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To cite this article: Yilkal Ayalew Workneh (2021): The terms of debate on the existence of Amhara ethnicity with a focus on the emerging Amhara ethno-nationalism, African Identities, DOI: [10.1080/14725843.2021.1972793](https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1972793)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1972793>



Published online: 02 Sep 2021.



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ARTICLE



## The terms of debate on the existence of Amhara ethnicity with a focus on the emerging Amhara ethno-nationalism

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### ABSTRACT

No other identity has been as debated as Amhara ethnicity is in post-1991 Ethiopia. The post-1991 Ethiopia staged the political and scholarly debate over whether or not Amhara exists as a distinct ethnic group. This article sheds light on the terms of the debate on the contested Amhara ethnicity, in its formulation both as an identity encapsulated within the Ethiopian national identity or a separate ethnic identity, with a focus on the ongoing Amhara ethno-national political mobilization. Data for the article is gleaned from a variety of sources, documents, opinions expressed in the broadcast, print, and social media platforms, and key informant interviews. The proponents of the former espouse Pan-Ethiopian nationalism and they reject the attribution of the Amharic language and its speakers to an ethnic category. It is part of the broader critic of ethnicity as a focus of social identity and unit of political participation which undermines national cohesion. Instead, Ethiopian national identity is promoted as a supra ethnic identity that ethnic groups need to integrate in to. While the latter argue in favor of Amhara ethnicity not only in the primordial sense of the term but also in the sense of reactive ethnicity as a result of othering which created deep-seated insecurity who have been vulnerable to attacks by other ethnic groups.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 January 2021  
Accepted 20 August 2021

### KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; terms of debate;  
Amhara ethnicity; pan-  
Ethiopian nationalism

## Introduction

The debate over the nature of 'Amhara' identity in Ethiopian political discourse has emerged since the 1990s among the Amhara elites. There is no agreement in defining 'Amhara' both among politicians and scholars. Walleign, who listed 'Amhara' as one of the 'nations' of the country in his manifesto, himself, did not precisely define who they are.

It was first problematized by the then-president of the country, Mengistu Haile Mariyam, who mentioned it shortly before his socialist government was overthrown. He said the 'term Amhara was coined by foreigners, Israelite visitors, to refer people living on the mountains.' When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seized state power in 1991 replacing the Dergue regime, it argued that Amhara existed as a distinct ethnic group with a specifically located boundary, distinct language as well as culture and history. On the other hand, most of the educated elites of the time rejected

this notion and argued the opposite asserting that there is no Amhara ethnicity. They insisted that Amharic-speaking people are the center of the Ethiopian state and one should not restrict them in a specific constituent unit.

This political debate later obtains scholarly attention still unfolding. Given the term 'Amhara' has been accompanied by multiple descriptions referring to a geographical place, class, ethnic, religion, or supra-ethnic (Ethiopian national) identity, the debate over its existence, than other ethnic groups of the country, is justifiable. Apart from the classic studies of Donald Levine (1965, 1974), academic writings on Amhara ethnicity began to appear in the 1990s following the debate. Authors such as Admasu (2010), Birhanu (2015), Markakis (2005), Michael (2008), and Tegegne (1998) specifically wrote about Amhara identity. The studies revealed the contested nature of Amhara ethnic identity and ethnicity since it is associated with Pan-Ethiopian nationalism. However, there is no study that traces the terms of the debate over the Amhara ethnicity. The purpose of this paper is to capture the terms of debates on the existence of Amhara as a distinct ethnic group or not. Comprehending the reasons behind this enduring debate is crucial to have a frame of understanding in the analysis of both Pan-Ethiopian political discourse and the ongoing Amhara identity conception and political mobilization. The latter is a recent phenomenon shaping the political discourse and appeared to be a contending force against the idea that Amhara does not exist as a distinct ethnic group. The term 'Amhara ethno-nationalism' has been used in this article as it distinguished from civic nationalism. It is not solely ethnic since the Amhara ethnicity develops in the past five years as having a political agenda that enables it to acquire national character.

Data for the article is gleaned from a variety of sources, documents, opinions expressed in broadcast and social media platforms, and key informant interviews. Relevant publications from within Ethiopia and by Ethiopianists as well as Amhara nationalists from abroad have been reviewed. Documents such as magazines and party programs, audio documents in which the speeches and debates of political figures, educated elites, and Amhara activists enclosed have been assessed. Interview with key informants such as political party officials and Amhara activists has conducted.

The discussion is organized into three sections. Section one discusses the link between Amhara identity and the process of state formation in Ethiopia as historical and political background to the current ethno-national mobilizations. Section two discusses the specificity of Amhara identity focusing on the issue of who Amhara are and their origin. Section three examines the first phase of the debate in the early 1990s, followed by section four that discusses the ongoing reiteration of the debate culminated in ethno-nationalist mobilization spearheaded by various Social media activism and Amhara based political parties such as the National Movement of Amhara/NaMA/ and Amhara Regional Prosperity Party/APP/. The last part concludes.

## Historical and political context

Most studies on Ethiopia, if not all, emphasized two historical fundamentals: the multi-ethnic nature of the Ethiopian polity and the political contribution of the 'Amhara people' in the making of the Ethiopian empire since the second half of the 13th century. With the spread of the Amharic language from the province of *Bete-Amhara*, located in the present north-central Ethiopia where the restored Solomonic dynasty had its base, to other parts

of adjoining areas of Ethiopia, Amhara came to assume the character of the ethnic category (Bahru, 2010a). The imperial authority steadily weakened since the 16th century, especially following historical events: war with the Muslim sultanates; the expansion of the Oromo; and the first formal contact with Europe, power had significantly shifted from the monarch to the imperial domains. In the late 17th century, the ascendancy of regional lords had intensified, and the imperial authority had broken down and culminating in the emergence of regional dynasties. It marked the infamous historical time called the era of princes, *Zemen Mesafint* (1769–1855) (Bahru, 2002).

