

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Genesis of Ethno-nations in Ethiopia: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

The genesis and evolution of the idea of ethno-nation in Ethiopia occupy the larger discussion of the nationalism scholarship. The “settler vs. indigenous”, “nefetegna vs. serf”, “colonizer vs. colonized”, “oppressor vs. oppressed”, and other dichotomies have been doing unimaginable mischief in the nation-building endeavor in Ethiopia. At the crux of the problem lays history and its contested interpretation to satisfy the ideology and program of certain political groups such as the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This article aimed to critically analyze the origin and the development of ethno-nations in Ethiopia. Four explanations could be provided as to the emergence of ethnonational groups or at least an “ethnic factor” in Ethiopian political history. First, the coronation of Tewodros II and the ousting of the Yejju dynasty; second, the presumption of the existence of independent “nation-states” prior to Menelik’s “unification” undertaking in the second half of the 19th century; third, the Italian colonial policy that amplified and co-opted ethnic and religious differences; fourth— the transformation and crystallization stage, the Ethiopian Students Movement’s (ESM) relentless activism of the national question and the institutionalization of “national oppression thesis” in the dawn of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front/Ethiopia People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front era. Apart from these contending explanations, this paper argues that ethno-nation(s) in Ethiopia are the discursive formations constituted in and through contentious and hegemonic discourses of the 20th century.

Keywords: Ethno-nation, ethnicity, question of nationalities, discursive formation, Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

The emergence of the nation is largely played out in light of interpretations of historical phenomena. As a result, dating a nation appears to be a contested subject in the nationalism scholarship. The widely accepted modernist school with certainty dates the nation having the elements of borders, legal-political community, nationalist legitimation, inter-states system and mass citizenship to the 19th century Western Europe. Connor (1994: 224) went further and suggested that “claims of a nation existed prior to the late 19th century should be treated cautiously.”

In contrast, Levine (2004) rejects the conventional Western nationalism scholarship and the modern invention of the Ethiopian state and proposes the Ethiopian nationhood, as we know it, that dates back to the 6th century. However, the prevailing conception of the Ethiopian nationhood is characterized by the existence of multi-nations (Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Sidama, Somali, and others) that repudiates the idea of the “Ethiopian nation”. This is institutionalized in post-1991 Ethiopia by a government which is a product of the Ethiopian Students Movement’s (ESM) radicalism and intellectual dexterity. Again, an ethnic reading of Ethiopian history has obscured Ethiopianness and fostered ethnic contradiction (Yates, 2016). As a result, a specter is now up on Ethiopians— ethnic carnage, displacement, and war (that stemmed from the politicization of ethnicity and competing ethno-national movements). The underpinning of the hegemonic conception of “Ethiopia’s modern invention” is contested and even suffering from an incomplete interpretation of history (see Messay, 2003). Indeed, there are three paradigms in Ethiopian studies, i.e., Aksumite, Orientalist-Semetic, and the Radical Left (Teshale, 1995). In light of such overarching reading of Ethiopian history, this paper analyzes the manifold politico-structural and historical phenomena in the making of ethno-nation(s) in Ethiopia, and discusses the recent developments in the Ethiopian politics. It goes without saying, this paper follows the following key arguments made by Connor (1990: 92) to analyze ethno-nations in Ethiopia; first, “national consciousness is a mass not an elite phenomenon”; second, “nation formation is a process, not an occurrence...”; third, “...ethnographic history of people is often of little pertinence to the study of nation-formation”.

The paper is organized into three parts. The first part discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the ethno-nations and tries to shed light on the theoretical lacunae in studying ethno-nations in Ethiopia. The second part address the nexus of contested historical interpretation and the formation and mobilization of ethno-nations. The third part critically look into the existing debates on the formation of ethno-nations as a modern phenomenon. Finally, the paper put forward an alternative perspective on the making of ethno-nations in Ethiopia.

2. Methods

An interpretive research paradigm in general and discursive method in particular is adopted to analyze the genesis of ethno-nations in Ethiopia. The article aimed at critically apprising existing research works in Ethiopia nationalism scholarship. Through examining the debates and gaps in the literature, this paper aimed at proposing its own dimension of looking at the origin of ethno-nation(s) in Ethiopia. Thus, secondary sources of data such as articles, books, and book chapters were thoroughly examined to address the intended research purpose. The findings are analyzed into themes to find meaning and exhaust possible explanation for “the origins of ethno-nation(s) in Ethiopia” in the literature. The study draws theoretical underpinnings from a constructivist theory of nation.

