration of Tigray operated in the area through the Guna Trading Corporation, a parastatal company belonging to the TPLF-controlled Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray, whose profits funded political and economic initiatives in Tigray. The Eritrean ruling party of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), in turn, had a stake in Humera's trade through the Red Sea Corporation. In 1996, however, Guna was able to secure a de-facto monopoly of the local agricultural market, preventing the Red Sea

Corporation from disposing of farm products purchased at Humera (Dias 2008: 61). The enactment of a new Eritrean currency in 1997 created additional strains. The Ethiopian government suddenly put an end to the free trade policy followed so far and requested all cross-border transactions to be managed in hard currency (Tekeste Negash, Tronvoll 2000: 35-37). The dispute over Badme and the ensuing 1998-2000 war sanctioned the closure of the border with Eritrea once for all, depriving northern Ethiopia of the Massawa sea outlet (Abbink 2003).

The turn of events led Addis Ababa to secure an alternative import-export route to Djibouti, which it found in Port Sudan. In 2002, Ethiopia and Sudan signed a trade agreement to reduce import-export tariffs and improve the transportation network through Gedaref (Fig. 1). Bilateral trade increased dramatically, from 3 million US dollars in 2002 to 2,304 million US dollars in 2011 (Abebe Eshetu 2012: 4). The main beneficiary of this commercial alliance was western Tigray, which had suffered the most from the loss of the Massawa outlet. Now, Port Sudan offered a cheaper transportation route than Djibouti, making the local cash crop economy competitive on international markets again (Hammond 2003: 15). In the following years, the north-western lowlands became one of the country's breadbasket for the production of sesame seeds, the most important oil seed export crop in Ethiopia (Slujjier Cecchi 2011: 15).

In contrast with the past, Eritrea was largely excluded from the wealth generated by this new cycle of agricultural expansion. While the revival of the Sudanese route gave new centrality to Metemma, the main winner was the regional administration of Tigray. Mekelle controlled the process of land allocation, which meant that it could grant large land leases to individuals with the right political connections. Moreover, the ruling party in Tigray was able to accumulate large fortunes through Guna Trading Enteprises, which controlled the bulk of sesame seeds export from Humera to Port Sudan. To a certain extent, the relationship between Mekelle and the Mazega was similar to the one enjoyed by Gondar under the imperial regime. The wealth produced in the western lowlands was largely captured by the regional centre of Tigray, with few revenues reaching the federal government in Addis Ababa. Most of Guna's proceeds were re-invested in the TPLF's home region, while the firm's competitiveness was nurtured by the exemption from export taxes (Hammond 2003: 25). This arrangement, in turn, found the support of Sudanese military authorities on the other side of the border, which were suspected of entertaining secret links to Guna Trading Corporation itself.[41]

Other towns in the highlands of Tigray were advantaged by the commercial alliance with Khartoum. Shiraro, for instance, became the main terminal market for camels from eastern Ethiopia before their exportation to Sudan (Yacob Aklilu, Catley 2011: 21).

The position of the TPLF-dominated federal government toward the border dispute with Sudan changed accordingly. In 2007, the two countries entered into negotiation for the establishment of joint military units to patrol the frontier, while also agreeing to undertake the demarcation of the boundary line according to the 1972 Addis Ababa

agreement (Wubneh 2015). In contrast with the past, interest groups from Gondar were largely marginalized from the foreign policy decision making in Addis Ababa. This does not mean that they abstained from trying to affect the actual enforcement of this policy shift at the border. Fieldwork operations for the delimitation of the international boundary with Sudan, for instance, were interrupted in 2008 in response to local resistance (Temesgen Eyilet, Getachew Senishaw 2020: 15). Clashes resurfaced again between 2013 and 2015 along the Amhara section of the international border, mainly in response to the regional administration's policy of encouraging agricultural expansion in the western lowlands to relieve demographic pressure in the over-crowded highlands (Kiza Gezahegne 2019: 23). According to the chairman of Gedaref legislative council, in 2015 more than 50 Sudanese settlements in the contested borderlands between Humera and Metemma had been occupied by Ethiopian settlers.[42]

Opposition to border demarcation was articulated as a legitimate resistance to the expansionist tendencies of a foreign country. According to local narratives in the Amhara region, the TPLF was relinquishing control of the contested borderlands between the Angareb and the Atbara river to Sudan in return for other benefits, such as the recognition of usufructuary rights to TPLF-backed concessionaires in the lowlands between the Angareb and Setit river under formal Sudanese sovereignty.[43] In other words, the ruling party was accused of creating ethnic hierarchies in collaboration with Khartoum, bargaining territorial adjustments in favour of Tigray at the expense of the Amhara constituency. These rumours found a ready audience in the Metemma *woreda*, where the TPLF was accused of supporting Sudanese soldiers in the skirmishes with irregular Ethiopian militias (Temesgen Eyilet, Getachew Senishaw 2020: 18). This rhetoric was also aimed at providing legitimacy to the political economy of raiding. Sudanese soldiers were accused of seizing Ethiopian farms at time of harvest. In revenge, Ethiopian irregular militias often engaged in kidnapping activities against individuals on the other side of the border. That the Amhara regional state was against the foreign policy shift of the EPRDF was confirmed also by the Sudanese ambassador in Addis Ababa in 2015, in occasion of an interview to a local newspaper. The Sudanese diplomat argued that "the regime currently governing Ethiopia came out of the womb of Khartoum. In addition, Sudan is a major export destination of their products".[44] The Amhara regional state, on the contrary, was accused of "not accept(ing) the border line" and providing undercover support to paramilitary forces involved in clashes with Sudanese soldiers.[45]

Conclusions

An analysis of longue durée of the trajectory of the north-western Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands shows that fixed ethnic categories are not a sufficient lens to understand the nature of territorial disputes in present-day Ethiopia. In addition, it highlights the close inter-connection between sub-national, national, and trans-national politics: the

rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan cannot be disentangled from the internal competition between Ethiopian sub-national centres of power for control of the Mazega's agricultural and commercial wealth. The case study reminds us the importance of going beyond a state-centred approach to understand the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy and border politics. To a large extent, the political economy of frontier governance of different Ethiopian regimes in the Mazega between 1941 and 1991 was the outcome of the dominant position enjoyed by Gondar in the sub-national struggle with Tigray for control of the area. Interest groups connected to the ruling centre of Begemder found it more convenient to bring forward their irredentist claims over the western part of the Mazega in order to capture the agricultural wealth of the lowlands, thereby challenging the same validity of the international border with Sudan. At the same time, Gondar had every interest in promoting a free-trade policy with Eritrea, which represented a critical export outlet for the Mazega's cash crops. European and African interest groups in Asmara, in turn, derived direct and indirect benefits from the *pax Gondarina*. The rise to power of the TPLF and the redrawing of the map of the lowlands in favour of Tigray sanctioned a radical shift in patterns of conflict and cooperation at the regional level. The competition between Mekelle and Asmara for control of local trading flows was one of the driving factors – though not the only one – behind the appeasement with Khartoum and the re-activation of the western route. The redrawing of the north-western lowlands' internal boundaries along ethnic lines after 1995 and the foreign policy shift in favour of Khartoum after 2001 did not change the contested nature of the area, but paved the way to the enforcement of Tigray's control over local sources of economic accumulation and political capital at the expense of sub-national rivals.

Historically, government change in Addis Ababa had far reaching effects on the balance of power at the periphery. In the Mazega, the demise of the TPLF and the rise of a new coalition linked to the Amhara establishment paved the way to the *de-facto* re-drawing of internal boundaries according to the pre-1995 territorial map. The same assumption is valid in the other way round, however. The shift of power at the north-western periphery and the re-incorporation of the area under the sphere of influence of Gondar had far reaching consequences on the foreign policy making process of the Ethiopian centre as well. The re-activation of economic and political relations with Eritrea was paralleled by the resurgence of the border conflict with Sudan: these patterns were similar to those experienced between 1941 and 1991, when Gondar had the upper hand in setting the Ethiopian government's agenda at the north-western border. This does not mean that history mechanically repeats itself and that the current stalemate in north-western Ethiopia is the teleological outcome of a zero-sum game. Nonetheless, historical analysis is useful in deconstructing one-sided narratives that explain the current conflict and legitimize opposing claims through a selective reading of history and social categories (Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2021: 57).

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Universities as Contested Terrain. Interpreting Violent Conflict in Ethiopia in Times of Political Transition

Yonas Ashine

Abstract

This paper explores the root causes and trajectories of ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities between 2017 and 2019. Adopting a critical approach that focuses on structural, historical, and discursive factors I argue that university conflicts constitute a microcosm of wider social and political fractures that have characterised the Ethiopian nation-building project under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Ethnic conflict in universities must be understood against the unresolved contradictions of the "nationalities question" as it was initially framed by the student movement of the 1960s during the late Imperial period. The resulting tensions over the country's nation-building project constitute the structural background against which present-day political crises that preclude the benefit of multi-nationalism and diversity in the country unfold. Elite discourse has produced opposing narratives of oppressed and oppressors, making ethnicity a defining trait of national and local politics at the expense of diversity. These trends have divided university students, and Ethiopian society more broadly, by producing a simplistic binary of victims and perpetrators among different ethnonationalist groups. The recent political liberalisation and the widening of the political space since 2018 have amplified these dynamics further. As result, universities have become a contested terrain, a microcosm of ethnic confrontation that hinders a political debate conducive to national dialogue. The paper concludes by calling for universities to initiate a critical pedagogy that involves debate, dialogue and deliberation to challenge the dominant public discourse relying on divisive ethnonationalist politics. This may help universities to become critical sites for new historical possibilities and the formation of subjectivities that transcend the enduring legacy of the 1960s university student radicalism.

Keywords: Ethiopian universities; ethnic conflict; Ethiopian student movement; deliberation

Introduction. The classroom meets the multinational state: an ethnographic account

In 2018, I taught the course Politics and Government in Contemporary Ethiopia to first-degree students of Political Science and International Relations at Addis Ababa University.[1] The class gathered students from different Ethiopian regions, and could be regarded as a microcosm of the country's multinational society. One Tanzanian and one Norwegian student were also part of the class, speaking to the diversity of interactions and cosmopolitan ambitions that the department prided itself in establishing the course. The course was particularly attractive to students as it dealt with the country's contemporary politics. The course exposed students to critical literature on Ethiopian politics, including the country's history of state formation, as well as popular protests and the then recent 2018 political transition. I paid particular attention to address debates around nationalism, elite formation, and the absence of a national consensus over nation-building as a major challenge to current political dialogue. Students were encouraged to engage critically with scholarship addressing the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s, a critical conjuncture in the radicalisation of the political debate. Taking this historical angle, the class discussed the need and possibility for transcending the limits of weak national consensus in Ethiopia. Students were encouraged to reflect critically on how to understand present-day politics in Ethiopia, including unpacking dominant political narratives and their own positionality in it.

