EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATES AND IDEOLOGICAL FAULT-LINES IN ETHIOPIA

PRF THINK PEACE
APRIL 2023
Dereje Feyissa

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATES AND IDEOLOGICAL FAULT-LINES IN ETHIOPIA

PRF THINK PEACE

APRIL 2023

Dereje Feyissa

Rift Valley Institute

MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

Peace Research Facility

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATES AND IDEOLOGICAL FAULT-LINES IN ETHIOPIA

THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

THE AUTHOR

Dereje Feyissa is an adjust associate professor of Social Anthropology at Addis Ababa University, research and policy advisor to the Life and Peace Institute and a consultant research advisor with the Peace Research Facility.

COVER DESIGN: Maggie Dougherty

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Addis Ababa University
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
CH	Counter Histories
CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy
CSU	Civil Service University
EDR	Education Development Roadmap
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
GT	Great Tradition
ICES	International Conference of Ethiopian Studies
ICG	International Crisis Group
IES	Institute of Ethiopian Studies
ISEN	Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities
NAMA	National Movement for the Amhara
OFC	Oromo Federalist Congress
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
PP	Prosperity Party
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Social science knowledge production in Ethiopia, as elsewhere in Africa, has Eurocentric roots. This is because Ethiopian Studies was born outside of Ethiopia, with the first generation of scholars consisting mainly of academics from Western countries or Ethiopians educated in Eurocentric traditions.

- The Eurocentrism that arose from these early scholarly endeavours distorted—and continues to distort—how Ethiopians relate to each other, including in the political sphere. In particular, it has contributed to a domestic hierarchy in knowledge production, with greater focus placed on societies in the northern highlands where the Ethiopian state originated.

- Described as the so-called 'Great Tradition' (GT), the epistemological approach promoted by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church depicts Ethiopia as being a cradle of ancient civilisation, having a longstanding sense of nationhood arising from sacred narratives, and being the only African country that defied colonialism. In doing so, the GT at best ignored those who belonged to Ethiopian society outside the northern highlands, and at worst depicted them in a light reminiscent of the colonial discourse of 'people with history' and those 'without history'. Originally Eurocentric, the GT was utilized in the nation-building project implemented under imperial rule and, to varying extents, subsequent regimes.

- The hegemonic GT ultimately begot its nemesis, the 'Counter Histories' (CHs) advanced by ethno-nationalist movements. The CHs vehemently rejected Ethiopian Studies as disproportionally focused on the Semitic languages, Orthodox Christianity and state formation in the northern highlands. Paradoxically, however, the same Eurocentrism that generated the GT contributed to the emergence of the CHs, with socialist ideas applied to the Ethiopian context.

- These rival traditions have informed and/or been deployed by the four regimes that have governed Ethiopia in its recent history, from imperial rule through to the Derg and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) right up to the current Prosperity Party (PP). Moreover, the fierce political arguments currently being waged for or against an ethno-federal political order have their roots in these epistemological debates—while most Ethiopian nationalists invoke the GT, ethnonationalists invoke the CHs. Thus, a full understanding of Ethiopia's recent and current polity is only possible if the impacts of the two traditions and their contestations is taken into account.

- The two epistemic traditions are mutually constituted. The more the GT glorified Ethiopia's past, the stronger the CHs reacted. Both are also deeply implicated in and partly derived from political struggles. While the imperial government promoted the GT and the Derg selectively appropriated it, the EPRDF represented an epistemic rupture, presenting the CHs as aligned with its pluralistic reconfiguration of Ethiopia's unitarist state. The epistemic commitments of all these governments were, however, watered down by pragmatic considerations, as seen in their shifting positions along the GT–CHs continuum.

- Most recently, the epistemic ambiguity perpetuated—likely deliberately—by the PP has created an arena in which the two traditions are in competition, with the ultimate outcome uncertain. Initially, Prime Minister Abiy enthusiastically embraced the GT as he sought to build a new political legitimacy and party from the ashes of the EPRDF. More recently, however, the new political context engendered by the peace process between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, as well as strong push-back by Amhara political forces locked in territorial dispute with Tigray regional state, has led Abiy to lean more towards the CHs.

- While both epistemic traditions have advanced exclusive claims, leading them to lock horns, there are internal variations in both positions that offer the possibility of common ground. Within the Ethiopianist camp there is a growing consensus around federalism, while the current focus among ethnonationalists is the accommodation of ethnic interests within an Ethiopian national framework, however this could morph into a violent contest over who should pull the strings in Addis Ababa.

- It is expected that a major talking point in the upcoming national dialogue process will be the contested historical memories that inform major political fault-lines, as well as the question of how to generate a national consensus. This could provide an opportunity for the rival epistemic traditions to come together, negotiate and build a common platform.

INTRODUCTION

Social science knowledge production in Ethiopia, as elsewhere in Africa, has Eurocentric roots. This is because Ethiopian Studies was born outside of Ethiopia, with the first generation of scholars consisting mainly of academics from Western countries or Ethiopians educated in Eurocentric traditions. The knowledge they produced centred around Ethiopian exceptionalism, which was used to draw a distinction between the Ethiopian historical experience and that of the rest of the continent, especially sub-Saharan Africa. Beyond a fascination with the historical longevity of statehood in Ethiopia, including its ancient civilization and indigenous literacy, the concept was strategically deployed to excuse the European colonial defeat by a 'black' nation. This entailed a partial 'whitening' of Ethiopians, evident in use of the term 'black Caucasians'. Such an approach cut Ethiopia off from the scholarship elsewhere on the continent, which ironically looked to the country as a symbol of African pride and source of inspiration for Pan-Africanism.

The Eurocentrism that arose from these early scholarly endeavours distorted—and continues to distort—how Ethiopians relate to each other, including in the political sphere. In particular, it has contributed to a domestic hierarchy in knowledge production, with greater focus placed on societies in the northern highlands where the Ethiopian state originated. These regions are mainly inhabited by the Tigrayans and Amharas—both predominantly followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Described as the so-called 'Great Tradition' (GT), the approach promoted by the Orthodox Church at best ignored those who belonged to the rest of Ethiopian society, and at worst depicted them in a negative light reminiscent of the colonial discourse of 'people with history' and those 'without history'.

Originally Eurocentric, the GT was utilized in the nation-building project implemented under imperial rule and then, to an extent, by the Derg. The inequality in knowledge production and the politics of representation arising from the GT provoked discontent, leading to 'Counter Histories' (CHs) advanced by ethno-nationalist movements. Paradoxically, the same Eurocentrism that generated the GT contributed to the emergence of the CHs, midwifed by the Marxism of the Ethiopian student movement and its application of socialist ideas and frames of thought to the Ethiopian context. This is most clearly expressed in the fact that the primary social question in Ethiopia was framed as 'the question of nationalities'. While the GT places the stress on glory and national pride, the CHs spotlight the painful experiences of those relegated to the periphery during Ethiopia's state formation.

As this report will demonstrate, a full understanding of Ethiopia's recent and current polity is only possible if the impacts of the GT, the CHs and their contestations is taken into account. With this in mind, section 2 details past and current epistemological debates in Ethiopian

Studies, including the initial predominance of the GT and the later rise of the CHs. Section 3 then charts how the two epistemic traditions have informed and been utilized by, respectively, the monarchy, the military (Derg) regime, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s ethnic federalism, and the current Prosperity Party (PP). Finally, section 4 offers conclusions on how the GT and CHs are mutually constituted, and whether there is any prospect of the rival traditions coming together to build a common platform.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATES IN ETHIOPIAN STUDIES

The roots of Ethiopia's education system

The first epistemological challenge confronting the study of social sciences in Ethiopia was rooted in how the education system was designed and implemented in the 1950s. When Haile Selassie University (present day Addis Ababa University - AAU) was established, most of the teachers were foreigners, and more importantly the curriculum did not draw from indigenous knowledge and knowledge production systems. While the need to 'Ethiopianize' the higher education system was recognized early on, this was implemented through the Ethiopianization of the academic community rather than the curriculum itself, something Paulos Milkeas and Messay Kebede attribute to the appeal of non-Ethiopian theoretical systems (principally Marxism).[1] Such an extroverted academic system, pursued at the expense of local knowledge systems, was regarded by Ethiopian intellectuals as the best way to make sense of their own realities and improve the welfare of the masses. Thus, rather than centre on indigenous knowledge, the education system was designed to borrow from 'outside'. According to Yirga Gelaw, this led to a form of 'Native Colonialism', the process whereby a country colonises itself with foreign institutions and ideals.[2] The root problem is much broader, however, and relates to the terms of modernism, the achievement of which has been the overriding goal of the past four regimes.