3. Understanding Nation: An Overview

Understanding the meanings of “ethnicity” and “nation” in the Ethiopian context helps to make sense of the current political dispensation. It is worth to reiterate at the outset, however, that both concepts are foreign to the social, cultural, economic and political ideals of Ethiopia. The concepts are highly contested in the Western nationalism scholarship as scholars in the field explain the concept differently. There are three thoughts¹ that stand out in the study of nation; i.e., primordialism, ethno-symbolism, and Modernism (Özkirimli, 2017).

Nation for primordialists is given, a priori, natural, spiritual, and transcendental entity (Shils, 1975; Geertz, 1993). It is also defined by common descent and maintained by endogamy (van den Berghe, 1981). Nations evolved out of pre-existing ethnic communities, ethnies, defined by myth, symbols, and attitudinal factors persisted for *la longue durée* is the position of ethno-symbolism (Hutchison, 1994; Armstrong, 2001; Smith, 2009). In contrast, modernists perceive nation as products of modern (18th century onwards) processes of capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, secularism, and the emergence of the modern bureaucratic state.

The various thoughts on “nation”, for Brubaker (1996: 14), adopted a realist ontological approach where nation(s) are “real entities and substantial collectivities although how they exist and how they came to exist is much disputed”. He continued and claimed, “Nations are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world”. In the same vein, Calhoun (1998: 5) remarked that “nations are constituted largely by the claims themselves, by the way of talking, thinking, and acting that rely on these sorts of claims to produce collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects, and to evaluate peoples and practices”. Here one thing is clear; as Tilly (1975: 6) aptly pointed out, “‘nation’ remains one of the most puzzling and tendentious items in the political lexicon”. However, it is crucial to understand national identities or others “are not things we think about, but things we think with. As such, they have no existence beyond our politics, our social relations and our histories” (Gills, 1994: 5).

At this juncture, it is appropriate to illuminate how the word “nation” is understood in Ethiopia. Crystal (2014: 64) wrote that language signifies “a guide to understanding a community’s world view”. Therefore, a discussion of the “equivalent” Amharic or Ge’ez or other Ethiopian languages of “nation” and “ethnicity” will benefit to put the term in perspective and figure out the embedded worldview in a given language.

The Ge’ez word “*beher*” has been unanimously and uncritically granted to connote the meaning of nation since the 1960s. Prior to Wallilegn’s (1969) piece, provincialism, tribalism, and regionalism were the common parlance in the writings of the ESM activism (see Tumtu, 1971, Alem, 1971). Following the publication of “On the Question of Nationalities”, a Stalinist understanding and conception of “nation” received unduly endorsement. “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin, 1954: 8). This definition has tremendously shaped the discourse of “nations, nationalities, and peoples” in Ethiopian politics from the ESM to FDRE Constitution (see Article 39). The conception of “nations” in the Ethiopian context falls to the “essentialist” camp; such understanding of nation are only adequate to some members of a larger group, thus lacks explanatory power (Hobsbawm, 2012).

In the heydays of the ESM, Walleign's (1969) application of "nationalities" and "nation" to designate the diverse groups of people that constitute the Ethiopian Empire illustrates their failure to "let the meaning choose the word". To put it differently, they have "surrendered to them (i.e. words)" to use Orwell's (1953: 169) phrase. Messay (2008) also disapproved the undigested or uncritical usage of the word "nationalities" or "nations" in the Ethiopian context (see also Getachew, 2019). This unfortunately set the fundamentals for the reification of "nations" or "ethnic groups" that has become a hegemonic political discourse in Ethiopia. For Teshale (2008), this is an extension of a Eurocentric knowledge structure that failed to grasp the Ethiopian reality.

In the works of Ethiopian scholars, the semantics of the word "*beher*" is interpreted differently to its English equivalent, "nation". According to Kidane Wolde (1975: 261), *beher* refers to "place, region, and subdivisions in a region"; "land, country, town, rural area, provincial administration, region divided by appointment and territorial demarcation"; and "man, relatives, *nagad*(tribe), people (*hezzeb*) distinguished by language, state, administration, and law". For Teshale (2008), it is regional, trans-ethnic, trans-religious identity. "*Beher*", then, does not have the meaning Marxists intend to imply. Agreeing with Teshale's (2008) position of the usage of the word, "nation" by no means reflects Ethiopian realities; however, he overlooked that words may undergo semantic change.