At the end of the semester, I was asked to mediate a disagreement between different groups within the class. Students failed to agree on the design of a graduation t-shirt which was meant to represent Ethiopia. Different national and ethno-national symbols were proposed: for instance, these included the map of Ethiopia and of Africa, the *habesha* face, the *jebena* (Ethiopian coffee kittle), some Ethiopic scripts, the *ensete* (false banana) and the Oda (the charismatic tree used as a symbol by many national groups among the Oromo). The root of the disagreement was that all these objects were contested symbols of representation: they assumed controversial meanings when filtered through ethnonationalist politics. Based on their ethnolinguistic differences, students ascribed different values to the t-shirt, mirroring the divisions and contestations currently affecting Ethiopia as a multi-national state.

In the attempt to find a solution, students gathered along two main camps. Those who saw the risk of transforming the graduation ceremony into a divisive discussion about politics and had strong ethnonationalist feelings opted to suggest a logo sketching the map of Africa without any other symbol. Their rationale was to escape divisions by drawing on pan-Africanism as a form of post-nationalist political ideology. They were open to solve ethnonationalist divisions by moving beyond the nation-state project. A second group suggested to use the map of Ethiopia and additional symbols representing the country. Students belonging to this second group had usually nationalist or moderate ethnonationalist inclinations and opted for a solution in which Ethiopia could be re-

imagined as a multi-ethnic nation. Despite my intervention – I remarked the historical contradictions of nationalism in Ethiopia and its role in producing the contested nature of these symbols – and call to find alternatives – for instance using representations of the university itself – students failed to reach a consensus. The two groups finally opted to produce two different graduation t-shirts: the first depicting an Ethiopian map and some ethno-national symbols, the second relying on a general map of Africa with no symbol in it.

The failure of students to produce a single t-shirt is a clear metaphorical expression of the divisions and fragmentations of classroom and university groups in Ethiopia. With the deficit of deliberative democracy and critical dialogue, in recent years Ethiopian universities have become a site in which the failure to transcend ethnonationalist divisions beg the questions about how to represent Ethiopian history, and what symbols can be regarded as authentically Ethiopian. Thus, in absence of deliberative democracy, far from being agents of unity, transformation, and stability, universities become victims and agents of broader societal divisions, fragmentations, and antagonisms.

This ethnographic vignette illustrates much of the tensions and contradictions of the state and nation building project in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In the 1980s, the EPRDF was conceived as a national communist party bringing together different ethnic organisations sharing a Marxist and Leninist ideology, and combining both ethnic and class-based mobilisation (Andargachew 2015: 123-117). The EPRDF had the ambition to be both a national and an ethnic organisation, a feature which is at the heart of the contradiction of the "nationalities question", *i.e.* how to accommodate Ethiopia's different groups based on the principle of self-determination and a democratic political system, as articulated by Ethiopian students in the 1960s. The EPRDF brought together the experience of ethnic-based liberation movements from the Derg, led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). After the war, the EPRDF ruled Ethiopia for almost three decades operating as a *de facto* one party rule until 2019, and embarking on contradictory political projects such as ethnic federalism, decentralisation, and an economic model relying on the notion of developmental state.

In the course of the 2010s the ERPDF regime faced unprecedented challenges from popular protests, most notably in the country's two largest regions, Oromia and Amhara. In the three years spanning between mid-2015 and the beginning of 2018, the country was gripped by waves of protests. These were staged by disaffected youth and occurred alongside institutional decay and a power struggle within the EPRDF coalition. The EPRDF itself became a victim of the unresolved contradictions in dealing with the nationalities question. The popular protests can be viewed as a popular reaction to the EPRDF's domineering mode of rule and economic strategy relying on a developmental state model. The claimed 100 percent electoral win of the EPRDF and its allies in the May 2015 elections symbolises the challenges of multiparty democracy and pluralistic

politics. This occurred in a hostile political environment where alternative sites for civic engagement such as civil society organisations were nonexistent. The EPRDF-led government reacted violently to suppress popular dissent and by declaring two states of emergency in October 2016 and in February 2018.

The magnitude of protests, as well as a growing fracture inside the political elite itself over how to deal with the crisis, forced the regime to embark on political liberalisation and democratic reforms. The party fell into a self-ascribed political crisis warranting a deep renewal. In 2017 the EPRDF released a statement promising "deep reforms" within the party, pledging to release political prisoners and widening the political space. Prime minister Haile Mariam Dessalegn resigned in February 2018, paving the way for Abiy Ahmed to take power in April 2018. The transition came with expectations for a "new transition" to democracy. At the time of this transition the horizontal conflict among nationalities was limited and protests targeted the political elite controlling the state. The new leadership took comprehensive steps towards democratic reform. However, reforms soon faced various challenges. Ethnic conflict erupted throughout the country, causing mass displacement, and a significant human toll, including in universities. The opening-up of the political space since 2018 went side by side with unprecedented ethnic conflict and polarised ethnonationalism. The EPRDF was replaced in 2019 by the Prosperity Party (PP), and this generated a split with the TPLF. The civil war the country descended into since late 2020, pitting the TPLF against the federal government, indicates the failure of the ruling elite to transcend the inherited structural contradictions embedded in party and federal design (Yonas, Kassahu 2021).

Since the political transition violent ethnic conflict has disrupted public universities as well. Studies about violent conflict in Ethiopian universities are limited and mostly consist of case studies focusing on a single university and therefore lack comprehensive analysis (Adamu 2013). This study tries to fill this gap.[2] Violent conflicts that occurred in 2018 and 2019 are given special attention because they took place alongside comprehensive political liberalisation. How do we explain conflicts taking place in universities throughout 2018 and 2019? What are their causes? A considerable number of students have died or have remained wounded as a result of conflict, and since then many parents refused to send their siblings to public universities.

This study pursues three arguments concerning the causes of violent ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities. The first one concerns the lack of national consensus and cohesion in Ethiopia as a structural or root cause of a historical political crisis that constrains the benefits of multi-nationalism and diversity in the country. As a multinational state Ethiopia failed to use, accommodate, and recognise diversity. Moreover, there is a serious deficit of democratic norms and experience, allowing elites and communities to negotiate and overcome differences. The way differences are mobilised politically generated a crisis of national cohesion. Universities, far from being sites of stability and national cohesion, have become ethnicised spaces. Students have become ethnic

subjects mobilised for contestations. Universities have become a site of fragmentation and ethnic competition, failing to generate a much needed discussion about the nature of Ethiopian history, cosmopolitanism and post-nationalism.

Moreover, I also contend that how the Ethiopian political elite weaponised diversity and lack of national consensus as a political tool reflects a naturalised classification of friend-enemy produced through victimhood psychology. This has divided university communities and the larger Ethiopian society classifying ethnic groups as victims and perpetrators. Elite discourse produced a narrative of oppressed (victim) and oppressor (perpetrator) as political strategy. Therefore, university students who were mobilised and influenced by this discourse come to see each other as oppressors and oppressed, rather than Ethiopian citizens who came from different cultures to experience life in higher education. Despite similar agrarian or working-class backgrounds, nationalist discourses have helped students see each other in this binary frame of oppressor and oppressed.

The political liberalisation and widening of political space since 2018 have entrenched ethnic-based conflict further. Universities as public spaces hosted these political processes and became conflicting sites. Dissemination of rumours, fake information, conspiracy politics and the dominant public discourse of oppressor and oppressed have helped mobilise students towards violence. Universities have become contested spaces that mobilise polarised ethnonationalisms, in which students are produced as a political subject through these discourses fuelling ethnic animosity.

Using Paulo Freire's philosophical intervention, I conclude that pedagogical action is necessary to deconstruct the oppressive discourse shaping students, to democratise, de-ethnicize as well as to transform universities into civic public spaces where Ethiopian national cohesion and consensus, diversity and self-affirmation can be nurtured. Universities could be used as sites of a constructive dialogue where the new subjects of history and new social possibilities in history can be pursued (West 1993). In absence of critical pedagogy and dialogue between university students, they will remain both victims and agents of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia: a contested terrain of multinationalism

Ethiopia is a multiethnic society that historically has struggled with issues of identity politics. Despite the country's short-lived colonial experience, Ethiopia has a significant record of ethnic conflict (Mamdani 2017). The disagreement over the graduation t-shirt illustrates the scope of identity politics and the lack of national consensus and cohesion which became a significant concern during the most recent political transition in 2018. However, identity politics is not new in Ethiopia as it has been central to dynamics of elite formation for over a century (Merera 2011).

Identity politics is entrenched in the violent process of formation of Ethiopia as a modern nation-state. The impact of historical state building is a contested terrain in

itself, which can be best expressed through the so-called question of nationalities: how to accommodate diverse groups, nationalities, and people within one single and fairly centralised polity. As noted by Bahru Zewde (2014), these issues were first discussed within the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s in the late Imperial period, and remained unresolved despite the federal restructuring of the state in the 1990s. Despite some success in self-governance and self-administration of regional units, and some signs of economic recovery, ethnic federalism was largely unsuccessful in delivering the twin objectives of creating a cohesive nation and preserving multiculturalism (Kidane Mengisteab 2019). Rather, ethnic federalism has encouraged ethnic mobilisation not only in cultural terms, but as a political identity produced through a discourse, and a psychology, of victimhood. Recent trends show that the disagreement on national history and symbols has been used by political elites to mobilise ethnonationalist contestations and animosity: the re-working of symbols and traditions is inextricable from historical dynamics of power which had at their centre representations of Ethiopian history (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983). Ethnic mobilisation usually relies on victim psychology about remembering past injustices as they unfold along the formation and consolidation of the modern state. While historically constructed as a national discourse, Amhara ethnonationalism is the most recent addition to ethnonationalist forms of identity emerging alongside the EPRDF rule (Bantayhu, Ishiyama 2021; Tezera 2021).

Ethiopia can be regarded as a textbook case of what Mahmood Mamdani describes as a society whose political world is divided into victims and perpetrators in postcolonial Africa (Mamdani 2003). The historical violent process of formation of modern Ethiopia is today mobilised by ethnonationalist forces that divide the Ethiopian society horizontally, and that lock the political debate into an unending proverbial binary of "the rat and the cat" (Mamdani 2003). The praxis of the federal experiment encourages the mobilisation of cultural differences for political purposes and, at the same time, it fixes cultural differences as political identities of victims and perpetrators, rulers and ruled, and natives and non-natives. A starting point here is the argument by which the formation of modern Ethiopia could be labelled as an Amhara project. This argument has colonial origin similar to other contexts in Africa. During the colonial period, both Great Britain and Italy politicised ethnicity and mobilised anti-Shewan Amhara sentiments in the 1930s and 1940s (Andargachew 2015; Yonas 2018) by identifying the Amhara as an oppressor ethnic group and the rest of the Ethiopian society as oppressed. This gave the Amhara a new political identity as oppressor and perpetrator of violence against many other nationalities, including Tigray. This binary resonated in the TPLF's liberation struggles in the 1980s and later as a discourse of the EPRDF-led government.

