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Political and Ideological Legacy of Ethiopia's Contested Nation-Building: A Focus on Contemporary Oromo Politics

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Abstract
Ethiopia's nation-building is rife with accusations and claims of past atrocities and injustices from the time of Emperor Menelik's southward expansion to recent political discourse since 2018. This article attempts to capture these complexities embedded in the making of the modern Ethiopian state, critiquing both modernization and colonial theses used to explain this process, with an emphasis on Oromo politics, the legacy of political and ideological contradictions in these endeavours. Its analysis, how production and reproduction of Ethiopia's past has led to deep-seated divisions and complicated sense of common citizenship as a precondition for establishing stable democracy.

Keywords
Political contradiction, contending nationalisms, contemporary Oromo politics, Ethiopia's nation-building, modernization/colonial thesis

Introduction

Ethiopia is a polarized country born in contradictions. Its modern history has been marked by a struggle to build a common national identity or nation-state, so that, its cultural and political construction has been the underlying question of political struggles in a radically changing domestic and regional political landscape.

The complex nature of this development, especially since the 1960s, has given rise to fundamental questions about the nature of the state as a political institution, as well as about the cultural and political content of the nation as a national community. This development also revolves around a war of visions between two sides:[1] those who demand more regionalization and those who want to maintain a more centralized system.

As such, the question of what Ethiopia is and what it should become is so important that it has spawned different narratives rooted in the often-contested process of state-building that have been used in the country's increasingly organized violent political and ideological struggles. Historical and political discourses are filled with conflicting narratives and have long been widespread among

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scholars, historians, politicians, activists and more recently among the public, reinforcing various frameworks that idealize, sanitize and disparage the national history, erasing or justifying human suffering as collateral damage in the pursuit of nation-building.

Moreover, these debates about Ethiopia's cultural and political identity are often constrained by the use of concepts and frameworks that are theoretically rigid and politically limiting. One of the main questions, which has long occupied much of the political and intellectual debate in Ethiopia, is whether Ethiopia is an empire of completely different and subjugated societies, or a nation that, despite the many differences among its national groups, enjoyed essential unity.

There are two main different perspectives to explain this dynamic that has shaped the development of Ethiopia's complicated identity. The first perspective comes from those groups that take pride in Ethiopia as a country with more than 3000 years of statehood and see Menelik II as one of the greatest leaders in Ethiopian history, the hero of Adwa and the man who presided over the 'reunification' of Ethiopia in the late 19th century (see Crummey, 1988; Kebede, 2003; Taddia, 1994). For this group, Ethiopia is one nation that shares the heritage of history and coexistence over the centuries, so that, they try to sanctify the historical injustice and suffering inflicted on its various national groups as the price worth paying to maintain this 'unity'.

The second perspective claims that the empire reflects the political character of the Ethiopian state since the late 19th century, and views Menelik as a black colonizer who participated in the European scramble for Africa, acting as their agent, conquering independent territories and peoples by brute force (see Holcomb and Ibsa, 1990). This view is shared by a significant portion of the Oromo, Somali and Sidama elites, and so on. For this group, Ethiopia is essentially the empire of unequal nations, so that, they demand(ed) either the creation of their own independent state, or the simultaneous destruction of the old order and its transformation into an inclusive and multinational state.

To overcome this ideological and theoretical deadlock, Gulema (2020) puts forward the thesis that Ethiopia, which materialized after and as a result of the development of the late 19th century, was not a (colonial) empire or a nation-state (modernization) per se, but something in between, simultaneously possessing the qualities and elements of both structures (p. 364). The analysis presented in this article also advances this third perspective, breaking the analytical deadlock that limits the political imagination to capture the complexities embedded in the construction of the Ethiopian state both from the colonial and modernization perspectives. With this goal in mind, this article focusses on a critique of nation-building in Ethiopia, with an emphasis on contemporary Oromo politics, the legacy of political and ideological contradictions in this process, and their implications for democracy in the current transition.

To organize this analysis in this perspective, the article is divided into four sections. Having introduced the article in the first section, the second section discusses Ethiopia's controversial state- and nation-building endeavours to set the context for the article. The discussions in this section focus on examining the creation of modern Ethiopia and the structural crisis inherent in the process that have shaped the emergence of colonial and modernization/nation-building theses to explain the implications of Ethiopia's conquest and expansion in the late 19th century. The third section discusses Ethiopia's current predicaments for achieving democracy, which are deeply rooted in the creation of the modern state. This is the most important section of the article, analysing major historical paradoxes and the legacy of state-building efforts relevant to the quest for democracy in Ethiopia. It tries to answer an important question: how divergent and contrasting views of the state- and nation-building efforts have affected this quest. The fourth section provides concluding remarks with further focus on the way out of the multiple and complex crises the country has faced.

Ethiopia's controversial state- and nation-building

The Horn of Africa came into existence as bridgeheads of grand imperial ambitions to control the region in the second half of the 19th century, becoming the site of fierce expansionist competition that involved both internal and external forces (see Iyob, 2001; Khadiagala, 2001; Niane, 1984; Yasin, 2010). The Ethiopian Empire was the main actor in this tension and rivalry between and within states that became the hallmark of the Horn of Africa (Markakis, 1999: 65). Two forces from Christian Abyssinia (i.e. Tigre and Amhara) also engaged in this bitter rivalry with each other, seeking to control much of the same territory in which Menelik II later succeeded in creating the Ethiopian state (Gnamo, 2014: 116).

Thus, a closer look at political interactions in the Horn of Africa demonstrates that Abyssinians had expansionist ambitions, thus, the region underwent a simultaneous 'feudal expansionism' of Abyssinia and European imperialism. Unlike other unsuccessful attempts in the region, Abyssinia's aspiration for empire building was successful, giving birth to the modern Ethiopian state that had international recognition from the European powers operating in the Horn region (Clapham, 2017). The process was accompanied by the brutal conquest of several sovereign nations and territories with the ensuing consequences of the economic, political, cultural and religious oppression of the conquered communities, including the Oromo, thus being conquered for the first time in recorded history (Marcus, 1975: 44).

Although Ethiopia went through three historical stages since it began expanding southward – imperial, socialist and federal – and constantly tried to evolve into a multi-ethnic polity, participation in national political life usually required assimilation with the core cultural values of Abyssinia (see Clapham, 2017; Markakis, 2011). This generated many opposing views that define the current political interactions. Debated throughout this morphological process, especially among the Oromo elite and political forces, over and over but still unresolved, is whether the Oromo political questions should be viewed from a colonial or nation-building perspective. In hindsight, I bring up this very important question in reverse order: was Ethiopia really a colonial empire, as opposed to the rest of African states that survived colonialism? To answer these questions, it is necessary to place Ethiopia, as well as Oromo's aspirations for self-determination and democracy, in a broader global and African context, analysing the implication of both the colonial and nation-building/modernization theses on contemporary political development. Markakis, J. (2011) Ethiopia: The last two frontiers (Vol. 10). Boydell & Brewer Ltd.

Therefore, the reflections in the following sections attempt to shed light on some of the main arguments of modernization and the colonial thesis in the discourse on the making of an Ethiopian state. I then analyse the global and continental dynamics that shaped the emergence of the colonial thesis, with an emphasis on its impact on contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia.

Reflections on modernization thesis

The first discourse on the making of an Ethiopian state concerns modernization, as some view the southward expansion of Abyssinia in the late 19th century as a nation-building project for the reunification of the state (Donham, 1986: 3; Taddia, 1994: 506). According to this thesis, the search for modernization or development was Ethiopia's most important political project in the 20th century. Makki (2011) argued that the imperial southward expansion was driven by a derivative modernization of the west, which Ethiopia sought to implement due to its marginal position in the global economy. Ethiopian intellectuals of the early 20th century viewed modernity as a pressing need, seeing the lack of material progress more than anything else as existential challenge. Zewde (2002b) argued that these early intellectuals were driven by a cognitive dissonance between an

inherited sense of cultural superiority and an acute awareness of Ethiopian ‘backwardness’, in contrast not only to European states, where many of them studied, but also from colonized African peoples (p. 100).