State reformation pursued since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century involving the process of expansion (restoration) of the pre-existing autonomous and semi-autonomous groups into a centralized rule. Many historians agree that the process of state centralization, under the guise of the Ethiopian modern state formation, was started by Emperor Tewodros II. It broadly involved two features: centralization of power within the domain of historic Ethiopia and territorial expansion conducted southward (Teshale, 1995). The victory of Tewodros II in 1855 signaled the end of the era of princes and the beginning of the centralization process that the emperor sought to subordinate regional lords to the central government (Clapham, 2013).

There are two contending views on the mobilizing factors in such struggles between regional lords during the *Zemen Mesafint* and afterward in the modern state formation: regionalism and ethnicity. Bahru (2002) and Tegegne (1998) claim ethnicity was less politicized and rivalries lay between regions and provinces, not ethnic groups. The second view, presented by Merara (2011) and Teshale (1995), the struggle was an ethnic rivalry for power notably between the Tigray, Amhara, and Oromo elites. Nonetheless, given the multi-ethnic nature of the ruling class, the southward expansion was not based on the conscious mobilization of all Amhara (Semahagn, 2014; Tegegne, 1998).

Tewodros was only successful in unifying the territories of historic Ethiopia. Menelik II crystallized the present shape and size of Ethiopia who first was the king of Shewa, an 'Amhara kingdom' in current central Ethiopia. Following the spectacular expansion of the state in the second half of the 19th century, Ethiopia became a mosaic of diverse groups and cultures. Emperor Menelik had treated the newly incorporated areas in two ways depending on the way they reacted to the expansion (Bahru, 2002; Clapham, 2013; Teshale, 1995). Those areas which peacefully submitted had got an opportunity to maintain their prerogatives of ruling their regions and became members of the ruling class through embracing Amharic language and marriage alliance as well as conversion to Orthodox Christianity. On the other hand, those areas that fiercely resisted the expansion were subjected to harsh rule through direct appointment from the center. Since the conversion of Axumite king Ezana, church and state existed in a symbiotic relationship as the monarchies used the Orthodox Church to get solicit unreserved acceptance from the people and the church has taken endowments especially its share of expropriated land (Bahru, 2010a, 2010b). Indeed, being the cultural marker of the royal court, along with the Amharic language, Orthodox Christianity played a dominant role in Ethiopian history.

There were Orthodox Christian warrior settlers with mixed ethnic backgrounds like Tigreans, Gurages, and Oromos but speak the Amharic language imposed on the peasantry to occupy strategic social and political positions in the outposts of the new empire (Bahru, 2010a). Haile Sellassie took strong and centralized policy measures in the

expansion of the Amharic language with less degree of sensitivity towards local sentiments (Bahru, 2010a). The official establishment of Amharic as a national language of Ethiopia was laid by the 1955 revised constitution and the subsequent measures taken in education, communication, and other government policies were part of the broader project of nation-state building. This creates relative strain in the south which eventually interpreted as national oppression by the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s Ethiopian left intelligentsia. Since this time the name Amhara and its identity have been linked to negative connotations like 'Amhara domination', 'Amharaization', and to this day 'Amhara chauvinism' (Markakis, 2005). This negative characterization has been the burden the Amhara have to bear. However, the vast majority of the Amhara peasantry has more or less lived as peasants in the southern parts of Ethiopia. Despite they got the name 'empire builders' or 'oppressors', they have got little benefit from the empire and this does not go beyond the cultural stuff (Markakis, 2005). In reality, by the end of the imperial regime, it was the northern part of the country marginalized and a victim of underdevelopment and famine strike.

The students' movement of the 1960s and 70s with its radical thoughts has shaped the political discourse and the way the state has been viewed. It also paves the way for the development of ethno-regional movements in the country for the past four decades (Semahagn, 2014). Despite some debates and misunderstandings especially on the solutions is a class-based or ethnic-based struggle, the national question which is the reaction of 'Amhara oppression' was taken for granted, by the left intelligentsia. Even though the ethno-nationalist groups amended the Amhara oppressor and other oppressed nationalities rhetoric, it has negatively contributed to shaping the attitude of other ethnic groups towards the Amharic speaking population in the past two and half decades (Semahagn, 2014). Currently, it is hard for members of other ethnic groups to think of the imperial period without assuming that all Amhara have somehow benefited from its exploitations.

Eventually, the ethno-nationalist group Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) movements prevailed in the armed struggle against the Dergue, and almost at the end of the armed struggle TPLF established an ethno-nationalist coalition Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and controlled the central power, and established ethnicity as an organizing principle of the polity. Immediately, the Amhara identity has been criminalized as oppressors and individual members have been killed and evicted from their residences by the newly empowered ethno-nationalists up until this day.

Going through an ethnic-based political discourse for the last two decades, the 'Amhara people' have allegedly been affiliated with Pan-Ethiopian sentiments and universal values. However, currently, there is a significant visible sign of an emerging Amhara ethno-nationalism (Zola, 2020). As observed from social media campaigns and banners of the rallies of the Amhara protest of 2016, the cause of Amhara ethno-nationalisms is the perceived and (real) alienation of the Amhara people from the political, social, and economic aspects of the country. The paradigm shift from pan-Ethiopian identity to ethno-nationalism was very swift especially among the Amhara youth (Amanuel, 2018). The protests have been used as a platform to voice discontent over alleged government repression of the Amhara as well as to promote a promising ethnic nationalism among them. Among political changes that show the development of Amhara ethno-nationalism, one is the establishment of the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) with its motto 'one

Amhara for all Amhara and All Amhara for one Amhara' by June 2018. Those who deny the presence of Amhara as a distinct ethnic group have been facing one additional contender political party named after Amhara.