The Amharic word *neftegna* epitomises the construction of this binary well. It identifies those who "have a gun" and historically refers to the landed gentry who settled in the conquered territories as a class of warrior and administrators under Menelik II. The

neftegna is constructed both as an ethnic group (Shewan Amhara) and an upper class (tribute collectors of the state) (Andargachew 2015: 161-167). Beyond retrospective memory, today a poor Amharic speaker peasant or worker, or a day labourer outside of the Amhara region, could be seen as a *neftegna* or a perpetrator and a non-native, if not a settler, because of his/her Amhara identity. Similarly, the new mobilisation of Amhara as an ethnic identity also relies on victim psychology: it labels the Tigrayans as the perpetrators of state violence. These binary political identities are key to explain the challenges and contradictions of ethnic federalism under EPRDF, as well as the wave of conflict in universities between 2017 and 2019 that this article tries to unpack.

Universities as a microcosm of African societies

Debates addressing African universities have taken three theoretical directions. The first two are about university relations with the state and the larger society. The third is about the historical formation of the university in Africa as a foreign institution and its evolution over time. The politics of higher education and its relation to violent student conflicts in Ethiopia must be located within these three strands of literature.

African universities have historically played an important role in mediating state-society relations. The idea of the university itself is defined by its relations with society and the state. A starting point to frame university-society relations is the model proposed by Barnett, which distinguishes between university *in* society, university *of* society and university *for* society (Amare 2011). A university of society is rooted in a "Napoleonic university model, which rested on a clear subordination of the university to the state" (Amare 2011: 39). According to Amare, in such a model the role of the university is "to ensure political stability and unity of the nation in the physical sense" (*Ibid*). The opposite view frames university as a site of critical knowledge production to serve society, as opposed to the state, also referred to as university for society. Following this model, universities are expected to play key role in socio-economic upliftment as well as the cultural transformation of society (Daniel 2004). Universities are dialectically produced as a site of struggle between the state and society.

Except for few years during its establishment, Addis Ababa University has always been a university *of* society, and by extension *of* the state. Since the late Imperial period, Ethiopian universities could be regarded as an extension of state-controlled autocratic bureaucracies (Amare 2011). An alternative perspective brings to the fore the functional or utilitarian relations between university and society. University can be regarded as an "ivory tower" and as a site of excellence aloof from society: its mission is exclusively confined to knowledge production, of which society is expected to benefit indirectly (Mamdani 2016). The opposite interpretation is that university is a microcosm of society, and that knowledge production cannot be disentangled from broader societal forces (Barrett 1998).

While normatively imagined to stand as an ivory tower producing knowledge of

universal and national relevance, a nuanced understanding of university-society relations in Ethiopia requires studying how universities have been historically produced as a political and social space. Despite universities are normatively expected to ensure political stability and unity of the nation, they are practically produced as a site of contestation. Ethiopian universities reflect a key tension of the multinational state model in that they are imagined to serve a national project while, at the same time, they reflect deep societal fractures (Anderson 1983). As noted by Jacques Derrida the university represents society as much as society represents itself through the university (Derrida *et al.* 2005). In Ethiopia, universities remain divided along ethnic lines and constitute an important space where ethnonationalist politics is performed. The contestation over the t-shirt represents this fragmentation both in the classroom and the society. This forms a dual identity of the university in Ethiopia: the first is an imagined ivory tower where societal wounds get healed, and the second is a historically produced microcosm of society with all its shackles.

The third theoretical perspective puts into sharp focus the historical formation of universities in Africa as a derivative of the western intellectual tradition. From this perspective, like other universities established as part of the colonial modernist project in Africa (Mamdani 2019), universities in Ethiopia can be regarded as foreign institutions (Balsvik 1985; Yirga 2017). University institutions embody the civilizational mission of the colonial project, with the partial difference that Ethiopian universities are a product of a native modernist project (Yirga 2017). However, the western intellectual tradition has clearly influenced the institutional and epistemological setting of universities in Ethiopia. For instance, similar to many other universities in the continent English is the language of science and intellect in Ethiopian universities (Mamdani 2019).

Addis Ababa University became a site of student activism in the 1960s, giving rise to a radical movement with revolutionary intention (Hussien 2006). While the Ethiopian student movement played a significant role in bringing to the end the Imperial regime in 1974, it left two permanent legacies in post-revolutionary Ethiopia in the course of the 1990s. The first is "the question of nationalities" and the tension between an ethnic versus a multi-ethnic form of state organisation. This question brought to the elaboration of the EPRDF as a coalition party and ethnic federalism as a radical form of state organisation. The second legacy is about an elitist political culture by which "dogmatic belief, rather than reasoned debate and a spirit of compromise, become the norm" (Bahru Zewde 2014: 280). These legacies were produced when university students struggled to construct a socialist utopia in the 1960s. The contemporary Ethiopian society is burdened with the task to transcend both these legacies so that credible and durable political possibilities can open. Messay Kebede, however, argues that student radicalism in the 1960s was nurtured by a university institutional setting which failed to produce an environment conducive for students to become intellectual subjects (Messay 2008).

Under the EPRDF, Ethiopian universities became a microcosm of these deeper societal fractures. On the one hand, the contradiction of the multi-ethnic state organisation reproduced universities as a contested terrain. On the other hand, the democratic deficit of elitist political culture, including the lack of compromise and dialogue, reproduced universities as the most securitised, silenced, and surveillance spaces in Ethiopia. Ironically, the fragmentation of students along ethnic lines remains an enduring legacy of the student movement of the 1960s. Thus, ethnic politics reduced the space for a productive debate about the role of university in society. For instance, discussions around the meaning of decolonisation, democratisation, and de-securitisation of universities have been almost entirely absent in Ethiopia.

Since the 1990s the EPRDF government established new university campuses throughout the country. Today Ethiopia counts over fifty universities located across all regional states. The Ethiopian government pursued its multicultural agenda by demanding students to enrol in universities outside of the region of origin. Rather than fostering dialogue and diversity, this increased the scope of ethnic factionalism and conflict among different student groups, which escalated significantly after 2018. Language policy has also been contradictory. Rather than streamlining teaching in local languages the government has opted for establishing departments dedicated to the study of specific languages, for instance *Amharic, Afan Oromo*, and *Tigrigna.* In the social sciences and the humanities teaching takes place in English exclusively. These policies were meant to depoliticise the language question in universities, and thus have reduced significantly the scope for a productive discussion around ethnonationalism, including the meanings of decolonisation and democratisation. Curricula increasingly privilege depoliticised topics that refrain from engaging with questions about what it means to study the national Ethiopian history and identity. As result, universities have remained highly securitised and silenced spaces inhabited by fragmented and divided student subjects. Against the stark silence of curricula over important questions about the nature of the country's history, identity politics persisted, marking a new high in the conflict between different student's ethnic factions.

Ethiopian universities have been operating under the sky of an authoritarian political culture shaped by radical Marxism that survived in the neo-liberal age. Critical discussion and dialogue, in other words deliberative democracy (O'Flynn 2006), has been largely absent. Political activism and horizontal competition by divided student communities became the target of political repression by the state (Amare 2011: 183). This increased the scope of conflict between different groups and between students and the university establishment.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the Ethiopian case is not isolated in Africa. Literature discussing countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, and South Sudan highlight how universities can turn into violent spaces. For instance, Fomunyam notes that "African universities from Cape Town to Cairo are gradually becoming battle grounds

where students wage war against one challenge or another in the fight for liberation" (Fomunyam 2017: 57). Goolman Mohamedbhai (2010) contends that conflicts between students and/or student protests against the government or university management are increasingly common in many African countries. The author notes that there is a substantial difference between the nature of protests in the 1960s and 1970s and the more recent one. First, the number of students enrolled in African universities increased dramatically in the past two decades, and this increment resulted in increased protests. Second, while the number of students grew sharply, the availability of key infrastructure such as libraries, lecture halls, student residences, have lagged behind. This increased the scope of discontent. Third, a more diverse student profile, which now includes students from different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, has exacerbated class differences and generated tensions between students. Finally, mobile technology has increased the capacity of students to mobilise and organise protests.

While violence is a feature that many African universities share (Fomunyam 2017), the reasons behind protests depend on specific issues such as institutional culture and the level of social cohesion. Conflict may occur between students, between students and staff, or be directed against broader state and government institutions (Etadon 2013). For instance, recent conflicts between students at Zalingei University in central Darfur State have been characterised by a deteriorating residential and academic environment and have been affected by civil war and conflict. The nature of the curricula and university fees are important reasons behind some recent conflicts (Hassen, Ageed 2015). For instance, rising fees is reported as a cause of conflict in both Nigerian private schools and South African universities. In South Africa, since 2015, student protests against rising university fees ("Fees Must Fall") have raised broader issues about social justice, the legacy of apartheid to higher education, institutional racism, and the meaning of decolonising knowledge (Rene 2019).

Ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities: findings of the survey

Conflicts have become a norm in Ethiopian universities: this is the main finding of a survey I conducted between 2017 and 2019 based on questionnaires administered to student representatives across the country. In a recent article Miressa Yadessa contends that "these days it has become common news to hear that a student of one ethnic group being attacked by the other and it is hard to find a university which finishes its academic year without such horrendous incidences and interruption" (Miressa 2018: 4). Since 2017, many casualties occurred as a result of violent conflicts in Ethiopia universities. The sample of student representatives interviewed was asked whether there had been recurrent conflicts at their universities in the past three years. Among 122 respondents, 20 strongly agreed, 31 agreed, 10 opted to be neutral, 34 disagreed and 27 strongly disagreed.

This polarised response seems to indicate that the nature of conflict in Ethiopian

universities is somehow different from the 1960s student protests. Present day conflicts do not occur via a fairly coherent student movement. However, fieldwork evidence indicates that until 2018 protests were mainly driven by an anti-government sentiment, which unified students to some extent. There is no inherited culture of violence or ideological orientation from the past generation. While the 1960s conflict occurred along vertical lines – had the Imperial regime as the ultimate target – the current student conflict is horizontal in nature. Contemporary violence is between students, this reflecting the absence of a fairly unified student movement. Thus, if one compares the causes of conflict in 2017 against 2018 and 2019, the former appears of a more vertical nature. Conflicts that occurred in 2017 in Haremiya, Adigrat, Woldia, and Gondar university took the form of protests against the ruling government. This is confirmed by 74 of the 122 respondents. In 2017 protests targeted the authoritarian character of the EPRDF regime. From this perspective, 2017 protests took a similar value to those that occurred in the 1960s, although without a coherent student movement as the driving force.