Quoting Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, a prominent intellectual of the early Ethiopians, Gulema (2020) argues that acquaintance with the west was seen not only as the key to resolving the challenges of development in the country, but also believed as a revelatory teleology that would return Ethiopia back to history as a member of the civilized world (p. 366). The modernization process began with state-led projects that attempted to reorganize politics, economy and foreign policy of the imperial regime. For example, Menelik initiated several modernization projects, such as the establishment of the first Western-style school in Ethiopia, the creation of government ministries, hiring of several European advisers and the construction of a railway from the coast to Addis Ababa that was completed after his death (BeaureGard, 1976: 23). All the same, there is much evidence in the historical records showing that Ras Tafari Mekonnen, the future Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974), visited Europe in 1924 with the conviction that modernization was the key to building a modern country, as well as to overcome its lagging behind the west (Monin, 2013: 389).

Levine (2007) argued that the vision of modernization began to prevail in 1957, over half a century ago, when the emperor put into practice various measures, such as the creation of a modern bureaucracy, the creation of a national army, the emergence of a national school system and the construction of national symbols that he believed would benefit Ethiopia in the future (p. 6). Ethiopia adopted a 5-year plan as early as in 1957 to set economic goals, but as a predominantly agrarian country, it was unable to reform the land tenure structure on which the power of the state elite was based (Clapham, 2006: 143). Zewde’s account of modern Ethiopian history also offers an understanding of an emerging socio-political order that becomes increasingly successful over time until it eventually breeds its own defeat. Ethiopia’s struggle for centralization began with unification attempts in the 1850s and 1860s, which was later brutally realized under King Menelik II, but its consolidation was achieved a 100 years later under the absolutist rule of Emperor Haile Selassie (Zewde, 2002).

However, the modernization experiment in Ethiopia was largely unsuccessful as violence that was embedded in the modernization project elsewhere also accompanied the Ethiopia’s version, because the need for modernization faced an internal shortage of economic resources, which led to large-scale exploitation and dispossession of the newly incorporated territories (see González-Ruibal, 2006; Regassa and Korf, 2018). Zewde (2002) also explained that Haile Selassie created the unitary state that was first conceived by Emperor Tewodros, but its repressive nature eventually led to its downfall: Haile Selassie’s unitary state could not last as opposition and repression mutually reinforced each other until they reached their logical conclusion in the 1974 revolution. Yet, supporters of the imperial order continue to believe that the imperial Ethiopia represents a time of progress, that could set Ethiopia on the path of peaceful and democratic development if it were not cruelly halted by the 1974 revolution (Clapham, 2006: 144). Emperor Haile Selassie is portrayed as the modernizer of Ethiopia, which was true during the early years of his reign until the first constitution was adopted in 1931. After that, ‘true’ modernization was constrained by colossal centralization, bureaucracy, poverty, lack of infrastructure and urban plutocracy (see Makki, 2011).

Reflections on colonial thesis

The second discourse on the creation of the Ethiopian state is the colonial thesis, which emerged in the political and intellectual discourses of the 1960s and continued through the 1990s to explain the making of the modern Ethiopian state. It represents the colonial conquest of the Amharic-speaking groups against the Oromo, Somalis and other southern peoples who were independent peoples until the late 19th century.

The arguments in this thesis can be divided into four main categories. The first one is that European weapons of destruction were supplied exclusively to the Abyssinian forces for strategic purposes to conquer Oromo and neighbouring territories, rendering Oromo's spears useless in battle (see Hassen, 1999). The second argument is that European technical skills were also offered to the Abyssinian elites, which helped them create a state apparatus designed to occupy the conquered Oromo and other southern territories (Jalata, 2005). The third argument, according to Holcomb and Ibssa (1990), is that the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire was the result of an alliance between the major European powers and the Abyssinian princes. Hence, the newly built Ethiopian colonial empire was a dependent colonial state that required constant support from Western powers, not only when it was created in the late 19th century, but also throughout its modern history to survive (see Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990).

The fourth argument is that Menelik II played an active role in the 'scramble for Africa' as a regional warlord to save imperial Ethiopia from falling prey to European colonialism, allowing him to triple the traditional kingdom of Abyssinia with the support and understanding of European colonial powers because of their vested geopolitical interests (Gnamo, 2014: 113). Other scholars also further cemented that the forcible incorporation of several independent territories inhabited by different societies into the modern Ethiopian state led to subjugation and deculturation (see Benti, 2009; Hassen, 2002; Kumsa, 2009).

The above arguments, expressed in the modernization and colonial theses, not only represent divergent accounts of the country's history, but also expose agonies of Ethiopia's past that continues today, either complicating or obscuring the magnitude of the problems the country faces. First, the claim that Ethiopia was invented as a result of an alliance between the imperialist powers of Europe and Abyssinia is contested because no such formal alliance with an element of legality was established. Even by Holcomb and Ibssa's (1990) account, Menelik managed to avoid confrontation with the Europeans for a long time, giving them the impression that his plans 'matched exactly with the desires of the Europeans' (p. 92). This match was not the result of a formal 'alliance', but rather the result of influences that were going on behind the scenes. A closer look at Ethiopia's history suggests that Ethiopia's relationship with the rest of the world has always been in doubt and often left open to manipulation in favour of the Ethiopian rulers.'

Second, the arguments advanced in both theses offer accounts of Ethiopia's history that point to European influence, but of completely different kinds, reflecting two opposing views on the role of Ethiopian rulers. While historians with the modernization thesis try to shed light on how the Ethiopians used European means to achieve Ethiopian goals, others with the colonial thesis try to downplay the accomplishments of the Ethiopian rulers and attribute all their successes to the intervention of European powers. For example, Zewde (2014) attributed the creation of the modern Ethiopian state against the interests of outside powers to Menelik's strength and competence, but this account of Ethiopian history has been disputed by several scholars, including Holcomb and Ibsaa. Similar argument was also raised in the context of the debate over the acquisition of firearms by the Abyssinian rulers from foreign powers operating in the region. For example, the claim that the Abyssinians were only able to subdue the southern peoples because they had firearms is true. But the firearms were not provided free of charge by the European powers. The Abyssinian rulers bought the bulk of the firearms with resources plundered from the southern regions, as their goals were a monumental quest for power and conquest of territories, for which weapons were both a means and an end.

Third, although the country has gone through numerous morphological processes, the consequences of the Ethiopian conquest that took place a 100 years ago are far from over, as there are huge inequalities and injustice that persist today. The peoples of southern Ethiopia, including the Oromo, are still suffering from the consequences of the Abyssinian conquest of the southern

regions of modern Ethiopia in the second half of the 19th century. These consequences are discussed in detail below under various subheadings in the third section of this article.

However, despite these features expressed in the colonial thesis, which depict similar characteristics of colonial practices in other parts of Africa, I argue that there are other global and continental dynamics that shaped the emergence of the colonial thesis in Ethiopia. This is found in the emergence of the student revolutions in Ethiopia, which coincided with the rise of Marxism and the development of nationalist movements with socialist orientation in other parts of Africa. The period of the 1950s and 1960s were the heyday of the Marxist, anti-colonial and leftist ideologies of the former colonial countries of Africa and Asia. Many revolutionaries viewed Marxism as a logical response to European colonialism as it incorporated people of African descent, emphasizing human solidarity and equality (Agozino, 2014: 182).