The genesis of a more organized Ethiopian Studies goes back to 1959, when the first International Conference on Ethiopian Studies (ICES) was held in Rome. The second international conference was held in Manchester in 1963, the same year the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) was established at AAU. Ethiopia itself hosted the third conference in 1966, with greater Ethiopian participation. Following this, inter-generational tensions in knowledge production surfaced in the form of two competing conferences held in 1972. First in Rome, and then in Michigan, with

---

1   Paulos Milkias and Messay Kebede, *Education, Politics and Social Change in Ethiopia*, Tsehai Publisher, 2010.

2   Yirga Gelaw, Native Colonialism: *Education and the Economy of Violence Against Traditions in Ethiopia*, Red Sea Press, 2016.

the former representing the older generation focusing on history and languages, and the latter a group of younger academics turning their attention to social sciences and current issues.[3] ICES was held alternately abroad and in Ethiopia every two years until 2018, when it was announced at the 20th ICES conference in Mekelle that the following two conferences should also be held in Ethiopia with a greater emphasis on national ownership and experience-sharing among Ethiopian universities. Unfortunately, this model failed to get off the ground as many members of the Mekelle organizational committee were unable to attend the 21st ICES conference hosted by Addis Ababa University, or refused to do so, given the war in Tigray.

The impacts of Eurocentrism

One of the epistemological debates on Ethiopian Studies is the issue of Eurocentrism: most social science knowledge produced about Ethiopia comes from Europeans (and scholars from the Global North more broadly) using thought categories transposed from abroad, or Ethiopians trained in the Eurocentric manner who unquestioningly utilize the same tools/categories. More generally, much of the knowledge on Africa has been produced outside the continent using methods rooted in colonial discourse. This includes Ethiopian historiographers who wrote from abroad, although many of these histories were state-sanctioned within the country. Thus, somewhat ironically in light of the fact that Ethiopia was the only one African country to escape European colonialism, its history has largely been written about from beyond its borders.

One might assume—at least in terms of Ethiopia-based Ethiopian Studies—that Ethiopia's languages would be at the centre of scholarship produced about the country. In reality, this is far from the case. Contemporary structural realities play a part in this, including the push for high impact factor publishing at Ethiopian universities, all of which is in English. Given the perceived need for greater incorporation into global academic structures, calls for vernacular knowledge production are unlikely to be met in the near future.

Even so, the Eurocentric foundations of Ethiopian Studies is becoming increasingly contested, as a panel dedicated to 'Rethinking Ethiopian Studies' at the 2018 ICES in Mekelle demonstrated:

> For far too long, Ethiopian Studies as an academic field of study has been an exclusive preserve of the west. This often meant that Ethiopians themselves had little say on knowledge and knowledge production about Ethiopia and Ethiopians, both in the humanities and social sciences. This panel seeks to explore and critically assess the implications and epistemological ramifications of this trend, i.e., western (mainly European) dominated intellectual representation of Ethiopia.

Similar sentiments were on display in a debate that featured in the *Addis Standard* the previous year:

> Using European ideals and languages changes the basic way of how we understand

---

3   Baye Yimam, 'Five Decades of Ethiopian Studies', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 42/1–2 (June–December 2009): v–i.

ourselves; almost always, it forces us to accept that we are trying to be like Europe. It is why it may be necessary to also create room for Ethiopian, or other African ways of describing, labelling, and categorizing ideas.[4]

At the very least, this represents a call for Ethiopians to be given space to present research in local languages. There has been some progress in this respect, with ICES now including some publications in non-English languages in its proceedings including in Amharic.[5] Critics of Eurocentrism in Ethiopia also highlight the politics of historical representation, with the portrayal of the Axumite civilization being one example. This relates to the so-called 'Caucasian thesis', according to which all world civilisations can be traced to the Caucasian 'race' from which white people are descended. In the case of the great Axumite civilization, it was attributed to Semitic immigrants from South Arabia:

> Foreign scholars have stated boldly that indigenous Ethiopians were invaded by Arabians. This narrative is singularly the most Euro-centrist way of studying Ethiopia. A land of black Africans who have achieved equal, if not greater, in their history stands to shake the core belief that white-Europe is the epitome of human civilization. Representing discomfort at all cost, (northern) Ethiopians are thus presented as not entirely black, with Arab features, and not appearing 'African enough'. The silver lining of this is, 'they must have been foreign to Africa. They could not have achieved this without foreigners helping them'.[6]

Much of the discourse of Ethiopian exceptionalism, which has done harm at various levels, has been blamed on Eurocentric undercurrents such as these. Domestically, this can be seen in differentiated citizenship, with some cultures apparently more equal than others when viewed through the lens of the GT. This Eurocentric viewpoint was internalized by imperial elites and deployed as a racial 'philosophy' to subjugate people outside of northern Ethiopia. Moreover, Eurocentrism undermined the growth of Pan-Africanism, with the discourse implying that Ethiopia was only part of the continent by geographical accident, in effect insulated from Africa's wider processes and dynamics. Thus, as Teshale Tibebu notes, 'Western scholarship saw Ethiopia as outlandish to Africa. Like ancient Egypt, Ethiopia was systematically de-Africanised in the annals of Western high culture'.[7] All this notwithstanding, Ethiopia's colonial defiance

---

4   Hewan Semon, 'Opinion: Decolonizing Ethiopian Studies', *Addis Standard*, 30 November 2017. https://addisstandard.com/opinion-decolonizing-ethiopian-studies-2/.

5   Binyam Sisay and Moges Yigezu, 'Restoring African studies to its linguistic identity: reflections on Ethiopian studies, *Social Dynamics* 40/2 (2014): 289–307.

6   Semon, 'Decolonizing Ethiopian Studies'.

7   Teshale Tibebu, 'Ethiopia: The "Anomaly" and "Paradox" of Africa', *Journal of Black Studies* 26/4 (1996): 414–30.

serving as inspiration for Pan-Africanism and in the Caribbeans.[8]

The irony here is that most Ethiopian scholars who are otherwise critical of the Eurocentric foundations of Ethiopian Studies remain oblivious to similar criticism levelled at the GT by the CHs. The basic tenets of Ethiopian Studies are rooted in the GT, with its emphasis on Ethiopia being a cradle of ancient civilisation (including having its own language/script); having a longstanding, robust sense of nationhood arising from sacred narratives; and being the only African country that defied colonialism. This perspective has as many critics as it has admirers, with recent years seeing a shift towards research and publications focused on multi-culturalism and indigenous studies. Nevertheless, despite the façade of representing local realities, the CHs are also strongly Eurocentric.

The rise of the Counter Histories

The terms of the debate between the two traditions of knowledge have exposed the layered nature of coloniality in Ethiopian Studies. The hegemonic GT begot its nemesis, the CHs, which vehemently rejected Ethiopian Studies as disproportionally focused on the Semitic languages, Orthodox Christianity and state formation in the northern highlands (Abyssinia). This, according to the CHs, was at the expense of varied communities in other parts of Ethiopia who have their own sociocultural achievements and dynamic forms of interaction. As noted by an Ethiopian critic of ethnocentric studies, although European imperialism was crucial to the emergence of the social sciences in the Western world and its colonial discourses:

> Ethiopian imperialism *cum* nationalism was equally decisive in the formation of Ethiopian Studies under the aegis of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. Seen from the point of view of the peripheral subjects of the Ethiopian state, the Ethiopian epistemology institutionalized by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies has historically been exclusionary. Consequently, the institutional practices and preferences of this Institution or the field of study it has sponsored since the middle of the 20th century found wanting on grounds other than Eurocentrism.[9]

Various competing sub-national studies proliferated under the CHs rubric, starting with Eritrean Studies, followed by Somali and, more vigorously, Oromo Studies. Most recently, an incipient form of 'Tigrayan Studies' is emerging in the context of the war in Tigray and weakened social cohesion between Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia. As far as can be gauged from social media, corroborated by public opinion analysis, many Tigrayans do not currently identify with Ethiopia

---

8   See for instance Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America*, London: Verso, 2020.

9   Hailegebriel G. Feyissa. 'Opinion: On decolonizing Ethiopian studies: Methodological nationalism as bad as Eurocentrism', *Addis Standard*, 4 December 2017. https://addisstandard.com/opinion-on-decolonizing-ethiopian-studies-methodological-nationalism-as-bad-as-eurocentrism/.