Conflicts that have occurred since 2018, after the political liberalisation under Abiy Ahmed, became more horizontal, they occurred between different groups of students. At the same time, the number of casualties increased sharply. However, the immediate causes vary from university to university. In 2017 conflicts were generated by protests in which the majority of students were standing together against the government, though conflicts between students occurred as well. The government itself was involved in university conflicts during the protest period causing "tension and conflict among students to divert the attention of the society when there is political or social pressure on the government and when it wants to accuse some groups or political parties" (Adamu 2013: 15).

Interviews suggest that since 2018 trivial disputes between students escalated to full-blown ethnic conflicts. The vertical conflict between students and the regime has now transformed into horizontal violence between students. This has transformed campuses in highly volatile spaces and questions around security have become a public concern. As result, since 2018 student enrolment has sharply declined, while the admission rate in private universities and evening courses, for example in Addis Ababa University, has increased.

A main feature of conflict since 2018 is volatility. Interviews show that external actors actively played a role in destabilising universities after the 2018 political transition. External political forces increasingly targeted universities. One initial example is a conflict that took place at Debre Markos University, Amhara region, in May 2019. Three unidentified individuals wearing masks attacked the campus leaving one student from Tigray dead and injuring three others.[3] While the actual reasons behind the attack remain unknown this episode escalated ethnic tensions between different groups of students both at Debre Markos and in other universities. Conflicts driven by external

forces escalated significantly towards the end of 2019. Incidents similar to Debre Markos were reported in several universities, including Woldia, Jinka, Dembi Dollo, Ambo, Mettu, Addis Ababa, Madda Walabu, Gondar, Wollega, and Dire Dawa. It seems clear that these incidents were the outcome of political disputes between elite groups unscrupulously regarding universities as a fertile terrain to nurture ethnic animosity. Commenting these conflicts, Samuel Kifle, the Minister of science and higher education has repeatedly denounced the involvement of external actor in university conflict. In an interview he contended that external actors have been "working intentionally to escalate conflicts and tensions in universities. (...) Trouble makers look like students. They are within the students or illegally entering University grounds in different ways (...) they post unfounded information on social media to instigate conflicts or some of them are throw rocks and run away. Others come at night time to commit crimes. Still, others wear masks to attack the students".[4]

Universities have become an ideal target to mobilise ethnic violence precisely because they are spaces where students from different groups meet and interact on a daily basis. Even when ethnicity is not the initial source of conflict, manipulation by external actors is likely to generate ethnicized outcomes. After 2018 Ethiopian universities have become spaces for violent political conflict, becoming a microcosm of broader societal fractures in Ethiopia. Students were mobilised along ethnic lines producing an escalation of ethnic tension and conflict inside multicultural campuses. The role of external forces in triggering violence was a matter that was brought up by 54 out of 120 respondents (30 "strongly agreed" and 24 "agreed"). While 24 respondents remained neutral on the issue, 21 disagreed and 21 strongly disagreed on the role of external forces in triggering campus conflicts.

The weaponisation of diversity

The recent surge of university conflicts in Ethiopia is clearly connected to the broader politics of identity and ethnonationalism after 2018 and has its deeper roots in the inherent contradiction over the Ethiopian nationalities question. It appears that in time of political liberalisation, particularly in the course of 2019, elites competing for shares of power actively played a role in mobilising ethnic differences for political purposes. Cultural differences have been ethnicized and weaponized, turning universities into a battleground. This mirrors historical fractures discussed above along the production of political identities of victims and perpetrators, in which the political mobilisation of diversity plays a central role.

In post-2018 Ethiopia universities have become a space of animosity and inter-ethnic tension. Of the 121 respondents to the survey, 43 contended that student relations are defined by suspicion and mistrust. The mobilisation of ethnic differences as a political tool produced the university as a space in which "everything is seen through ethnic eyeglasses" (Adamu 2013: 13). The educational system does not only incubate

contesting narratives, but it also celebrates "historical unfair events" (Miressa 2018: 4) which exacerbate ethnic animosity among students. Interviews further reveal that 82 student representatives consider the narrative oppressor/oppressed as a main reason behind ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities (51 respondents "strongly agreed", 31 "agreed"). Only 17 respondents have rejected the connection (9 "disagreed" and 8 "strongly disagreed"). Adamu (2013: 13) has discussed how the oppressors/oppressed binary leads to ethnicized outcomes as follows: "there have been several ethnic conflicts because of ordinary disputes between individuals. Managers and teachers noted that once the ordinary dispute between individuals is ethnicized, the other students who are involved in the conflict do not ask or critically examine the rationality of the cause for the dispute. They just align with their group and participate in the conflict". These dynamics are exacerbated when human resource managers and staff members take position to defend one specific group (Miressa 2018: 6).

In addition, ethnic conflicts have sometimes sparked from minor issues. In June 2019 a conflict escalated out of a dispute over a soccer game at Debre Birhan university. Similarly, in December 2017 one student was killed and twenty-nine remained injured following a confrontation between supporters of two soccer teams, the "Mekelle Kenema" and the "Woldia Kenema". Another ethnic incident involving soccer was reported at Dire Dawa university. As a result of these conflicts, recreational activities such as sport and cultural events are becoming increasingly rare. Ethnic conflicts have also sparked following public ceremonies. A conflict at Adigrat university in 2017 was the result of clashes between different student groups at the national ceremony on the Ethiopian day of nation and nationalities. Interviews conducted with student representatives show a clear relation between minor disputes and full ethnic conflict. Among 120 respondents, 70 contended that ethnic conflicts often originate from minor disputes (36 "strongly agreed", 34 "agreed", 15 had no opinion, 15 "disagreed" and 20 "strongly disagreed").

Interviews also suggest that other factors play an important role in the dynamic of ethnic conflict in universities. Factors mentioned include corruption, the lack of impartiality on the side of administrative staff, as well as the spread of rumours and fake news through social media. In November 2019, at Debre Tabor university, the spread of a rumour about alleged poisoned food distributed to students generated tensions with university management. Similarly, rapidly spreading rumours on social media claiming that students would be transferred to universities closer to their place of residence brought students to boycott classes, disrupting teaching in several universities. A correspondent for the news outlet *Reporter,* has contended that "the major cause for ethnic conflicts in universities is social media. It becomes the platform for extreme nationalism which is taking control of the minds of youngsters".[5] On several occasions the Ethiopian broadcast authority has blamed local television channels for disseminating hate propaganda and to instigate ethnic tensions within and outside

universities. The lack of human, infrastructural and institutional capacity play also a role in exacerbating disputes between different student groups. In addition, universities usually hire staff based on the ethnic profile of candidates.[6] Clearly, this rarely creates an environment conducive to establish healthy inter-ethnic dialogue.

Ethnic and ethnicized universities

Ethiopian universities are not only characterised by divided student communities. The broader institutional setting is constructed and deeply divided along ethnic lines. One could argue that each university is *de facto* a "property" of specific ethnic groups. For instance, at the federal level there has been a significant competition between ethnonational groups to host universities in their localities. This reflects how from an institutional perspective universities have been the battleground within which the meaning of the Ethiopian state and its history of formation has been negotiated. That the competition between ethnonational groups to establish universities is a source of conflict is a finding that emerges with particular clarity in interviews conducted with student representatives. Out of 119 respondents 106 contended that macro politics is a clear reason behind surging conflict (74 "strongly agreed" and 32 "agreed").

University campuses are also divided internally, with buildings that may be regarded as controlled by specific ethnic groups. The power dynamics between students from the ethnonational group hosting the university and "outsiders" are complicated. According to Tesfaye people from "nearby areas have in many occasions threatened to storm campuses in support of their ethnic groups" whenever conflict arises on the university campus (cited in Miressa 2018: 4). This implies that even student's relatives sometimes play a role in exacerbating rather than mediating tensions. An example are the events that unfolded at Dire Dawa university in the fall of 2018. Following a border dispute between the Somali and the Oromia regional states, which had at its heart issues about internal displacement, Somali and Oromo people flooded the campus in support of students belonging to their respective ethnic group.[7] The outcome was a significant escalation of conflict and animosity between the two groups of students.

While the EPRDF policy that encouraged campuses to accommodate students from different parts of the country was intended as a measure to nurture the positive value of diversity, university communities in Ethiopia have remained deeply divided: conflict-free interactions are increasingly limited. Then, what possibilities remain for students and staff to create a more civil and de-ethnicized university? In the last part of the article I will engage with this difficult question by drawing on the concept of deliberative democracy as elaborated by Paulo Freire (2005).

Universities without deliberative democracy

Universities are expected to change society for the better by democratising and fostering debates and deliberation on campuses and beyond. As noted by Nancy

Thomas, "dialogue, informed deliberation, analysis, and problem-solving – and their guiding principles – inclusion, reason, respect, neutrality, and collegiality – are critical to a strong democracy *and* the academy" (Thomas 2010: 88-89). It is only through this deliberative process that universities become publicly relevant, a gateway of critical and informed deliberation and democratic culture.

Ethiopian universities remain silent spaces lacking productive conversations about democratic culture and upliftment. Paulo Freire notes that "human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world" (Freire 2005: 88). What Freire suggest is that silent universities remain unable to nourish human existence. For instance, the silence of Addis Ababa University during the recent political crisis has been particularly prominent. Even now, in an era of political transition, Ethiopian universities allow little space for meaningful dialogue. In Addis Ababa critical dialogue and deliberations open to the public take place more often in hotels and other sites in the city. Following the contested 2005 national elections, mass arrests and draconian laws, universities have become highly securitised and politicised spaces. Moreover, there is a serious deficit of democratic norms and experience that would allow elites and communities to negotiate and overcome some of the negotiable social differences and fractures that haunt present-day Ethiopia. Dialogue is the only option towards enriching the existential potential of Ethiopians. Freire notes that "dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, to name the world" (Freire 2005: 88). Dialogue is therefore indispensable for Ethiopian university students to name each other and to rename their relation to their country and the world at large. Failing to promote dialogue nurtures oppressive discourse and extreme nationalism that produced fragile relations among Ethiopians. Dialogue is the only option that Ethiopia has to deconstruct a political identity relying on the victim and perpetrators binary.