Moreover, the era of decolonization was the golden age of associational life and the emergence of civil society, such as trade unions and student associations, as well as the growth of government bureaucracy and private business, which brought many changes in many parts of Africa (Young, 1994: 36). Deeply influenced by such global and continental dynamics in the early 1960s, trade unions, student and teacher associations started to emerge in Ethiopia. Ethiopian intellectuals who were influenced by anti-colonial movements and Marxist ideologies, largely Oromo, Somali and Eritrean elites embraced nationalism that saw the making of Ethiopian statehood as a colonial enterprise. Zewde (2014) identifies that the radical nationalist ideas of African scholarship students who joined Haile Selassie I University had a strong influence on Ethiopian students and activists.[2] With the aspiration to become the seat of the African integration process that led to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), Ethiopian intellectuals and students of the time emphasized the African part of Ethiopian history. This helped them to learn not only about the foreign ideologies and challenges that other African societies were facing, but also to become acquainted with some radical Marxist thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah (Gebrekidan, 2012: 82).

However, the conditions under which the colonial ideologies developed in Ethiopia were very peculiar and different from other African countries. This was mainly due to two factors: the absence of European colonization in Ethiopia and the scholarship that mythologized Ethiopia as an independent empire living in peace, unity and civilization. In particular, the victory of the Battle of Adwa in 1896 over invading Italian forces is often used as a tool to reaffirm Ethiopia's unique image as an African power that was able to defeat the European army, which served as an inspiration for the Pan-African movement (Milkias and Metaferia, 2005: 181).

Despite this difference between Ethiopia and the rest of Africa, there were some similarities between them in terms of nationalist movements and the ensuing social transformation. For example, like all other African states, socialism and Marxism, as one would expect, became popular in the intellectual and student circles of Ethiopians (see Donham, 1999; Zewde, 2014). The Marxist–Leninist elite, who viewed Marxism as an unchallengeable truth, plucked up courage and reconstructed their experience of alienation, exploitation and oppression as internal colonialism, formulating an ideology against the archaic feudal-capitalist system (see Jalata, 1996; Viratnen, 2015).

Besides such external influences, the historical and cultural justifications used for Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962 actually further exacerbated the alienation of other communities and provided additional impetus, especially for Oromo resistance (see Keller, 1995). As a result, an alliance was formed with disaffected elements of Eritrean society who felt alienated by the annexation. This alliance of struggle against the imperial regime took up arms to undo the annexation as well as end other forms of oppression elsewhere in the country, such as grievances over agricultural taxes and land expropriation. It began to acquire improved interdependence since the 1970s and continued even after Eritrea gained independence in 1991 (see Woldemariam, 2018).

Thus, the exposure of Marxism and anti-colonial movements was the main continental dynamic that shaped the emergence of the colonial thesis in Ethiopia. It provided these intellectual and students with a framework for interpreting their alienation experiences through the notion of colonization, an idea that portrays Ethiopia as a black colonialist, akin to European white colonialists in other African countries. This was like a double-edged sword that allowed them to reject the Ethiopian Empire, as well as the west that was conquering other African states, while supporting Emperor Haile Selassie, the last king of the empire, who crystallized the creation of the Ethiopian state begun by Menelik II. Haile Selassie's regime, once hailed as a modernizer, was perceived as either backward or 'colonialist'.

Meanwhile, two dominant narratives, in which the question of land was central, began to take shape in the Ethiopian student movements against the oppression of the imperial system. The first was apparently the colonial thesis, which demanded the dismantling of the Ethiopian empire to end internal colonialism (see Záhořík, 2017). The second was the question of 'class and national oppression' (see Keller, 1981), the root causes of which were attributed to the failure of the nation-building project and of modernization and progress, the resolution of which should not necessarily lead to the disintegration of the Ethiopian state. The differences in perspectives led the groups to seek the fulfilment of the demands of democracy and self-determination, either within the framework of the Ethiopian state or through the creation of an independent republic.

In short, as the period coincided with the era of decolonization and the emergence of Marxism as an inspirational revolutionary ideology of student movements, the impact of such changes was profound. This led to a series of uprisings that resulted in the downfall of the Imperial regime in 1974, only to be replaced by the military regime that devastated the country for the next 17 years. Hence, Oromo's struggle for democracy and self-determination must be seen as part of this broader continental and regional dynamic process of ending oppression.[3]

However, as the Oromo struggle was deeply influenced by external dynamics, such as Marxism, it was also negatively impacted by events in the region that perpetuated the suffering arising from the interaction of widespread struggles for justice and democracy. As Oromia stretches from the edges of the Ogaden Lowlands in the east to Ethiopia's border with Sudan in the west, the Somalis sought to realize the Greater Somalia project by annexing much of the adjacent eastern Oromia, while the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) frequently invaded the Oromo Liberation Front's (OLF) operational areas in the west (see Jalata, 2000; Lata, 2006). This forced the OLF to fight simultaneously with these regional movements and the Ethiopian regime, which significantly reduced their combat effectiveness and had a deterrent effect on the strict pursuit of anti-colonial perspectives.

Furthermore, this crucial moment in the struggle of the Oromo people was also of negative importance because the chronic divisions between Oromo elites and political forces, which continue today, began with the student revolution (Jalata, 2020: 160), utterly divided into two main positions on the way forward. The first is the separatist stance that emerged in the 1970s and is represented by the OLF. This separatist stance strongly defies the nature of the Ethiopian state, viewing Menelik's expansionist war in the late 19th century as internal colonization and enslavement, arguing that the only recourse is to secede from Ethiopia and create an independent Oromo republic. The second stance in Oromo politics can be characterized as a federalist position, which also emerged in the 1970s but took hold in the 1990s after the formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) (Østebø and Tronvoll, 2020: 614).

Thus, in 1991, the military regime was defeated by the Marxist-Leninist nationalists, who formed the liberation front that created a 'multinational state' that considers the country's ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Post-1991 politics also provided the conditions for a resurgence of the colonial and national oppression discourse, leading nationalists to exercise the right to

self-determination in different ways. While the Eritreans were allowed to create an independent state, with the intervention of the United States and the west, Oromo, Somali and other nationalist movements sought to satisfy the demands of democracy and self-determination within the Ethiopian state (Blaine, 1991).[4] Ethiopia, after a unitary state system had existed since the state took its current form at the turn of the 20th century, adopted a multinational federal system in 1991 to address the long-standing questions of national oppression and democracy. In an effort to soften the demands of separatists as well, the political forces that assumed state power adopted a self-determination clause in the federal constitution that aimed at achieving a higher level of self-government.

However, if we take stock of the past 27 years (1991–2018), the practice of federalism was often violated by the very party that enacted it and pledged to defend it. The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party ruled the country with democratic centralism and centralized state rule practically snatched ethnic groups of the right to self-determination and other constitutional rights, triggering a series of protests and resistance from the ethnic groups. The 2014 Addis Ababa Master Plan, which sparked strong and sustained Oromo protests, was the straw that broke the camel's back. The protesters originally demanded respect for the autonomy of the Oromia regional state over development and urban planning decisions, but quickly turned to a broader demand for regime change and rectification of historical injustices that have perpetuated since state formation, such as redefining national identity and rewriting national history.

Thus, the current crisis in Ethiopia is essentially a crisis of state- and nation-building: they have a genealogy that goes back to the formation of modern Ethiopia when the nation expanded southward because of its economic centrality to the new state. As such, the failures to create an enabling environment for democracy in today's Ethiopia are linked to the political development that is rooted in state-building, which continues to this day. The systemic marginality of the incorporated nations into the emerging Ethiopian state gave rise to 'national' oppression as long-standing social grievances were not effectively resolved. This was mainly because the structural flaws of the Ethiopian state were not only political and economic, but also deeply cultural, as identity politics is more often used as a means of expressing political struggles in contemporary Ethiopia.