A more confusing approach is adopted in the post-1991 Ethiopia. For instance, the 1995 Constitution (Art. 8 (1)) declared sovereignty resides on "nations, nationalities, and peoples" of Ethiopia. It is perplexing to ascertain "who is who?" theoretically in light of Article 39 (5) (in theory at least).

A "Nation, Nationality or People" for the purpose of this Constitution is a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable predominantly contiguous territory.²

Similarly, finding an Amharic (or any other Ethiopian languages) equivalent of "ethnic" or "ethnicity" would be challenging as the concept is imported and originated elsewhere. Quite frequently, however, the Ge'ez word "*zaweg*" is used to substitute ethnicity. According to Aleqa Kindane Wolde Kifle's (1948: 415) dictionary, "*zaweg*" means "two, twin, dual, overlapping twofold, husband and wife". It also means "relative, one's peers, one's resemblance, and friend" (as cited in Teshale, 2008). "*Gosa*"—tribe or "*neged*"—clan are other alternatives in the tongues of politicians, activists and the politically conscious mass to mention ethnicity.

Getachew (2019) prefers the Ge'ez and Oromiffa words "*nagad*" and "*gossa*" in lieu of "ethnic group" and "nation". These terms are "practical social categories" developed and deployed in Oromo, Somali, and other groups. In addition to "*gossa*" and "*nagad*", Teshale (2008: 365) suggested the Ge'ez word "*beher*", "if used without translating it as the Marxist concept of 'nation', explains the Ethiopian reality better, and more profoundly". The point here is that we submit to the Eurocentric interpretation of Ethiopian history, and we often do the worst thing one can do with words, "surrendering to them", to mention a few "feudalism", "imperialism", "nation", "ethnicity". In this research context, the researcher will not refer to these words. This is because the "cat is out of the box", and there is no reproaching to rethink the meaning a word should connote after half a century.

4. Contested Interpretation of History: Foundation of ethno-nation(s)

Scholarly literature on the history of Ethiopia, for Teshale (1995), can be categorized into three, i.e., Aksumite, Orientalist Semiticist and the Radical Left paradigms. The Aksumite paradigm (Ge'ez Civilization) is rooted in the Orthodox Monophysite Church and suspicion of the explanation of the Queen of Sheba, by some, as "myth" (Messay, 2003). The Oriental Semiticist paradigm is a Euro-centric interpretation of Ethiopian history. Although the paradigm has produced a systematic discourse of Ethiopian Studies (Teshale, 1995), the Semitic thesis, for Messay (2003: 4), is a "Eurocentric phantasm".³ In contrast, the Radical Left paradigm includes scholars influenced by the Marxist-Leninist linings in their understanding of Ethiopian history. This paradigm questioned the legitimacy of the Ethiopian Imperial establishment and the scholarship that rationalized the monarchial legitimacy.

Among others, class, nationality/ethnicity, and race are the central themes the paradigms attempted to discern. In this regard, their contribution in the interpretation of Ethiopian history could be summarized as racial distinction of the Abyssinians and "natives", ethnicization of the past, delegitimizing the crown, feudalism, self-governing territories, "national oppression", "class oppression", and "dependent colonialism" (Ullendorff, 1967; Crummey, 1980; Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990; Bahru, 1991; Mohammed, 1990; Levine, 2000; Gebru, 2009). The big picture of such contested interpretations represents the insurmountable challenge in crafting a common discourse on the state-building and nation-building processes of Ethiopia. The ongoing simmering anomaly in Ethiopian politics draws its origin from the highly polarized narrations of history and memory.

Teshale (1995) suggested three possible timescales for Ethiopian history; 3000 years, 100 years, and 40 years old. In the words of Clapham (2002), the history of Ethiopia has fallen to the prey of ethnonationalist historians with a Leninist conception. The Somalis and the Oromo have already embarked on the course of national construction through the selective use of history. Hence, how old the Ethiopian state is contentious and the search of a unifying history appears daunting.

The emergence of the modern Ethiopian state is traced back to the rise of Tewodros II to power in 1855 (Bahru, 1991; Teshale, 1995). The making and remaking of the Ethiopian polity in the 19th and 20thC has been shaped by state formation, war of incorporation, the Italian invasion, the ESM and the subsequent revolution of 1974, and the creation of multi-ethnic polity (Merera, 2007). In the same vein, through Marxist-Leninist lens, Markakis (2011) remarked that the Ethiopian past involves contentious relations between the center (Abyssinian core) and periphery (newly incorporated territories or lowlands). The polity is characterized by imbalance of power that marginalizes the majority of its people including the highland peripheries. Unlike other African countries, the nature of Ethiopia's state formation, for Markakis (1999), is a result of a response to the challenge of European imperialism and a successful partition in the scramble for Africa. Therefore, Ethiopia as we know it is not older than most African countries. This assertion denounces the 3000 years' statehood of Ethiopia as a nationalist mythology and reduces the history of the state to 100 years.