The de-politicisation and securitisation of universities significantly affected academic freedom and deliberative democracy. As Amare (2011) has argued, this has to do with the complex relationship between universities and the country's ruling elite. An absence of dialogue, conversation and critical debate limited the potential for transformation of university communities through positive interaction and engagement. The de-politicisation of university life constrains the ability of society at large to transcend difference and to accommodate, appreciate and recognise diversity.

Despite the most recent political transition in 2018 universities have remained a silent and de-politicised space. Student conflict has replaced the existing apparent peace that characterised Ethiopian universities under EPRDF. The recent establishment of "peace clubs" in all Ethiopian universities by the Ministry of peace is commendable. However, these clubs require institutional support if they aim to become microsites for critical pedagogy and dialogue. The unnecessary competition between these clubs and the student councils has to be addressed through critical dialogue so that both

associations become sites of dialogue for university students and the community at large. Thus, recent news indicate that the level of state policing of university campuses is likely to increase in the near future.[8] Such options can be a short-term solution to stop violence, but unless wider and long-lasting measures are taken into consideration, the role of universities will be limited to producing graduate students without any experience of deliberative democracy, critical thinking, and the capacity to engage in informed dialogue. Measures aimed at securitising university spaces will unlikely create an environment conducive to civic and de-ethnicized dialogue. Academic freedom and the democratisation of the university spaces are the only long-term options to nurture democratic dialogue in the wider Ethiopian society.

Prescriptive conclusion: towards a pedagogy of the oppressed

What does it take to liberate Ethiopian universities, and to nurture the potential of students as political subjects, from the domineering and dehumanising discourse of toxic ethnonationalism? Deconstruction must necessarily begin with self and inner group critique. This is a painful but necessary exercise. As Paulo Freire in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explains, such an exercise is similar to the process of childbirth: "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labour which brings into the world this new being: neither longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom" (Freire 2005: 49).

In this article I have contended that Ethiopian universities and students are victims of the inherent contradiction of the nationalities question, which has produced a discourse relying on the binaries of oppressor and oppressed, and victim and perpetrator. Under the EPRDF rule, universities have been ethnicized in the same way as other public spaces in the country. The ethnicization of universities was operated through the politicization of difference, and resulted in the emergence of different irresponsible narratives about Ethiopian history. These narratives have eroded any common psychology and national cohesion among Ethiopians. The inability of scholars to build consensus among people in Ethiopia has exacerbated these problems.

Ethnic conflicts in Ethiopian universities have increased markedly after the 2018 political transition. While in 2017 conflicts could be characterised as vertical – they had the EPRDF government as the ultimate target – this study has shown that political liberalisation was marked by increasing horizontal conflicts between student groups centred on competing ethnonational identities. Students became both the victims and the agents of such conflicts. Diversity was weaponised through competing ethnonationalist narratives. To address these issue universities must undertake what Paulo Freire has defined a pedagogy of the oppressed. This entails exposing the binary discourse which divides and mobilises society along identity politics. This is put by Freire

as follows: "the central problem is this: how can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be "hosts" of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy" (2005: 48).
Such pedagogical oriented action is the only way we have to open-up a "demystifying moment" (West 1993: xiii) in which the deconstruction of the oppressive discourse occurs, thus gradually liberating the potential of students and the university community as political subjects. This creates an opportunity for critical dialogue between students towards transforming Ethiopian universities as spaces of dialogue and deliberative democracy. In turn, deliberation and dialogue enrich national cohesion and the positive value of diversity.

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NOTES:

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2 - Student perspectives were collected through structured questionnaires designed using a Likert scale (Members of University students' council and Peace Club). A total of 122 (62 female and 60 male) student representative members of student councils and peace clubs from 43 universities returned questionnaires. The questionnaires were written in Amharic with a range of 1–5, '5' to represent strong agreement, '4' agreement, '3' inability to decide, '2' disagreement and '1' strong disagreement. A total of 17 questions were given to participants. The questionnaire contains information on the nature, actors and the extent of conflicts in universities as well as broader relations in universities and surrounding communities. This article relies on an opinion survey along with a qualitative exploration of university conflicts in the country.

3 - *Seemingly clandestine attack in Debremarkos University left a student from Tigray dead,* «Borkena», 28 May 2019.

4 - *Minister Blames Third Party for Ethnic Clashes at Ethiopian Universities*, «Ezega News», 13 November 2019.

5 - *Universities should not be at the forefront of conflict!*, «Reporter (Amharic version)», 17 December 2017.

6 - *How to deal with stress created by universities?*, «Reporter (Amharic version)», 17 December 2017.

7 - *It is not possible to start education at three universities in Oromia*, «Reporter (Amharic version)», 10 December 2017.

8 - *Ethiopian Government to Deploy Federal Police on University Grounds*, «Ezega News», 9 December 2019.

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Ethiopia in Transition: Thinking with Feminist Notions of *Waloo*, *Tumsa* and *Wallala*

Serawit Bekele Debele

Abstract
This article reflects on the much anticipated political shift in Ethiopia. It does so through a Siinqee Feminist lens as proposed by Martha Kuwe Kumsa. Beyond regime change in 2018 after long years of protest especially by the Oromo youth, some significant reforms such as opening up the political space were witnessed. However, regressive politics has set in soon after - extreme social polarisation and the ongoing civil war being major manifestations. This highly moving (and hence unpredictable) socio-political context begs for new questions on what actually constitutes political change and how differently it might be imagined. How do we make sense of a political shift that is filled with hope and dismay? I ponder over what can be gained from paying attention to grounded practices to cultivate democracy, solidarity and politics that drive from and attend to everyday struggles by people on the margins. I suggest that we draw inspirations from the lived experiences of Oromo women and how they mobilise Siinqee feminist practices to foster solidarity.

Keywords: Halagaa, Siinqee, Ethiopia, Oromo women, transition

Introduction

Just a year before the start of the Oromo Protest in 2014, I had a series of conversations about the sacred lake of Arsadi. The one that focused on what constitutes a legitimate development within the federal arrangement resonates with the questions I ask in this article. Conventionally known as an annual thanksgiving ritual performed by the Oromo, the nationwide *Irreecha* takes place at this sacred lake that is located in Bishoftu of

the Oromia Regional State. My research at the time focused on the ritual, particularly on what its increasing popularity does to our understanding of political processes in Ethiopia. Seated in a small cafe in the city centre, I was chatting with one of my interlocutors. I asked him about the investment opportunity the beautiful lake is said to have attracted in recent times. I wanted to know his take on the rumours about the permission granted to a nearby resort to expand to Lake Arsadi. He sipped on his coffee to take his time before he spoke. His "let them dare us" sort of answer revealed his rage at the very thought of giving out the sacred lake to yet "another one of those tycoons".[1] What I gathered from his reflections was a reliance not on his might to stop the state, or his anticipation of a coordinated force that will subdue the move to commercialise the sacred site. He counted on the constitution that grants the cultural and religious rights of citizens. He pointed out that to give the lake to developers violates the rights of those who revere the lake as sacred. For him, it is preposterous to take away places of worship in the name of investment. I asked what he thinks about the justification - that investment creates job opportunities. He said: "not at the expense of our rights to worship", implying that the state has to find another way of developing the area without compromising constitutionally granted rights. This and similar other conversations offer entry points to explore the tensions abounding state-society relations and how that is shaped by the way in which the role of the state is understood. On one hand, the state promises to boost the economy and make Ethiopia a middle-income country. On another, it focuses on the celebration of ethno-religious and cultural identities as one of its main priorities to redress past injustices. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but one may get the impression that there is a tension in managing these overlapping commitments by the state. As I show in this article, this tension can, among other things, be linked to the way in which the nation-state is organised and how ethnic federalism approached the question of socio-economic and political inclusion of historically marginalised groups. To come back to *Irreecha*, Lake Arsadi was not handed over to investors. Rather, the sacred lake and the annual ritual continued to be central in shaping (as they are shaped by) the country's politics. Equally, the act of taking away land from farmers for large scale investment and urbanisation remained as salient as ever. In 2014 the infamous Addis Ababa Master Plan was publicised by the city administration. The grand plan threatened to expropriate land from farmers surrounding Addis Ababa in order to expand the city. This sparked the Oromo Protest for which Lake Arsadi became one of the most important venues. What started out in 2014 as a demand by the youth to revoke the master plan grew into a nationwide protest with more expansive demands such as the removal of the regime itself. *Irreecha* was one of the rare points that brought Oromo youth across Oromia region to express grievances and aspirations. The October 2016 celebration is remembered for "Down down TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front]" "Down down Woyane", a pronouncement by fearless Oromo women and men who protested the regime. The protest continued

for more than a year, joined by protesters from other parts of the country such as the Amhara region. In February 2018, Hailemariam Desalegn resigned from his short-lived premiership and April marked the coming to the political scene of the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Beyond the replacement of one administrative body with another, some reforms have been introduced but regressive politics seems to dominate the atmosphere. This highly moving socio-political context begs for fresh perspectives on what actually constitutes political change and how differently it might be imagined. The question then is, how do we make sense of these political changes that are at the same time filled with hope and dismay? Drawing on my own research, I explore what can be gained from paying attention to grounded practices to cultivate democracy, solidarity and political shift that drives from and attends to everyday struggles by people on the margins. I am guided by Martha Kuwee Kumsa's (2020) Transnational Siinqee Feminism (TSF henceforth). Named after the stick Oromo women carry, Siinqee feminism emanates from Oromo women's socio-political and cultural practices and revolves around three main pillars: *waloo* (relationality), *tumsa* (solidarity) and *wallala* (barriers). These notions emerge from a specific conception of womanhood as strangeness characterised by mobility, as I will explain later. I would argue that the insights that emerge from women's lived experiences can be extrapolated to imagine an emancipatory politics understood as Jacques Rancière's (1992) "impossible identification" with the pain and suffering of the other. I complement TSF with Andreas Eshete's (1981) ideas of fraternity as a bond created among those who share, beyond an identity, a common cause (for example the cause of social justice). Though my intention is to shed light on embedded and embodied everyday practices as sites of thinking emancipatory politics, I am also aware that these everyday practices do not exist outside of histories and structures that shape the socio-political and material conditions of citizens. Considering this, I also propose rethinking the nation-state in a way that is divorced from essentialising majority/minority divides as solid and settled entities. Drawing on Elleni Centime Zeleke (2019) and Mahmood Mamdani (2020), I would posit that the making of centre-periphery as well as majority-minority is an outcome of historico-political processes. Accordingly, the essay is divided into three main parts. Section one begins with discussing my position as a researcher/citizen to show that my research does not promise any objectivity due, among others, to my own socio-political and cultural formation and commitment. Since it is important to situate my interventions in context, in the second part of the essay I evaluate political transformation and what it means in shaping Ethiopia's recent history. I mainly focus on how changes were handled by regimes that came in 1974, 1991 and 2018. Central here is a synthesis of how the state/the political is organised in a way powerful actors imagined to address issues such as the national question. The third part deals with the three notions - *tumsa, waloo, wallaala* - within TSF in tandem with my proposal for restructuring the political. This will lastly be followed by a few concluding remarks.