In short, as the discussion of the complexities embedded in the construction of the Ethiopian state appears here, the Ethiopian state, which materialized after and as a result of the development of the late 19th century, simultaneously possessed the qualities and elements of both colonial and modernization structures. Ethiopian intellectuals and political forces have also interpreted the country's malaise and prescribed political alternatives to address it, based on different ideological predispositions. This ranges from those who described the country's underdevelopment as the main problems in the early 20th century, to those who identified the lack of freedom and equality as the main structural problems, including the colonial thesis, debated since the 1960s in the context of political and social changes taking place in the country. However, despite some radical raptures and revolutions, the changes do not meet the basic demands of progress, self-determination, democracy, freedom, justice and equality in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's predicaments for achieving stable democracy

Below, I take a deeper look at some of the historical paradoxes in Ethiopia's nation-building endeavours and analyse the legacy of the political and ideological contradictions that are relevant to the quest for democracy in Ethiopia today. Accordingly, the important question that this section tries to answer is how the divergent views on the Ethiopian state- and nation-building process have affected the quest for democracy in the current transition.

Political contradictions and fragmentation of national politics

First, political contradictions are one of the legacies of the making of the modern Ethiopian state. The contradiction that originated with the conquest of the south has since remained at the centre of Ethiopia's political discourse and development and remains a challenge for transformational politics today. It creates a narrative of struggle that recognizes the histories, memories and truths of one group, but elides or erases the rest of their memories, truths and histories. A good example of such omission or erasure of history is how various national groups in Ethiopia would like to remember the victory at the Battle of Adwa and the conquest of the southern independent territories. The conquest of the southern territories and the victory at Adwa were closely connected not only because the same king and generals led and fought battles. However, the organization of bloody 'campaigns' against the southern territories made it possible to plunder the very lands that provided the coveted capital and resources Menelik desperately needed before going to the Battle of Adwa. His goal was to gain control of the southern territories, over which he had to wage war, to obtain the resources needed to fulfil his monumental quest for power. This also allowed him to 'make history' at the Battle of Adwa when Ethiopia defeated Italy. However, while the Battle of Adwa became international news and had an important place in Ethiopia's modern history, the conquest of the southern territories and the agony endured by its people remained largely unknown to the world until recently (see Strecker, 1994).

Historians of Ethiopia's glory do not like to point out this depressing connection on the grounds. For them, Ethiopian victory at Adwa symbolized and anticipated the end of colonialism, equating Adwa with the victory of all free people against their oppressors. They emphasize the glory and independence of the Ethiopian rulers, omitting how the peoples of southern Ethiopia were conquered as the painful political consequences of the process were not their primary concern. Positive metaphors, such as 'unification', 'expansion' and 'incorporation' are used instead of terms, such as the subjugation, exploitation and colonization of the southern regions of Ethiopia.

Unfortunately for historians of Ethiopia's agony, Adwa's victory never turned Ethiopia into a beacon of independence and dignity for black Africans: it was a tragic event where one oppressor fought another, but the southerners had to pay the price. For them, Adwa's victory had little impact on Ethiopian's emancipation narrative, so that, they turn their attention to the agony, marginalization and oppression of the Oromo, Welayta, Kafa and other originally independent peoples of the southern regions, whose subjugation in the second half of the 19th century continued to have grave historical consequences today.

Another contradiction in Ethiopia's state-building centres around the place and impact of the politics of heroism and commemoration of past leaders who are considered to have made significant contributions. The rhetoric of heroism pervades contemporary Ethiopian politics, in which heroification forms an ideological component of the state-building process along with the construction and reconstruction of competing narratives over who those heroes represent. The last 19th-century emperors Tewodros, Yohannes IV and Menelik II loom large in the official history of government, but the high status accorded to these figures is highly contested in the popular imagination. The main reason is that Ethiopia's convoluted history, with its competing narratives, casts the hero of one group as the villain of another, creating disputes over the moral character of these past leaders in favour of other heroes outside of the dominant ruling groups.

Thus, besides the state-imposed heroes, various groups in Ethiopia have also sought to honour heroes known only in their communities, especially those who attempted to challenge the Abyssinian state system through political means and armed struggle. By honouring different heroes, these groups seek to define an alternative understanding of the nation that honours not only the dominant groups but also the victims of past regimes. This alternative understanding has power

to shape the victims' relationship with the state as activists challenge persistent inequalities and age-old injustices. It also turns memorials of past leaders into places of contestation, where contrasts run deep in the remembrance of state-imposed heroes and heroes celebrated by other groups, including the celebrations of heroes' days.

Again, one of the contested memorial sites is Menelik Square in Addis Ababa, which features the statue of Emperor Menelik II. For Ethio-nationalists, this monument commemorates the Battle of Adwa by portraying Menelik II as a champion of unification and an anti-colonial battle that rescued Ethiopia from colonization. For Oromo nationalists, this statue reminds them of the crimes committed against their peoples, their evictions, psychological wounds, physical suffering and oppression in the Abyssinian rulers' quest for dominance and territories. Contestation is also seen in the celebration of Heroes' Day; 5 May is a national holiday in Ethiopia, as many celebrate Patriot Victory Day (Arbegnoch Ken) to mark the end of the Italian occupation on that day in 1941. However, there is alternative heroes' day celebrated by the Oromos as Oromo Martyrs' Day, also known as Gayaa Gootota Oromo, which is observed by Oromos around the world to honour those who sacrificed their lives to free Oromia and renew their commitment to the cause for which they died (Jalata, 2010). Many of these Oromo heroes are heroes of endurance whose causes of emancipation outlast the brutality and suffering inflicted on their communities by successive Ethiopian regimes.

Another variant of the rhetoric of heroism in Ethiopia's contemporary political discourses is the glorification of Menelik's warlords to counter the Oromo nationalists' strategic reliance on an alternative narrative of heroism for mobilization against the forces and systems deemed to have subdued the Oromo. In the official history of Ethiopia, the military leaders of imperial regimes with Oromo ethnic origins, such as Gebeyehu Gurmu, Balcha Aba Nafso (Balcha Safo) and Ras Mekonnen are considered Ethiopian heroes who fearlessly faced and defeated Italian forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. However, Oromo nationalists downplayed the role of Oromo agents in Ethiopia's state-building for various reasons, but mainly because Oromo territories were not part of Ethiopia until it was brutally conquered in the last decades of the 19th century. Thus, acknowledging any role that Oromo agents played in Abyssinian imperialism would not only diminish Oromo nationalist claims that they were victims, but would also be a direct insult to Oromo cultural and political nationalism.

Another key figure at the centre of controversy in contemporary Ethiopian politics is Ras Gobena Dache (1821-1889), Emperor Menelik's most revered military commander. Like his master, Ras Gebana's legacy is also hotly contested. Ethio-nationalists present Gobena as a prominent figure who is destined to become a means for Ethiopian reunification, and more importantly, Oromo reintegration or entry into an Abyssinian 'moral' society. In this view, Gobena Dache is the right-hand man of Menelik, who helped the emperor extend his power over the vast territories that became part of the Ethiopian Empire, embodying Oromo's crucial role in the reorganization of the modern Ethiopian state. However, while there are long lines of Oromo military leaders who are revered by the Oromo, Gobena deviates from this tradition due to his brutal conquest and subsequent distribution of Oromo lands to the Abyssinians. In the minds of many Oromos, Gobena appears as a brutal, self-hating conqueror, who was a willing tool of the Abyssinia rulers in their conquest of Oromo territories. He is depicted as a symbol of an Oromo traitor who betrayed his people and whose actions in the service of the Abyssinian rulers created a monolithic empire in which the Oromo had no place (see Yates, 2013).