In contrast, without denouncing the Orientalist Semitist argument, the widely cited Greater Ethiopia of Levin (2000) proclaimed the making of Greater Ethiopia (Ethiopia synthesis) is the product of the "Amhara thesis and Oromo anti-thesis". The genesis of the thesis (i.e. empire building) is the year 1270 A.D. (restoration of Solomonic Dynasty or Amhara

rule) and 16th Century Oromo expansion for the anti-thesis (parochial tradition).⁴ With a nuanced approach, Teshale (1995) maintained Ethiopian history from the 16th century on is the history of the relations of the Amhara and the Oromo. Levin's (2000) assertion construed the Greater Ethiopia through the lens of ethnicity, i.e., through "ethnicizing the past". This begs a question; did the Amhara or Oromo or Tigray perceive themselves as distinct ethnic categories? Is there any evidence to explain the relations in ethnic terms?

Be that as it may, the nation-building effort of Ethiopia is far from completion (Markakis, 2011). Since the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty (for the second time), Tewodros II embarked on centralizing state power and continued to live in the post 1991 federal Ethiopia (Merera, 2003; Fisseha, 2006). In the course of consolidating the centralization of power, homogenizing the Ethiopian society or assimilation policy, i.e., Amharanization guaranteed a way out especially in the period of Haile Selassie I. In this regard, Markakis (1999) claimed that the state promoted its own version of Ethiopian nationalism, whose cultural ingredients, not surprisingly, were pure— Amhara. This has kindled dissent from the Ethiopian students albeit different structural factors contributed to the ESM to flare-up in the 1960s and 70s (see also Balsivik, 1985; Messay, 2008; Bahru, 2014).

The legacy of the ESM in the conception of Ethiopianness has dramatically altered the old version and challenged the Haile Selassie I rule with "land to the tiller" and "nationalities question". The later proliferation of radical insurgent movements grew from the students' persistent activism and the regime's failure to respond to their urgent quests (Messay, 2008; Bahru, 2014). The "wrong address theory" (Anderson, 2006) best describes the proliferation of ethnonationalist organizations in the 1970s. The theory suggests the intention of awakening the working class accidentally diverted at ethnic politicization and mobilization. Presumably, as a "tactic" or "strategy" however the ethnonationalist architects put it, the idea of ethno-nations in Ethiopia crystallized over time.

Incongruity to Ethiopianness and enmity epitomizes the nature of the ethno-nationalist organizations. Ethiopian nationalism (alias patriotism) has historically been adamant on repulsing external aggression and maintaining the territorial integrity of the polity.⁵ Tewodros (2013: 113) distinguished the symbol of nationalism of the historic Ethiopia— country, religion, and wife; and the modern nationalism— flag, the king, and mother land. The genesis of the ideology of Ethiopian nationalism rooted in part from the period of Adwa and the patriotic resistance of Italian colonialism. This has been a long sturdy tradition in Ethiopian history. Solomon (1993: 139) remarked "Ethiopian nationalism has a time-tested resiliency".

In contrast, Ethiopian nationalism in the eyes of the ethno-nationalists of the 1960s and 70s is construed as an "Amhara" imposition (Solomon, 1993; Almeseged, 2010). Thence, it is rooted in Amhara tradition and falls short to exhibit the famously cited Rossini's (1928) declaration "un museo di popoli" (a museum of peoples), of Ethiopia. It would be fallacious, however, to acknowledge Conti-Rossini's assertion given the claim illustrates the "people" were in a secluded "museum" devoid of any interaction and contact. In this regard, Levine (2000: 21) eloquently argued that such conception neglects the historical realities of the various people in the current Ethiopia "have in common and the existence of discernible cultural areas, and to ignore the numerous relationships these groups have had with one another."

Since the 1960s, the hegemonic Ethiopian nationalism started facing challenges of propagating an ethno-linguistic nationalist tone questing outright secession and more autonomy/restructuring of the state (Solomon, 1993). The ascendance of Dergto pow-

er heralded a “tortuous period of revolutionary violence, political repression, chronic civil war, and ethnic fragmentation” (Levin, 2004: 5). On the positive side, the swift “land decree” of 1975 addressed the burning questions of “land to the tiller”. Like its predecessor, a grip into the Ethiopian nationalism marked the regime’s nation-building policy albeit the *Derg* acknowledged the rights of nationalities (Markakis, 2011).