Methodological reflections

In terms of my modes of engagement, this is a contemplative reflection on a subject that matters to me on many levels. I do not claim to understand nor exhaust everything that is going on in the country since the new change, as it is much complex than can be captured in a piece as short as this one. It is rather a call for us to pay attention to other venues outside of conventions we are used to. Most of what I write is based on deep conversations and debates as well as introspection in addition to written materials. My observation of Ethiopian politics, my research on *Irreecha* and Oromo protest and the recent debates among stakeholders spur my reflections. This piece is also highly informed by thinking-together with my friends Semeneh Ayalew, Surafel Wondimu and Shimeles Bonsa on our weekly program on Asham TV. In a sense, I am not saying a lot of new things rather than reiterating some thoughts in order not to remain silent at a time our voices are much needed. Indeed, there is no such thing as a private intellectual as we learn from Edward Said's writings and the life he lived. Following Said (1994: 12), I write "as someone who is trying to advance the cause of freedom and justice [... I reflect] my own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from my experiences, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how these enter into the social world where-people debate and make decisions about war and freedom and justice". I struggle with the question of what it means to be me and write such a contemplative piece at this time. My reflections stem as much from my situatedness in as my displacement from a country I call home. I write about an issue that deeply concerns me as an Ethiopian, an Oromo with an Amhara mother - at times accused of being *baletera* (the newly groomed to privilege). I write as a woman whose feminist sensibilities come from women who raised me up collectively. I also write as someone who is in a lot of pain due to the continuous violence faced by everyday people. I find resonance in what the Rwandese intellectual Jean-Pierre Karegeye said to the Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop responding to the question "what is going on" in Rwanda. Karegeye responded: "my perception of Rwanda cannot be that of a researcher who stands far away from the object that he is observing. That is impossible for me. I inhabit Rwanda as much as Rwanda inhabits me with its past and present, where the horrors of the genocide and the hopes of an entire people intertwine. I would even add that the destiny of my homeland haunts me".[2] So there is no semblance of objectivity in this piece. Rather, I want my writing to be read as coming from a plethora of emotions: anger, frustration, disappointment, desperation and sadness but also a great deal of hope for national healing.

Political transformations in Ethiopia 1974-2018

Ethiopia has undergone major political transformations that reorganised the state as well as state-society relations in significant ways. However, one might argue that Ethiopia's experiment with political reform has not always been the most rewarding. It

is one dominated by continuity rather than a radical departure from what new regimes criticise as the fault of their predecessors. Let us see just one example: the nationalities question. Transforming imperial Ethiopia in a way that changes the nature of the state to be more accommodative of the nationalities question was conceived in the prehistory of the revolution that culminated in the emergence of Derg in 1974. The demand for inclusion by diverse social groups into the nation-state is one of the ways through which economic questions were articulated during the student movement of 1960s and 1970s. How these struggles for inclusion should be concretised is at the centre of intellectual debates and socio-political processes that led up to the 1974 revolution and its afterlife. The Derg adopted socialism as an umbrella to address the question of inclusion by foregrounding the workers in urban and the peasants in rural areas. While the Derg might be credited for introducing major structural transformations including the issue of land distribution, end of monarchy and birth of a socialist state, it relegated the question of nationalities as something that might open "the gate for narrow nationalism" to use Bahru Zewde's formulation.[3] This does not mean that the nationalities question was simply ignored. It was acknowledged and the cultural rights of nations and nationalities were respected. As Elleni (2019: 141) notes, "the PNDR [Program of the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia] recognised the right to self-determination of all nationalities, it also insisted that unity between the different nationalities in Ethiopia existed through the common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucratic capitalism" (Elleni 2019: 141). However, this recognition had bounds. Organising and politicising the workers and peasants as major allies was the priority compared to granting the right to self-determination up to secession, which was seen as a distraction from the main agenda of maintaining the country's much needed unity on its road to progress. As such, the Derg resorted to repressing quests and forcefully uniting under what Samson Tadelle Demo (2021) calls "scientific materialism". This is despite the fact that the popular protests prior the revolution demanded change not only to transform relations of production, but also for the respect of religious, cultural and linguistic rights.

Since the nation-state became synonymous with those who agreed with Derg's ideology and the state served in reinforcing it, there was much less room to address these multiple agendas as a result of which some groups took arms. For example, TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) resorted to armed struggle to fight for liberation as their names indicate. In 1991 Ethiopia's civil war came to an end with Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) taking power. Guided by democratic centralism, EPRDF incorporated the question of self-determination in the charter of the transitional government and later on became the most controversial article 39 of the 1995 constitution.[4] EPRDF introduced ethnic federalism and instrumentalised it to organise the state by devolving power to sovereign regional states that were divided in accordance with majority ethnic groups. The articulation of socio-cultural relations

within the framework of ethnic federalism took centre-stage to determine inclusion within the state for the past thirty years. To be sure, contemporary debates that are simplistically framed and ridiculed as "identity politics" - as if identity takes shape in a vacuum and devoid of political economy - remained to be lingering demands for inclusion in the nation state.

Since his appointment in 2018, Abiy Ahmed's administration seems to be regressing to politics that suppresses differences and looks back to the "old Ethiopia" with nostalgia. His inaugural speech in April of the same year suggests his commitment to an Ethiopia whose lost glory he promised to work towards restoring. He said: "we live as Ethiopians and we become Ethiopia when we die"[5] presenting Ethiopia as if it is uncontested. For him, Ethiopia is a country made by the sacrifice its different nations paid to protect its territorial integrity, longstanding and proud history and great people. The mixed reception by the public of his speech - a speech that oscillated between seeking liberal consent and nostalgia for an old empire - is telling. A sharp criticism was forwarded by the so-called ethno-nationalists for his implicit marginalisation of the constitutionally recognised categories of nations, nationalities and people. His speech was received by some in the so called Ethiopianist camp as the arrival of the moment Ethiopia was waiting for to undo what has been inflicted by ethnic federalism. The main umbrella of his speech, *medemer* (synergy), was seen by others as a hybrid framework that might potentially work for both groups which take extreme positions.[6]

What we gather from the regime changes of 1974, 1991 and recently in 2018 and the ensuing political actions is a high degree of continuity in the way the nation-state has been organised despite the major changes introduced. The centre-periphery as well as majority/minority divide continued to organise politics in the country. Political processes in Ethiopia are characterised by perpetual postponement and this is so because of the way in which politicians set priorities. Politicians stick to what Walter Benjamin (1968) calls a "stubborn faith in progress" around which they organise citizens. Faith in progress suggests that we are waiting for the next stage in anticipation of it being better. Central to this is linearity and that people are made to accept their present-day suffering in anticipation of a better future for their children if not for themselves. When it comes to taking popular demand and politicking from below seriously, the regimes suffer from overlooking what actually mattered to ordinary citizens. This kind of thinking does not lend itself to a change that is made possible through a different relation with the past and the present. A break from this tradition requires interrupting the anticipated progress for the future while the oppressed continue to suffer in the present. The question then is, instead of dwelling on their vulnerability, what ways are there for the oppressed to work against postponement orchestrated by political leaders and the violence it entails? One way could be to explore the potentials of politics from below in order to transcend the notion that political leaders alone determine the fate of the ruled. What might TSF lend us to think this politics from below? I agree with Martha

(2020: 133) that TSF "has the immense potential to facilitate the work of peacemaking, reconciling, and unifying among the diverse peoples of Ethiopia. [...] Siinqee feminism offers a framework of context, solidarity, and vision for broader emancipatory projects and environmental sustainability".

Thinking with feminist notions of *waloo*, *tumsa* and *wallala*

Theodros Alemu Teklu (2021) characterises today's Ethiopia as a moment of crisis of political culture that is marred with "hatred of the ethnic other" who is already defined as the enemy. This rhetoric and practice of "politics as hatred" cuts across the elite and ordinary citizens, he opines. Disconcerted by this political crisis, Theodros asks where Ethiopia is headed to in socio-political terms. He quickly answers saying we are "in a milieu of ethnic enmity" on the verge of full-blown ethnic-conflict (Theodros 2021: 14). There seems to be just enough evidence to support Theodros' fear. The ongoing displacement and killings in places such as Oromia, Gedeo, Benishangul-Gumuz, Konso, Metekel, Wolayta, Somali and Tigray have made Ethiopia home for the highest number of internally displaced people.[7] Major cities, including the capital Addis Ababa and others like Hawasa, Dire Dawa, Moyale, Ambo, Jijiga and Nekemt have not been spared of atrocities as they have had their share of killings and internal displacement. Survivors, such as those in Shashemene of Oromia region, are yet to recover from the trauma, the loss of social fabric, and economic hardship caused by violence.[8] The war in Tigray that is labelled by the federal government as "enforcing law and order" is yet another manifestation of problems underlying not just the 2018 insertion of the new administration. It exposes much more historically grounded problems, with the question of what kind of state Ethiopia needs being a major one.

Yet, while I share Theodros' fear and concern, I shy away from definitive characterisations such as "hatred of the ethnic other" or "milieu of ethnic enmity" to rather think of this moment of heightened change as one full of contradictions replete with multiple other possibilities. I reckon this moment is irreducible to parts of its aftermath, namely to the atrocities we are witnessing. It is a moment pregnant with the potential of cultivating solidarity within and across national boundaries. It has to also be seen as an opportune moment to restructure the political, such as the way the nation-state is organised. In light of this, I focus on what ordinary citizens live and do as a site of innovative political practices with an eye for contradictions not definitive characterisations of political developments in the country. I use Martha's TSF to imagine emancipatory politics from everyday practices and lived experiences in times of violence. The idea is that if we are to engage humanities from the place of the subordinated, we have to see like a feminist a la Nevidetta Menon (2012). TSF is central "because we feel deep kinship and empathy with our kith and kin from across the boundaries of multiple nations" (Martha 2020: 126). Asserting the transportability of Oromo women's feminist sensibility, Martha calls it transnational.