Such contradictory and competing narratives of national history are forced upon others through deeply authoritarian political exercises. No doubt that Adwa's victory has an external positive resonance in the fight against imperialism in Africa, but it also contributed to the internal subjugation of various national groups that are now in conflict with the state, putting forward contending narratives about Ethiopia's past and visions of the future. Groups that have dominated the state in

Ethiopia have treated others as peoples devoid of valuable history, culture, or political structure (Baxter et al., 1996: 90). Hence, such practice has not only limited our understanding of the past, but also resulted in the fragmentation of national politics, blocking the path to a more transformative politics that overcome past divisions to create a stable democracy.

Second, the contradiction and polarization in contemporary Ethiopian politics creates a paradoxical experience that forms a vicious circle between maintaining the status quo, making progress and then completely abandoning any gains of the past, blocking the path to more transformative politics and robust democratic order, further impoverishing national politics. For example, in post-imperial Ethiopia, there are two main distinguishing features that stand out as the achievements of the revolutionaries who turned into nationalist liberation fronts. First, the 1974 revolution not only dethroned the imperial regime and gave birth to the first Ethiopian republicanism, but also led to the redistribution of land among farmers, which dismantled the economic foundation of the imperial regime. Second, the liberation fronts, which came to power in 1991, restructured the state on a new foundation, replacing the old, centralized structure with a multinational federal system that created a second republic (see Abbink, 2009).

However, the inconsistent implementation of these changes has led to the persistence of poverty, oppression and authoritarianism, as contradictory experiences in the sphere of freedom and equality have become a hallmark of post-imperial Ethiopia, in which citizens are empowered and legally recognized, but constantly circumscribed through political action. For example, despite the March 1975 Land Reform Decree that abolished the Imperial landed class, in Ethiopia's recent history and certainly throughout its past, land has not been the property of the farmers. Especially, under the defunct EPRDF, the implementation of authoritarian development scheme, which is founded on the policy of leasing millions of hectares of land to foreign investors, involves forced displacement and human rights violations that contributed to political repression under the guise of development (see Kelecha, 2022).

Moreover, since 1991, ethnicity has become the most important foundation of Ethiopian politics, which has become the source of several contradictions in the country. The protection of linguistic and cultural rights in the national constitution has generated a sense of ethnic satisfaction among the country's historically marginalized groups. But the centralized party structure with Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) seats at the top generated a strong sense of Tigrean dominance over the country's major ethnic groups. Likewise, while the debate over the institutional structure of the Ethiopian federation has continued for nearly three decades, since 2018, this debate has intensified in the context of the political liberalization and freedom of expression that accompanied the reform process. Opponents of the federal system, most of whom are Ethio-nationalists, despise it as the source of all the problems the country has faced over the past three decades, stressing its divisive nature, which they believe severely undermines national cohesion by privileging ethnicity over national identity.

Proponents, most of whom are ethno-nationalists, see multinational federalism as a panacea for the country's long-standing problems, such as the deep-seated inequality and oppression that marginalized groups have endured for decades. For this group, the federal system is an important political settlement that ensured the survival of Ethiopia, which was on the brink of collapse in early 1990s due to the proliferation of liberation movements, most of which were separatist.

From this perspective, Oromo's struggle for democracy is trapped between groups that associate the problems with the inherent defect of the Ethiopian state as a colonial enterprise of the late 19th century, so that, resolute to regain independence from the very state that inflicted the oppression, and the groups, which largely resort to finding a solution to the crisis of the state itself, including Oromo grievances, by democratizing current multinational federalism.

Political developments since 2018 have also shown the same paradoxical experience of post-imperial Ethiopia, where citizens are empowered but constantly constrained by political action. While the youth protest movements that brought Abiy Ahmed to power in early 2018 inspired a sense of optimism and confidence in the possibility of a transition to democracy, the recent relapse into civil war and the mismanagement of the political transition over the past 3 years nonetheless points to the same consequences of citizen empowerment and disempowerment, replicating the past. This vicious circle of expansion and contraction of democracy, from which the country seems unable to emerge, is the most enduring factor in all the changes that have occurred to date. Thus, shaping Ethiopia's future requires a critical reflection on what went wrong in the past to allow political compromise and overcome the problems of polarization and contradiction that impede the development of robust democracy in the country. This article notes that among the elements that have gone wrong in the past and required critical reflection is the uncritical emulation of foreign models to resolve the country's problems.

Uncritical emulation of foreign models, theories and ideas of progress

The uncritical emulation of foreign ideas of progress that emerged with the making of the modern Ethiopian state has since always remained one of Ethiopia's biggest problems, regardless of the type of regime – imperial, socialist or federalist. In this respect, Ethiopia's experience is unique compared to other African countries, where emulation of foreign models is largely a post-Cold War phenomenon, with the World Bank's development assistance programmes driving Western liberal values around world since the 1990s. But Ethiopian rulers fell into the trap of imitating foreign models as early as the middle of the 19th century, which even preceded the conquest of the south (Kelecha, 2022: 9). Clapham (2006) argued that the policy of emulation in Ethiopia began in the mid-19th century taking Imperial Russia as the first model of modernization and development (p. 148). This was followed by an attempt to copy the Meiji period from the Japanese Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The process discontinued during the war with fascist Italy. After the Second World War, the British monarchy became a model for emulation. And the 1974 revolution brought the socialist military regime that staunchly followed the Soviet Union as a model (see Bekele, 1995).

However, despite imitating foreign models from time to time, Ethiopia's fundamental problems, such as poverty, instability and authoritarianism, remained unresolved. Under the imperial regime, Ethiopia's early educated class adopted modernity as the universal norm, but Ethiopia and its people inherited only the foundations of a failed state and a failed modernity that became the hallmark of the country along with a deeply entrenched autocratic political culture. Instead of critically appropriating cultural values and traditions as a prerequisite for modernity, political elites have resorted to the destruction, alienation and uprootedness of the indigenous knowledge system.

The forces that toppled the emperor in 1974, like their predecessors, quickly adopted foreign forms of Marxism and socialism as solutions to the country's problems. This experience also has either destroyed or overlooked indigenous institutions and traditions in an attempt to replace them with those that were recreated on the basis of the imported radical socialist and Marxist ideology. The same practice continued under the EPRDF, but with only slight flexibility in switching the policy of emulation between west and east depending on the circumstances. The political elites that came to power in early 2018 seem to be shifting their imitation policies to the west, describing their predecessor as a failed attempt to emulate the East Asian development model. The accumulative outcome of such uncritical imitation of foreign models by successive regimes not only allowed the repressive state to persist, depriving people of the freedom to exercise their rights, but also poverty, inequality and authoritarianism remained entrenched.

In this regard, the biggest challenge for Ethiopia's democratic transition, rooted in the contested nation-building process, has been the uncritical imitation of the notion of nationalism (see Gellner, 1997) from the European nation-building experience that identified homogeneity as a precondition for political, economic and social citizenship. The Ethiopian state, which was born with Amharic as the only state language, prevented vital information from reaching the majority of the population, as the insistent use of a single language was counterproductive to socio-economic development and the emergence of inclusive democratic societies (see Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). Ethiopian language policies marginalized parts of the population, for example, impeding Oromo education for decades, which in turn fed struggles for self-determination in the 1970s, and since 2014, it has become a key grievance factor for the Oromo protests.