(although the potential exists for ties to be re-established).[10] There are already two associations promoting the launch of Tigrayan Studies, both established in the US: the Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals and the Center for the Advancement of Tigrayan Studies. Tigrayan scholars are currently engaged in historical revisionism, partly reflecting what Donald Levine (1974) calls the historic 'sibling rivalry' with their Amhara counterparts, as well as their increasing disillusionment with the Ethiopian polity, viewed as the preserve of the highland elites that have dominated Ethiopia since the 1990s.

Ethno-nationalist political organizations have been at the forefront of deconstructing the GT and the form of Ethiopian Studies attached to it. This has included setting up sub-national counter-studies—an approach pioneered by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which ultimately led to Eritrean Studies being established well before Eritrea became an independent state in 1991. As noted in the EPLF's political programme, 'Ethiopian feudalists and rulers fabricated a legendary history of three thousand years in order to realize their expansionist ambitions'.[11] Like Ethiopian Studies, Eritrean Studies represents an outgrowth of Eritrean nationalism.

Here, Ried points out that the historical relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia has been problematic partly because of the contrasting traditions of knowledge connected to the two 'studies', with the analysis put forward often polemical and polarized: 'The region's pre-colonial history has been 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"'.[12] It is little wonder, then, that Eritrean Studies focuses on boundary making, going as far as calling Tigrayans in Eritrea *Tigrigna*, or people of the *Kebesa*, in contrast to labelling Tigrayans in Ethiopia *Tigre*. This is further reinforced by Ethiopian Tigrayans newfound perception of themselves as *Tegaru*.

Similarly, Oromo political organizations have been at the forefront of deconstructing the GT. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), for instance, is very hostile to the GT, which it derides as a colonial knowledge construct:

> At no time before the conquest by Menelik was the present-day Ethiopia a single country. What existed were independent polities.... The official Ethiopian history that... presents Menelik's era as 'the unification of Ethiopia' is a fabrication, pure and simple. As in the rest of colonial Africa, the Oromo and other southern peoples were subjugated, their

10   Asmelash Yohannes Teklu, 'Because of the war, many Tigrayans no longer identify with Ethiopia', *Ethiopia Insight*, 16 January 2023. www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/01/16/because-of-the-war-many-tigrayans-no-longer-identify-with-ethiopia/.

11   Quoted in Okbazghi Yohannes, 'The Eritrean Question: A Colonial Case?', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 25/4 (1987): 644.

12   Richard Reid, 'The Trans-Mereb Experience: Perceptions of the Historical Relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1/2 (2007): 237.

peace, their cultural identities and human dignity deprived.[13]

This strand of thought ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Oromo Studies Association in North America, which has produced an immense body of knowledge that runs counter to that produced by Ethiopian Studies under the GT framework. Oromo Studies strongly rejected the official Ethiopian 'imperial' historiography, which systematically portrayed the Oromo population as radical enemies of the empire. The historical frame of reference for this Oromo-centred CH is the Oromo people's dramatic territorial and cultural expansion into much of Ethiopia since the sixteenth century. Depicted as threatening 'others' in the GT — in opposition to the 'civilized' Christian Habesha — the Oromo, though historically not substantiated, were identified with Madagascar as their place of origin and their dramatic expansion within Ethiopia was often associated with a kind of 'divine punishment' for the wrongs the Habesha did to God.[14]

Oromo Studies has sought to renegotiate this image by inverting one of the Habesha origin myths linking them with Arabia as migrants to Ethiopia. This historical contestation is playing out in the current political struggle between Oromo and Amhara political forces in post-EPRDF Ethiopia, with the debate centred on which historical frame of reference should be invoked to back up claims of political entitlement. While the Oromo invoke the late nineteenth-century territorial expansions of (Amhara ruler) Emperor Menelik and the 'Yemeni connection' of the Habesha thousands of years ago, the Amhara invoke the sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Oromo expansion, presenting them as 'intruders' to the Amhara–Tigray-built Ethiopian polity. This is playing out in the fierce contestation and conflicting historical narratives underpinning claims of political ownership over Addis Ababa, which the Oromo call Finfine and the Amharas Berera. Oromo Studies also emphasizes the Oromos' traditional form of governance—the *Gada* system—which is hailed for its republican and democratic features, in contrast to the more hierarchical and imperial Habesha kingdoms.

The CHs have flourished particularly since the implementation of ethnic federalism in 1991, the political edifice of which is built around the 'national oppression thesis' and 'self-determination of nations and nationalities'. Although the GT's epistemic hegemony began to slip in the wake of the 1960s Ethiopian student movement, and has been further challenged since 1991, it has proved remarkably resilient, being revived in political discourse and practice amid the resurgence of Ethiopian nationalism since 1998 in the context of the protracted war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and political reform since 2018. The advent of Amhara nationalism in particular provided the GT with a new lease of political life, as expressed by organizations such as the National Movement for the Amhara (NAMA). The mixed signals given out by the Abiy Ahmed administration regarding the GT has further complicated the terms of the epistemic contestation, with a governing ideology yet to emerge.

13   Quoted in Sara Marzagora, 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia: The "Great Tradition" and the counter histories of national failure', *Journal of African History* 58/3: 425–44.

14   See Marzagora, 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia'.

In many ways, the CHs are as problematic as the GT, with Sara Marzagora noting: 'Historians who promoted the national oppression thesis and the colonial thesis tended to legitimise their political claims using the same tools employed by the GT: antiquity, unity, and authenticity'.[15] Advancing a similar argument, Alexander Truilizi observes that in the case of Oromo Studies, its historiography employed an 'upside-down version of the old paradigm of exclusion' and presented 'new images of racialized differences and essentialized traits in the region'. Moreover, the new Oromo identity was constructed through 'moral ethnicity which tended to isolate each community within its own cultural and linguistic bounds'.[16]

This example illustrates how counter-hegemonic projects inadvertently reproduce structures which they seek to change, as they rarely propose a paradigm shift but continue to enact hegemonic ideas. As expected, the polemic debate between the GT and the CH has not led to a new synthesis. The following section discusses the links between these mutually exclusive traditions of knowledge and the ideological stances of the Ethiopia's political regimes since (and including) imperial rule.

15   See Marzagora, 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia', 16.

16   Alexander Triulzi, 'Battling with the past: new frameworks for Ethiopian historiography', in *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, eds. Wendy James et al., Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND TRADITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE: THE GT–CHS CONTINUUM

Ethiopia has seen four different political regimes in its recent history: the monarchy, the military (Derg) regime, the EPRDF's ethnic federalism, and the current political reform under the Prosperity Party (PP). Although all operate(d) along a continuum in the traditions of knowledge—with the GT at one end the CHs at the other—they predominantly subscribe(d) to one or the other of the two extremes (with perhaps the exception of the PP).

The GT provided an academic justification for imperial rule, as mentioned in the previous section. The Derg, influenced by the revolutionary fervour of the time, initially drew on the CHs, only for their commitment to waver towards the GT in the context of myriad wars and the nationalist sentiment they engendered. The EPRDF in turn rejected the GT and enthusiastically embraced the CHs, at least in the first decade of its rule, as evidenced by the institutional design of the Ethiopian federation—variously called ethnic/multinational federalism. Like its predecessor the Derg, however, the EPRDF ended up tapping into the GT in the context of war (in this case, the Ethio–Eritrean war), as well as the regime's developmental state project. Rising from the ashes of the EPRDF, the PP has displayed intentional ambiguity, enabling an elastic populism that appeals to various sections of society. Initially, Prime Minister Abiy leaned more towards the GT and its associated Pan-Ethiopianism. This was reflective of both Abiy's search for a new basis of political legitimacy, and his attempt to moderate antagonisms by striking a balance between Pan-Ethiopian and ethnic identity/nationalism.[17] As events leading up to the June 2021 election attest, however, he has also increasingly embraced the CHs as a means of reaffirming the PP's commitment to a multinational federation. Below, the report elaborates on where the various political regimes stood/stand on the GT–CHs continuum.