### **Ethnicity and nationalism: theoretical stance**

Apparently, there is no agreed definition of ethnicity in the field of identity studies. The current orthodoxy regarding ethnic identities imagines ethnicity and nationalism are social constructs and ethnic affiliation and identification is determined by society (Yang, 2000). It argues that ethnicity is not static and biological rather it is volatile and ethnic boundaries are not stable which undergo changes from time to time based on socio-historical contexts. The theoretical speculation of Barth's (1998) concept of ethnic identity is fluid and relational is central to understand identity conceptions, in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. Barth He also emphasizes the subjective aspect of ethnicity that ethnic groups must be treated as units of ascription in which social boundaries are used to determine the group rather than the cultural content enclosed (Barth, 1998). Barth's relational and processual approach to ethnicity is still acknowledged by scholars in ethnic studies. In this regard, Eriksen (2010) writes 'The ethnic group is defined through its relationship to others, highlighted through the boundary, and the boundary itself is a social product which may have variable importance and which may change through time' (p. 45).

However, language has been mentioned as the basic core element of ethnic group formation which justifies the subjective element of ethnicity (Nash, 1996). In this regard, Yang (2000) recommends conceptualizing ethnicity in a balanced way as it is 'the outcome of subjective perceptions based on some objective characteristics'. Amharic language is an important cultural marker exclusively shared by a significant number of people with no additional vernacular. As ethnic identity often requires a designation by relevant others, these Amharic speakers are identified as Amhara by other ethnic groups of Ethiopia.

The issue of ethnicity often related to 'otherness' expressed by the application of the systematic distinction between 'us' and 'them' in which any identity needs the presence of other comparable identities in order to define it (Eriksen, 1992). Hence, ethnic identity requires designation by relevant others. Certainly, the presence of other identities in Ethiopia is a sufficient condition for the presence of Amhara identity at least in the minds of others.

There is a strong assertion in the literature that nationalism and ethnicity in Africa is the product of the transformations brought about by colonialism (Coleman, 1954). The anthropological researches argued that pre-colonial groups of Africa were hardly 'authentic' and 'traditional' to establish a state system while nation-state was introduced by Europeans. However, the most advanced level of state formation emerged in pre-colonial northeast Africa principally in Ethiopia and Sudan in which language and religion are major identity markers (Bahru, 2010c). The conversion of Axum into Christianity (4th c. A.D.) enabled those successive regimes to draw their main ethos and ideology (Bahru, 2010c). Markakis (1999, p. 70) expresses this as: 'Ethiopia's rulers invested more in weaving a colorful nationalist mythology complete with the familiar fable of a three-thousand-year-old state, which gained worldwide currency.' During the

decolonization and post-colonial period, the primary emphasis of African countries was securing the territorial integrity of the state with non-ethnic premises. However, this was without an exception. Ethiopia and Sudan tried to build the nation in the image of the culture and history of the dominant group (Markakis, 1999). By the end of the 1960s, Ethiopia as a nation was challenged by the radical student movement. It was presented as multinational state that is narrowly defined by Amhara-Tigre hegemony (Bahru, 2014).

Given the generally agreed assumption that ethnic identities are social constructs defined by the historical contexts they emerge from, Africa's historical reference for ethnicity and nationalism is largely associated with the colonial period (Markakis, 1999). The political goal of the first generation of Africa's political leaders, who call themselves 'nationalists', was the quest for independence from colonial rule and the aspiration of nation-state building (Markakis, 2021).

Colonial boundaries are continued to be the boundaries of newly independent states and nation-building was based on colonial language which is neutral to all ethnic groups (Kymlicka, 2006, p. 48). However, this is not without exception. Unlike other African countries, the nation-building process in Ethiopia and Sudan was far from using neutral images for the state symbols and values as they aspire to build the nation in the image of the culture and history of the dominant group (Kymlicka, 2006; Markakis, 2021). In Sudan, claiming their majority proportion the northerners want to establish an Islamic state governed by religiously inspired laws and norms since the early days of independence that became one of the sources of discontent from the non-Muslim south which precipitated an enduring civil war (El-Gaili, 2004). In Ethiopia too, colonial language was not used for nation-building rather it was through diffusing Amharic language and culture throughout the territory (Markakis, 2021). By the end of the 1960s, Ethiopia as a nation was challenged by the radical student movement. It was presented as a multinational state that narrowly defined by Amhara-Tigre hegemony (Bahru, 2014).

## The specificity of Amhara identity

### *Who Amhara are?*

There is no precise definition for the term 'Amhara' that everybody would agree on it. Rather it is used to refer to different meanings signifying province, language, religion, class, supra-ethnic identity, or ethnic group. The one that the term 'Amhara' stands for is the medieval province, Bete-Amhara currently located in north-central Ethiopia. Ludolf mentioned it as one of the dominant political kingdoms in the medieval Ethiopian period. To him, Amhara is the geographical location (being the center of Abyssinia with those inaccessible fortified rocks) that helped to play a key political role in historic Ethiopia. Ludolf (1682), characterizes Amhara as '... the most-noble kingdom of all Ethiopia ... and is, therefore, accounted the native country of the late and present kings and of all the nobility' (p. 13).

Without overlooking the connection between the Amhara province and the Amhara people, Chernetsov (1993) writes as '... in the Ethiopian chronicles [both in Christian and Muslim written traditions] of the 14th-18th centuries the term



“Amhara” occurs to be a toponym, not an ethnonym, and designates a province, not people’ (p. 97). The inconclusive nature of the definition of Amhara is visibly seen in the works of domestic authors. For example, the lexicon definition of the term Amhara, in Desta (1981), is associated with all ethnonym, religion (Christianity), and provincial sentiments.