The coming of the TPLF/EPRDF to power and the ethnic federalism as a panacea was feared that it may descend the country into a political abyss. However, with all the disdain to “Ethiopianness”, the EPRDF regime has effectively utilized the Ethiopian sentiment in assembling support in the Ethio-Eritrea war (1998-2000), celebration of the Ethiopian Millennium, and the building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (Bach; 2013; Abdelhady et al., 2015). As Bach (2013) aptly put it, Pan-Ethiopian symbols, events, heroes, and images were used in different ways depending on concrete political contexts in post 1991.

The EPRDF “accommodationist policy” is assembled from primordial identities of the different nations, nationalities and peoples (NNPs). Ethiopianness, as the late PM Melese said, is a right not an obligation. However, there are established popular Ethiopian national symbols: Adwa, athletics, religion, culture, and GERD (Alemseged, 2004; Abdelhady et al., 2015).

Over all, ethno-nationalist scholarly works dominated the nationalism scholarship. Thus, the Ethiopian nationalism is construed as anachronistic idea and deconstructed in its every facet. Cultural elements have been given a particular emphasis. Accordingly, prior autonomy of ethnic groups; contention over which ethnic group is indigenous to Ethiopia; and contested interpretation of history sum up the works on ethnic nationalism in Ethiopia.

5. The rise of ethno-nation(s) in Ethiopia

Ethiopia’s boundary has always been fluid encompassing diverse people of dynamic territorial coverage. With the ushering of a new historiography of the Ethiopian history, these people were considered as distinct “ethnic groups”, “nations” or “ethno-nations” (Clapham, 2000; Yates, 2016). The introduction of the “ethnic factor” and the idea of ethno-nation(s) in the Ethiopian political dispensation have been attributed to different explanations. In the following section the varying debates on “when is the ethno-nation in Ethiopia?” are discussed and an alternative perspective has also been proposed that departs from the existing literature.

5.1. Tewodros II and the Letter to Queen Victoria

For Merera (2003), the rise of ethno-national groups is traced back to the period of the coronation of Tewodros II (see also Yonatan, 2010). The letter (see below) Tewodros II sent to Queen Victoria in 1862 declaring the ousting and conclusion of the Yeju dynasty, “ethnically Oromo”, dominance in his reign happened to justify the “ethnic factor” of politics in Ethiopian history (Merera, 2008: 116). Here is Tewodros II’s letter to Queen Victoria as cited in Teshale (1995: 38):

My fathers the Emperors having forgotten our creator, they handed over their Kingdom to the Gallas and Turks. But God created me, lifted me out of the dust, and restored this Empire to my rule ... By his power I drove away the Gallas.

“The Northern Oromos” (Yeju), as Yates (2019) call them, were assimilated through marriage to the Abyssinian culture and nobility. Apart from the language signifier, no distinctive features distinguish the Oromo from the Abyssinians. In another note, as Crummey (1975) pointed out, ethnicity had a minimal role in defining politics in the Christian Ethiopia, instead patron-client relations, payment of tribute, and modestly regionalism dictated politics. If we take, for the sake of argument, Merera’s proposition, can we claim that there was an ethnic justification when YekunoAmlak pronounced the Zagwe Dynasty as usurper of power in 1270? If affirmative, should the ethnic factor in Ethiopian history go back to the 13th century? This indeed is ethnicization of the past. Hence, the struggle against the Yeju dynasty either by Tewodros II or other regional warlords was “dictated less by ethnic and religious considerations than by self-interest and regional aggrandizement” (Bahru, 2005: 12).

5.2. Menelik II’s March from Shoa

King Menelik’s (later Emperor Menelik II) territorial “expansion” or “conquest” or “reunification” (Messay, 2015) to the south, west and east of current Ethiopia is believed to be the turning point in the conception of ethnic politics in Ethiopia. The integration of various diverse groups in the late 19th century sparked a contested discourse on Ethiopian state building project, to use Merera’s (2006) expression “nation-building, national oppression, and colonial theses”. The historical discourses assumed a prior existence of “nation(s)”.