The imperial regime: firmly rooted in the GT

Prior to Haile Selassie's reign, imperial rule was firmly grounded in the GT and the ethnic stratification associated with it.

The 'pioneers of change'—members of the first intelligentsia of the early 20th century—further refined the GT. While acknowledging his great contributions to economic development theory and governance more broadly, Messay, for instance, criticized even the most celebrated of these pioneers, Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, as follows: "Various passages of Baykedagn's [books]

---

allude to the superiority of northerners [...] this way of ranking peoples is a by-product of the internalization of Eurocentrism. Not only is the disparity between the Amhara and the Oromo greatly exaggerated, but also the use of the evolutionary scheme of Eurocentrism led Baykedagn into placing the Oromo at a lower level of social evolution with regard to the Amhara (2006:828)."[18]

Thus, the traditional Ethiopian education system's ethnocentric orientation and content was agreed under the auspices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which supplied the national symbols and sacred narratives required by the monarchy for its political legitimacy. Amharic was the only medium of instruction used in lower grades, with English used in high schools. The education system propagated 'higher culture'—the Semitic, Orthodox Christian values of northern Ethiopia—leaving little room for Ethiopia's other cultures and religions.[19] Of particular note in this regard is the regime's sponsoring of research on Ethiopia's history,[20] with the intention of forging a shared narrative on Ethiopia's past. This was part of the wider nation-state project, which involved political centralization and cultural homogenization. As such, no other regime before or since has invested as much in the study of Ethiopian history.

Emperor Haile Selassie sought to modernize the education system, with the higher education institutions established in the 1950s intended to meet the increasingly cumbersome challenge of staffing the bureaucracy with young, academically trained Ethiopians. This objective required the gradual replacement of church-educated civil servants with those educated in public 'secular' institutions, both in Ethiopia and abroad. The building of state institutions, including the army, was therefore centred on expanding modern education and training bureaucratic elites.

Haile Selassie's government launched a range of interventions to promote education, with the emperor himself becoming Minister for Education. Moreover, having established AAU (Haile Selassie I University at the time) in 1950, the emperor handed over Genete Leul Palace to serve as its main campus and appointed himself the university's chancellor. Haile Selassie paid particular attention to the study of Ethiopian history and cultures, paying regular visits to the IES—established in 1963—and supporting its work.[21] The IES opened a gateway to a Eurocentric/colonial model of education, with Haile Selassie's education policy criticized for its very modernist outlook. As Messay notes, 'the education system may have caused cultural cracks into which radical ideas, which were then in vogue, were injected'.[22]

---

18   Messay Kebede. 'Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, Eurocentrism, and the Decentering of Ethiopia'. Journal of Black Studies, Vol.36, No.6, July 2006, PP.815-832.

19   Daniel Alemu and Abebayehu Tekleselassie (2006). Instructional language Policy in Ethiopia: Motivated by politics or the Educational Needs of children? Planning and Changing. 37(3 &4), 151–168.

20   Shiferaw Bekele, speech at expert workshop organized by Andimta, Addis Ababa, 17 December 2021.

21   Remarks made by the second Ethiopian president of the university, Dr Aklilu Habte, Addis Ababa, 28 January 2022.

22   Messay Kebede. 2006. The Roots and Fallouts of Haile Selassie' s Educational Policy, p. 3 (2006:3).

The education sector, as well as the graduates it produced, were seen by Haile Selassie's government as crucial to the country's centralization and modernization. This drive was both a reflection of the anguish and shame inflicted by Italy's second invasion, and motivated by recognition of Ethiopia's poverty and backwardness, even when compared to the newly independent African states. Moreover, the education sector was regarded as a key instrument in the nation-building project of the time.[23]

The rise of the student movement was driven primarily by issues of justice and equality concerning 'land to the tiller' and the 'nationalities question': key social challenges underpinning the CHs of the 1960s. This was articulated by Waleleign Mekonen, a prominent student leader, in a 1969 article entitled 'On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia', which not only heralded the advent of the CHs, but provided their epistemological foundation. Walelign wrote 'the main purpose of this article is to provoke discussions on the "sacred", yet very important issue of this country—the Question of Nationalities'. The article goes on to ask:

> What are the Ethiopian peoples composed of? I stress on the word peoples because sociologically speaking, at this stage, Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? ... Then, may I conclude that, in Ethiopia, there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigrai Nation, the Amhara Nation [etc.] ...There is, of course, the fake Ethiopian Nationalism advanced by the ruling class, and unwillingly accepted and even propagated by innocent fellow travellers.[24]

This radical deconstruction of Ethiopia's GT and its sacred basis was made intelligible through a Marxist framing especially in the Leninist and Stalinist form. The importance of the Ethiopian student movement lies in, as claimed by Walelign, 'provoking a discussion'. Ever since Walelign's influential article, Ethiopian politics has been dominated by the question of nationalities, with political actors lining up on either side of the divide.[25] In effect, the students were attempting to dismantle the imperial mode of governance, which was viewed as a betrayal of the emperor's role as patron of education. It was not the students or the clandestine political associations/parties they formed that ultimately toppled the imperial government, however. Instead, the army seized power following the 1974 revolution.

23   *Bahru Zewde.* 2002. A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991.

24   Walelign Mekonen, 'On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia', *Struggle*, 17 November 1969.

25   This, though, was more down to instrumental use of the term for practical reasons than normative commitment. As former senior TPLF leader Mulugeta Gebrehiwot argues, the TPLF could not organise Tigrean peasants on a class basis, so ethnicity/ethnonationalism was deployed for tactical reasons. See Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, *Laying the Past to Rest: The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-Building*, London: Hurst & Co., 2020.

The Derg regime: scientific socialism and modified GT

Although the Derg implemented Marxist and socialist-informed reforms in various socio-economic arenas, and despite the political alliance it formed with students during the revolutionary moment that swept the regime to power, it did not have amicable relations with students and the educated class. The Derg exterminated many young, educated men and women (particularly from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) through the infamous 'Red Terror", while others were imprisoned, fled or joined one of the burgeoning rebellions.

The Derg mainstreamed 'scientific socialism' at all levels of the education system,[26] at the same time sealing off avenues for critical reflection and debate. Although the education system was required to contribute to the wider agenda of building a socialist economy, greater attention was paid to the natural sciences. In the social sciences and popular arenas, the focus was more on heroes and authorities with lowly origins and/or from marginalized groups. Marxist–Leninist courses were made compulsory in all undergraduate programmes and Marxist–Leninist philosophy became the guiding theme for all government systems. One of the Derg's first policy changes involved granting every citizen the right to free primary education. More generally, the educational system was geared towards communist ideology, with Eastern European governments providing policy advisors to help devise a curriculum along these lines. The overarching idea was education for the masses, summarized in the slogan: 'Education for production, for research and for political consciousness'.[27]

The most significant research project implemented in this period was conducted by the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN), and can be seen to demonstrate the Derg's wavering between the GT and CHs traditions. Established in 1983 and composed of senior researchers in various disciplines, the ISEN was not only a response to growing demands for autonomy among Ethiopia's diverse national groups, but itself the outcome of tensions between central and ethno-national forces within the Derg. The 1987 Constitution drew on the ISEN study's findings in its attempt to strike a better balance between national unity and demands for autonomy/self-determination.[28] The Derg also defended the idea of 'unity in diversity' and promoted, during the regime's final years, a federal reconfiguration of the Ethiopian state based on recognition of the different nations. As noted by Bach, 'although it created the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities in order to list the different nationalities that had to be represented in the national Assembly (Shengo), the groups so identified had no real power and

---

26   See Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 156–172.

27   Ayemayehu Bishaw and Jon Lasser, Education in Ethiopia: Past, Present and Future Prospects', *African Nebula* 5 (2012).