Oromo women's political practices have three main guidelines, namely *tumsa* (solidarity), *wallaala* (barriers blocking the pursuit for justice) and *waloo* (relationality). She uses three proverbs rooted in the history of the people to illuminate the notions. Solidarity/ *tumsa* is described using the expression "*abbaan iyyatu, ollaan birmata* [neighbors respond only if one screams]", where *iyyatu* "means a cry for help, a demand of justice, and *birmata* means a response of empathy and solidarity" (Martha 2020: 126). She describes *wallaala* using the proverb, "*dhakaan of hindarbuu; abbaan of hinarguu* [A pebble cannot throw itself; self cannot see itself]". In essence, this means that "no solo introspection produces self-knowledge. As our eyes are cut to look outward, we need Others' eyes to see ourselves" (Martha 2020: 127). *Waloo* relationality is captured in the saying "*migirri lagaa gubannaan gingilchaan golaa boosse* [when the reeds are burned in the valley, the sieving basket weeps in the kitchen]" (Martha 2020: 126). This signifies the capacity to feel other's pain even when we are in the comfort and warmth of our homes as represented by the basket that cries when the reeds are destroyed. Martha's articulations of the three notions within Oromo feminist thinking come from her keen observations and situated knowledge of Oromo women's socio-political cultural as well as spiritual practices and experiences which are marginalised in Oromo nationalist discourses (Martha 2020).

According to Martha, women are *halagaa* (strangers) due to their mobility within their communities. A daughter is a stranger in her parents' house because she will soon be given out for marriage. When she becomes a wife, she is a stranger because she comes from "elsewhere" and her belonging is affirmed later through childbirth. This perpetual strangeness while still belonging is where the potential for *tumsa* lies. As a matter of necessity, women stick together in solidarity. In situation of injustice suffered by one woman, all of those in the village raise their *sinqee* (the stick) and call out the one who committed the wrong, and they continue doing so until the wrong is amended by whoever committed it. As *halagaas*, women have no one but one another (Martha 2020). This resonates with my upbringing as it does with many who did not grow up in today's urban contexts that are hyper individualised. No woman raises a child alone. Irrespective of conflicts, tensions and differences, women come together in support of a struggling mother. They practice *tumsa* by sharing their deep knowledge and wisdom as well as material resources. Similarly, *tumsa* is lived at Lake Arsadi, where I conducted research, among the women who gather every Sunday and other Orthodox Christian holidays for coffee rituals. Most of these women do not know each other and yet bond in the process of sharing the space and the moment. Different issues - such as health, politics, economic struggles, marriage, motherhood - are reminisced about during the coffee sessions. Prayers (for the self, the other, the country, its leaders, peace, etc.) are said together. Items for coffee making, food and drinks are shared as much as experiences and hopes. It should be noted that the women at the weekly sessions are diverse - for ethnic origin, education, class, religious background, age wise - but there

are always shared experiences that cut across these differences and offer the ground for *tumsa* deliberations. These moments by the lakeside are instructive of the potentials of *tumsa* and its capacity for extrapolation.

For instance, looking at the annual thanksgiving *Irreecha* celebrations at Hora Arsadi in Bishoftu and its shifts over the years offers us an entry point to appreciate the potentials of the Oromo protest that began in 2014. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the "political side" of the ritual was dominated by the presence of (or longing for) the OLF in the youth's imagination and invocations as we gather from songs and prayers. This was the case even while the ritual was one of the most government regulated public events in the country. The government goes as far as characterising *Irreecha* as the field on which OLF plays. The longing for OLF was always presented in relation to the frustration and anger with and rejection of TPLF and disappointment with its puppet satellite Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO). This started shifting gradually to become more obvious during the protest when the youth showed that they are prepared to take matters into their own hands instead of waiting for OLF to come and rescue the Oromo from the tyrannies of TPLF/OPDO (Serawit 2017, 2019). This was more so the case in 2014 and in 2016. In the 2016 celebration, the youth called on all Oromo to join hands, in the spirit of *tumsa* to fight against injustice. They pleaded with fellow Oromo from north, south, east, west and those in the diaspora to commit themselves to the cause of lifting the Oromo out of years of disenfranchisement. Oromo across class, education, generation, gender, creed, occupation, residence (urban, rural, diaspora) joined together to wage a coordinated social struggle.[9] Affirming this nationwide movement, Martha praises the support: "we come together in the spirit of *wal malee maal qabnaa* (who else do we have but each other). When Oromo protestors are brutally repressed by the totalitarian regime in Ethiopia, *waloo* relationality brings us out in full force from across the many nations we inhabit" (Martha 2020: 131). The performance of *tumsa* as *wal malee maal qabnaa* was glaring in the 2016 celebration of *Irreecha*. Right before the stampede that killed hundreds, the protesting youth held their hands and created a line. They then started reciting prayers and pleas. In their plea, they asked the armed Oromo security forces not to fire and not to kill anyone in the name of *wal malee maal qabnaa.* The unarmed youth appealed to *tumsa* and said: "you are our own brothers, you should come join us in the fight for justice". They asked their fellow citizens not to align themselves with power which will soon betray them. They demanded the security forces to stand on the right side of history in the making by disowning a state that deployed violence to tame the struggle. In their plea, the protesters questioned the state and its functionaries by mobilising the notion of *tumsa*, solidarity.[10]

While this can be seen as *tumsa* within the same ethnic group, the Oromo, it should also be noted that these protest moments are significant not only for mobilising the Oromo nation across the board. They are equally crucial for their capacity of crossing

national boundaries. Protests in other parts of the country sprung up taking up the question of social justice, employment, human dignity, relief from the repressive state and demand for democracy. The Amhara were one of the first to follow suit to both protest the government in their own right and in solidarity with the Oromo. In these series of demonstrations in the Amhara region, the youth not only demanded change but also expressed support for their counterparts in Oromia as they condemned the inhuman and brutal treatment of the unarmed Oromo women and men. This was a significant manifestation of *tumsa* where impossible identification was practiced in sharing the pain of the brutalised youth. Recently, we have witnessed a boundary-crossing *tumsa* in the way ordinary citizens responded to victims of displacement, inter-communal violence and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. As an example, we can look at the seemingly simple gestures such as feeding and offering shelter to the internally displaced. It was not international NGOs that helped during these times; it was the neighbours who shared what they had. While descriptors like hate might cloud such practices of *tumsa*, exploring potentials that lie outside of victim-perpetrator afford us a space to imagine a way forward. *Tumsa* as lived by communities who have been subject to various forms of violence can be launched for rejuvenating social fabric as genuinely transformative. The state of being *halagaa* and its attendant *tumsa* are expressions of *wal malee maal qabnaa*. This highly frequented phrase among the Oromo, be it in popular songs or everyday communications, captures our interdependence as humans. It does not negate differences, nor does it deny violence. It refuses injustice but builds on empathy for the other. It operates on the basis of acknowledging *wallaala* (trespasses) to indicate fraternity as a complex process that ties communities of survivors while also accommodating "perpetrators" of violence since their fates are tied together.[11] The duo Zarihun Wadajo and Elfnash Qano Afan Oromo singers say: "a tree has leaves who do we have but each other - *wal malee maal qabnaaree*?" Martha recognises this cross-national solidarity saying "I see movements of reconciliation and peace building as the young Oromo leaders play *waloo*, the adhesive glue that holds together the disparate peoples of Ethiopia. I see movements of *tumsa* solidarity among peoples with historical animosity" (Martha 2020: 132).[12] Along with Martha, I stress the potentials these protest moments exposed to cultivate what Andreas Eshete calls fraternity as a connection built across ethnic differences (Andreas 1981).

For Andreas, the existence of a common bond is what defines fraternity, a bond that is not based on sharing material goods. The necessary condition for fraternity is a common cause such as the concern for equality and freedom. This kind of fraternity transcends ethnonational connections which assume a primordial kinship. Although nationalism is one of the examples Andreas uses to elaborate fraternity, he does not impose the idea that fraternal bond is natural. He says it is open. What he calls a "public ideal of fraternity" is a "relationship in which individuals are wholeheartedly committed to a cause-say, the cause of abolishing hunger from their community. If the cause is a central

project in the lives of all, and if they are able to work harmoniously in pursuit of their cause, and if they mutually recognize their calling, they would develop strong bonds of loyalty and affection" (Andreas 1981: 28). The possibility of fraternity presupposes identifying with both the cause and those who share it. This makes a community built by devotees of a cause whose membership is based on choice, not "natural" bond such as kinship. In anticipation of objections to his assertion, Andreas laments that "the received view is that fraternity cannot be realized under modern social circumstances. So, though it may be conceded that the ideal of fraternity points to a distinctive, perhaps even attractive, vision of social life, it is denied that the form of social life envisioned is a live alternative for us. To think otherwise is deemed misguided, or, worse, pernicious" (Andreas 1981: 34). Arguing otherwise, he brings nationalism to see the possibility of fraternity as bond by a common cause. And yet, one of the things he does is show that nationalism can break away from nationhood and exist without being encumbered by "the natural fetters of ethnicity". One "can be possessed by a passionate devotion to a moral or non-moral ideal: liberty, justice, beauty, productive work, adventure, the state, the betterment of the human condition. [...] Depending on the nature of the shared ideal and the distribution of the individuals who aspire to it, these forms of civic fraternity can exist in institutions within a nation and in associations that cross national boundaries" (Andreas 1981: 37-38). But this takes the willingness from all sides to engage in conversations that go past dehumanising the other as violent, that shades the sham of representing the self as innocent.[13] It takes a genuine commitment for an inclusive social change around which we can gather as a community of justice seekers. These fraternal bonds also presuppose the preparedness of the Ethiopian youth to transform themselves from inward looking persons to subjects who go against their self-interest and move their organising to a more inclusive politics. Martha sees this possibility in TSF which is also vital in moving away from the androcentrism fraternity implies by assuming the figure of the man as its centre.

And yet, I do not want to romanticise citizens as if they are not capable of committing atrocities. They are not passive recipients of orchestrated violence either. They are capable of performing "political evil" in pursuit of some goal or vision for a good life. We all possess the capacity for political evil, which according to Alan Wolfe (2011: 9-10) means the readiness to inflict "a wilful, malevolent, and gratuitous death, destruction, and suffering [...] upon innocent people by the leaders of movements and states in their strategic efforts to achieve realizable objectives". We have had similar instances in Ethiopia recently where people committed atrocities in pursuit of "a grotesque conception of the good life" (Wolfe 2011: 45). Those who need to be held accountable need to be engaged on those terms but not in a manner that reproduces the cycle of violence. We have to take this into account while engaging embedded practices like *tumsa* and *waloo* for grooming democracy, for state making and for genuine political transformation from below. Acknowledging the capacity for political

evil - not as transcendental but man-made - enables us, first, to deal with historically situated systemic and structural injustices that people suffer and, second, to create the conditions conducive for cultivating *tumsa* to better manage violence. Even if we might be limited by *wallaala*, we have *waloo* and *tumsa* - deliberate and conscious political practices that remedy our flaws and compel us to look out for one another against exploitive forces of capitalism that thrive on perpetual division and bickering. In the below section, I discuss how we might theorise the political/structural by moving away from the dichotomies minority/majority or centre/periphery.

