Nationalities Papers (2026), 54: 1, 190–205
doi:10.1017/nps.2024.108

ARTICLE

Multiple Layers of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism in Current Debates on Nationalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia

Jan Záhořík,[1] Aleksi Ylönen[2,3] and Jonah Lego[4]

[1]University of West Bohemia, Pilsen, Czech Republic; [2]Centre for International Studies (CEI), Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal; [3]Department of Political and Administrative Studies, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana and [4]University of Cambridge, UK
Corresponding author: Jan Záhořík; Email: jzahorik@kbs.zcu.cz

Abstract
Since 2019, Ethiopia has embarked on a new "national project of peace and unity". The government's official discourse has been characterised by an uptake in the use of Pan-African and Pan-Ethiopian rhetoric. Strategically invoking visions of a united Africa and shared continental prosperity, the Abiy administration seeks to enhance its international reputation and rally African support for its domestic agenda. To overcome the pervasive *ethnofractionalist* tendencies in Ethiopia's political landscape and consolidate the Ethiopian state within its present boundaries, the current government is selectively borrowing political strategies from previous administrations. This has produced a unique, new form of Pan-Ethiopian governance ideals. So far, the repercussions of this government discourse on political tensions in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian diaspora has received no scholarly attention. This academic article analyses the implications of the current Ethiopian government's deployment of Pan-Africanist and Pan-Ethiopianist rhetoric on Ethiopia's current political crises. This article argues that these Pan-Africanist and Pan-Ethiopianist rhetoric and ideals are paradoxically perpetuating divisive identity politics in Ethiopia's domestic and diasporic political realm. This, in turn, exacerbates the most serious threat to Ethiopia's national unity.

Keywords: Pan-Africanism; Pan-Ethiopianism; Ethiopia; ethnicity; politics

Introduction

Current efforts to reinforce national unity build on Pan-Ethiopian nationalist ideals, centring around an 'Ethiopian' exceptionalism. Politically competing with Pan-Ethiopianism, ethno-nationalist discourses approach ethnicity based on essentialist/primordialist principles. While emerging from different starting points, both outlooks share a deliberate disregard for the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds that have formed the Ethiopian state and society up to this day and are anchored in historically inherited patterns of highland-lowland dichotomy. What it means to be Ethiopian has been long-debated and contested. The recent 2020-2022 war in Tigray served as a vivid reminder, highlighting the dilemma of political identity within the country's internal and external relations. The Tigray war was rooted in several competing, ideologically motivated interests, often understood and performed along the lines of ethnic identity. Fundamentally, the conflict was a continuation of historically inherited and repeated patterns of power relations within Ethiopia. These include ethnic, socio-economic and religious aspects of nationhood, which have

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Association for the Study of Nationalities. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

often been observed through the lens of the 'centre-periphery', or northern (highland)-southern (lowland) relations (Bach 2015).

Debates about the nature of Ethiopian nationhood date back centuries. Official Ethiopian historiography traces the roots of the Ethiopian nation as going back to Menelik I, son of King Solomon and Makeda (Queen of Sheba), who became the first king of the Solomonic dynasty in the 10th century BC. This constructed lineage going back to King Solomon has served as the mythical legitimation of Ethiopian highland-rulers since at least the early 14th century. The nature of Ethiopian nationhood became more contested from 1855 and intensified from the 1960s onwards. As the expansion and consolidation of the modern Ethiopian state was framed as the 'unification' of Ethiopia, the most visible challenge came from sections of the 'Oromo', an identity-group which increasingly came to understand itself as marginalized by the Amharic-speaking 'Northerners'. Oromo historiographies of oppression emerged against the backdrop of Menelik II's southward territorial expansion in the late 19th century and successive consolidation of the feudal-type imperial state. The modernist ideals of a homogenised, centralised nation-state under imperial rule, clashed with the societal, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity on the ground that challenged proclamations of Ethiopian unity (Matshanda 2022). Those opposed to the ruling regime began to question the basis of 'Ethiopianess' (*Etiopiawinet*) and the nature of the 'Amharaness', claimed as the epitome of what was depicted as the 'Ethiopian identity' (Chanie and Ishiyama 2021).

Over the same period, Ethiopia increasingly became celebrated by Pan-Africanist intellectuals, such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois, as a 'model state'. To boost Ethiopia's international appeal, Emperor Haile Selassie promoted the view that Ethiopia was never colonized. Furthermore, the myth of the Solomonic dynasty and the long history of Christianity in Ethiopia resonated with the Christian underpinnings of ideological Pan-Africanism. While Ethiopia was portrayed as 'African', Haile Selassie coincidently sought to emphasize uniqueness and the idea of an 'Ethiopian nation'. This was not least to demonstrate Ethiopia's suitability to take the lead in the continent's affairs with the world. Haile Selassie used his international reputation to successfully lobby for Addis Ababa as the seat of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) founded in 1963. Moreover, during the times of split between Casablanca and Monrovia groups, it was Haile Selassie who affirmed that Ethiopia belonged only to one camp, and that was the African camp (Gebrekidan 2012, 82).

The emphasis on a Pan-Ethiopian identity became less pronounced during the later years of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led government (1991-2018), which through its governance buttressed a political culture highlighting expressions of ethno-territorial identities.

However, since Abiy Ahmed Ali became the Prime Minister in 2018 Pan-African and Pan-Ethiopian rhetoric has again intensified. It sharpened in particular in the context of the armed conflict in Tigray, which pitted the central government leadership's Pan-Africanist and Pan-Ethiopianist vision of unification against a diverse ethno-nationalist opposition that the outgoing governing party, the TPLF, claimed to lead. The governmental rhetoric has drawn on Ethiopia's centrality and perceived leadership in the Horn of Africa, the legacy of Ethiopia's active role in continental matters and Addis Ababa serving as the seat of the African Union (AU).

This article deals with forms of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism produced by the current government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed as part of broader strategies to attract wider African support for its cause (e.g. in the war in Tigray) and against the Western sanctions and criticism. As the focus of this article is the changing use and instrumentalization of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism in the present, this article will only briefly consider broader discussions on the historical trajectories of Pan-Africanism. Our main research questions are: what kind of role does Pan-Africanism play in current politics of Ethiopia?; how does it correlate to fragmentation of Ethiopia since the war in Tigray?; do Pan-Ethiopian and Pan-African discourse have a meaningful role in resolving the current identity crisis of Ethiopia? The article is based on a careful study of online primary sources, secondary literature, interviews with political analysts, diaspora activists and Ethiopian scholars.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In this article, we analyze the concepts of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism in the context of the current crisis in Ethiopia and discuss the way they conflict with other nationalist projects. We argue that thus far, all forms of Pan-Ethiopianism and ethnonationalism deployed throughout Ethiopian political history have produced authoritarian tendencies, before being eventually overhauled due to their failure to adequately accommodate minorities and opposition voices, thereby causing significant security issues for the respective central governments. However, these forces and the nature of the Ethiopian state and identity have mutually been mutually shaped by the expansionist, centralizing and hegemonic ambitions of the central power holders as well as the narratives of oppression and suffering and the political actions against central state domination. We begin by conceptualizing Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism in a broader context of modern and contemporary political debates in Ethiopia. We proceed by giving examples of several nationalist projects and debate their respective challenge to the central government's Pan-Ethiopianist state consolidation efforts. Finally, we draw attention to how the increasingly important diaspora politics have interacted with the government's Pan-Ethiopian and Pan-African rhetoric and the political situation in Ethiopia, before summarising this article's findings.