The ethnonational political organizations established in the 1960s and 70s pronounced Menelik’s expansion as a “colonial quest”. In the early days of the TPLF, as Aregawi (2008) stated, the “colonial thesis” was advocated partly by the higher members of the front. This has latter led to the publication of “Manifesto 68” in such spirit declaring Tigray independence as the ultimate goal of the armed struggle. The Manifesto has also unequivocally declared the “Amhara nation” as enemy, and construed the coronation of Menelik as Emperor as usurp of power from Tigray by Shoa-Amhara. This has fomented animosity among the elites of Tigray and Shoa since then (Young, 1997; Gebru, 2009). However, the Manifesto was shortly renounced in the following years within the front not publicly (Young, 1997). Mobilizing the public to this cause through inciting ethnonational sentiment in Tigray was demanding. It required time, other modus operandi, and suppression by the Derg regime (Clapham, 2002).

The OLF has also declared the “Oromo question” as a “colonial question” and an independent movement (OLF program, 1976 as cited in Asafa, 2020).⁶ The root of the Oromo nationalism goes back to the 19th century although the origin of the nationalist movement was conceived in the middle of the 20th century with the establishment of the MechaTuluma self-help association (Yates, 2016). Scholarly works in the Oromo nationalism suggest the existence of an independent “Oromo nation” before Menelik’s subjugation. This phenomenon is considered as “dependent colonialism”/ “settler colonialism”/ “junior colonialism”⁷ (Holcomb and Ibsaa, 1989; Mohammed, 1990; Asafa, 2020). As Mohammed (1990) remarked, Oromo nationalism emerged partly out of the struggle against Amhara domination and partly against Somali expansionism. The OLF has failed achieving the objective of creating an independent Oromia, yet it has succeeded in mustering support from the intellectual and the critical mass.

The imposition of Amharaization-Orthodox Christianity, Amharic language, and introduction of tenancy by “non-native” Amhara- is the feature of Ethiopia’s colonialism (Asafa, 2001; Mohammed, 1990; Mekuria, 1997). In contrast, Ethiopian history, for Teshale (1995), from the 16th century on is the history of the relations of the Amhara and the Oromo. Hence, upholding the “colonial thesis” to the Oromos or Eritreans or other eth-

nic questions in Ethiopia fails making the characteristics of either “Internal colonialism” (Hechter, 1975) or qualify for the epithet “European colonialism” (Messay, 2015). Clapham (2002: 45) accounted that such construction of ethno-nationalist history stems from the “pursuit of the intellectual and emotional basis for one political project or another”.

5.3. Legacy of the Italian Colonial Policy (1936-41)

The rise of ethnicity in Ethiopian politics is attributed to the legacy of Italian colonial policy. The colonial policy targeted at destroying the pillars of Ethiopian nationalism and fomenting communal hatreds through maliciously “chopping up Ethiopia”, to use Sbacchi’s (1985) words, in ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and class terms. To be precise, to quell an organized resistance to the “civilizing mission”, the administrative units during the Italian occupation were structured to amplify ethnic and “racial” differences. The Italian East Africa constituted, inter alia, Amhara, Oromo-Sidama, Addis Abeba (later Shoa) and Eritrea (including Tigray) Governorates that noticeably illustrated the Cushtic-Semitic dichotomy of the Ethiopian polity (Tewodros, 2013).

The Italian “divide and rule” policy also intentionally favors one ethnic group over others. In doing so, the subtle incentives (like armaments) were in order for one ethnic group or religion to turn against another: Oromo against Amhara; Muslims against Christians and so on (Sbacchi, 1985). The legacy of the Italian colonial policy has continued to pose a challenge to the Ethiopian statehood. The post-1941 political developments such as the Woyane, Gojjam, and Bale uprisings, the 1960 “Palace Coup” and the ESM partly fetched their attributes of the central dissension from the Italian anti-Shoa (Amhara) policy and condescension to the monarch⁸ (see Gebru, 1984; Tewodros, 2013).

5.4. The Ethiopian Student Movement and the Proliferation of Political Organizations

“Nations” ostensibly received a wider political currency coterminous with the radicalization of the ESM and the proliferation of ethno-nationalist fronts. The anti-colonial struggle, the influence of Marxism as liberation ideology, worldwide student revolutionary movements, the 1960 abortive coup, government repression and others were deemed as the underlining factors in the radicalization of the ESM (Andargachew, 1993; Messay, 2008; Bahru, 2014). The paradigm shift from internationalism and waging a working class revolution to the national questions dramatically changed the face of the political dispensation. Bahru (2014) accounted that the break-up of the multi-national group in 1976 heralded the onset of the ethno-national movements.