Moreover, despite the broader conception of self-determination rights, equating the expression of nationalism and self-determination with secession is the main legacy of the decolonization movement in Africa (Halperin et al., 1992: 20), in which Ethiopian elites emulated their African counterparts who committed the first mistake, strikingly equating such rights with independence. I argue that the reason why the Ethiopian state violently opposes the right to self-determination of its national groups is partly due to the contradictions and inconsistencies with which this right is exercised in Africa. The fact that the right to self-determination was equated with decolonization in post-colonial African states made the recognition of this right a very difficult exercise for the defenders. Respect for these rights fundamentally contradicts the claims of the Ethiopian rulers about Ethiopia's 'exceptionalism', based on centuries-old myths of statehood, as the only black African country not conquered by white colonial rule. The recognition of these rights was always seen in part as a concession to the colonial thesis, according to which the Ethiopian state subjugated the Oromo and southern peoples.

A careful analysis of the struggles of the Oromo people in Ethiopia now and in the past shows that the original goal was never to secede and achieve an independent state. Oromo nationalism was originally a demand for equality. But intransigence and denial of the right to self-determination on the part of Ethiopian rulers have always been more responsible for the accompanying unrest and conflict, which prompted some factions within the Oromo and other groups to accept secession as an alternative to securing freedom and peace. For example, one of the defining moments in modern Oromo struggles is associated with the Bale peasant uprising and the formation of the Macha and Tulama Association (MTA) in the 1960s, which marked the birth of Oromo nationalism. The Bale Peasant Revolt was a historic act of tax resistance and an uprising against land confiscation by the feudal system that existed in the Ethiopia (Østebø, 2020). The creation of the MTA also aimed to promote Oromo identity and provide basic infrastructure, such as schools, medical facilities, roads and water.

However, the intransigence of imperial rule to properly cater to peasant demands, as well as the imperial regime's ban on the self-help association, led to the creation of Oromo's first political party, the OLF. Oromo nationalists, who founded the OLF in 1974, constituted the majority of the former MTA members. The Bale revolt on the periphery, the creation of the MTA and then OLF informed the Oromo about the importance of their culture and the oppression inherent in the imperial socio-economic and political system. With the intransigence of the Ethiopian regimes, Oromo nationalists put forward a variety of demands – from secession to achieving regional autonomy and reconstructing Ethiopia's national identity.

In nutshell, the uncritical emulation of foreign model, its theory of history and ideas of progress is the main legacy of state-building that negatively influenced the emergence and development of democracy in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's main problem in imitating modernity is its narrow approach to achieving material progress without critically considering fundamental problems of democracy, such as popular sovereignty, social equality, freedom and secularism (see Gulema, 2020). Lata

(2006) also argued that part of the contemporary crisis in Ethiopia may rest on the political elites who do not often critically evaluate foreign ideas of progress, suggesting that shaping Ethiopia's future requires a deeper understanding of its complex history, traditions, indigenous knowledge system and practices. Teshale explained that uncritical belief in the transformative power of radical political experiments and revolutionary ideas, such as Marxism–Leninism aiming to end injustice ended up creating new injustices (see Tibebu, 2008). This indicates that identifying positive cultural and political values and practices from Ethiopia's past will continue to be a challenge that Ethiopians will have to confront to build peace and social justice. In fact, building a just, democratic and equitable country requires a sincere attempt to confront the past and correct mistakes.

An enduring legacy of nativist discourses

The enduring foundation of an autocratic state, perpetuating nativist discourses, is another Ethiopia's contested state- and nation-building legacies, which continues to pose serious structural problems for democracy today. Charles Tilly (2004) argued that democracy in European countries was a by-product of state-making and emerged out of the contentious and conciliatory relationship between the state and the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy and the peasantry, which over time forced the state to reconstruct itself in a more inclusive way.

However, the 19th-century imperial expansion in Ethiopia saw marked deviations from Europe's imperial past in terms of state formation. While Charles Tilly's axiom 'War made the state, the state made war' is most relevant in explaining the intense and continuous warfare that led to the emergence of the Ethiopian state, this process did not lead to significant democratic dispensation in Ethiopia. One of the reasons is that in Ethiopia, as in other African colonized countries, the process of state formation precedes the creation of a 'nation'. Allegedly, this has become the Achilles heel of many African countries for democratization projects (see Mazzuca and Munck, 2014).

As such, the conception of nation remains primordial in post-imperial Ethiopia, embodying the same elements of cultural and religious construction that it acquired at birth, which led to the division of the country into a civilized north and a backward south (see Ullendorff, 1960). This localized the global cultural divide between the west and the rest, legitimizing and informing Ethiopia's contemporary politics, which divided the people into locals and outsiders, the former being northerners and the latter mostly referred to as Oromo (see Baxter, 1978).

The division also served as the foundation upon which the homogenization policy was built to create a 'nation' in imperial Ethiopia, privileging Orthodox Christianity and the Amharic language as the standard for membership. For example, in imperial Ethiopia, Ethiopian Muslims were called 'Muslims in Ethiopia', which is the idea of Muslims as 'outsiders' to Ethiopia (Desplat and Østebø, 2013). Islam was seen as the antithesis of 'Ethiopianism' (Markakis, 1987: 74), while Christianity has always been the profound expression of Ethiopian national existence (see Ullendorff, 1968).

Even though the revolutions forced the state through a morphological process from empire to socialist, from socialist to federal, what has been perpetuated since the creation of modern Ethiopia is the inability to transform the country into a democratic multinational polity with an all-embracing national identity. The inability of forging a common national identity is the result of the contradictory interpretation of the state-building process that reinforces the global north–south dichotomy in Ethiopia's version. This dichotomy represents the political distance from the Ethiopian state, where the north was the political core and the south is the political periphery.

Such dichotomization also has important implications for Ethiopia politics today: it replaces the old grouping of the country's population as 'modern and backward' with 'indigenous and outsiders'. Abyssinians used to consider themselves alone indigenous to Ethiopia, while others, mostly Oromo, were outsiders. This traditional assumption is overturned through historical, political and

epistemological reconstructions of the narrative in which non-Abyssinians now become indigenous to Ethiopia. However, this becomes the basis for the revival of nativist discourses, not only in terms of the perception of the Abyssinians as 'outsiders or settlers', but also in terms of the spread of political regionalism in Ethiopia, especially among the Oromos.

Regionalism in Oromo politics has two main sources. First, it is largely the result of the manipulation of pre-existing classifications of society, such as regimes-imposed 'divide and rule' tactics. Ethnic/clan affiliation, religion, geographic settlements or administrative boundaries are exploited to impend integration, create communication barriers and competition over resources, which often become sources of intercommunal conflicts. Second, factional power struggles among the Oromo reinforce such conflicts, as regional and religious affiliations are used as a means to strengthen their power base. Political elites also propagate stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, hatred and parochialism into society to win the infighting. Another factor exacerbating this problem is the dependence of the Oromo political forces on the diaspora due to lack of resources, which has made them more vulnerable to further discord as the diaspora is highly polarized and divided due to political elites' failure to deliver results. This led not only to disappointment, confusion, despair and splits among the Oromo political elite, but also to the eruption of a dormant volcano that localized regionalism (see Jawar Mohammed, 2009).

Moreover, the desire to overcome past divisions, as well as the country's authoritarian foundations, are always constrained by the concentration of political power in the hands of a small number of elites belonging to a particular ethnic group. For example, the recent shift in the centre of power from north to south in early 2018 as a result of popular protests added dynamism to an already existing regionalism. In the past, the state was in the hands of the northerners (Amhara or Tigray), so that, external hands used 'divide and rule' tactics, which were met with a desire to confront the common 'enemy'. Following the shift of the centre of power to the south with the rise to power of the Oromo prime minister, there are widespread claims that power is in the hands of one of the Oromo groups. But this fresh experience has begun to deepen fault lines, creating a sense of discrimination among other groups as prejudice meets power, as evidenced by the new elites' desire to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of elites of limited locality in the name of the Oromo people.