Mapping Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism onto Ethiopian history

At the core of Pan-Africanism is the belief that the 'African peoples both on the continent and in the diaspora, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny' (African Union 2013, 1). Pan-Africanism aspires to engendering the political, economic and social progress of *Africans* and their total emancipation from oppression (Adi 2018). In its political and economic use Pan-Africanist discourse is highly versatile. The discursive use of Pan-Africanism in Ethiopia is based on exceptional standing in Pan-African imaginaries. As the only officially uncolonized African country, Ethiopia and the so-called 'Ethiopianism' played an important role in shaping Pan-Africanism, as can be seen in the work of W. E. B. DuBois, one of the key Pan-Africanist figures (Rose 2019). While the term Ethiopianism has a broader meaning, we use Frühwirth's definition of this concept which 'subsumes various ways of enslaved/colonized Africans and their descendants to positively identify with Africa via the ancient notion of Ethiopia in both Western as well as Biblical mythologies' (Früwirth 2020, 34). Yet the Ethiopian leader's appeal differed from other leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana's first president 1957 – 1966) or Léopold Senghor (Senegal's first president 1960 – 1980) in that Ethiopia was never officially colonized. As a result, Haile Selassie could never represent anti-colonialism and anti-racism, as well as a concern for the social and political emancipation of Africans and African diaspora, in the same way as other prominent Pan-African leaders. While especially Nkrumah brought an Afro-optimistic and unification rhetoric based on his own experience as a father of the nation of Ghana (Muchie 2000), Ethiopia's Pan-Africanist image was always rooted much more in Ethiopia's specific place in the history of Africa, going back to Queen of Sheba as a prominent character in the Abrahamic religions, and the Battle of Adowa in 1896, in which the Ethiopian army defeated the Italian invading forces, providing the only instance in which an African army was able to militarily ensure political sovereignty against European colonisation efforts. In the words of Fuller, "the example of Adwa continued to be a symbol of inspiration and hope for the next generation of African nationalists and Pan-Africanists" (Fuller 2014, 134) and retains its symbolical value up until today.

What for one part of Ethiopia it represents an unprecedented historical victory over the aspiring colonial power, for other parts it symbolizes centralist domination and subjugation due to the concurrent territorial expansion of the northern highland imperial regime into contemporary South, East and West Ethiopia. In this sense, the Battle of Adowa, the highlight of Ethiopia's Pan-African appeal, sowed the seeds for national disunity and the failure of Pan-Ethiopian political ambitions into the present.

We conceptualize Pan-Ethiopianism as a centralizing vision of the Ethiopian state based on highland cultural pillars (Clapham 2017), i.e. Orthodox Christianity, sedentary agriculture, use of

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Semitic languages, the pursuit to maintain and consolidate the 'Ethiopian' state's territorial integrity and efforts to instil and forge stronger ideas of national cohesion in the population under Ethiopian state-control. At least since the rule of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1869), the promotion of a central Ethiopian identity been closely interwoven with modernizing ideals. It is important to highlight that there has never been one core Pan-Ethiopianism articulated by outstanding ideologues. Instead, it has been a discursive category filled with particular meanings by central governments, academia and regime opponents to describe elements of Ethiopian state-building over time. It is in this light that all governmental actors in Ethiopia since Tewodros II with modernizing and developmental epitomes can be regarded as Pan-Ethiopian.

In its conceptual origin the idea of a chosen and unified Ethiopian nation heavily draws on divine ordination. Based on Solomonic and Christian traditions this has been depicted as central to the foundation and historical continuity of the Ethiopian state (Markakis 1974). Much of the 19th and 20th century governmental Pan-Ethiopianist rhetoric and policies centred on the coercive expansion and modernist consolidation of this *exceptional* nation. The political centre promoted the Amharic language and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) to propel Orthodox Christianity in an attempt to consolidate language and religion as the two main pillars of 'Ethiopian' national identity and state sovereignty. In both the national constitutions of 1931 and 1955 the origin of the Ethiopian nation was described according to the narrative of historically inherited biblical connections going back to Queen of Sheba and King Solomon.

Pan-African discourse idealising Ethiopia sat comfortably aside this exceptionalist self-conceptualization of Ethiopia. As the persistence of the Ethiopian state against colonial aggression became regarded as the beacon of Pan-African anti-colonial resistance, the viability of the Ethiopian state could easily be constructed as a Pan-African priority by Ethiopian powerholders. Against this background Pan-Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism significantly overlap both in Ethiopian politics and African continental politics until this day. Ethiopia's unique position (although Italians did occupy the country from 1936 to 1941), propelled by Haile Selassie's active international role and skilful diplomacy, contributed to Addis Ababa becoming Africa's diplomatic capital. This has boosted Ethiopia's international image further. As Robert Hess once wrote, 'Ethiopia, in so many ways the least African of the African states became the major spokesman for Africa' (Hess 1970, 214).

Overthrowing Haile Selassie in Ethiopia's socialist revolution, the Derg regime (1974-1991) sought to portray itself as the emancipator of Ethiopians and Africans alike from imperial and imperialist oppression. Therefore, there was much continuity between the pre- and post-1974 regimes in terms of Pan-Africanist and Pan-Ethiopianist rhetoric. The Derg's leader Mengistu Haile Mariam went to great lengths to promote black African solidarity against what he viewed as Western imperialism and white South African and Israeli racism. At the OAU he called for a joint front in support of the liberation movements facing the apartheid regime several times, and to a lesser extent rallied African support for the Palestinian cause. However, his proclamation of a 'socialist path to development' as well as claims that 'the developed countries continue exploiting our cheap industrial and manpower resources, which has enriched them still further' (The New York Times 1985) did not facilitate a united African stance. The political environment of the Cold War contributed to persistent continental division, disrupting the logic of Pan-African solidarity and unity. Coincidently, the Derg's domestic efforts to create national unity, reflected in its Amharic language policies and the continuous violent efforts to overcome internal dissent, heavily echoed centralist ideas of the previous imperial regime.

Following the 1991 transition, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)-regime abandoned the previous efforts to forge one homogenous nation. Instead, after Eritrean independence was completed in 1993, with the intent of preventing further disintegration, the TPLF-EPRDF focused on a combination of Ethiopianness (Pan-Ethiopianism) and national self-determination derived from the Soviet era. However, we argue that the EPRDF's emphasis on Ethiopian multinationalism should be

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understood as an ideological re-configuration of the Pan-Ethiopian ambition – to maintain an integrated, modern Ethiopian state. The TPLF restructured the state into an ethno-territorial federation and designed the EPRDF political umbrella, providing groups identified by the new rulers as Ethiopia's main ethnic identity groups various levels of political representation and the constitutional right to self-determination and secession. Nonetheless, its repressive political centralism and developmental Ethiopian state-building rhetoric unmistakably represented Pan-Ethiopian ambitions of state modernization and consolidation.

To bolster its national agenda, the TPLF-EPRDF leadership relied heavily on Pan-African rhetoric, serving to accelerate the efficacy of Ethiopian developmentalism through greater economic outreach and to deepen African cooperation and integration. In 2012, the late Meles Zenawi, longstanding figurehead of the TPLF-led government, endorsed the older idea of 'African renaissance' to reflect Africa's increasing importance in the world. In a speech at the AU, he stressed that the African nations must keep evolving: 'The African Renaissance has begun and it is within our means to keep it going. It is within our means to create a new pole of global growth in Africa, to fully stabilize our continent and to make sure that it takes its rightful place in the global scheme of things' (Meles 2012). A call for a rejuvenated Pan-Africanism, this position drew on the ideas of Ethiopian exceptionalism and positioned the Ethiopian developmental state as a model for African integration and progress.