The other is the expression of Amhara with either people with the Pan-Ethiopian national identity or affiliated to their regional identities or both. Levine writes as ‘... despite the recent ethnicization of political discourse, many, if not most people considered “Amhara” continue to identify themselves primarily as “Ethiopians”, beyond being residents of some local area’ (D. Levine, 2003, p. 231). He further describes as ‘Amharic-speaking Shewan still feel themselves closer to non-Amharic speaking Shawans than to Amharic-speakers from distant regions like Gondar and there are few members of the Shewan nobility who do not have Oromo genealogical links’ (Levine, 2003). During the first half of the 20th century, the term Amhara is used to refer to ‘Ethiopian’ as opposed to ‘ferenj’ which stands for ‘foreigner’. As Girma refers to the advertisement for a horse race during the time of empress Zwuditu (1916–1930), one of the schedules of the race was reserved for only Ethiopians written in the Amharic text as ‘Amhara’ (Girma, 2009). As Greenfield states, cited in Chernetsov,: ‘the people of Merabete are partly of [Oromo] descent and [Oromo] living in the nearby Shewan fief Fichie, though many speak only a few words of Amharic, tend increasingly to describe themselves as Shewan and Amhara’ (Chernetsov, 1993, p. 101).

Historically, ‘Amhara’ is associated with a settled human group in the north-central highlands of Ethiopia later fractured into provincial constituents such as Gojjam, Shewa, Gonder/Begemidir and Wollo (Levine, 1974). Particularly, he writes as ‘The Amhara as a whole are not much given to aesthetic concerns. They are practical-minded peasants, austere religionists, and spirited warriors. Their interests and achievements as a nation are chiefly in the spheres of military activity and government’ (Levine, 1965). Amhara is also known for its interest and energy for local units and at the same time looking to others which may offer greater economic opportunities and less restrictive regimes (Levine, 1974). It rarely expresses strong solidarity to all Amhara and identifying themselves either on a provincial basis or supra-ethnic terms such as Habesha or Ethiopia (Levine, 1974). As a people, the Amhara can mobilize when it called upon the situation which threatened their land possession in which Ethiopia in within, religion, and wife rather than its ethnic members (Baye, 2008). They respond to the call of a military campaign from the ruler with no hesitation and marching wherever and adapting and living everywhere. Chernetsov (1993, p. 102) also confirmed this and writes as ‘They are not self-centered at all, nor indifferent for the fate of Ethiopian state and the whole country, and demonstrated it during the Ethio-Somali conflict’. In the cultural dimension, Amhara is associated with the Amharic language which is exclusively its own as opposed to a culture shared with Tigray (Markakis, 2005). Unlike the language, cultural stuff that they enclosed in is presented as it is supposed to belong to a wider Ethiopian case than the Amhara only. In this regard Chernetsov writes as:



The Amhara are keeping some cultural traits which are not ethnic strictly speaking, and belong to a wider Ethiopian culture. They are devoted Christians and the church this ancient national institution plays a vital role in their everyday life. They still consider themselves to be Ethiopian par excellence and preserved a taste for government and administration on a national level. (Chernetsov, 1993, p. 102)

Markakis (2005) underlined that the ethnographic, historical as well as cultural dimensions do not 'disclose a crucial historical fact' without looking into the sociological dimension of Amhara that is characterized by a rigidly stratified social structure. He also writes as 'The class dimension needs to be emphasized, because the Amhara peasantry belonged to the dominant group in cultural and psychological terms only, having no share of power or economic privilege' (Markakis, 2003, p. 9).

From the above various descriptions about the term 'Amhara', one can understand that it is hard to specify its way of mobilization be it social or ethnic. Referring to the literature of the Russian travelers and the works of other foreign scholars on Ethiopia, Chernetsov concluded as "'Amhara" probably never had a close definition and always meant more social than ethnic group' (Chernetsov, 1993, p. 100).

### *The origin of Amhara*

Based on the modern scholarship about the origin of 'Amhara', Chernetsov has made the army of the emperor since the time of the 13th century that is responsible for both the expansion of the Ethiopian empire and Amharic language and culture. He writes as 'this army was naturally not recruited exclusively from the population of Amhara province ... [and] these soldiers were of quite different origins and background' (Chernetsov, 1993, p. 98). In contrast to the assertion that limits the back history of Amhara to 1270, it has been argued that the Amhara are one of the oldest and endogenous groups of people in Ethiopia (Mesganaw, 2018).

Such controversial justifications emanated from the two contending historical and linguistic hypotheses on the origin of Ethio-Semitic people and the Amharic language. These are according to Girma (2009), the pidgin origin of Amharic language which is built on, though no hundred percent connections, the migration hypothesis of Ethio-Semitic people on the one hand and non-pidgin origin of the Amharic language and the non-migration hypothesis of Ethio-Semitic people on the other. The first assumption considers these people as descendants of those who emigrated from South Arabia in the first century B.C. The second hypothesis claims that the Ethio-Semitic are autochthons groups that lived in their home origin. While the first hypothesis is the most widely known explanation in various historical and linguistic works such as Baye (2008 E.C 2009), Bender (1983) and Taddese (1972) the second one is an emerging which is gaining ground in recent years. This pidgin theory for Amharic language and the people has been debunked by the recent hypothesis which claims Amharic is not a pidgin rather a distinct and the Semitic people in which the Amhara are dominant, are indigenous to Ethiopia (Girma, 2009). Considering the fact that Amharic exhibits a number of non-Semitic features due to later influence. Indeed, there are non-Semitic features in other ethio-Semitic languages and Amharic could not be the exception (Girma, 2009).

