

Ethiopian Statecraft and the Enigmatic Amara

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This note offers tentative thoughts on the consequences for Ethiopia of atavistic political ethnicity. It does this by looking at the dilemma facing the Amara, as the prominent upholders of Ethiopian nationalism and hence as targets of ethnicist persecution, through the prism of the incomplete project of transforming Ethiopia from a historic Christian state into a modern supraethnic republican state. It will hopefully throw some light on the tepid response from the Amara so far, and on the inherent danger of infantile ethnocentrism for the national political fabric.

State Formation is a Protracted and Violent Process

The constitutionalization of political ethnicity in Ethiopia in 1994, whatever the motivation of the victors of the protracted civil war of the two preceding decades, has produced the tell-tale signs of state de-building. The flagbearer of the modern Ethiopian state, the patrimonial state elite led by the 'Amara' of Shewa and by extension all Amara marked by some as "the oppressor nation," have been subjected to a clearly orchestrated ethnic cleansing from the civil service, the military, key economic activities, and longstanding settlements outside of its ancestral lands.

As in the heydays of state building in Europe and Asia (c. 1850-1990), the borders of Ethiopia's 'regional states' have been delimited, a project of moving or physical elimination of 'aliens' is underway, if only haphazardly, as newly empowered local elites rush to create their own ethnically homogenous populations; the regionalized public education system and public administration have been deployed to accentuate separateness and to impose cultural assimilation on those who cannot be expelled; and claims of actual or imagined nationhood are being peddled in the hope of fusing political identity with territorial identity. The nihilistic search for 'a piece of rock for a country and a rag for a flag,' as Hagos Gebreyesus memorably put it, is universally bloody (Fukuyama, 2014: 193): "[T]he stability of modern Western Europe was built on ethnic cleansings that had taken place in earlier historical periods, which modern Europeans had conveniently forgotten."

Ethiopia, of course, has a pedigreed political history having had an independent state centered on the north-central provinces at least since the medieval era. This is no mean feat since few societies were able to overcome the challenges of establishing central authority by transcending the limits of kinship (friends and family), subsistence production, and control over independent-minded tributary populations. Where Ethiopia has not yet succeeded is in transforming itself into a modern political order whereby the state embraces the rule of law, the consent of the governed through an appropriate mechanism of accountability of power-holders, a secure territory, and a fiscal base for basic public service delivery.

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What is in a Name: Amhara versus Amara

I want to clarify at the outset the interchangeable and confusing labels that are commonly applied to inherently overlapping identities (Levine, 2003). Properly speaking, “**Amhara**” refers to the historic region between Beshilo River in the north, the Kassam River in the south, the Abbay River in the west and the Afar escarpment in the east—basically, southern Wollo and northern Shewa provinces. The kings of Amhara supplied the Emperors of the medieval Ethiopian state between the Zagwe and Gondar (c. 1270-1570). Along with its Gondarine successor (c. 1570-1770), the reach of the Abyssinian tributary state stretched from the Bogos to Wolayta and Bali under Amde Tseyon (1314-1344) and then under Sarsa Dingel (1563-1597).

A quasi-modern state emerged subsequently (c. 1770-1900) following a protracted political contestation for control of the Throne among the elites of major Abyssinian polities. The Agaw, the Tigre, the Amara, and two Amara-Oromo assimilated dynasties (the Mammadoch of Wollo and the Woresehoch of Yeju as well as the Menze of Shewa) all took turns serving as flagbearer of the pan-ethnic Christian state. The ‘physiology of state-making’ is such that all great states were forged by fire under flagbearers a historically-determined hegemonic political culture: the non-Chinese Manchu rulers ironically upheld the Mandarin high culture, the English rode roughshod over others in forging the state in the UK and its offshoots, and the French, the Spanish and the Turks did likewise.

The Shewan State of the twentieth century, led by a hybrid multiethnic coalition of state elites (often misidentified as Amara), managed to expand southwards to double the territorial reach of the post-1880 Ethiopian state, moved the administrative and economic hub to the Addis Ababa region, and thereby marginalized the power centers in the historically autonomous provinces of the North as well as in the various kingdoms and principalities of the greater South. Appreciating this history is key to understanding why ambitious and disgruntled political elites today have opted for group rights and ethnic fiefdoms.