28   Upon assuming power, the EPRDF would also rely heavily on the study's findings, but with much greater attention paid to aligning ethnicity with administrative boundaries, as reflected in the 1994 Constitution.

the Shengo remained an appendix of the Derg'.[29] It should also be highlighted that the Derg's (and later the EPRDF's) notion of 'nations and nationalities' relied on Stalin's writings on the nationalities question, first brought to the Ethiopian political stage through Walelign.[30]

The EPRDF regime: firmly rooted in CHs

The EPRDF's military victory in 1991 heralded the triumph of the CHs. In fact, under the EPRDF 'the question of nationalities in Ethiopia' received a constitutional response recognizing that nations and nationalities had the right to self-determination including session. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant political force in the EPRDF coalition, viewed itself as an offshoot of the Ethiopian student movement. During the transitional period (1991–1995), it was already clear in the national charter that the Ethiopian state was being fundamentally restructured along federal lines. This became more concrete following the 1995 Constitution, which declared the country to be the 'Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia'. The institutional design of the Ethiopian federation regards ethnic groups as being the federation's building blocks. In fact, constitutionally speaking, sovereignty resides in the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' that ideally form the federation's member states. The CHs provided epistemological justification for the new ethno-federal political order, which was initially sharply hostile to the GT.

Aligned with ethno-nationalist interpretations, the EPRDF reduced the span of Ethiopia's history from 3,000 years (the GT historical frame of reference) down to a century-and-a-half, beginning with the territorial expansion and emergence of the modern Ethiopian state in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the EPRDF's approach represented a rupture. Although the Derg had sought to undermine the GT foundation of imperial rule, it had also embraced the parts of the GT it found useful for nation building. The EPRDF, by contrast, sought to build a new nation based on rectifying past mistakes while promoting inclusive, fast-tracked economic development. In the second decade of its rule, however, the EPRDF softened its hostility towards the GT in the context of the nationalist mobilization required for the Ethio–Eritrean war and, from 2006, the countrywide pursuit of fast-track economic development called for by the newly minted developmental elite.

Throughout the EPRDF's reign, ideological twists and turns played out in the education system. From very early on, the TPLF's/EPRDF's relationship with the universities, educated class and intelligentsia was not amicable. During the EPRDF's first congress in 1989, it announced that the bureaucracy was 'the next enemy to fight' after the war had been won against the Derg.[31] This

---

29   Jean Nicolas Bach 2014. EPRDF's Nation-Building: Tinkering with convictions and pragmatism.

30   See John Young, 'Bolshevism and National Federalism in Ethiopia', in *The Nation State: A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*, eds. John Markakis, Günther Schlee and John Young, Berlin: Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, 2021.

31   EPRDF, 'Report of the 1st Congress of the EPRDF, 1983 [Ethiopian Calendar]', unpublished manuscript (in Amharic), 1990.

would ultimately entail a massive restructuring and expansion of the bureaucracy, including establishing regional bureaucracies with their respective language needs, and launching the Civil Service College (now Civil Service University, CSU). The CSU trained most of the civil servants who would eventually fill the regional and federal bureaucracies, and functioned in a manner that suited the EPRDF.

The TPLF/EPRDF prided itself on its rigorous debates over a range of issues, culminating in the political debates leading up to the 2005 election, arguably the most contested and democratic election ever. As Elleni notes, in this election 'both the social sciences and historiography have become major battlefields where politics is played out'.[32] She further observes that 'the 2005 election replicated a pattern of politicizing social science knowledge that continues to be deeply connected to a form of knowledge production adopted by the Ethiopian student movement beginning in the 1960s'.[33] Headed by domestic and diaspora intellectuals, and representing a resurgence of the Ethiopian nationalism repressed by the EPRDF and the CHs underpinning EPRDF's ideology, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) called for a full repeal of Article 39 of the constitution, which guarantees the right to secession of all of the nations, nationalities and peoples that constitute the federal republic of Ethiopia. The fact that the CUD proved itself a power to be reckoned at the 2005 election winning 109 out of the 547 seats in the House of People's Representatives was taken as a major lesson by then prime minister Meles Zenawi. An internal evaluation indicated that reduced attention was paid to the political education of cadres following the 2001 splits within the TPLF/EPRDF. In order to remedy the latter issue, it was decided to go beyond a guerrilla-style evaluation forum (*gimgemas*) and engage in theoretical renditions of social problems. This was followed up by the quarterly publication of the EPRDF's new theoretical magazine, *Addis Raey* ('New Vision').

It should be noted that throughout its reign the EPRDF frequently used phrases such as 'after lengthy scientific study and debate we decided...' in statements communicating its policy decisions. Rather than dividing issues into morsels that can then be sold to the public in order to gain their support (as most politicians tend to do), the EPRDF generally viewed itself as a vanguard party bearing sole responsibility for thinking/policy studies. Such an approach implies a sense of intellectual equality between EPRDF figures and dissenting scholars/researchers. An early example of this attitude can be seen in a 1991 televised debate between Meles and Prof. Mesfin Woldemariam, viewed as an outspoken, centrist and anti-ethno-nationalist public scholar. At the heart of the debate was whether there existed an Amhara identity separate from Ethiopian national identity or provincial identities. While Meles and his intellectual partner Professor Andreas Eshete argued for the existence of an Amhara ethnicity, Professor Mesfin—who regarded ethnic federalism as a recipe for the disintegration of the Ethiopian polity—argued vehemently against. In engaging with this debate, Meles was also keen to draw a distinction between the 'oppressor' Amhara ruling class and the 'oppressed' Amhara masses,
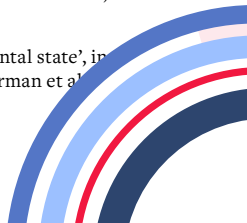
---

32   Elleni Centime Zeleke. 2020. Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016. P.149.

33   Zeleke. Ethiopia in Theory.

bearing testimony to the persistence of a Marxist vocabulary.[34]

The debate, held early on in the transition period, was probably intended to demonstrate that the rebels were as learned as the professors.[35] Such intellectual posturing was reinforced by the 1992 visit to Addis of Samuel Huntington, who advised Meles to opt for a dominant party democratic system, which he considered more fitting to the Ethiopian context than the alternatives of a non-democratic political system or multi-party democracy.[36] Following the 2001 splits in the TPLF/EPRDF, there began lecture-type training and consultations with university professors, with Meles himself leading the initial week-long meeting with AAU scholars. Following the 2001 splits, Meles regularly chose to discuss development-related issues with foreign scholars—including Alex de Waal, Joseph Stiglitz and Thandika Mkandawire—rather than Ethiopian politicians or scholars. The exceptions to this were Professor Andreas Eshete and Dr Samuel Assefa, who provided the EPRDF with a liberal justification for ethnic federalism[37] and were respectively appointed president and academic vice president of AAU in 2000. Meles failed to cite any Ethiopian author in the excerpts of his incomplete dissertation[38] or the single published academic work bearing his name.[39] The EPRDF's (or Meles's) aversion to the national educated class is also reflected in his frequent labelling of them as 'rent seekers' or 'chauvinists'.

One major break from the pre-1991 period was the qualitative change in state support provided to the social science disciplines. Given the EPRDF's ethno-nationalist stance and associated historical interpretations, the GT historical narrative of millennia-long uninterrupted statehood was dismissed. Instead, greater attention was given to anthropological studies focused on oral histories and the cultures of marginalized communities, while Ethiopian history and Ethiopian geography undergraduate courses that had been compulsory under the Derg were cancelled by the mid-2000s. Later, the EPRDF took issue with anthropology, as well as philosophy, with

34   See Ankuar Tube, 'Meles Zenawi and Prof Mesfin Woldemariam about the existence of Amhara 1991 E C', YouTube, 31 May 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8SXeZGnxls.

35   See Hadush Quiha, 'Who said what about Amhara in 1991', YouTube, 9 February 2014. www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmdgqTwSkQY.

36   Samuel Huntington, 'Political Development in Ethiopia: A Peasant-based Dominant Party Democracy', Report to USAID/Ethiopia on Consultations with the Constitutional Commission, 17 May 1993. www.ethiopia-insight.com//wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Huntington-A-Peasant-Based-Dominant-Party-Democracy.pdf.

37   See for instance Andreas Eshete, 'Federalism: New Frontiers in Ethiopian Politics', *Ethiopian Journal of Federal Studies* 1/1 (2013).