Since the political transition in 2018, Pan-Ethiopianism has taken on a new trajectory. In defiance of the TPLF-EPRDF legacy, the formation of the Prosperity Party (PP) in 2019 is at least discursively the embodiment of a new Pan-Ethiopian order. This shift is underlined by the ongoing efforts to re-centre 'Ethiopianess' away from highland Orthodox Christian culture towards the incorporation of a an Oromo-centered political privilege in order to form a new identity-core of any future Ethiopian state. This can be specifically seen in the current clash over Addis Ababa which many Oromo people call *Finfinne*, and the debates whom the capital city belongs to (Pellerin and Elfversson 2023).

In addition to the domestic representation of the current administration as undoing previous authoritarian injustices, the PP government has made effective in-roads to leverage Pan-African sentiment to bolster its international weight. Besides the Pan-African undercurrents in the Ethiopian-Eritrean rapprochement in 2018, throughout the Tigray war the Ethiopian government sought to present its battle in Pan-African terms. In reaction to a wide variety of Western political and journalistic actors embracing TPLF narratives of the war, the current Prime Minister Abiy evoked Pan-African sympathy by presenting Ethiopia as existentially threatened by a Western-supported separatist insurgency. It is in this context that the popular *#nowar* campaign spread throughout Ethiopia. This undertaking framed the Tigray war as a concern to all Pan-Africanists and those interested in African state integrity and rallied against Western disinformation and Western military interventions in Africa in general. Such narratives appeal to Pan-African sentiments in particular due to the continental commitment to maintain colonial borders and a general understanding of African secessionist projects as platforms for neo-colonial intrusion (following in particular after the 1960 Congo crisis). With regards to the external involvement in Ethiopian affairs and subsequent call for support from African partners, in 2022 Prime Minister Abiy declared at the General Assembly of the AU that 'The greatest lesson that Ethiopia has learned this past year is that without the solidarity of our African brothers and sisters, our existence as a nation would have been at great risk. This affirms the wisdom of our forefathers and foremothers in their dream of Pan Africanism. […] Today we stand proud and tall as Africans in the shadow of those who struggled to liberate and unite Africa. Our steadfast unity is the anchor and foundation of our Agenda 2063' (Lawton 2022).

As international discussions of the Tigray war were heavily impacted by diasporic engagement, the Tigrayan diaspora accentuated its cause by also resorting to Pan-Africanist rhetoric. A noteworthy example of this is discourse on the alleged war crimes committed against Tigrayans at Adowa during the war. In an essay titled 'A letter to continental leaders from a Tigrayan pan-

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Africanist' (Belay 2022), Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is accused of being responsible for violence and massacres at this site of Pan-African pride and symbol against tyranny. While rallying continental support for its own cause, such positions, coming mainly from foreign and diaspora circles (Kidanemariam 2023), aim to delegitimize Pan-Africanist framings of the war by the Ethiopian federal government. Thus, recent resorting to Pan-Africanist rhetoric 'seems a tactic to acquire support from the continent' which is rather 'instrumental than authentic' (Interview with a diaspora political activist, 2022).

The post-2018 regime presented itself as an institutional remedy to heightening tensions arising from identity politics. In this context, Abiy revitalized and used the concept of *medemer* (coming together around a common cause) as the guiding spirit of Ethiopia's political change. Without attributing too much value to the integrity of the concept, a brief engagement with *medemer* helps elucidate the current regime's disposition towards Pan-Ethiopianism and Pan-Africanism. In contrast to the EPRDF's Pan-Ethiopianism, *medemer* argues that Ethiopian and continental progress require a synergetic retention of the best elements of previous "Ethiopian" political orders. These need to be combined with innovative 'indigenisations of imported ideologies' to make them transformative for African contexts (Yohannes 2022). In this regard Ethiopia's most recent state-building efforts implicitly attribute much greater value to elements of previous political orders than the EPRDF-regime in its ambitions to dismantle all imperial legacies ever could (YouTube, A Changing Ethiopia, 2022). Abiy's commitment to multinational federalism, as evidenced by the Sidama state creation, coupled with the re-calibration of 'Ethiopianess' towards an Oromo-identifying elite, delineates how contemporary discourse on national unification is distinct from any previous centralizing state-building ambitions and conditioned by the realities created by previous orders. The idea of learning from the past instead of 'starting afresh', as Mamo Mihretu put it in a recorded discussion on *medemer* in 2020, is central to this debate.

Abiy's promotion of *medemer* not only as Ethiopian, but African remedy is a striking nod to the discursive importance attributed to Pan-Africanism, as well as the role of a strong, unified Ethiopia in Pan-African goals, by the current administration. Anchored in exceptionalist understandings of Ethiopia, *medemer* is addressed at Africans writ large, evoking ideas of Ethiopia as Pan-African beacon of integrity (YouTube, A Changing Ethiopia, 2022). The new administration promotes itself as at the heart of both political and economic African prosperity. This was not least demonstrated by the prominent billboards throughout Addis Ababa during the 2020 AU Summit promoting 'Medemer, for a prosperous Africa'.

Excerpts from speeches by all recent Ethiopian leaders show that Pan-African values have been at the forefront of their political self-legitimation. In his OAU presidency acceptance speech, Haile Selassie emphasized the need to make Africa a place 'quarantined from the contamination of non-African interference' (Haile Selassie 1963). In the 20th Summit of the OAU in 1984 Mengistu Haile Mariam advocated for reinvigorating Pan-Africanist unity under Ethiopian leadership as an 'epic struggle for genuine independence and equality' (Mengistu 1984). This was in a certain sense echoed by Abiy in his welcoming speech to the 35th AU assembly in which he reacted to the war in Tigray and external forces interfering in Ethiopia's internal affairs by stressing the need of more intense implementation of the AU agenda 'African Solutions to African Problems' (Abiy 2022). Ethiopian leaders have repeatedly used the OAU/AU, the main African diplomatic forum, to seek to demonstrate Ethiopia's exceptional leadership in promoting African solidarity and unity. However, the long trajectory of complicated relations with most of its neighbours and fragile 'social contract' within the country have compromised the integrity of Ethiopia's Pan-Africanism.

Ethnicity and nation the Ethiopian way

For long, ethnicity in Ethiopia has been primordially understood as predetermined and unchangeable. Already in 1977, Mengistu Haile Mariam, in a BBC interview said: 'We have inherited a very noble value from our forefathers, and that is the national identity of the country. So, if there is a

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

challenge to this value, we have no alternative but to defend ourselves' (Mengistu 1977). This statement implies that the nation is equal to the state and that only the official discourse on 'Ethiopianess' is permitted Diverging considerations on national identities in Ethiopia are denied any validity. This begs the central question: what is Ethiopianess and who represents it?

Rooted in the constitution from 1995, ethnic federalism puts ethnic identity at the forefront of discussions over the socio-cultural and political composition of the country. Measurements of the proportion of each ethnic identity group by percentage have become a normal part of social and political debates in Ethiopia. The relative size of ethnic identity blocks, widely conceived of as unchanging, since 1991 has become associated with claims for political rights, representation and ultimately power.

After the TPLF-led EPRDF came to power, the Tigrayans were compelled to politically and legally acknowledge the existence of bigger ethnic nations. Ethnic federalism institutionalized ethnic identity as part of the formal state structure, thereby elevated ethnonationalism as the defining factor in the Ethiopian political system. Both as a result of the TPLF's political agenda and the ambition to maintain Ethiopian state integrity, the EPRDF's Pan-Ethiopianism relied heavily on the idea of multinationalism. This was conditioned by the ramifications of the previous nationalist homogenization agendas and the resulting political contestations. Nonetheless, the TPLF-EPRDF ruled the country through power monopolization with each part of the federal structure being woven into a highly hierarchical state apparatus. Political rights of various ethnic majority and minority groups were often compromised when they challenged the *status quo* of the TPLF-led governing system. This became increasingly visible during the so-called Oromo protests (2015-2018) which erupted after the announcement of the Addis Ababa Master Plan (Záhořík 2017) and resulted in some 60,000 arrests.