Parenthetically, the word “**Amara**” is variously used to refer to three competing and conflated identifiers for the illustrious people who hail mostly from the Amhara region (Levine, 2003). Each is a distinctive and context-specific identity with varying mixes of culture and politics:

- *Amara 1* is a religious identity which refers to adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church regardless of lineage or region of birth. To wit: At a wedding feast where dietary customs are salient, there is nothing odd in a Tigrigna speaker of Oromo origin from Raya self-identifying as Amara just as an Amara from Gondar would do likewise as a Muslim.
- *Amara 2* is a national identity which refers to the political, that is, Ethiopian either as a subject of the Emperor or a citizen of a republican state. *Amara 2* may therefore be a legendary cavalry (*fereseigna*) from Damot (today’s Wollega) serving under Sarsa Dingel’s or Menelik’s praetorian guards (*mehal sefari*). The case of urbanized or multiple-heritage Ethiopians, of course, obviously falls under this category. It is in this sense that the icons of Ethiopian statehood, including Amharic itself, are the joint products of its diverse and far-flung peoples. Yes, Axum has as much *symbolic* significance for a Wolayta as it does for a Tigre. Ownership of the storied ancient kingdom, we now know, legitimately goes to the Agaw and the Kunama. It is indeed intellectually lazy as well as politically dangerous to infer claims to a civilization or a territory based on current patterns of settlement.
- *Amara 3* is a linguistic identity which refers to those for whom Amharic is a mother tongue and who self-identifies as such. This purely cultural identity has so far proved impervious to politicization. While ethnic identification may be salient in some parts of Ethiopia where daily life is governed in important ways by tribal institutions, it would be fair to say that the

vast majority of Ethiopians in the central highlands have lived under state rules and/or pan-ethnic regional customs.

Why the Amara are Understandably Befuddled by Atavistic Political Ethnicity

In all three senses, the Amara are arguably the most detribalized of Ethiopia's cultural groups since Amaraland is bereft of non-state and non-parish authority governing access to resources or social life. In terms of political consciousness, the ethnic Amara is the weaker of the religious Amara or the Ethiopianist Amara whether one resides in the government-designated homeland (the Amhara Regional State, ARS, one of the poorest states which contains three quarters of Amara) or elsewhere in Ethiopia. Even within ARS, regional identification (in terms of districts or parishes) is more salient.

Ethnic cultural (or even political) *awareness*, which is inherent in human beings as social animals, should not be confused with ethnocentric political *consciousness*. As the leading members of the multiethnic ruling class which acted remarkably collectively in defense of the state from external aggression and in expanding the state's territorial control within the "greater Ethiopia" culture area, the Amara of the Gondarine and the Shewan states did not and could not have ruled on behalf of their ethnic kin (but did rule on behalf of their religious kins just as their contemporary Muslim contemporaries in Harrar and Jimma did). Levine (1974: 185) captures the genius of the Amara political class quite aptly, "They proved politically successful largely because their societal community was defined as a nation rather than as a tribal or sub-tribal entity. The Amhara elite was fairly exclusive during the centuries of initial expansion, it clearly broadened its ethnic base in the succeeding period: both Galla [Oromo] and Tigreans came to play important roles in court politics and royal military campaigns after the seventeenth century." This process is obviously not complete: historically-rooted state building (military, administrative and territorial) has yet to be fully complemented by nation-building (through industrialization and standardized educational services) and capped by popular sovereignty.

By the same token, the sophomoric characterization of the Amara (elite and non-elite alike) by Wallelign (1969: 2) as inherently supremacist is ironically a tribute to the iconic nature of the Amara synthesis of various cultures into an Ethiopian one: "To be a 'genuine Ethiopian,' one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity, and to wear the Amhara-Tigre *shamma* in international conferences." One only wishes that he added cuisine, intermarriage, the unusually modern (but not yet equal) status of women for a traditional society, and *yilugnta* to this remarkable legacy of Amharic speakers.

Distressingly, while 'Amara the Christian' has adjusted quite nicely to the belated separation of church and state and the Amara of the Bantustan refuses to be born, 'Amara the flagbearer' of Ethiopian nationalism continues to endure the indignities of progressive loss of status which actually began around 1800 (and much earlier for Tigreans). The first impetus for the decline came with the eventual demise of the Gondarine State as ambitious upstarts (from Yeju, Enderta, Wollo, Simien, Gojam, Menz, and Lasta), with a historical sense of equal entitlement to be Emperor, scrambled for the Crown from all sides.

Even the nature of the momentous historical forces which induced these inversions the center and the periphery is quite instructive. The decline of the Amara-dominated state was a consequence of the devastating aftereffects of Ahmed Grag's Jihad of the early 1500s and the ensuing and equally destabilizing invasion of the central provinces primarily by Oromo pastoralists. As in the case of other major pastoralist polities conquering settled societies (Huns, Aryans, Mongols, Vikings, Germans), replicable or segmentary lineage promoted the emergence effective institutions (such as *gada*) for predatory territorial expansion that resulted in wanton destruction

of settled civilizations. Unable to rule over settled communities for lack of state-level institutions, pastoralists such as the Somali, the Oromo, and the Nuer developed the knack for culturally absorbing their enemies. Absorption, of course, is how the two initially small but aggressive groups managed to become the two largest groups in Ethiopia today: the Amara by assimilating the Agaw through church and state institutions, and the Oromo by assimilating the various Sidama peoples through fictive kinship.