The migration hypothesis is largely suggested by historians based on the fact that cultural presence of South Arabia elements in the northern part of Ethiopia. However, historians like Sergew (1972) and Marcus (2002) maintained that the Ethio-Semitic people are indigenous groups to Ethiopia. They suggested that the origin of Amharic hardly associated with the rise of Zagwe dynasty and its place of origin to be somewhere in the central part of Ethiopia and the birth of Amharic dated at much earlier period in the central part of Ethiopia among the Amhara people (Marcus, 2002; Sergew, 1972). Girma has presented two linguistic shreds of evidence to deconstruct the migration hypothesis: diversity and the least move principles. The first is about the existence of a diversity of Semitic language such that diversity indicates origin. Ethio-Semitic languages are the most diversified languages within Semitic (Girma, 2009). The second reason is the 'least move' principle 'it suggested that the origin of the proto-Afro-Asiatic language (peoples) in Africa, especially in Ethiopia.' This is because, 'only a few of Semitic languages are spoken in Asia while the rest are spoken in Africa' (Girma, 2009, p. 144).

### The terms of the debate on Amhara ethnicity

Following the radical student movement and their national question framed in Walleign Mekonen's and Tilahun Takele's articles, the issue of 'Amhara' appeared to be a recent political discourse. The main argument of Walleign's manifesto was his rejection of the idea of Ethiopia as a nation and the 'Ethiopian people' in *single person singular*. Rather he characterized it as a collection of nationalities. Walleign Mekonen's article was staged as the first official claim of the national question as he defined Amhara as a dominant and oppressive nation. The first assertion that Walleign makes is the presence of national oppression from the view of the imposition of cultural and political hegemony of Amhara and to some extent Amhara-Tigre over other nationalities (Walleign, 1969). Walleign and his colleagues have taken the idea of oppressor/oppressed ethnic groups only from the view of Marxist-Leninist perspective without showing interest to understand the Ethiopian history and ethnography. They grasped unparalleled ideologies from such kinds of literatures and tried to apply it in a very different context in Ethiopia. Immediately after the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) set up in 1991, the issue of Amhara became the epicenter of the political debate. Its immediate cause was the question of why the Amhara was not represented in the July 1991 'peace and democratic conference' which ratified the Transitional Charter. Soon it has got political and scholarly dimensions.

Despite the question of 'who is Amhara?' became sensitive political agenda in post-1991, the first person who tried to define it was Mengistu Haile Mariyam prior to TPLF/EPRDF's control of power (Mengistu, n.d.). He insisted there is no Amhara identity; even the name Amhara was coined by the foreigners to signify 'people of the mountain'. According to Mengistu, the name 'Amhara in Ethiopia' is understood as *degegn* (highlander) and he emphasized that Amharic is not belong to an ethnic category (Mengistu, n.d.).

A heated debate was held on the existence of 'Amhara' as a distinct ethnic group between Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariyam (leading educated elite) and Meles Zenawi (the chairman of EPRDF and president of TGE by the time) in a widely televised program in the autumn of 1991 (Meles & Mesfin, 1991). In the debate, Mesfin argued there is no ethnic

Amhara and it is difficult to represent which does not exist. To him, the people use the term Amhara to refer the religious or provincial identification not ethnicity. Meles contended Mesfin's argument and underlines the presence of Amhara ethnicity since it has distinct language, culture and common history. He argued, evidence (features) presented by Professor Mesfin witnessed in all ethnic groups. But there is an essence that makes oromo, Tigre or Amhara is an ethnic group. In 1993 the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement (EDPM), one of the coalition member of EPRDF, changed in to Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) to mobilize the Amhara people.

In response to the execution and mass displacement of 'Amhara people' from the new national self-administration territories a political party was established in the name of Amhara for the first time: All Amhara People Organization (AAPO) which later changed into All Ethiopian Unity Organization (AEUO). In its statement, AAPO announced that the purpose of its establishment is: 'representing the people and strive without delay to see to it that the interests, aspirations, democratic rights, and freedom of the Amhara people are respected where ever they are found' (AAPO Program, as cited in Getachew, 1992). AAPO's conception of Amhara ethnicity i.e. reactive ethnicity with a protectionist agenda was criticized by the then-educated elites to maintain its Pan-Ethiopian sentiment. Professor Getachew Haile has suggested that AAPO would reconsider its identity conception and the naming of the party itself. He writes as:

I would prefer to call [AAPO] All Ethiopian People Organization and change and replace the aim from [which says] 'It will strive without delay to see to it that the interests, aspirations, democratic rights and freedom of the Amhara people are respected wherever they are found' in to 'it will strive without delay to see to it that the interests, aspirations, democratic rights and freedom of minorities and other peoples not organized by ethnicity are respected' (Getachew, 1992).

Following the political debate held, conceptualizing the 'Amhara ethnicity' in terms of supra-ethnic consciousness had been strengthened in justifying the non-existent of Amhara ethnicity. Underlining the advent of ethnicity as EPRDF's conspiracy, Getachew has urged all the 'Amharic speakers' need to resist the dividing terms of EPRDF: 'the oppressed' and 'the glorious Amhara nation,' is to continue the Amhara identity playing a binding role across ethnic groups of the country. For Getachew, Amhara is an ethnic Ethiopia.; he calls for the Amharic speakers: 'Your glory is your acceptance of every Ethiopian as a member of your ethnic group, Ethiopia, and your role to serve as a bridge between ethnic groups' (Getachew, 1992).

A more summarized account on the side of those who claim there is no Amhara ethnicity was brought by Takkele. According to Takkele, as cited in Michael (2008, p. 396) the Amhara can 'be said to exist in the sense of being a fused stock, a supra-ethnically conscious ethnic Ethiopian serving as the pot in which all the other ethnic groups are supposed to melt'. Similarly, Tegegn argued Amhara as a group with no myth of common descent and shared historical memories and a link with a homeland given that they have several homelands (Tegegne, 1998). There was a loud voice that came out from the proponents of 'there is no Amhara ethnicity' through scholarship and media outlets. On the opposite camp, only Andargachew (1993) wrote a book called 'the Amhara People: from where to where' (*Ye Amaraw Hizb Keyet wedet*). Buying Meles's criteria of ethnicity, he defined Amhara as a group of people who have a similar language, culture, and history.