Many southern Ethiopians became alienated from the state, seen by many as an enemy due to a perceived oppressive regime monopolizing the narration and production of national history (personal communication. 7th December 2022). Resisting the imposition of the northern-highland-glorifying narratives, that emphasized the Amhara and Tigray identity as the essence of Ethiopian identity, the Oromo protests were marked by attempts to rewrite the Ethiopian history to contribute to an inclusive, heterogenous national identity. During the protests, the Oromo representatives repeatedly evoked the historical battle of Aanolee in 1887 as an example of historically inherited patterns of violence in which the Oromos are victims of Ethiopian state violence. Aanolee, amongst other examples, resonates within the Oromo representatives, who otherwise see themselves as peacemakers, as one of the examples of a historical suffering caused by the Pan-Ethiopian state/nation-building (Hussein and Ademo 2016).

The TPLF-EPRDF regime built its political legitimacy on the idea of transcending the previous centralizing oppression of the Ethiopian state. The establishment of ethnic federalism as a constitutional system was intended to bring more emancipation and autonomy to various ethnic groups while facilitating further state consolidation. However, it failed to live up to its initial intentions. The shortcomings of ethnic federalism are manifold and have been extensively discussed in academic literature (van der Beken 2007; Abbink 2006). But one of the key factors was the incompatibility of visions of the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), two key actors in post-1991 Ethiopian politics (Matshanda 2022). Both groups conceptualized, instrumentalized and politicized ethnicity through the primordialist perspective, thereby elevating the influence of this outlook in the re-formation of the Ethiopian constitution. Eventually, the TPLF leadership represented the persistence of highland domination over the rest of Ethiopia, thereby evoking continuities with the repression associated with imperial and Derg Ethiopian nationalism, or Pan-Ethiopianism.

Besides the Tigrayan and Oromo elites, discussions about the nature of Amhara identity have been central to political contestations about the nature of the Ethiopian state and identity. For many - particularly Oromo activist - Amhara people (or Amhara elites) symbolize past imperial repression under which the Oromo were suffering. While the Amhara culture has always been

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

associated with *Ethiopiawinet*, the term Amhara gets somewhat blurred when it comes to ethnic debates. In the scholarly analysis of Ethiopian identity, Pausewang (2005) deconstructed the concept of the Amhara as largely twofold. Following Chernetsov's arguments, Pausewang claims that there have always been two types of Amhara identity. The peasants in the rural areas identifying themselves with Amhara culture on the one side, and the Amhara elites in urban areas who identified themselves as "Ethiopians" with an Amhara language on the other Pausewang 2005, 274). Prior to 1991 when Amharic and Orthodox Christianity were promoted as national values, assimilation into "Amharaness" was possible and encouraged. Clapham termed this emphasis on behaviour over genealogy the 'plasticity of Amhara' (Clapham 1988). Ideas around ethnonationalism facilitated this flexibility and 'un-ethnic' labelling to increasingly verge into a prescriptive, rigid ethnic label. Populations throughout Ethiopia increasingly came to ascribe the responsibility for historic oppression to the first type of Pausewang's Amhara category and inhabitants of the Amhara federal state, more broadly. This also needs to be considered in light of the historical rivalry between Tigrinya-speaking and Amharic-speaking populations over control of the Ethiopian highland. Therefore, ethnofederalism and the EPRDF's narrational entanglement of the Amhara as imperial oppressors has contributed to a popular reattribution of responsibility for oppressive repercussions of Pan-Ethiopian politics.

The other symbol of Ethiopianess is the EOTC which, historically, has been closely connected to Ethiopian state structures and therefore with the expansion of the Ethiopian state. Just like the Amhara, the EOTC is part of the 'oppressive-oppressed saga' (Chanie and Ishiyama 2021). Particularly for Oromo activists, but also for representatives of other ethnic identity groups, this core element of Pan-Ethiopian identity is problematic because of its imperial roots and limited diffusion. According to some, the creation of a unitary state centring on the Amharic language and the supremacy of the EOTC 'has been tried and it failed' (Interview with an Ethiopian scholar, 2022).

Although inter-ethnic relations in Ethiopia are complex, fluid and changeable, they tend to fluctuate in response to the 'political temperature at the [political] centre' (Teferra 2017, 609). The EPRDF used the federal system as a vehicle to manipulate elections and dominate Ethiopian politics (Ayele 2018) while shaping its 'national unification narrative' on the construction of 'the external' (e.g. Eritrea and Somalia) and 'the internal' (e.g. terrorism and Oromo and other nationalisms) threats (Newbery 2021; Ylönen 2021a). The opposition forces deemed the governing party to be composed of one powerful ethnic group that dominated and directed national political dynamics through the wider EPRDF and satellite parties and organizations. This produced a paradoxical form of governance. While the ethno-federalist logic tended towards facilitating separatist considerations, the centralist aims, and main political priority remained the maintenance of Ethiopia's political and territorial integrity. The constitutional clauses on the possibility of secession arose from the TPLF's ideological struggle and its conceptualizations of national self-determination. Yet these 'rights' remained mere theoretical exercises responding to the pressures produced by the preceding Pan-Ethiopian governance forms. Any practical implementation of secession continued to be deemed unfeasible.

The early Abiy era and the war in Tigray

The Oromo and Amhara protests of 2015-2018 accelerated the tense debates over the national question and ethnonational composition of the country. Both resulted from structural governance problems centring around the imposition of a particular interpretation of ethnicity as a divisive force (Záhořík 2017). In this situation, the former intelligence officer turned Oromo rights defender Abiy Ahmed ascended to premiership in April 2018 by using a particular 'subjugation narrative'. This gave leaders of Ethiopia's most populous ethnic group hope about the end of Tigrayan-led minority rule and the Oromo's incorporation at their rightful place in the helm of the Ethiopian politics.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, the optimism brought about by the 2018 political transition was short-lived. Abiy, who had risen through the ranks of the security-political system of the outgoing regime, was increasingly viewed as unable to deliver the promised significant political reforms. Abiy, whose mother is Amhara and father an Oromo, from early on faced a formidable challenge in his attempt to displace the entrenched TPLF from the centre of Ethiopia's political and economic system. Replacement appointments and the retirement of political and military cadres promised more inclusive political representation.

In June 2018 the National Movement of the Amhara (NaMA) was established, aimed to express dissatisfaction with central government's long-term side-lining of the Amhara. This led Abiy to warn about the rising tide of the Amhara nationalism (Chanie and Ishiyama 2021). At the same time Pan-Ethiopian values –encapsulating one stream of Amhara nationalism– featured prominently in his vision of 'Making Ethiopia Great Again' (Allo 2020). For external powers Abiy's Oromo origin was an encouraging sign (Verhoeven and Woldemariam 2022) and much optimism about the potential for national reconciliation surrounded the regime change in 2018. Soon however, many Ethiopians began feeling disillusioned by Abiy's pursuit towards further centralization and unification of the state and the nation.