A second source of marginalization for the Amara (as well as the other peoples of the old north) was the rise of the hybrid Shewan State at the end of the nineteenth century which, while upholding the icons of Amara culture, nonetheless appointed its loyalists and quartered its *neftegna* (soldiers) in large parts of the old north (especially Wollo and Begmdir) just as it did in the reconquered south (albeit in with greater harshness). This would explain why a random survey of high schoolers around 1970 in Mekelle, Gondar, Dessie, Debre Markos, and even Debre Birhan might very well have produced a uniformly deep-seated resentment of neglect against the myopic government in Addis Ababa—a fact TPLF cleverly but shortsightedly exploited.

The last, and most blunt, source of disaffection came with the demonization by the left-wing student movement, the military regime, and then the TPLF-OLF-EPLF troika which gave birth to an ethnic-based regional-state system feeding dreams of myriad Eritreas. The rent-seeking ethnocrats have predictably chosen to scapegoat the Amara for undeserved collective punishment.

Amara Self-Awareness Metastasizing into Political Ethnic Consciousness?

The billion-Birr question then is how the Amara will react to ill-treatment and indifference by their hapless compatriots, and what this might mean for the future of the Ethiopian state. Resistance to forming an ethnic-Amara political party appears to be giving way to self-defense organizations and even separationist sentiments. To appreciate how playing with the fire of ethnic hatred is fraught with unintended consequences, it will be good to remember that mutual recognition is a precondition for social trust. A sense of self-worth by any group in society is only partially internal; it also depends on the willingness of other competing groups in society to acknowledge the worth of the Other. This is why status contests which lack good-will are inherently negative-sum games. Where a group is discriminated informally or as a matter of government policy, cultural self-awareness eventually gives way to inherently exclusionary group consciousness.

Furthermore, political development is all about the transformation of political identification with the lineage to identification with a larger community of a transcendent state. To try to do the reverse is political retrogression. The Amara are distinctive in Ethiopian society for completing the transformation from an ethnic polity to a nation under a multinational state.

It is, therefore, no cliché that Ethiopia today is standing at the dangerous cross-roads as far as the Amara are concerned. One obvious path is redoubling pan-Ethiopian activism in favor of the consolidation of a modern Ethiopian multiethnic state in the face of an existential threat to the traditional channels (Amharic, public education, and the Church or the Mosque) for socializing the youth into Ethiopian citizenship. The second option is to go for self-preservation and prepare for the formation of an Amara State as a culmination of the forces of re-tribalization unleashed by Article 39 of the Constitution (the right of nations, nationalities, and peoples to secede).

Excessive politicization of economic and social life in Africa (Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan being closest to home), the Middle East (Syria being the most pertinent case), the Balkans, and Eurasia has for sure had an unbroken record of tragically ending in mutually destructive civil wars as narrow nationalists salivate at the prospect of an enriching officialdom in a new sovereign state (see Alemante G. Selassie, 2003, for a sober analysis of the promises and pitfalls of ethnic federalism in Africa). One predictable outcome is the replication of corrupt and authoritarian rule

in each and every banana republic that might emerge on the ashes of old Ethiopia (Messay Kebede, 2013).

History teaches us that fighting for an effective mechanism of accountability of rulers to the ruled, propelled by a springboard of shared history and culture, not a flag, is what will eventually ensure both liberty and prosperity for all. As the sociologist Charles Tilly observed, it is also true that “War made the state and the state made war.” As they say, be careful about what you dream for; the unthinkable sometimes has a way of becoming thinkable, if not doable.

Were such an infectious secessionist to engulf the proverbial Land of Prester John, an intriguing parade of horrors springs forth to haunt us all. The primordial clusters with the best chance of forging viable albeit fragile ethno-states are the big three: the rhinos of Tigray-Tigrign (with 10 million people but must overcome deep political divisions on both sides of the *Mereb*), the lions of Bete Amara (30-33 million people but must overcome regional rivalries and an inevitable war to unscramble greater Shewa), and the elephants of Oromia (35 million people but must overcome a stateless history, east-west divisions along religious lines, and bitter border-delimiting contests with almost every other group). The rest (a quarter of the population) are too diverse and too small for political viability. Some will likely join other states (notably the Afar and the Somali) while most will be highly vulnerable to perpetual civil wars as well as to forcible absorption by bigger ones which renders a united and democratic Ethiopian state the only realistic option. We must all shudder to contemplate the suicidal battles over strategic Addis Ababa, Nazret, Jimma, Hawassa, Dire Dawa, or Harar.

A Happy Ethiopian New Year to All!

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