Wallelign (1969) raised the notorious subject of “ethnicity” to the forefront of the ESM.⁹ Three decades earlier, Prochazka (1936) remarked ethnic contradiction as the problem of Ethiopia and sympathized how different ethnic groups live under the yoke of Amhara rule. Ethno-nationalist movements of the 1970s characterized Ethiopia as a multi-nation state in the eclipse of Amhara-Tigray culture dominance. Thence, the EPRDF and its allies later construed the pre-1990s Ethiopia as “the prison of nationalities”.

In contrast, Tumtu (1971: 6-7) with similar stance asserted, it is logically inconsistent to accept the presence of, for example, the “Oromo nation” in the absence of capitalism. This conception is not without any defect. The mere assumption of economic factors to justify the rise of nations oversimplifies the discursive, cultural and political elements. From a different perspective, Yates (2016) also doubts the purpose of employing “a static ethnic lens” to decipher the Ethiopian reali-

ty as it “distorts” and “suppresses” shared historic experiences at the local level.

The ethno-nationalist movements such as TPLF, OLF and others claimed the unqualified rights of self-determination, including secession (Asnake, 2013). To achieve this objective, a rural-based armed insurrection has been considered as a viable option. However, the armed struggle resort of, for instance, EPLF, TPLF, OLF, EPRP and others further complicated and politicized the “nationalities question”. First, their nomenclature presupposes the acknowledgment of a substantive reality of a “nation” to represent as vanguard. Second, it steered the invention of discourses of hatred, sentiment of oppression, and enmity as a tool to mobilize their ethno-national groups. The invention of ethno-nations has been instigated in the period of the insurgency. As Gellner (2008: 139) rightly put it, “nationalism invents nations where they do not exist.”

In the post-1991 Ethiopia, two crucial developments could be underscored in terms of the rise of ethnic sentiments. First, the restructuring of the state in line with ethno-linguistic terms formally endorsed NNPs as substantial collectivities and fostered the proliferation of ethnic-based political organizations. This has not always been true to all NNPs. Second, the misleading assumption of “primordial” elements in the rise of ethno-national movements oversimplifies the problem since the ethno-national movements are after “fair share or for full control of state power” and to ensure “right of self-determination” (Aregawi, 2008: 19). This fostered an ethnic solidarity emanated to challenge the alleged domination of TPLF. The OroMara (short for Oromo and Amhara) moment (2016-2019) could be cited as a recent collaboration of OPDO and ANDM that ousted the TPLF from its hegemonic position.

5.5. Discursive Formations of ethno-nations in Ethiopia

Identity is a fluid concept. Ethnic or national identities are too complex to comprehend as “category of analysis”. A continued application of these words as category of analysis, in contrast, fosters their reification (Burbaker & Cooper, 2000). It is indeed the banal flagging of ethnic, nation, and race (sometimes) categorization in the Ethiopian Studies that zoomed in singular than shared identities in the current Ethiopia. The Oriental Semitics in particular unduly emphasises on the “Semitic versus others” divide and has engendered the putative existence of nations or races in Ethiopia.

Given the complexity of historical interpretations and contested memory politics, attributing the rise of ethno-nations in Ethiopia to one historical event cannot do sufficient justice. This paper, therefore, argues the rise of ethno-nations as political actors in Ethiopia is, ipso facto, “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1977). As discussed in the previous sections, ethno-nations are categorically accepted without exclusively drawing lines between “us” and “them”, for instance, of “Amhara” versus “Oromo” excepting the language and homeland (in the post 1991) identifier. Political questions summed up the center of the problem though it is supposedly disguised in a cultural or economic question.

This line of argument does not reject ethno-nations as fictions or accept otherwise. It does not undermine the manifold political economy and socio-cultural features in the construction of ethno-national groups. However, contested interpretation of history as a strategy to fit a certain political project and the persistent discursive practices to reify ethno-nations could explain the quintessence in the rise of ethno-nations as enormous/defining political actors. The manifold discursive trajectories of Semitic-Cushitic dichotomy, Amhara versus Others discourse, Abyssinian Imperialism, and the prominence of the national oppression thesis in the post-1991 Ethiopia contributed in the invention of ethno-nations. The Italian colonial policy of dividing Ethiopia along ethnic or tribal lines became an official at-

tempt that conferred ethno-linguistic identities a homeland of their own and political currency (see Sbacchi, 1985). Indeed, travelers' accounts of the 17th, 18th and 19th century on Ethiopia recorded the diverse people's common names from their own perspectives. The discursive projection what later came to be ethno-nations then sprung from the idea of "museum of peoples" and the need for "self-determination" (Prochaska, 1936).