He also maintained that Amhara as a group appears in relation to other groups. And he urged the need for organizing along Amhara ethnic line. He further criticized the religious and topographic connotation of Amhara as 'a narrow definition trying to make the Christian and highlander Oromo, Tigrian and even German ethnic Amhara which is impossible'.

Within the academic debate, Chernetsov had come up with a well-briefly elaborated article on the question of who is Amhara. He had described Amhara as 'a culture of assimilation at the imperial court'. He underlined the way that Amhara managed to expand to other territories and dominated Ethiopian politics for centuries (Chernetsov, 1993). The land tenure system was crucial in the expansion of the Amharic language and culture. The military regiments of medieval Ethiopia called *Chewa* were predominantly multi-ethnic but embraced Amharic language and culture in which they receive *Gult* lands as a salary for their military service. Here Chernetsov also hinted at the presence of two interrelated Amhara identities: the rural Amhara and the Amharic imperial court culture. There was a close connection existed between Amhara peasant and the military class that the former wants to have *Gult* land and in order to have land he should serve in the army (Chernetsov, 1993).

Building upon Chernetsov's work on the 'Amhara identity', Pausewang has come up with his concept of the two-faced Amhara identity: urban and rural. The former is 'predominantly urban elite group maintains a distinctive supra-ethnic and Pan-Ethiopian outlook'. The latter is 'a rural Amhara population living in large parts of northern Ethiopia ... adopted a rural Amhara culture, self-consciousness, and ethnicity' (Pausewang, 2005, pp. 273–274). He underlined that despite the two are similar on Pan-Ethiopian sentiment, culture, and language, they are different in regard to social, economic, and political interests. Pausewang has concerned that nobody among the Ethiopianist scholars reacted to Chernetsov's presentation of the ethnogenesis of Amhara. This is related to, as he proposes, either the journal hardly gets the attention of scholars due to limited expansion or the attitude of elites who do not want to see any distinction between not only the Amhara and other ethnic groups of Ethiopia but also the urban and rural Amhara (Pausewang, 2005).

Mesfin came back with his enduring argument via his book '*ye kihdet kulkulet*' published 12 years after the first debate with Meles televised in late 1991. He said 'I mean there was (is) no Amhara is to refer that there is no *Gosa* called Amhara but now, Amhara as a *Gosa* is created by the direct order of the TPLF (Mesfin, 1996, E.C. 2004). He also maintained as it is the betrayal of Ethiopia by TPLF which transformed Amhara into an ethnic group. In the nutshell, the central argument of Mesfin's argument both in this book and various interviews with local media outlets afterward was the Amhara neither have the origin of common descent nor a political identity manifested through a mobilized Amhara people to achieve some socio-economic as well as political goals as a group. Leading oppositions from pan-Ethiopian political parties appeared to support Mesfin's argument accompanied by presenting experiences of their home origin on some occasions. For example, Yikal Getnet, former president of Blue Party and currently the leader of the Ethiopian National Movement (ENM) said to life magazine as:

People you called Amhara [to the journalist] do not believe in the existence of the Amhara ethnic group. I am from Gojjam. We used to say Amhara-Islam for religious identity. I know about the issue of the Amhara ethnic group when I joined the university for the first time. Unlike other ethnic groups of the country, it does not count genealogical descent. And I don't believe that it is appropriate to establish an ethnic-based political party for Amhara and tied up on only ethnic interests. If this happened, I believe that will be the end of Ethiopia (Yilkal, 2013).

The fluidity and instability of identity conceptions are witnessed in the terms of the debate over 'Amhara ethnicity'. Like the political reconfiguration of the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement /EPDM/ (from national to ethnic) and AAPO (from ethnic to national) in the late 1990s, the same has happened recently that those individuals who were active in the debate of the 1990s shift their positions. Whilst Andargachew 'came up with there is no Amhara ethnic group since it cannot claim common descent', Getachew argued 'the question "does the Amhara exists as a distinct ethnic identity" is the question of fools'. Andargachew (2020) said that:

Amharaness is an identity that follows the birth of the Amharic language and does not have an ethnic root. Since Amharic is a pidgin so do the Amaras and I call myself Amhara in that sense; not tracing my bloodline. There is no Amhara identity emanated from an ethnic core rather it is the legacy of interaction between identities through the state system for a thousand years.

Getachew has revisited the issue of Amhara and identified two faces of Amhara identity: 'Amharic-Amharic and xxx-Amharic'. The first is those who are primordially Amhara and the second is those who abandoned their pre-existing ethnic identities and assimilated into the culture of the state which was taken from the former (Getachew, n.d.). However, Getachew has not changed his claim of Amhara as ethnic Ethiopia and both types of categories have only one identity i.e. Ethiopianess. This is because according to him, the 'xxx-Amharic' neither wants to be called an Amhara nor claim their former ethnic origin since Amhara has already become the state's culture. Yilkal, has also recently revised this position with greater sympathy to Amhara ethno-nationalism. He clearly supported the idea and practice that Amhara need to organized to protect their interests. He said that:

EPRDF says that ethnic groups were oppressed. The oppressor group as it has been reiterated for a half-century is Amhara. Currently, Amhara have been experiencing double oppression: economic marginalization with all other ethnic groups and suffer separate victimization. Thus I encourage the Amhara to be organized based on ethnic line to resist such victimization (Yilkal, 2019).