This is indicative that the transition, which began in early 2018, is also in trouble due to misplaced priorities, which are being pushed from top to bottom with more pronounced nativist discourses. This remains the seed of its decline, as all previous changes that enacted a top-down approach to reform, in which reform ideas were imposed from above by self-proclaimed 'all-knowing' experts, were unsuccessful. It further exacerbates the divisions and violence that make the transition to democracy a nightmare in the current political transition. Combined with social and cultural differences, this has led to radically different perspectives on the interpretation of historical dynamics and the political lens through which members of the national groups see their relationship. In short, Ethiopians inherited the nativist discourses that helped perpetuate authoritarianism because of nation-building failures of the previous era, which remains the most serious challenge to establishing democracy in the country today.

Emergence of contending nationalisms

Ethiopia's contested state-building efforts have ultimately allowed contending nationalisms to flourish, which has several implications for the struggle for democracy today. The discussion in this section reflects the origins of the various forms of nationalism that have influenced the democratic aspirations of the Ethiopian people. It then demonstrates that the struggle for democracy has long been a prisoner of the political and cultural construction of Ethiopia's past, generating various competing ideas of the state and contested national identity.

I argue that the first phase of the rise of nationalism in Ethiopia was associated with Menelik's conquest of Oromo and the southern communities. This is a nationalism that emerged from the feeling of seeing oneself as superior and more civilized than others (see Clapham, 2002; Lata, 2006: 98)[5] but, despite this, constructed all the basic signs and symbols of the nation and imposed a certain identity as the identity of the state as a result of certain historical and cultural experiences. This state-framed nationalism has undergone several permutations over the years.

First, it morphed into pan-Ethiopian nationalism after Adwa's 1896 victory over Italian forces, creating Ethiopia's image as a unique African power that was able to defeat European forces. Adwa's victory served as a blank cheque for the conquerors to recreate their supremacist thinking as an integral part of the state ideology. It reproduced and imposed Ethio-nationalists' narratives of 'exceptionalism' to justify the imperial conquests of the 19th century and the affliction that followed, from which the country still suffers. Cementing this reality, Gulema (2020) argues that reasoning in the name of nation-building or national survival, Ethio-nationalism extols Ethiopia's achievements and sacrifices in defence against foreign aggression, while glossing over the agony of the nation or members of ethnic groups, women and religious communities.

Second, a pro-Marxist and socialist progressive tradition of the 1960s and 1970s, rooted in the Ethiopian student movement, attempted to re-define Ethiopia's national identity on ideas of equality, solidarity and freedom. But these efforts were largely unsuccessful due to the military takeover of the student revolution, and as a result, the old nationalism continued, only with the recognition of certain religious rights of Muslims, but ingrained pan-Ethiopian rhetoric even deep into the institutions, structures and discourses of socialist Ethiopia. The abolition of the imperial system in 1974 did not completely abandon the imperial doctrine of homogenization, as the new military regime continued to adhere to the same policy to some extent. More importantly, the centralist character of the old political order remained or even strengthened under the military regime, penetrating further into the peripheral regions through the organization of peasant associations, which allowed tighter control over people and resources (Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990: 361–362).

Even though the Solomonic dynasty, whose age counted in terms of millennia, finally ended with the overthrow of its last emperor Haile Selassie, the dominance of the Abyssinians remained, and with it the subjugation and exploitation of the people who had hoped to become free once the emperor had fallen. Hence, a democratic and inclusive Ethiopia never emerged because its protagonists could not break away from its fundamental cultural and religious roots. This allows the state to compose and impose a one-dimensional narrative obtained in the process of its creation. Only with the fall of the latter in 1991 was this policy mitigated with the emergence of the second Republic.

With the EPRDF coming to power in 1991, Ethio-nationalism lost its privilege in national discourses as a new multinational, secular and federalist Ethiopia emerged. But the contestation continued, while now Ethio-nationalism went underground and became an anti-establishment opposition for much of the EPRDF's rule, until it resurfaced in national discourses with a political opening enacted in early 2018. Over the 27 years of EPRDF rule, Ethio-nationalists resented the ethnic-friendly rhetoric of the EPRDF regime and emphasized its perceived negative impact on the country's unity, viewing the federal system as a step towards Ethiopia's disintegration. They often accused the TPLF of conspiring with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) to violate Ethiopia's territorial integrity by allowing Eritrea to form its own state, leaving the country landlocked.

Third, over the past 3 years since 2018, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethio-nationalism has morphed into populist nationalism. Populist nationalism is a variant of nationalism that combines features of nationalist politics and populist rhetoric (see Blokker, 2005). Abiy views Ethiopia as a magnificent political project, a 'land of origin' with a long and uninterrupted history of greatness. His vision of the future also feeds off these mythologized notions of the

past and exaggerated perceived greatness of its controversial emperors (Allo, 2020). The prime minister, as the embodiment of populist nationalism, often claims to be the only person who can restore the ‘nation’ to its ancient ‘greatness’ and lead the ‘nation’ to prosperity and ‘unique’ Ethiopian democracy.

The second phase of the rise of nationalism in Ethiopia was associated with three organized revolts against Emperor Haile Selassie’s regime in the northern and southern edges of the Empire. The revolt in the north began with the annexation of Eritrea to the Ethiopian Empire in 1962, which angered some sections of Eritrean society. In the southern part of the empire, Somali Muslims in Ogaden and Oromo Muslims in Bale rebelled against the domination of the Christian empire (Tibebu, 2008: 345–346). All three of these revolts were started by Muslims, who were treated as second-class subjects of the empire, so that, religious elements were among other forms of grievances.

This second phase of nationalism also eventually morphed into ethno-nationalism as non-Muslims later joined the struggles through civil unrests and protests against the centralized rule of Imperial Ethiopia, as well as the emergence of Marxist and socialist-oriented student movements and various associations in the 1960s and 1970s. The entrenchment of ethno-nationalism was spearheaded by the many rebel liberation movements that mushroomed throughout the country. More than a dozen rebel groups fought the military regime between 1974 and 1991. In the process, they raised ethno-nationalist consciousness among their constituents, leading to the downfall of the military regime in 1991, assisted by shifts in international political economy and regional politics. Thus, ethno-nationalism took various ethnic names during the armed and liberation struggle against the military regime, which triumphed in the post-1991 period.

Repression, marginalization and authoritarianism laid the foundation for the emergence of ethno-nationalist movements in Ethiopia. For example, the Oromo nationalists, who began organized struggle against the Ethiopian state since the 1960s, demanded a radical restructuring of the state and society through revolution, exposing Ethiopia’s structural crisis, such as lack of progress, a highly authoritarian state and deeply unequal nations. However, despite the significant contribution they have made to all the changes that the country has experienced since it acquired its current shape, the Oromo’s securitized relationship with the Ethiopian state remains unchanged.

The imperial regimes exercised direct rule, appointing northern settlers to rule over the conquered southern and Oromo’s territories, practicing forced assimilation, cultural marginalization and economic exploitation. The military regime also established tighter control over the people and resources of the empire inherited from its predecessor, Haile Selassie, further securitizing Oromo identity as the culture of leadership elimination and oppression persisted. Under the EPRDF, the TPLF exercised indirect rule over the newly formed regional states following a regime change in 1991, which nominally recognized demands for self-government, cultural and linguistic rights on paper, but continued to practice political domination and economic exploitation. This further entrenched the securitization of opponents with the introduction of draconian proclamations.