What would restructuring the political look like?

The XIX century formation of the Ethiopian nation-state under Minilik cannot be viewed in isolation from colonial and global political processes that shaped the political history of the rest of Africa, indeed with no disregard to its own specificities. For Elleni, nation-state formation has to be seen as part of a larger process of Ethiopia's transition to capitalism and its self-assertion against the European scramble for Africa. Elleni (2019: 45) concedes that "[e]ven if the colonial state in modern Ethiopia had a sporadic existence, the social and political dynamics of the scramble for Africa set the stage for the entire series of actions pursued in the name of state formation from the time of Minilik onwards". The socio-economic marginalisation and the struggle between those perceived as the centre and hence favoured by the state and its peripheries have to be seen in this light not just as local skirmishes. Reducing the history of nation-state formation in Ethiopia to local developments and stating it as a struggle between the centre and its peripheries clouds colonial histories, capitalist formations and the scramble for Africa in shaping Ethiopia in the XIX century. According to Elleni, being stuck in the localised centre-periphery/inter-ethnic clash narrative of nation-state formation is at the heart of Ethiopia's political problems. This is so because, first, the relation between the centre and periphery is "read as the intensification of age-old tendencies within the Abyssinian state" and, second, "instead of showing the active participation of non-Amhara peoples and groups in the making of the modern Ethiopian nation state, [scholarship] ends up 'legitimising the dominant positions claimed by agents of the centre'. What is lost is the role of 'diverse social networks' in the process of nation-state formation" (Elleni 2019: 40-41). The consequences of this is that it solidifies the centre-periphery and imagines the struggles for social inclusion only within that frozen framing as if belonging was natural, ahistorical and apolitical. Part of this arguably comes from the position that conceives the Amhara as an essentialised ethnic group privileged to define the nation-state, who belongs and on what basis (Yates 2016).[14] The question of national identity as shaped by Amhara sensibilities such as language, religion, cultural expressions underlies political processes in today's Ethiopia. Nevertheless, these debates are not necessarily new. Ethiopian students of the 1960s deliberated on "how to expand membership within the Ethiopian state; how

to reorganise the state to address regional inequalities; and how to build an economy where the newly forming petty bourgeoisie could have a role" (Elleni 2019: 45). Political organising and practices follow this discourse in formulating policy, partly because there is an overlap of actors operating between the two spaces since the student movement. As the concern of my interlocutor in the introduction indicates, if EPRDF had claimed to facilitate economic transformation in the life of the dispossessed through granting self-determination, it failed to achieve that because post-1991 Ethiopia for the most part ended up being a political game play for the urban-based petty bourgeoisie who appropriated and at the same time disregarded popular demand for inclusion. Two issues can be raised about the attempt to address the economic question through ethnic federalism and how the urban elite appropriated and reduced the question to one of representation. One is that ethnic identity was made the only reality that defines all political struggles and demands, gradually pushing socio-economic questions to the background. What it did instead is the creation of a certain class that benefited from the arrangement in the name of representing the interest of a particular national group like Oromo, Amhara, Wolayta, Tigre. The second problem is that it created a permanent condition of minority-majority by simply promoting the illusion that ethnic identities are primordial not contingent on socio-political, economic and historical formations. This might give the impression of benefiting the representatives of the majority while actively excluding minorities, particularly those that reside in the regional states other than their own, such as Amhara living in Oromia and Oromo living in Amhara regions. What is granted to these minorities is limited to basic rights while denying the chance for political inclusion in the regional state apparatus. Their existence is "tolerated" within one region for as long as they do not make demands that might just suffocate the political privileges of the ethnic group that defines the regional state.

Even though EPRDF defined its role as promoting "self-rule and fraternity amongst the peoples of Ethiopia" (Elleni 2019: 5), what the current developments in the country show is that the state as imagined by EPRDF did not live up to its promises. If, as Elleni (2019) suspects, the sense of fraternity that informs some of the provisions in the 1995 constitution is inspired by Andreas Eshete, the lived realities at this moment in time go against what Andreas wants us to understand as fraternal as discussed above. The developments in the last decades simply expose the limits of what many have thought would bring about a meaningful change in the life of citizens. As it stands now, the ethnic based federal experiment has reached an irreversible threshold as Theodros Alemu Teklu (2021) observes. Ethiopia's federalism needs to come to terms to the fact that identities and associated privileges are a result of a political process rather than a birth right a few are given while others are denied.

The dictionary meaning of transformation suggests that there has to be a radical departure from what was. Bringing this to the political realm: when is a country said to have undergone transformation in the sense of a radical shift away from what has

been? Mahmood Mamdani (2020) lends us an appropriate vocabulary: decolonising the political. Transformation is when we decolonise the political, particularly the nation-state by first acknowledging it as a colonial invention. This is understood as restructuring politics as opposed to a simple facelift, which is when transformation as a radical departure can be thinkable. Mamdani calls for a novel way of organising political orders as the only way out of persistent violence. This means, moving away from the logics of colonial modernity that birthed the nation-state that is at the centre of extreme violence in our times (Mamdani 2020). Coming to Ethiopia, Elleni's proposal on theorising the nation state is well aligned to Mamdani's call for decolonising the political. Elleni (2019: 41-43) suggests theorising the nation-state as, first, "result of the activation of new social processes within the global context", second, as "the arena through which third world politics takes shape" within global political and economic dynamics such as (neo)colonialism and capitalism. This opens up the possibility to see the nation-state as a site of active social struggle in which inclusion or exclusion is political rather than a permanently given condition. It is a political process in which a variety of interests and subjectivities play out. Imagining the nation-state as always in flux and hence unpredictable makes it possible to articulate it as a site of perpetual struggle by different socio-political forces. While this is an approach that calls for transformation through a departure from the way the nation-state is organised, it is also important to think of political culture and subjectivities to start imagining new narratives of the self in relation to others with whom one shares the country. This continues to be crucial since the nation-state is penetrated by various interest groups. Ordinary citizens shape the nation-state as much as they are shaped by it.

Conclusion

Ethiopia has hosted political experiments that were orchestrated by thinkers and practitioners who are to a significant extent divorced from the life of citizens. Less attention has been paid to what those on the margin might actually want as well as what their practices might generate in terms of imagining a more profound political transformation that takes the lives of peasants, unemployed youth, children, women seriously. I believe perhaps the potential for a genuine transformation is one that seeks to build on ordinary citizens' experiences with violence. It is clear that our political theorising cannot afford to neglect entanglements of such experiences with structures of power that affect every facet of life. Imposition of political thoughts that are not attuned to the life and experiences of citizens has thus far proven fruitless if not futile. There is a need to seek new forms of political organising to cultivate thoughts and practices outside of the colonial logic. By bringing together Oromo women's experiences and practices of dealing with their strangeness, I have tried to indicate one potential site of such a political engagement that emanates from embedded and embodied practices. I have suggested that the TSF's three pillars - *tumsa* (solidarity), *wallaala*

(barriers blocking the pursuit for justice) and *waloo* (relationality) - can be launched as lenses for political theorising without losing sight of national-global networks and structures of exploitation and violence. I have also shown that these everyday practices are not enough if we are not equally interrogating the nation-state and rethinking its organisation. This said, I do not want to imply that Ethiopia's complex socio-economic and political problems can be exhausted in such a short piece. Mine is rather a call to pay attention to the grounded aspects too as part of the things we think about while reflecting on political transformation as it is happening in today's Ethiopia.

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NOTES:

1 - Conversation with Caalaa Soresa, Adama, 25 February 25 2013.

2 - *The Oppressor Remains What He Is,* «Chimurenga», 21 January 2021: https://chimurengachronic.co.za/the-oppressor-remains-what-he-is/.

3 - *The Legacies of the Ethiopian Student Movement: an Interview with Bahru Zewde*,«Jacobin», 12 February 2019: https://jacobinmag.com/2019/12/ethiopian-student-movement-bahru-zewde-abiy-ahmed-1974-revolution.

4 - Walleligne Mekonnen, *On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,* cit. Walleligne's piece in 1969 served as a blueprint not only for debates held by student activists in the 1970s and 1980s but also for organising state-society relations in post-revolutionary Ethiopia including the 1995 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

5 - I translated a segment of Abiy Ahmed's inaugural speech delivered in Amharic, available here: *Ethiopian Prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed inauguration speech*, "YouTube" 2 April 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4yn_bxVJIw.

6 - *Ethiopia Will Explode if It Doesn't Move Beyond Ethnic-Based Politics*, «Foreign Policy», 8 November 2019: https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/08/ethiopia-will-explode-if-abiy-ahmed-doesnt-move-beyond-ethnic-based-politics/.

7 - Norwegian Refugee Council, *Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID),* Spotlight on Ethiopia, 2019: https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2019-IDMC-GRID-spotlight-ethiopia.pdf.

8 - Shashemene is one of the hardest hit by inter communal violence within a short time span, the latest being the one that happened following the tragic murder of Haccalu Hundessa in June 29, 2020.

9 - This section mainly draws on and echoes my ethnographic and archival research most of which are published in different platforms (Serawit 2018, 2019, 2020).

10 - A detailed account of this can be found in Serawit (2019).

11 - This is in sharp contrast to Mamdani's call to open the category "survivors" to accommodate all-beneficiaries, bystanders, victims, and perpetrators alike. Given that survivors get shaped differently by a specific experience of/with violence, positive political transformation comes from recognising and articulating differences of past experiences with violence assuming a future togetherness among beneficiaries, bystanders, victims and perpetrators.

12 - It should be noted that the performative political alliances between the Amhara and Oromo political elites (popularly known as Oromara) was a tactical alliance fostered against and due to the existence of a shared enemy that is TPLF. We should not lose sight by mixing that with grassroots forms of solidarity that do not necessarily reflect political alliances.

13 - Martha Kuwe Kumsa emphasises this in another article she wrote in "Ethiopia Insight" where she insists that we must be ready to interrogate our innocence as a way forward to cultivating transnational feminist solidarity. See Martha Kuwe Kumsa, *Our Diverse Feminists Must Team Up to Disavow Epistemological Violence,* "Ethiopia Insight", 16 December 2020: https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/16/our-diverse-feminists-must-team-up-to-disavow-epistemological-violence/.

14 - Brian J. Yates argues that ethnicity is a hindrance to our understanding of XIX century Ethiopian history. One of the claims he makes is that a more fluid socio-cultural identity is reduced to being a primordial ethnic identity (e.g. Amhara and Oromo) through which historical relationships are understood in today's Ethiopia. For instance, he highlights the absurdity of ascribing an essence to the category Amhara stating that it is more a class-based identity than ethnicity, a category all might belong to (Yates 2017).

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