Various social anthropologists underlined that the role of diverse situational contexts in understanding ethnicity and ethnic relations. Barth and Nagata accorded the variability of ethnicity is determined by the actors' perceptions and understandings of cultural symbols and signs in social situations (Barth, 1998; Nagata, 1974). The situational approach to ethnicity 'illuminates the fact that variability is the essence of ethnicity in its significance for the structuring of social relations in diverse situational contexts' (Okamura, 1981, p. 463). From the above discussion one can understand that the weight of context in the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of identity discourses and practices even in the life span of individuals.

### *Re-defining Amhara: the Amhara ethno-nationalism*

One year before the Amhara protests, some bloggers and activists (most of them were from the diaspora) began to write on social media about the need for a struggle based on an ethnic line. This can be viewed from Anderson's (1983) speculation about the crucial role of print media in the formation and spread of nationalism. Unlike print capitalism, the digital one, particularly Facebook and Twitter have been major sites of identity construction instrumental in enhancing Amhara ethnic consciousness among the youths. Most of the ideas came out from a movement called *Bete Amhara* to mean House of Amhara via its web page. It advocates separatist agenda claiming that 'if being an Amhara is a crime in federal Ethiopia, an Amhara independent statehood shall be established'.

This social media discourse had coincided with the Amhara protests, a surprise turnout for both the government and the Amhara activists. Condemning the TPLF's dominance and the annexation of the territory of Wolkait to the neighboring Tigray, Amhara in their regional state went to the streets and were shot. The immediate cause of the Amhara protests was the attempted arrest of Colonel Demeke Zewdu on 12 July 2016, by the federal security forces. He was and is urged for a return of the Wolkait district to the Amhara state in his position as leader of the Wolkait Identity Question Committee. The protests have been used as a platform to voice discontent over alleged government repression of the Amhara as well as to promote a budding ethnic nationalism among them. During these times, slogans reflected a sense of victimization such as: 'Being an Amhara is not a crime,' and 'Respect Amharaness'. The Oromo protest which started in 2014 now got momentum in 2016 when the Amhara protest joined it, eventually leading to fragmentation within the EPRDF.

The debate over the existence of Amhara started afresh and the Amhara activists have been responded in passionately evoked arguments. Those who argue that there is no Amhara ethnicity are considered as persons caught by Amhara hatred if not enemies. The Amhara activists accused the Pan-Ethiopianist camp as it contributed to the securitization measures of the government by preventing the people from ethnic consciousness which the only playing card in the country's political system. The pan-Ethiopianists in turn accused the Amhara nationalists as agents of TPLF's divisive politics which endangered the territorial integrity of the country and Ethiopian national identity. Following the establishment of NaMA in June 2018, the fierce opposition immediately came from the Pan-Ethiopianists camp. NaMA is able to hold the fundamental questions raised in the Amhara protests and makes part of its program. It aimed to reverse victimization and the threat to the survival of the Amhara people emanated from anti-Amhara narratives and ensuring the effective participation of Amhara in socio-political and economic aspects of the country (NaMA Program). Amhara nationalists have been engaged redefining the Amhara ethnicity both in a primordial sense and reactive having a protectionist agenda.

Mesganaw's and Tedla's writings on social media and self-published books have been used as the ideological and academic back for Amhara activism as well as political mobilizations respectively in post-2018. Both rejected the assumption Amhara does not have common descent. Mesganaw (2018) traces the ideas of common origin of Amhara to the biblical Jethro claiming the described values; the way of life and geographic feature indicated the Amhara people and their current homeland. Tedla (2018) underlines Amhara is the direct descendants of earliest Agaziean-Sabeian tribes who originated in

Ethiopia and designated as the south-central Semitic category. Despite their differences on the genesis of ethno-linguistics of Amhara, both Girma (2009) on one side and Tedla and Mesganaw on the other, agreed on two fundamental findings: the indigenouslyness of Amhara to Ethiopia and the non-pidgin nature of Amharic language. This deconstructs the dominant assumption and historical narrative that Semitic people were migrated from South Arabia that used as the foundation for the 'settler colonialism' thesis. This autochthony claim could be also viewed as a reaction to the indigenous claim of other ethnicities particularly by the Oromo nationalists who have presented the Amhara as 'outsiders'. The discourse it is a reaction to the presentation of the Oromos as 'aliens' to the Ethiopian body politic; a mutually constituted deconstructionist indigenous discourse.

Here, it is not the self-ascription of Amhara or Pan-Ethiopian groups most matter in the process of identity conception among the Amhara. Rather what matters most is how others see them. From the perspective of ethno-nationalist, people who affiliate themselves with Ethiopian national identity and speak only Amharic language without acknowledging their ethnic identity have been seen as Amhara. The relational aspect of ethnicity has been seen in the university campuses, another site of Amhara identity formation. Researches have pointed out the campus climate to ethnic diversity has negatively affected the relation of students as ethnocentrism is the hallmark of universities (Abera, 2010; Desalegn & Seyoum, 2020). Students from the 'Amhara' background first surprised as they were defined as Amhara by their counterparts from other ethnic backgrounds with some characteristics and develop their ethnic consciousness on the campus. One key informant recalls his lived experience:

Until the time I joined the university I know the name Amhara used to refer to Orthodox Christian and I know as I am an Ethiopian. In the university, I discovered that students have their own ethnic membership. They told me that they can recognize me as an Amhara. My home origin and mother tongue were enough for them to designate me and my Muslim friend as an Amhara.

The Amhara living in other self-governing entities suffer from forced displacement, persecution, and property confiscations. This is largely due to the Amhara blame narratives diffused informally from the political actors of EPRDF. Data from the displaced people from Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Southern regional states indicated that for the 'owners' of those sub-national units, all are Amhara so far as they speak Amharic irrespective of their provincial origin or religion. For instance, those people evicted from Muslim-dominated Oromia and Somali region in 2018 were Muslims by religion originated from the Wollo province of the Amhara region.