Yet, the Tigrayan political elite was the group most threatened by the transition. To consolidate its position, and gain popular legitimacy, the new administration was insistent on the need to eliminate the ethnonationalist TPLF's power. Amongst the TPLF-elite, there was a keen awareness that the new government's policies aimed at relinquishing the principal tenets of the TPLF-regime (Interview with a political scientist, Addis Ababa, 2022). In response to the new leadership's efforts, the TPLF shifted personnel and resources to Tigray to strengthen its regional hold on power. The TPLF's resistance epitomized in the emphasis on ethnic federalism as the structural and territorial core of the Ethiopian political system. The TPLF would frame its struggle as the first of many Ethiopian *nations* whose very existence and right to self-determination was endangered by the new regime, framing the centralising ambitions of the new government now used against it as destructive. These powerful forces further entrenched the already existing political reality in which successful mobilization in the everyday political competition required the use of the 'ethnic card'. One of the results of this was the #tigraygenocide campaign, gaining in particular a large international following (Twitter 2021).

Seeking to consolidate power against the old political vanguard, Abiy resorted to ethnic politics and successfully sought an external alliance with Eritrea where the leadership, which identifies as Tigrayan, was keen to neutralize the TPLF as a significant adversary political and military force (Ylönen 2021b). The Oromo being perpetually politically divided, Abiy struck a domestic alliance with Amhara nationalist leaders, some of who became his leading advisers. Emphasizing 'Amharaness' from his mother's side, Abiy managed to gain confidence among his Amhara allies, although there were always those who keenly pointed out that he was truly an Oromo and not to be trusted (Ramos 2021). He accommodated Amhara support by resorting to a Pan-Ethiopian type 'unification narrative' that portrayed the TPLF as deliberately divisive, and separatist, due to its emphasis on ethnic identity. Abiy's proposed *medemer*, emphasizing unity and 'Ethiopianess', Ethiopia's past imperial grandeur and 'Africaness', appealed not only to many Amhara but also federal-level nationalists from other groups. The current Ethiopian political elite also remains convinced and outspoken about Ethiopia's radiant role in Pan-Africanism, expressed by Pan-Africanist slogans visible throughout Addis Ababa.

Still, as shown by Ishiyama (2021), emphasis on ethnonationalist particularism has been on the rise particularly among the Oromo and Amhara elites. Therefore, it is not clear that Abiy's Pan-Ethiopian effort to consciously and systematically embrace 'Ethiopianess' is facilitating the national unification it aspired to. So far, the establishment of the PP as a unifying political umbrella has failed to remove ethnonationalism as the main source of political organization. Instead, some of these forces which have stayed out of the government appear to have gained momentum (particularly the Oromo Liberation Army, OLA, the armed wing of the OLF until officially splitting in 2018). High

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

level of sensitivity can be seen on the question over the future administrative status of the Welkait area, officially part of Tigray-state. This is one of the key territorial manifestations of the current rise of a territorialized Amhara ethnonationalism. In past years Amhara elites have been seriously concerned over the status and marginalization of Amhara people in the Welkait area who, according to the Welkait Amhara Identity Question Committee, suffered marginalization and intimidation (John 2022). Similarly, ethnonationalist politics have produced a trend of identity and territorial fragmentation within the limits of the constitution, as has been the case of the formalization of the Sidama (2020) and South West Region (2021).

At the same time, Abiy's political proximity with Amhara nationalists brought up memories among many Ethiopians of violence and forceful 'Amharicization' during the imperial period. Although it did not initially generate significant antagonism among those, for example in the Somali Region, who believed in coming together on a voluntary and equal basis for a common cause, it did alienate many ethnonationalist leaders who thrived in conditions of inter-ethnic political rivalries. This brought Abiy into increasing political confrontations, such as with the TPLF. Furthermore, elements of the Oromo political community felt betrayed by his alignment with Amhara factions, perceived as agents of historical oppression. More recently, Amhara nationalists have become alienated from Abiy for his pragmatic handling of the TPLF after the war and the ambiguous political status of Tigrayan territories that are perceived as Amhara land, annexed in 1991. This has facilitated the approximation of Amhara nationalist factions with the Eritrean position. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has been highly suspicious of the TPLF since its inception. Particularly the circulation of ideas about establishing a "Greater Tigray" that would infringe Eritrean territorial integrity has been contentious (Kassaw and Veneranda 2024, 13).

Most notably, the intensification of the contradicting forces of Pan-Ethiopianist centralism and ethnonationalist particularism paved the to the Tigray war. When the TPLF continued to resist Abiy's political reforms, including the formation of the PP, the confrontation between the central government and the TPLF became more acute. In March 2020 Ethiopia's electoral board postponed the general elections to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Endeshaw 2020). While most ethnopolitical groups accepted the verdict, the TPLF went ahead with the election in Tigray, in which it scored an overwhelming victory in the 9th September regional poll (Ylönen and Meckelburg 2020) amidst contradicting opinions about their freeness and fairness. This enabled the TPLF leadership to reaffirm its control over the Tigray State Council.

On 3rd November, following TPLF militia's allegedly pre-emptive ambush of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) Northern Command, the national security forces launched a military campaign that the state leadership designated as 'law enforcement operation'. The conflict quickly escalated and featured heavily in international media. Both sides set up communications campaigns. This divided domestic and diaspora Ethiopians between those supporting the federal government and those siding with the TPLF's cause. The strength of the competing political narratives also absorbed many foreign analysts and renowned scholars who advocated for the position of either party in the conflict. As the conflict intensified, attempts at objective analysis and discussion fora often received politically charged responses and distractions.

The escalation of violence opened space for political entrepreneurs to emphasize inter-group differences along the conflict divide. Both sides elevated histories and past events to promote narratives of exclusion and violence. Intensification of the OLA insurgency and extension of violence to other regions during the Tigray conflict heightened ethnopolitical cleavages further, particularly among the youth who took part in violent activities on all sides.

In the last few years in Ethiopia it is possible to observe a trend towards youth radicalization based on primordialist outlooks on ethnic identity as in the case of Qeerroo (Oromo youth), and NAMA (Amhara organization) (Lyons 2021, 1060). The escalation of violence, which Ibreck and de Waal situate in genocide debates, is closely related to a number of historically unresolved themes which include imperialism and colonialism, subjugation and dominance, slavery and conquest (Ibreck and de Waal 2021). This is a result, according to Reid, of the 'deeply embedded culture of

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

violence, undergirded by an excluding and otherizing ideology' which 'continues to be felt' (Reid 2022, 105). Some have defined the historically inherited patterns of rule, dominance, and discrimination in the post-1991 political system as electoral authoritarianism (Kassa 2020). This was allowed by politics of exclusion, and ethnonational asymmetries in exercising self-rule which we can observe in current aspirations of the Wolayta and Gurage to reach regional government status just like the Sidama (Yimenu 2022, 11). The Ethiopian government has shifted large amounts of public spending to the military sector, now particularly in regard to the conflict in Western Oromia (personal communication 2023). Local conflicts in Oromia, Somali Region, Benishangul Gumuz, and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) have also produced high numbers of internally displaced persons (UN 2022, 15). This has not helped to improve the image of the government domestically, nor internationally (Interview with an Ethiopian scholar, 2022). According to several scholars and activists particularly in the diaspora,[1] all abovementioned features of the Ethiopian state show that there are two Ethiopian states and two Ethiopian societies. These diverging, antagonistic sentiments and approaches to the nature of the Ethiopian state also thrive in the diaspora.

Competing identity discourses in and outside of Ethiopia

From the 1980s, but particularly after 1991, we may observe a tendency of the diaspora playing an increasingly active role in Ethiopian politics. Generally, there are two types of diaspora. The first does not want to be engaged in politics and prefers economic remittances, such as investment or material support. The second, 'politically activist' diaspora concentrates in Western universities, predominantly in the USA, and often opposes the political developments in Ethiopia. The most striking feature of the political activist diaspora's involvement has been the entrenched, primordialist division along ethnic lines, which is often even more accentuated than amongst many political representatives in Ethiopia itself.