ESM radical activism of the late 1960s further revitalized the "nationalities question" through amplifying the question in writings and public protests. Against all paradoxes, the students' presumption of "feudalism" or capitalism without a proper industrial revolution, hitherto independent nations forced to move together under the Abyssinian Empire, the Students activism and the ethno-nationalist movements instituted a hegemonic "discursive rule" that defines the enigma of Ethiopian polity as "national contradiction". Resonance of ethno-national identities vis-à-vis the politics of contention as mobilizing strategy throughout the 2nd half of the 20th century had consummated their discursive construction. Apart from the students and their paraphalina, Derg inherited students' question and as President Mengistu regrettably said in his last address, "In terms of nationalities and language, in the years of the revolution perhaps for the sake of equality and democracy, I think we have all overreacted and misled our people."

The constitution of "negative ethnicity" (WaWamwere, 2003) as a major organizing factor in the post-1991 Ethiopia further gives the realization of ethno-nations with conterminous homelands. The institutionalization of "the national oppression thesis"— the Amhara being officially the villain of NNPs, inter alia could be an epitome of negative ethnicity. As in Yugoslavia, Ethiopia in the TPLF/EPRDF erawas embraced less as an end in itself than in principle as a means of satisfying its several ethno-nations' aspirations for self-determination. However, in praxis a minority tyranny of TPLF reigned with the help of surrogate satellite parties that instrumentalized ethnic identities as a wild card to prolong and assure its grip into power with all costs.

Discursive fields of public holidays such as NNPs Day, Flag Day and Adwa Victory capitalize on celebrating differences than commonalities. The role of the state-owned media, since the early days of the transition, in instigating and crystallizing the essential ethnic identities is profound. The political discourses of the 1960s and 70's ESM and the ethno-nationalist movements reinforced the re-making of the Ethiopian polity in the post-1991 based on Stalinist principles of common descent, language, territory, and common psychology capitalizing on ethnic self-determination.

The recent addition of Amhara nationalism into the Ethiopian body politic then as Tezera (2021) argues by drawing a Foucauldian presumption "reverse discourse" as a "strikes back" to the hegemonic anti-Amhara discourses. It is, therefore, the argument of this paper that various ethno-national groups are in essence the byproducts of the hegemonic discourse of "Amhara domination" through revitalizing peculiar cultural anecdotes, "glorious past, degraded present and utopian future" (Levinger et al, 2001:186).

Conclusion

Ethnic politics will remain a puzzle to deal with for years to come in Ethiopia. Today ethno-national groups have crystalized as the major constitutes of political dispensation along with a contested imagined boundary. At the heart of the problem lies interpreting history as it fit to the ethnic project. The elite ethno-national consciousness appears to be engendered into a mass phenomenon.

Altering the discursive rule and deconstructing the hegemonic “national oppression thesis”, *defacto* since the 1960s and *dejure* since 1991, needs “inventing tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983) that unifies Ethiopians. History will serve as a foundation to discover the authentic elements of Ethiopianness by taking off the ethnic lens. As Yates (2016: 125) remarked, “in Ethiopia, identities are fluid, conflict transcends ethnicity, and Ethiopia possesses a syncretic culture”. However, further studies should be undertaken to understand the socio-historical and cultural features of ethno-nationals’ groups in Ethiopia. Filling this void would greatly help to get a clearer picture of ethnic identity formations.

Notes

¹ These theories are generic encompassing various interpretations or conceptualizations of nation.

² See, FDRE 1995 Constitution, Article 39

³ The Semitic thesis emanated from disbelief that black peoples are incapable of great achievements or advance civilization. Hence, the Aksumite civilization is a Semitic speaker who crossed from South Arabia.

⁴ Levin (2000) assertion had laid a precedent for the later “fire and hay” symbolization of the Amhara and Oromo in the post-1991 Ethiopia.

⁵ It is worth to mention, the students and the political organizations had endorsed Said Barre’s Ethiopian invasion in 1976.

⁶ The recent December 30, 2011 OLF program has altered the secessionist clause.

⁷ Ethiopian settler colonialism was practiced through five institutions: slavery, the *nafixanya-gabbar* system (semi-slavery), garrison cities, an Oromo collaborative class, and the colonial landholding system (Asafa, 2001).

⁸ Protest slogans “Lion of Judah to the zoo!”

⁹ Walleign’s assertion perfectly fits with the Prochazka’s (1936) Abyssinia: the powder barrel.

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