The relational and security impacts of the 'Amhara oppressor' narrative on 'Amhara' students and people who enrolled and resided outside of the Amhara region respectively is visible especially in the past two decades. As a result, Amhara nationalists largely framed the movement in response to victimization inflicted from what they call 'anti-Amhara narratives' and its state machinery. Hence, the mobilization of Amhara identity can suitably portray as reactive as it began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its authenticity. This reaction was not limited to the activism and the relatively new party NaMA. The 'rebranded' ruling party of the region, APP has also the same assertions that the cause of all problems is the 'Amhara oppressor' narrative and its consequent institutionalization. The party secretary Abraham Alehegn (interview, October 2020) says:



The root of all the causes [perceived and real socio-political and economic marginalization as well as territorial annexations] are inherent in the persistent presence of political discourse that considers Amhara as an oppressive if not a colonialist which later changed into constitutional and federal arrangement. We have a stand that both are not genuine and struggled in the EPRDF.

The characterization of 'Amhara' as '*Ahadawi*' which stands for 'unitarist' and 'timkihtagna' (an Amharic term that refers to chauvinist) was one of the informal narratives that prevailed over the political climate of Ethiopia for decades (Anwar, 2018). One of the officials of APP and senior members of the party since it was EPDM has shared his lived experience in this regard. He says:

They [TPLF members] talk distressing things about Amhara in the party meetings then we [some members of the then ANDM] comment such acts are inappropriate then they immediately accused us as *timikihtegna*. The Amhara need to stay calm even they have been hurt. Many members expelled from the party for their resistance against such status quo. When claims raised over wolkayit immediately after demarcation, the TPLF says *timkihtegnet* has relapsed in the party subsequently many demoted and expelled.

The above terms, 'unitarist' and 'timkitegna' clearly stand for the 'arrogant Amhara nationalists whose ethnic affiliation is Ethiopianess which claim the past regime to restore' (Anwar, 2018).

In the process, 'Amhara' endured irreversible damage, and pursuing pan Ethiopian agenda is now perceived to be costly. Subsequently, the Amhara nationalists are redefined ethnically within a political system in which the rule of the game is protecting the interests of one's own identity group (Meganaw, 2018). Hence, Amhara ethno-nationalism is just an approach in which ethnic Amhara would redefine their interests collectively centered on victimization and securing their survival. Mesganaw put the situation that Amhara encountered in a metaphorical expression in which represented by the fate of a person who 'idly watching while his counterpart sojourners partitioned a tent in the desert and secluded and expand to have their separate rooms by pushing away him'.

Amhara ethno-nationalism also understands that the unsuited nature of the expression of one's identity is only Ethiopian. This is because equating Amhara identity with Ethiopia is ignoring or minimizing the Ethiopianess of other ethnic groups (Mesganaw, 2018). In this regard, NaMA opposes the idea that there is no Amhara ethnicity. Dr. Desalegn Chanie, former president of NaMA, (interview, 10 October 2020) mentions one of the 'red lines' that NaMA will not negotiate over or compromise is to sit to bargain with those political actors who do not recognize Amhara as an ethnic group in the Ethiopian political arena. Here it seems to suggest that Amhara ethno-nationalism defines Amhara ethnic identity in relation to others while taking Ethiopian identity as an identity of all ethno-cultural groups in which Amhara is part.

## Conclusion

This article addresses the terms of debate on the issue of Amhara concerning the newly emerged Amhara ethno-nationalism. The article focuses on the constructivism approach to ethnicity formulated by Fredrick Barth. According to Barth, ethnicity is fluid and ethnic boundaries are not stable which undergo changes from time to time based on socio-

historical contexts. In the Ethiopian political discourse, the fluidity and controversy over Amhara ethnic identity are coming to the fore. Amhara is the only identity that is the center of the debate than other ethnic groups of the country. Moreover, in the last, nearly three decades' actors and political parties shift their subscription from Amhara to Ethiopian identity and the other way around. The reason seems clear. The Amhara ethnic identity has been attached to the Ethiopian national identity because of its significant involvement in modern Ethiopian state-building.

Proponents of the idea that Amhara does not exist as an ethnicity espouse a Pan-Ethiopian nationalism and reject the Amharic language's attribution and its speakers to an ethnic category. It is part of the broader critic of ethnicity as a focus of social identity and unit of political participation which undermines national cohesion. Instead, Ethiopian national identity is promoted as a supra ethnic identity that ethnic groups need to integrate into. The irony of this argument could be two. On the one hand, it is probably an attempt to escape from the burden of political discourse put on the name Amhara. Hence, at an individual level, no one wants to appear a member of an ethnic group which criminalized for oppression. On the other hand, at the political elite level, they might want to use all Amhara which is affiliated to the Pan-Ethiopian identity used as a melting pot.

Opposed to this view of Amhara identity those who argue in favor of Amhara ethnicity not only in the primordial sense of the term but also in the sense of reactive ethnicity; that Amharas have already been designated by other ethnic groups of the country as 'the dominant ethnic group based on the "national oppression" thesis with roots in the students' movement of the 1960s and 70s. Proponents of Amhara ethnicity argue that this negative framing has created deep-seated insecurity, especially for those Amharas who live outside of the Amhara region, who have been vulnerable to attacks by other ethnic groups. Amhara is also challenging the assumption that equating Amhara identity with Ethiopian national identity ignores or diminishes the 'Ethiopianess' of other ethnic groups. The assumption that there was no Amhara ethnicity/nationality in the distant past does not mean it won't be developed in the future. Indeed, the ethnic sentiment gets more and more visible in relation to other ethnic mobilizations and subsequent othering. Moreover, currently, the Amhara ethnicity has been officially emerged and has openly confronted with the camp that denies its existence. No one can be sure about the sustainability of such identity conception but clearly, an Amhara political identity is already established with its institutions.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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