After coming to power, Abiy Ahmed invited the diaspora to come to Ethiopia to spur on national development, currently largely dependent on external actors (especially China) (Tarrosy 2019). The diaspora plays a crucial economic role in Ethiopia. It is in the diasporic space, where Abiy found some of his fiercest critics. Many claim that he has been able to manipulate the public and generate nation-wide support because he uses different (and opposing) narratives with different audiences (Interview a diaspora activist, 2022). Particularly the Tigrayan diaspora has been very critical Abiy's words and actions, as expressed by Debretsion Gebremichael stating that the 'trust has broken completely' (Walsch 2021). Coincidently, other diasporic commentators, such as the Professor for Political Science Alemayehu Mariam from California State University, have defended the government. In an English language blogpost on the peace deal signed between the TPLF and Abiy government on 2nd November 2022, Alemayehu Mariam amongst others presented the peace deal as 'Ethiopia making African history'. The African negotiated deal is contrasted with Western involvement in African conflict resolution. The capacity of Ethiopia to resolve its internal issues with African help is presented as a beacon of Africa's inherent capacity to resolve its own problems and posits Ethiopia as an example of a 'new dawn in Africa' (Al Mariam 2019). This is a clear example of diasporic engagement not only criticising centralist politics in Ethiopia, but also praising both *national achievements* and Ethiopia's continental importance, thereby promoting the government's self-accredited Pan-African credentials.

The diaspora's active role in all major events in Ethiopia in last few decades is acknowledged by the broader scholarly community (Lyons 2006; Záhořík and Godesso 2022). In the words of one political activist, 'The role of [the] diaspora is visible during crisis [like the] conflict with TPLF. [The] Amhara elite seemed to support the war. [The] Tigrayan diaspora supported the TPLF. Oromos seem to be divided, some against the war but had no visible impact on [the] day to day conduct of the war' (Interview with a political activist, 2022). With regards to the political battleground over Oromia, repeated calls for independence within part of the Oromo (particularly

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

diaspora) community are once again centred on the accusations of crimes committed by the 'colonial government of Ethiopia' (Independent Oromia 2021), responsible for killings of Oromos in Wellega and Arsi regions in 2021-2022. This is reflected in the OLA Manifesto (OLA 2023), published on January 24, 2023, and goes hand in hand with previous similar statements of the OLF putting emphasis on assaults on 'Oromoness'. Such criticism is firmly rooted in the OLF's historic struggle against imperial Ethiopia and its Pan-Ethiopian policies since 1973. The continued applicability of such discourse signals a perception according to which very little has changed about the oppression inflicted by centralizing Ethiopian governments. According to the OLA, the government uses 'fabricated crimes [associated with] the OLA, indicts innocent Oromo and subjects them to murder and mayhem' (OLA 2023). Even the Oromo Federalist Congress has vocally condemned the atrocities and has published a statement directed at Oromos 'working for this anti-Oromo government, for any reason or at any capacity. (…) We remind these Oromos who are working with the enemy of Oromos that they are the first in line to fall under the sword of the enemies of Oromo…' (Oromo Federalist Congress 2023). Such narratives have been perpetuated and supported by diaspora-sponsored Oromo websites that accuse the government of acts of genocide and land-grabbing being committed against the Oromo people in a cooperation between Amhara Fano groups and the National Defence Forces (Qeerroo 2022). In this regard, since its establishment in 1992, the Oromo Studies Association has provided an influential academic hub for Oromo-centric diasporic scholarship which critically engages with the Abiy administration and its united Ethiopia agenda.

Despite much condemnation of Abiy's government, his position still remains strong in places like Jimma, his stronghold. Therefore, it is very difficult to estimate the support of the Ethiopian government's actions among the Oromos as it differs from region to region and also across social classes and age groups (Interview with an Oromo scholar, 2023). However, with mounting clashes between the federal forces and Amhara militias on one hand and Oromo forces on the other, parts of the Oromo *qeerroo* movement strongly oppose Abiy's government in fear of what some see as an emerging 'spectre of civil war' (Hochet-Bodin 2022). The active criticism of Abiy's government by parts of the Oromo diaspora became clear once more, when after an uptake in fighting in Western Oromia region and a series of drone strikes with civilian casualties Oromo protests spilled into the streets in countries like the USA and Australia in mid-December 2022 (Advocacy4Oromia 2022).

According to some, the way 'people look at him internationally is different from the way people look at him domestically' (Interview with a diaspora political activist, 2022). Abiy's foreign relations and pragmatic use of Pan-Africanist rhetoric as in the case of the Eritrean-Ethiopian rapprochement is an example thereof. While some see this as a *realpolitikal* alliance to weaken the TPLF, others believe the public narrative of this representing a political reconciliation for the benefit of the Ethiopian people. From this perspective the Nobel Peace prize given to Abiy in 2019 in Oslo can also be perceived as both the international community's lack of understanding of Abiy's real intentions with Eritrea (Interview with a diaspora political activist, 2022), as well as an underestimation of Eritrean president Isaias' power politics in the region. Shortly before the war in Tigray, Abiy expressed his considerations concerning a possible formation of a joint military force among Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. In the eyes of many this evokes the memories of recreating a 'Greater Ethiopia', thereby fulfilling a Pan-Ethiopianist dream. At the same time, in light of similar considerations concerning the formation of a collective army in the East African Community as a Pan-African security initiative, this can also be viewed in Pan-African terms. In the words of Dina Mufti, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 'If you ask each and every Eritrean today, they don't like or celebrate the day they separated from Ethiopia and Ethiopians feel the same way' (Woldemariam 2022). What sounds like a melancholic account on a possible reunification of the two countries was promptly refuted by Eritrea. For Isaias, the binding 1963 OAU treaty on Africa's borders 'must be accepted and adhered to' (Isaias 2022).

Pan-Ethiopian ambitions of re-establishing a 'Greater Ethiopia' seem far removed from reality as the country grapples with various regional conflicts, each having the potential to metastasize.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Primordialist divisions among ethnic groups, seen both within Ethiopia and in the diaspora, present the biggest obstacle to any national harmonisation. Both Tigrayan and Oromo representatives, particularly in the diaspora, accuse the Amhara nationalists who the central government does not control of attempting to restore the unitary state in Ethiopia which 'no one likes' (Interview with a political activist 2022). Under conditions of a plurality of actors both inside Ethiopia and abroad openly resisting several of the current government's policies towards a more unitary state, the real potential of Abiy's policy of 'Ethiopianess' remains questionable. For at least some parts of the diaspora, regardless of the ethnic affiliation, it seems that the current PP central government lacks an authentic policy vis-à-vis both ethnic federalism, and pan-Africanism and wields Pan-Ethiopian rhetoric whenever suiting its *realpolitikal* considerations. One political activist said, 'There is nothing authentic about the recent polity. The media disseminates xenophobia which eventually may work against anyone including Africans' (Interview with a diaspora activist 2022). This perception has created a sentiment of lacking legitimacy, in Ethiopia and abroad.