38   Meles Zenawi, 'Africa development: dead ends and new beginnings', preliminary draft, Addis Ababa, 6 August 2006.

39   Meles Zenawi, 'States and markets: Neoliberal limitations and the case for a developmental state', in *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies*, eds. Akbar Norman et al., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Meles describing anthropologists as 'friends of poverty',[40] and Professor Admasu Tsegaye, president of AAU, infamously claiming philosophy had 'nothing to do with development'. This change in outlook was situated within the logic of the EPRDF's developmental state and the acquiescent subject it aspired to create.

Selective co-option of disciplines continued throughout the EPRDF's reign. AAU's history and philosophy departments narrowly avoided being closed down, while the department of political science and the law school were outflanked by the establishment of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Center for Human Rights, and Center for Federal Studies (initially under the School of Governance) in 2007–2008. With the advent of the developmental state discourse and its resultant policies, more explicit attention was paid to the natural sciences and engineering, with at least 70 per cent of university students and resources directed to these fields of studies. This relates to the Ethiopian government's attempted emulation of the South Korean and Japanese development(al) models (also, to a lesser degree, India and China with respect to university exchanges), which it sought to ingrain in the Ethiopian higher education sector with the aim of achieving science and technology spill-overs. Hence, between 2010 and 2015, the number of students assigned to the science and technology stream was increased as high as 70 per cent of the overall University student in Ethiopia's higher educational institutions.[41]

Government confrontations with social scientists and Ethiopian Studies abounded during the EPRDF's rule. History departments challenged the EPRDF's portrayal of Ethiopian history as extending back just a century or so, instead highlighting a much longer history of social interactions and cultural exchanges along ethnic and religious boundaries. This, in effect, represented an enactment of the collision between the GT and the CHs.[42] There was also contestation over the Adwa centenary celebrations in 1996, with the AAU team led by Professor Bahru Zewde (director of the IES at the time) establishing a special committee to commemorate the victory in a more 'historically correct' and scholarly manner, while the government sought to downgrade the centrality of Emperor Menilik through the national committee.[43] Later, in the early 2000s, Professor Berhanu Nega and Professor Mesfin Woldemariam organized a forum on academic freedom that was attended by a large audience of AAU students, following which the

40   Speech by Meles Zenawi during the 13th Annual Pastoralists' Day celebrations, Jinka, South Omo, 25/1/2011. https://www.mursi.org/pdf/Meles%20Jinka%20speech.pdf/.

41   Education Sector Development Plan IV (ESDP IV). Addis Ababa., 2015, p. 105).

42   See for instance Bahru Zewde, 2022.

43   Maimire Mennasemay, 'Adwa: A dialogue between the past and the present', *Northeast African Studies* 4/2 (1997): 43–89.

two professors were briefly imprisoned for 'disturbing the public peace'.[44]

Despite these restrictions on academic freedom and dissent, the number of public universities and graduate programmes increased from the 2000s onwards. In 1991, Ethiopia had just two universities: AAU and Alemaya (now Haramaya) University. Currently, it has 44. This rapid expansion took place alongside the ethnicization of the universities, as seen in decisions related to the appointment of university presidents by the prime minister, the appointment of board members, and the overall management of the universities. Such changes contributed to universities becoming hotspots for ethnic-based conflict between students.[45]

The relationship between the EPRDF and independent think tanks, especially Western ones, was very confrontational, as demonstrated by the former's response to International Crisis Group (ICG) publishing a report claiming there was a risk of violence around the 2010 elections. Meles announced at a press conference that, 'We have only contempt for the International Crisis Group' and that certain people 'had nothing better to do than spend millions of dollars interfering in Ethiopia's internal affairs without being asked'.[46] Meles's fury stemmed from the ICG's stinging criticism of not only the government's authoritarian practices but the praxis of ethnic federalism, which at the time constituted the core basis of the EPRDF's political legitimacy. Such tensions were compounded by criticisms from other international human rights organizations of the regime's human rights violations, in response to which Meles went as far as organizing public demonstrations.

The PP regime: ambiguity and populism

Extensive public protests against the EPRDF's authoritarianism coupled with power struggles within the party propelled Abiy Ahmed to the prime ministership in April 2018. The public protests took place mainly in Oromia and Amhara regions, representing Ethiopia's two largest ethnic groups. Despite this coming together of the two groups, the protests had more to do with shared grievances towards the democratic deficit shown by the EPRDF, galvanized by identity politics and related territorial disputes, than any shared vision. The rallying point for the Oromo

---

44   The case of Berhanu Nega is illustrative of how the thinking of some of the leading intellectual politicians has changed over time. Berhanu has moved from a very centrist to an accommodationist political posture, with his prison time as leader of the CUD apparently critical in this regard. See Berhanu Nega, 'Identity politics and the struggle for liberty and democracy in Ethiopia', paper prepared for the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) 24th Annual Conference, Howard University, Blackburn Center, Washington DC, 31 July–1 August 2010. http://ethiopatriots.com/pdf/birhau-ngan-Identity-page4.pdf.

45   Yonas Ashine, 'Universities as Contested Terrain. Interpreting Violent Conflict in Ethiopia in Times of Political Transition', *Afriche e orienti* 22/2 (2020): 127–45. See also Tatek Abebe, 'Lost futures? Educated youth precarity and protests in the Oromia region, Ethiopia', Children's Geographies 18/6 (2020): 584–600.

46   This 2009 report was written anonymously by Tobias Hagman, who has since written (in German) about the experience, including the response by Meles. See www.linkedin.com/pulse/wie-ich-mich-mit-dem-äthiopischen-regime-anlegte-tobias-hagmann/?originalSubdomain=de.

protests was the Addis Ababa Master Plan and the city's land encroachment into neighbouring territories in Oromia, while the Amhara protests related to a territorial dispute with Tigray regional state, especially over ownership of Welkait area in western Tigray. Other Amhara grievances included resentment at the spirit of the 1995 Constitution believed to have been built around the notion of Amhara as oppressor of nations and nationalities, blaming the Amhara for historical injustices, and anger over the contested results of the 2007 population census.

At the same time, the power struggle among EPRDF coalition members intensified following the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, with the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) challenging the TPLF's dominant position. This led to a political alliance between the OPDO and ANDM, reinforced by the protests in Oromia and Amhara regions. While the partnership, which came to be known as Oromara, managed to oust the TPLF from the helm of power, the lack of shared vision meant the alliance was a fragile one.

The Oromo protests, which called for a deepening of the federal project, did not object to the ethno-federal political order. Rather, the issue was one of Tigrayan ethnic domination, as well as the economic protection of farmers evicted under the EPRDF's developmental state. On the other hand, the Amhara protests called for fundamental political change, including a constitutional amendment putting ethnic federalism on the path to being replaced by a more geographic federalism.

Both Oromo and the Amhara politics are informed by a particular interpretation of Ethiopian history. While the former call for political reform that operates within the CHs, the Amhara call for political change that operates within the GT, as well as to some degree within a newer form of CH given that Amhara identity has been increasingly redefined in ethnic terms. The situation is further complicated by the advent of an Amhara nationalism, organisationally expressed in NAMA. NAMA has combined the right to protection of Amhara minorities living outside the Amhara region with elements of imperial nostalgia. This has been expressed in heightened historical claims, such as the oft-quoted assertion made by Christian Tadele, one of the organization's top leaders, that 'Amhara is the cornerstone of being human'.[47]

In light of the above, a power struggle flared between the ODP (Oromo Democratic Party) and ADP (Amhara Democratic Party) soon after Abiy became Prime Minister, reinforcing the perception that their alliance had been more of a tactical than strategic partnership. The debate has been complicated by Abiy's intentional ambiguity and evolving position regarding the GT and CHs. In the first two years of his rule, Abiy—keen to distance himself from the EPRDF's ethnic federalism—invoked the GT in his politics of national unity, referring to Ethiopia's 'glorious' past in speeches made at home and among the diaspora (mostly Pan-Ethiopianists). In December 2019, Abiy abolished the EPRDF and transformed it into a national party: the PP. The TPLF declined to join the PP, citing serious ideological differences related primarily to the

---

47   Tezera Tazebew, 'Amhara nationalism: The empire strikes back', *African Affairs* 120/479 (2021): 197–313.

structure of the state. Deriding the PP as unitarist, the TPLF presented itself as a champion of federalism, and to this end helped create a loose coalition among federalist forces.

The dissolution of the ethnic-based members of the EPRDF coalition also provoked an ethno-nationalist sensibility, especially among the Oromo. Thus, Awol Allo, an ardent critic of the GT from the Oromo nationalist camp, noted 'the architects of the move failed to take into account a range of constitutional, ideological and representational issues that could bring the political legitimacy and representative capacity of the newly formed party into question'. In defending the ethno-federal political order, Awol further asserted that 'one of the reasons why Ethiopia adopted a multinational federal order in 1994 was because there were politically salient ethnic cleavages that have received eloquent theoretical and political endorsements, particularly since the 1960s', and 'ethnic identity and ethnic nationalism came to be the predominant mode of political mobilization and organising not just because EPRDF chose such an arrangement but rather because of the asymmetric relationship of inequality and domination between ethnic groups in the country'.[48] Another Oromo commentator claimed 'since he was swept to power in 2018, Abiy has made no secret of his disdain for federalism and nostalgia for the centralized and assimilationist days of the unitary state'.[49] Abiy's notion of *medemer* (synergy, coming together) is construed by ethnonationalists as inimical to diversity.

In 2020, Abiy converted Emperor Menelik II's former palace grounds into a public park and museum called 'Unity Park'. Despite seeking to reflect the country's diversity, the park swiftly provoked controversy, especially regarding its lionizing of Emperor Menilik, who has been at the heart of the contestation between the Pan-Ethiopianists and ethnonationalists. For the latter, this is evidence of Abiy being '*Ahadawi*' (unitarist), allied with and supported by '*ye diro sereat nafaqiwoch*' (those who seek to restore the defunct imperial order). Unity Park displays as much Ethiopia's GT, however, as the park doubles as a museum of nations and nationalities.

What stands out here is the extent to which Abiy is at ease with the GT—a strong contrast even with members of the PP's Oromo wing. The politics of Unity Park and the tilt towards the GT over the CHs was situated within the broader political context of an intense power struggle among Oromo political actors. The OLF and the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) appeared to have greater Oromo nationalist credibility than PP. With the OLF claiming to be the leading brand of Oromo nationalism, and Jawar Mohammed of the OFC seen as the face of Oromo protest, both parties posed a serious challenge to Abiy's PP in the lead-up to the planned 2020 elections. This helps explain Abiy's embracing of, or at least tactical alliance with, the Pan-Ethiopianists, and his apparent support for the GT underpinning their outlook.

48   Awol Allo, 'Why Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party could be bad news for Ethiopia', Al Jazeera, 5 December 2019. www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/12/5/why-abiy-ahmeds-prosperity-party-could-be-bad-news-for-ethiopia.

49   Bahar Oumer, 'The Prosperity Party is a threat to multinational federalism', Awash Post, 8 November 2020. www.awashpost.com/2020/11/08/the-prosperity-party-is-a-threat-to-multinational-federalism/.

The OLF and OFC were effectively neutralized after their leadership was implicated by the government in the assassination of singer and civil rights activist Haccalu Hundesa and imprisoned. Both parties boycotted the June 2021 election, allowing the PP to run the show in Oromia. Since then, the Oromia wing of the PP has emerged as a major power-broker not just in Oromia but in national politics. This has brought it to loggerheads with the Amhara wing of the PP, as well as Amhara nationalists more broadly, who are unhappy with what they consider the new Oromo political hegemony under the Abiy administration. At the same time, both wings have come under strong nationalist pressure in a game increasingly defined by ethnic outbidding—that is, inter-ethnic competition is becoming tangled up with intra-ethnic power struggles, whereby the Oromo/Amhara PP wings claim to be more genuine representatives of their respective ethnic constituencies than the political organizations that previously presented themselves as better nationalist alternatives (e.g., the OLF and OFC in Oromia, and NAMA in Amhara). Despite the PP's claim to be a national party, its regional chapters behave as de facto ethnic parties. In fact, since at least 2019, Ethiopia's national politics has been dominated as much by the hegemonic rivalry between the Oromo and Amhara wings of PP as by contention between the PP and other political forces.

In the run up to the June 2021 election the PP competed on a multinational federalism ticket. This was much to the chagrin of Pan-Ethiopianist forces, who expected an overhaul of the political order after the election. Shortly after Abiy came to power, some had even proposed dismantling the constitution—one of the main reasons they had supported him in the first place.[50] Like his predecessors, however, Abiy has shifted along the GT and CHs epistemic continuum. Previously seem as closer to the GT position, he now appears to be moving in the direction of the CHs. Along the way he has deployed considerable strategic ambiguity, using populism to manage Ethiopia's complexity in a context of political transition.

These shifts have also played out in the educational field. Following the post-2018 political reforms, a moratorium was placed on the construction of new universities. There were also attempts to reverse some of the wrongs wrought in the sector, particularly the ethnicization of university management. This was addressed by stipulating that the chairperson of a university board had to come from a different ethnic background than that prevalent at the university's location. The AAU board, meanwhile, conducted a revitalization study led by professor Berhanu Nega (who had been a board member before becoming minister of education in October 2021). Driven by the government's expressed interest in turning the AAU into a chartered, autonomous university, Berhanu has begun preparations for implementing the revitalization study's recommendations.

The focus of Berhanu's educational reforms more generally has been improving the quality of education, especially at the tertiary level. While his strict control measures proved effective in the 2023 high school leaving examinations, they also led to shocking results: of the close to a

50   See for instance Dawit Woldegiorgis. 'Ethiopia needs a new constitution', *Ethiopia Observer*, 21 January 2019. www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/01/21/ethiopia-needs-a-new-constitution-dawit-wolde-giorgis/.

million students who took the examination, 97 per cent failed. This reveals not only the extent of the crisis in the educational system, but points to the risk of political violence, as the 'failed' students—facing an already high educated youth unemployment rate—may end up seeking a purpose in life through ethnic or religious mobilization.

Much like other sections of society during the peak of so-called 'Abiymania' in 2018, academia came out in support of Abiy. While many scholars were 'in the marketplace' pre-2018, they now took the step of officially joining politics. This might not be an entirely new phenomenon, but the fact that all university presidents (except those in Tigray) ran on the PP's ticket at the 2021 elections is a troubling development.

Tensions between the GT and CHs under the Abiy administration played out in debates surrounding the 2018—2030 Education Development Roadmap (EDR). The EDR, which was developed in the final years of the EPRDF, recognizes the need for enhanced national cohesion and tacitly seeks to mitigate the politics of difference engendered by ethnic federalism. Although Pan-Ethiopianist forces welcomed the EDR, ethnonationalists vehemently opposed it, especially in Oromia and Tigray. Given that language is a key signifier of ethnic identity in Ethiopia, it was only to be expected that the EDR's focus on Amharic as the 'federal working language' would be contested.

While Abiy remained silent on the issue, Shimelis Abdisa, president of Oromia, threatened to close Amharic schools operating in the region if the language was imposed on all schools. The Tigray region also rejected the Ministry of Education's recommendation that students be taught Amharic. Jawar Mohammed of the OFC reacted furiously to the EDR's reference to Amharic as a 'national language', as well as the federal government's violation of the regional government prerogative of language choice (the new language policy was directed at elementary schools, which according to the constitution is the prerogative of the regions, not the federal government). Jawar also argued that Amharic being made a 'national language' could only be considered once Oromifffa had been made a second federal language.

After two years of intense debate in which the language issue was dropped from the roadmap and a shorter time frame imposed (2021—2026), the EDR was finally made official in 2021. One tangible change has been the restoration of the 6+2+4+4 educational system, respectively for elementary, junior high, high school and university education.

CONCLUSION

As this report has demonstrated, social science knowledge production in Ethiopia is rooted in Eurocentrism. This has led to a domestic hierarchy in knowledge production, as well as ongoing contestation between two opposed traditions of historical knowledge the so-called 'Great Tradition' versus the 'Counter Histories'. One or both of these rival traditions have informed and/or been deployed by the four regimes that have governed Ethiopia in its recent history, from imperial rule through to the Derg and the EPRDF right up to the current PP. As such, a deep understanding of these traditions of knowledge and how they interact is essential to anyone seeking to grasp the full extent of Ethiopia's present political struggles.