There is a seeming incoherence of public statements on Pan-African loyalties and connections, and violent domestic policies towards various ethnic groups. This has led many representatives of ethnic minorities to doubt the integrity or oppose Abiy's Pan-Ethiopian and Pan-African intentions. Arguably, conflicts in several Ethiopian regions have intensified through the domestic repercussions of the Tigray war. This has further spurred on primordialist identity politics which further brings into question the viability of revitalized discourses on "Ethiopianess" and the future of the Ethiopian state. While many blame the Abiy government for pushing the unitary state agenda under the umbrella of the PP, representatives of ethnopolitical communities (particularly Oromo, Tigray, Sidama, etc.) prefer a truly functioning ethnic federal arrangement over a homogenising central state. Many fear that this will turn Ethiopia back to the Amhara-led, repressive empire of the past, even though demographic shifts in Ethiopia's administrative bodies and an increasing use of Afaan Oromo in ministerial buildings signals a qualitatively different Pan-Ethiopianism than previous iterations. This essential shift in Ethiopian nationalism presents a rich field for further academic enquiry.

Conclusion

The contemporary Ethiopian government deploys Pan-Africanist and Pan-Ethiopianist ideals in a diverse, instrumentalized manner, envisioned in a variety of ways. By appealing to a united Africa and common prosperity for the continent, the Abiy government seeks to bolster and leverage its international reputation to rally African support for its own causes. A rhetorical emphasis on Pan-African ideals highlights not least the current administration's intent of further consolidating the Ethiopian state both economically and politically in its contemporary borders. While constitutionally permitted, secession is understood as diametrically opposed to Ethiopia's national and Pan-Africanist interests. We have argued that the Ethiopian governments range of Pan-African and Pan-Ethiopian rhetoric and ideals have contributed to the intensification of identity politics within Ethiopia as well as in the diasporic political space. Such primordialist outlooks on identity are situated at the core of the most fervent threats against the current Ethiopian state. As the current Ethiopian government is following in the steps of historic forms of Pan-Ethiopian, centralist politics with the ambition of maintaining Ethiopian state integrity and achieving state consolidation, the core parameters of political resistance from the 'peripheries' are spurred on.

The history of ethnonationalist struggles against imperial and Derg Pan-Ethiopian politics, the institutionalization of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia after 1991 and the persistence of oppressive centralist politics even under normative decentralization have facilitated the increasingly hostile primordial ethnic identity politics in Ethiopia. The way the current administration seeks to defuse the tensions through a selective engagement with elements of ethnonational politics, while advancing its own version of Pan-Ethiopian politics, has intensified internal struggles between various socio-cultural groups. The Tigray war, the recently intensified OLA-insurgency, rising

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Oromo-Amhara tensions and the ongoing explosive tensions between militarised Amhara nationalist factions and the government are all examples of this. As diasporic actors are playing an increasingly influential role in Ethiopia's domestic politics and economy, the prevalence of primordialist identity politics in diaspora politics present a further seriously destabilising factor in the future of the Ethiopian state. Therefore, both the governments Pan-African and Pan-Ethiopian discourse, aimed at harmonising Ethiopian politics, are paradoxically perpetuating the most serious threats to Ethiopian national unity.

The era of political turbulence in the last years have created an atmosphere in which the most influential ethnonational elites have had difficulties entertaining mutual trust. This has seriously impeded effective discussions over reconciliation within the country. Both inside and outside Ethiopia, the first year of prime minister Abiy's rule created an unprecedented veneer of unity amongst all those not directly threatened by the shift in power. However, the subsequent political developments, and the Tigray war in particular, have altered this perception and contributed to further political polarization in Ethiopia and its diaspora.

Spurred on by the political shift in 2018 and the new political conditions this created, various interpretations of Pan-Ethiopianist unification projects and ethnonationalist, primordial ambitions have intensified their competition. As in previous decades, the central government's use of Pan-Ethiopian language has antagonised a variety of actors, as they perceive clientelist bias in the proposed 'unity' and understand their priorities and necessities undermined.

The current Ethiopian government is weary of the threats that national disunity presents both to its grip on power, as well as how Ethiopia is viewed throughout the African continent and the world at large. Under the current political circumstances the central Ethiopian language of unity – both nationally and continentally – has failed to produce the desired effects and has instead accentuated a culture of political violence in the country. In light of the tokenistic and counter-productive effects of the Abiy administrations Pan-Ethiopian language, the transformative potential of the central Ethiopian government rhetoric about African integration and continental prosperity remains highly questionable.

Disclosure. None.

Note

1 Based on the interviews conducted for this article, and personal communication with diaspora activists.

References

Abbink, Jon. 2006. "Ethnicity and conflict generation in Ethiopia: Some problems and prospects of ethno-regional federalism." *Journal of contemporary African studies* 24 (3): 389–413.

Adi, Hakim. 2018. *Pan-Africanism: a History / Hakim Adi*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

African Union. 2013. AU Echo, Issue 5 (27. January 2013).

Allo, Awol. 2020. "How Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia-first nationalism led to civil war." 25 Nov 2020, in: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/25/how-abiy-ahmeds-ethiopia-first-nationalism-led-to-civil-war

Al Mariam. 2019. "Medemer" by Abiy Ahmed, Ph.D., An Interpretive Book Review in Two Parts (Part I), 2019. Al Mariam's Commentaries. https://almariam.com/2019/10/20/medemerby-abiy-ahmed-ph-d-an-interpretive-book-review-in-two-parts/ (accessed 1st July 2023).

Ayele, Zemelak A. 2018. "EPRDF's 'menu of institutional manipulations' and the 2015 regional elections," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28 (3): 275–300.

Bach, Jean-Nicolas. 2015. "New Trends, Old Views: The Ambivalent Centre/Periphery Paradigm in Ethiopian Studies." In *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, edited by Eloi Ficquet and Ahmed Hassen, 27–40. Addis Ababa: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Belay, Nahusenay. 2022. A letter to continental leaders from a Tigrayan pan-Africanist. Ethiopia Insight. URL https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/02/07/a-letter-to-continental-leaders-from-a-tigrayan-pan-africanist/ (accessed 1.7.23).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chanie, Bantayehu Shiferaw and John Ishiyama. 2021: "Political Transition and the Rise of Amhara Nationalism in Ethiopia." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56 (5): 1036–1050.
Clapham, Christopher S. 1988. *Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Clapham, Christopher S. 2017. *The Horn of Africa: State formation and decay*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Endeshaw, Dawit. 2020. Ethiopia Postpones August Election due to Coronavirus, Reuters, March 31. https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN21I2S6/
Gebrekidan, Fikru. 2012. From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963. *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6 (1-2): 71–86.
Frühwirth, Dominik. 2020. "Ethiopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers!" From Ethiopianism to Pan-Africanism. *Vienna Journal of African Studies* 38 (2): 33–54.
Fuller, Harcourt. 2014. *Building the Ghanaian Nation-State. Kwame Nkrumah's Symbolic Nationalism*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan.
Hess, Robert L. 1970. *Ethiopia: the modernization of autocracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Hochet-Bodin, Noé. 2022: "Specter of civil war resurfaces in Oromia region of Ethiopia." *Le Monde*, 28th December 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/12/28/specter-of-civil-war-resurfaces-in-the-oromia-region-of-ethiopia_6009349_4.html (accessed 30th January 2023).
Hussein, Hassen, and Mohammed Ademo. 2016. "Ethiopia's Original Sin." *World Policy Journal* 33 (3): 22–28.
Ibreck, Rachel and Alex de Waal. 2021. "Introduction: Situating Ethiopia in Genocide Debates." *Journal of Genocide Research* 24 (1): 83–96.
Ishiyama, John. 2021."Is Ethnonationalism Growing in Ethiopia and Will it Lead to the Dissolution of the Country? Evidence from the World Value Survey 2007-2020." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56 (5): 1024–1035.
John, Sonia. 2022. "The Potential of Democratization in Ethiopia: The Welkait Question as a Litmus Test," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56 (5): 1007–1023.
Kidanemariam, Weyni. 2023. We Must Hold Abiy Ahmed Accountable For The Atrocities Committed in Ethiopia, https://registerforum.org/18437/opinion/we-must-hold-abiy-ahmed-accountable-for-the-atrocities-committed-in-ethiopia/
Kassa, Derese G. 2020. "Beyond the Limits of Theory: Qualifying Electoral Authoritorianism in Ethiopia (2005-2015)." *South African Review of Sociology* 51 (1): 70–82.
Lawton, P. D., 2022. "PM Abiy Ahmed Calls for the Creation of a Genuine African Media." https://www.msingiafrikamagazine.com/2022/04/pm-abiy-ahmed-calls-for-the-creation-of-a-genuine-african-media/
Lyons, Terrence. 2006. "Transnational Politics in Ethiopia: Diasporas and the 2005. Elections." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 15 (2): 265–284.
Lyons, Terrence. 2021. "The Origins of the EPRDF and the Prospects for the Prosperity Party," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56 (5): 1051–1063.
Markakis, John. 1974. *Ethiopia: anatomy of a traditional polity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Matshanda, Namhla Thando. 2022: "Ethiopia's civil wars: Postcolonial modernity and the violence of contested national belonging," *Nations and Nationalism* 28 (4): 1282–1295.
May, Clifford D. 1985. *Africans' Conference Opens with a Call for Self-Reliance*. The New York Times, July 19, 1985.
Meles Zenawi. 2012. Meles Zenawi speech at the AU, 2012, https://au.int/sites/default/files/speeches/29404-sp-remarkes_by_h.e.ato_meles_zenawi1.pdf
Mengistu Haile Mariam. 1977. BBC Interview. https://aineps.org/1977/08/29/6223/
Mengistu Haile Mariam. 1984. Report to the 20th Summit Conference of the Organization of African Unity. https://www.marxists.org/archive/mengistu/1984/1984-oau-speech.htm
Muchie, Mammo. 2000. "Pan-Africanism: An idea whose time has come," *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 27 (2): 297–306.
Newbery, Katharina M. B. 2021. "State identity narratives and threat construction in the Horn of Africa: revisiting Ethiopia's 2006 intervention in Somalia." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 15, 2: 255–273.
OLA 2023. Publishes a 'Brief Political Manifesto', in: https://oromia.today/news/ola-publishes-a-brief-political-manifesto/?cn-reloaded=1
Pausewang, Siegfried. 2005. "The Two-Faces Amhara Identity." In: *Scrinium. Revue de patrologie, d'hagiopgraphie critique et d'histoire ecclésiastique. Tome 1. Varia Aethiopica. In Memory of Sevir B. Chernetsov (1943-2005)*, 273–286. Sankt Peterburg: Byzantinorossica (2005).
Pellerin, Camille and Emma Elfversson, E. 2023. (Re)claiming Finfinne?: Violent Protest and the Right to Addis Ababa, In: Sam Kniknie; Karen Büscher (ed.), *Rebellious Riots: Entangled Geographies of Contention in Africa* (pp. 128–161). Leiden: Bril.
Qeerroo, The National Youth Movement for Freedom and Democracy, Ibsa-Labsii Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo, https://qeerroo.org/2022/12/06/ibsa-labsii-qeerroo-bilisummaa-oromoo/#more-34667, 6th December 2022 (accessed 2nd February 2023).
Ramos, Manuel J. 2021. "Tigray Tragedy," *Stichproben - Vienna Journal of African Studies* 41, https://stichproben.univie.ac.at/en/all-issues/stichproben-no-412021/

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Reid, Richard. 2022. "Atrocity in Ethiopian History." *Journal of Genocide Research* 24 (1): 97–108.
Rose, Wayne A. 2019. "W.E.B. Du Bois: Ethiopia and Pan-Africanism." *Journal of Black Studies* 50 (3): 251–272.
Tarrosy, István. 2019. "The Belt and Road Initiative and Eastern Africa." In: *BRICS and Resistance in Africa. Contention, Assimilation and Co-optation*, edited yy Justin van der Merwe, Patrick Bond, and Nicole Dodd, 170–186. London: Zed Books.
Teferra, Zelalem. 2017. "Shifting trajectories of inter-ethnic relations in Western Ethiopia: a case study from Gidda and Kiremu districts in East Wollega." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11 (4): 609–627.
Kassaw, Alene and Mbabazi Veneranda (2024) TPLF's annexation of Wolkait, Ethiopia: motivations, strategies, and interests, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10, no. 1, 2376859. http://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2376859
United Nations, United Nations Ethiopia Annual Results Survey, 2020/2022. https://ethiopia.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/United%20Nations%20Ethiopia%20UNSDCF%20Results%20Report%202020-2022.pdf
Van der Beken, Christophe. 2007. "Ethiopia: Constitutional protection of Ethnic minorities at the regional level." *Afrika focus* 20.1-2 (2007): 105–151.
Verhoeven, Harry and Michael Woldemariam. 2022. "Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and U.S. foreign policy," *Contemporary Security Policy*, http://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2091580
Yimenu, Bizunesh Getachew. 2022. "The Politics of Ethnonational Accommodation Under a Dominant Party Regime: Ethiopia's Three Decades' Experience." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221097663.
Ylönen, Aleksi. 2021a. "Positivism or Understanding? The Complexity of Analyzing the Objectives of Armed Opposition Groups." *Critical Review*, 33 (1): 128–144.
Ylönen, Aleksi. 2021b. "Ethiopia: What's next after Tigray?" Italian Institute for International Studies, 11th January, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/ethiopia-whats-next-after-tigray-28936.
Ylönen, Aleksi and Alexander B. Meckelburg. 2020. "Ethiopia: between domestic pressures and regional hegemony," in Giovanni Carbone, ed. *Africa's thorny Horn: searching for a new balance in the age of the pandemic*, Milan: Ledizioni, 122–148.
Walsch, Declan. "'I Didn't Expect to Make It Back Alive': An Interview With Tigray's Leader." *The New York Times*, 3 July 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/03/world/africa/tigray-leader-interview-ethiopia.html (accessed 19th January 2023).
Yohannes Woldemariam, Isaias Afwerki's gamble in Ethiopia is endangering Eritrean sovereignty, London School of Economic, 2022, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/03/24/isaias-afwerkis-gamble-in-ethiopia-tigray-is-endangering-eritrean-sovereignty/
YouTube. 2022. A Changing Ethiopia: Understanding Medemer. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKyP7M5NtSE&t=7s
Záhořík, Jan. 2017. "Reconsidering Ethiopia's ethnic politics in the light of the Addis Ababa Master Plan and anti-governmental protests." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 8 (3): 257–272.
Záhořík, Jan, and Ameyu Godesso Roro. 2022. "Ethiopian diaspora and its impact on politics in Ethiopia." In *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, edited by Jean-Nicolas Bach *et al.*, 618–627. New York: Routledge.

Interviews

Anonymous Interview with a political activist, 15th December 2022, online.
Anonymous Interview with a diaspora political activist, 10th September 2022, online.
Anonymous Interview with a diaspora political activist. 21st August 2022, online.
Anonymous Interview with an Ethiopian scholar, 28th December 2022, online.
Anonymous Interview with a diaspora political activist, 24th August 2022, online.

Cite this article: Záhořík, Jan, Aleksi Ylönen, and Jonah Lego. 2026. "Multiple Layers of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Ethiopianism in Current Debates on Nationalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia". *Nationalities Papers* 54: 190–205, doi:10.1017/nps.2024.108

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.108 Published online by Cambridge University Press