Here, it is important to acknowledge that the two knowledge constructs are mutually constituted. The more the GT glorified Ethiopia's past, the stronger the CHs reacted. Both are also deeply implicated in and partly derived from political struggles. While the imperial government promoted the GT and the Derg selectively appropriated it, the EPRDF represented an epistemic rupture, presenting the CHs as aligned with its pluralistic reconfiguration of Ethiopia's unitarist state.

The epistemic commitments of all these governments were, however, watered down by pragmatic considerations, as seen in their shifting positions along the GT–CHs continuum. For instance, although the Derg set off by deconstructing the GT, especially during its revolutionary moment, the regime ultimately moved towards a pragmatic co-option dictated by the imperatives of war mobilization and associated nationalist rhetoric. Similarly, the EPRDF started with a radical approach towards diversity firmly rooted in the CHs tradition, but pragmatically tapped into the GT in the context of war mobilization and national resource mobilization for its developmental state project.

Most recently, the epistemic ambiguity perpetuated—likely deliberately—by the PP has created an arena in which the two traditions are in competition, with the ultimate outcome uncertain. Like the Derg and EPRDF, the PP's position has over time shifted along the GT–CHs continuum. Despite coming out of the CHs tradition, Abiy enthusiastically embraced the GT as he sought to build a new political legitimacy and party from the ashes of the EPRDF. This was reinforced by the nationalist infrastructure provided by the GT in the context of the Tigray war.

Since then, however, the new political context engendered by the peace process between the federal government and the TPLF, as well as strong push-back by Amhara political forces locked in territorial dispute with Tigray regional state, has led Abiy to lean more towards the CHs. The partisanship Abiy has shown for an Oromo splinter group in the current schism within the Orthodox Church and the ethnic politics connected to this has further provoked the Ethiopianist camp, which increasingly sees the Abiy administration as promoting an Oromo hegemony.

Both epistemic traditions have advanced exclusive claims, leading them to lock horns. There are internal variations in both positions, however, that offer the possibility of common ground. Within the Ethiopianist camp there is a growing consensus around federalism. While some propose federalism based on geography and administrative convenience, others call for maintaining and reforming the existing structure, with human rights safeguards incorporated to protect the new regional minorities.

Similarly, ethnonationalism has come a long way from the politics of secession, with its current focus being the accommodation of ethnic interests within an Ethiopian national framework. It is hoped and expected that a major talking point in the upcoming national dialogue process will be the contested historical memories informing many of the current political fault-lines, as well as the vexing question of how to generate a national consensus. This could provide an opportunity for the rival epistemic traditions to come together, negotiate and build a common platform.

REFERENCES

Abebe, Tatek. 'Lost futures? Educated youth precarity and protests in the Oromia region, Ethiopia'. *Children's Geographies* 18/6 (2020): 584–600.

Allo, Awol. 'Why Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party could be bad news for Ethiopia'. Al Jazeera. 5 December 2019. (www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/12/5/why-abiy-ahmeds-prosperity-party-could-be-bad-news-for-ethiopia)

Ankuar Tube. 'Meles Zenawi and Prof Mesfin Woldemariam about the existence of Amhara 1991 E C'. YouTube, 31 May 2017. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8SXeZGnxls)

Ashine, Yonas. 'Universities as Contested Terrain. Interpreting Violent Conflict in Ethiopia in Times of Political Transition'. *Afriche e orienti* 22/2 (2020): 127–45.

Bishaw, Ayemayehu and Jon Lasser. Education in Ethiopia: Past, Present and Future Prospects'. *African Nebula* 5 (2012).

EPRDF. 'Report of the 1st Congress of the EPRDF, 1983 [Ethiopian Calendar]'. Unpublished manuscript (in Amharic), 1990.

Eshete, Andreas. 'Federalism: New Frontiers in Ethiopian Politics'. *Ethiopian Journal of Federal Studies* 1/1 (2013).

Feyissa, Hailegebriel G. 'Opinion: On decolonizing Ethiopian studies: Methodological nationalism as bad as Eurocentrism'. Addis Standard. 4 December 2017. (https://addisstandard.com/opinion-on-decolonizing-ethiopian-studies-methodological-nationalism-as-bad-as-eurocentrism/)

Gebrehiwot, Mulugeta. *Laying the Past to Rest: The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-Building*. London: Hurst & Co., 2020.

Gelaw, Yirga. *Native Colonialism: Education and the Economy of Violence Against Traditions in Ethiopia*. Red Sea Press, 2016.

Huntington, Samuel. 'Political Development in Ethiopia: A Peasant-based Dominant Party Democracy'. Report to USAID/Ethiopia on Consultations with the Constitutional Commission. 17 May 1993. (www.ethiopia-insight.com//wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Huntington-A-Peasant-Based-Dominant-Party-Democracy.pdf)

James, Winston. *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America*. London: Verso, 2020.

Mennasemay, Maimire. 'Adwa: A dialogue between the past and the present'. *Northeast African Studies* 4/2 (1997): 43–89.

Marzagora, Sara. 'History in twentieth-century Ethiopia: The "Great Tradition" and the counter histories of national failure'. *Journal of African History* 58/3: 425–44.

Mekonen, Walelign. 'On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia'. *Struggle*. 17 November 1969.

Milkias, Paulos and Messay Kebede. *Education, Politics and Social Change in Ethiopia*. Tsehai Publisher, 2010.

Nega, Berhanu. 'Identity politics and the struggle for liberty and democracy in Ethiopia'. Paper prepared for the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) 24th Annual Conference, Howard University, Blackburn Center, Washington DC, 31 July–1 August 2010. (http://ethiopatriots.com/pdf/birhau-ngan-Identity-page4.pdf)

Quiha, Hadush. 'Who said what about Amhara in 1991'. YouTube, 9 February 2014. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmdgqTwSkQY)

Oumer, Bahar. 'The Prosperity Party is a threat to multinational federalism'. Awash Post. 8 November 2020. (www.awashpost.com/2020/11/08/the-prosperity-party-is-a-threat-to-multinational-federalism/)

Reid, Richard. 'The Trans-Mereb Experience: Perceptions of the Historical Relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia'. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1/2 (2007): 238–55.

Semon, Hewan. 'Opinion: Decolonizing Ethiopian Studies'. Addis Standard. 30 November 2017. (https://addisstandard.com/opinion-decolonizing-ethiopian-studies-2/)

Sisay, Binyam and Moges Yigezu. 'Restoring African studies to its linguistic identity: reflections on Ethiopian studies. *Social Dynamics* 40/2 (2014): 289–307.

Tazebew, Tezera. 'Amhara nationalism: The empire strikes back'. *African Affairs* 120/479 (2021): 197–313.

Teklu, Asmelash Yohannes. 'Because of the war, many Tigrayans no longer identify with Ethiopia'. *Ethiopia Insight*. 16 January 2023. (www.ethiopia-insight.com/2023/01/16/because-of-the-war-many-tigrayans-no-longer-identify-with-ethiopia/)

Tibebu, Teshale. 'Ethiopia: The "Anomaly" and "Paradox" of Africa'. *Journal of Black Studies* 26/4 (1996): 414–30.

Tiruneh, Andargachew. *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974–1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Triulzi, Alexander. 'Battling with the past: new frameworks for Ethiopian historiography'. In *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, edited by Wendy James et al. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002.

Yimam, Baye. 'Five Decades of Ethiopian Studies'. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 42/1–2 (June–December 2009): v–i.

Woldegiorgis, Dawit. 'Ethiopia needs a new constitution'. *Ethiopia Observer*. 21 January 2019. (www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2019/01/21/ethiopia-needs-a-new-constitution-dawit-wolde-giorgis/)

Yohannes, Okbazghi. 'The Eritrean Question: A Colonial Case?'. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 25/4 (1987): 643–88.

Young, John. 'Bolshevism and National Federalism in Ethiopia'. In *The Nation State: A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*, edited by John Markakis, Günther Schlee and John Young. Berlin: Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, 2021.

Zenawi, Meles. 'Africa development: dead ends and new beginnings'. Preliminary draft, Addis Ababa, 6 August 2006.

—. 'States and markets: Neoliberal limitations and the case for a developmental state'. In Good *Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies*, edited by Akbar Norman et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.