Even more puzzling, according to prominent opposition politician Jawar Mohammed,[6] is that since the Oromo prime minister came to power in 2018, the relationship of this securitized Oromo identity with the Ethiopian state has remained unchanged, as the new elites running the state continued to practice direct rule, ignoring the constitutional provisions that proclaimed regional autonomy. What distinguishes the Prosperity Party’s direct rule from the imperial system is that Oromo elites of limited locality rule directly over the Oromos, while the imperial system practised direct rule of non-Oromo over the Oromos. As such, mass repression remains the defining character of both rules, which continued to securitize the Oromo identity as it had under previous regimes, even though the Oromo prime minister retained state power, ceding position and wealth to new elites promoting a consumer state captured by the unproductive oligarchy to protect their short-term gains.

Moreover, the facts that decades of Ethiopia's encounter with imperialist state building and derivative modernity have further aggravated the contradictions in Ethiopia's political economy. One such crisis manifests itself in appalling inequality, particularly Addis Ababa representing the greatest concentration of power and wealth. The struggle over Addis Ababa by the Oromo nationalists is the epitome of the current national political discourse. Two periods are of particular importance in shaping the historical memory of Oromo and its contemporary political claims. One of them is the late 16th century, marking the beginning of a continuous and effective Oromo presence in present-day Addis Ababa and its environs. The second is the 19th century, which includes episodes when the expansion of the city began after King Menelik occupied the lands and conquered their inhabitants. Oromo, along with other subjects of the empire, were subjected to various forms of violent state practice, including mass evictions that occurred after the founding of Addis Ababa. The dispossession and eviction of Oromo has since become an integral part of the capital's fabric and history. The most recent manifestation of this phenomenon was the eviction of Oromo peasants following the physical expansion of Addis Ababa, especially in the years leading up to the announcement of the city's master plan in 2014, which sparked the 2014–2018 Oromo social movements.

Overall, the past three decades under the EPRDF represent a continuation of the struggle for the cultural and political remaking of Ethiopia, framing political interactions and discourses according to either pan-Ethiopian or ethnic nationalisms by their respective advocates. The difference is that ethnicity has become a privileged organizing principle of the state, competing among groups and with Ethio-nationalism.

Nevertheless, the problem is not that there are opposing ideas or competing nationalist views of Ethiopia, but that nationalists often re-impose exclusive interpretations of the past to inform the present, which often become sources of violence as the past is always viewed with escapism. This currently happens from all sides. For example, Ethio-nationalists often focus on a national history that excludes or erases origins, reality and persistent inequalities, while ethno-nationalists often focus on a history of dissensus to reconstruct past realities.

Ethio-nationalism extols Ethiopia's past achievements in an attempt to cover up the atrocity inflicted by the state on various members of ethnic and religious communities. On the other hand, ethno-nationalists impose wary nationalist discourse within the ethnic group that they purportedly represent to refute hegemonic narrative that the pan-Ethiopians have produced and reproduced to mask the dark side of the past regimes. These contending nationalisms reinforce each other in opposite way: the narrative of one group becomes a recipe for another to create counter narratives to dominate the political discourse and mobilize their political base, which often leads to violence. For example, since 2018, tensions between different ethnic communities have increased more than ever for various reasons, but they also stem from contradictory narratives that are aggressively pursued by contending nationalisms.

For Ethio-nationalists, politics aimed at uplifting ethnic identity is tantamount to destroying a perceived sense of unity, while for ethno-nationalists, politics advocating ethnic emancipation is the only way to save the country from disintegration. National politics is conceived as a zero-sum game of these competing nationalisms. Ethio-nationalists glorify the myths of Ethiopia's ancient statehood and the social cohesion of its people. The exclusivism and brutality of the state- and nation-building process in Ethiopia, as well as the persisting structural inequality in the country, are underlined by ethno-nationalism. For ethno-nationalism, rewriting the past is mostly the result of the presentism of the past, since the current struggle to re-define Ethiopian national identity is never really about the past, but is about the present and the future. The consequences of such production and reproduction of Ethiopia's past to inform the present led to deep-seated divisions and complicated the sense of shared citizenship as a precondition for establishing stable democracy.

Obstacles to political liberalization in Ethiopia also have persisted over the past 3 years. One of the main problems is the growing polarization of political elites. As discussed above, Ethiopia's political landscape has always been full of competing nationalisms with different and conflicting views of the state and its ideological underpinnings. The ethnic mobilization that has propelled the current transition process remains significant, as the main issues regarding the current multinational federalism and its ideological foundations remain largely unresolved. The debate around the constitution is an elephant in the room, directly or indirectly fuelling political violence and instability in the country as the opinions of the political elites differ sharply along ethnic lines. One group, which includes the majority of Oromo, Tigray and southern elites, sees the current constitution as the tool for managing cultural and ethnolinguistic diversity and protecting both group and individual rights. This group believes that it is necessary to implement the various provisions of the Federal Constitution 'in their true letter and spirit'. However, others support fundamental and unconditional constitutional changes, in particular the elimination of Article 39, which is an article on the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination up to secession. Many Amhara scholars, politicians and government officials are now openly advocating the latter view.

Conclusion: a way out of multiple crises facing the country?

Ethiopia's state-building process is full of claims and accusations of historical atrocities and injustices. From the time of Emperor Menelik's expansion to the south in the late 19th century to the more recent political discourse since 2018, it is common to find different perspectives of major historical landmarks believed to have influenced cultural identity, livelihoods and rights of citizens and communities. During imperial periods, the archaic form of state-building promoted by autocratic monarchs and the unitary state sparked, among other things, many ethnic nationalist movements against the state itself, as well as the 1974 student revolution that ended monarchical rule in Ethiopia. Under the military leadership, the revolution succeeded in destroying the old regimes and their economic basis, but it was unable to provide the democratic ideals of freedom and equality, which became the main factors in the proliferation of ethno-nationalist liberation fronts that overthrew the military regime in 1991.

In the post-1991 period, the new ruling party, the EPRDF, remapped the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines, without shedding the authoritarian tendencies of the past. The outcome is the further intensification of not only ethnic mobilization, but also contending nationalisms within a tightly controlled state through a hierarchically organized party structure, which has undermined the foundations of the regime, especially since early 2014. These demonstrate deeper connections between historical trajectories and current political situations that inform the Oromo youth social movement that has erupted in opposition to the Addis Ababa Master Plan. Disputes over such issues are not merely historical, as they persist in current political discourse, contributing to political polarization that undermines national cohesion. Political elites are sharply divided over the interpretation of the country's past, the current constitution and federal structure, as well as by national history and symbols.

There is no easy way out of this vicious circle of crisis in which the country has found itself. But it all starts with fixing politics, adjusting narratives from exclusionary rhetoric to more inclusive dialogue to resolve political contradictions around the negotiating table. One area requiring such narrative adjustments is the securitized relationship between the Oromo elites and the Ethiopian state, where one sees the other as an existential threat. Knowing the seismic shift that has been taking place over the past decades, Oromo elites must adjust their narratives and begin to see the state as an instrument of collective good, not only as an evil machinery, by readjusting their struggle for

the social, economic and human rights improvement without threatening the existence of the state. For its part, the state must move from reactionary nationalism to progressive patriotism, guided by democratic pluralism. Strategic and tactical relationships need to be strengthened as Oromo interests and security are intertwined with those of neighbouring peoples and countries. Honest yet sensitive conversations about a country's past and future are essential to building a just, equitable and sustainable society. Political elites on all sides should strive to create a common Ethiopian citizenship rather than a nation-state, as attempts to create a common national identity for a country as diverse as Ethiopia is impossible in the current rigid and polarized political landscape.

Another area where politics needs to be fixed is to move radical political positions and ideologies towards the centre and reconcile contending nationalism. The incredible level of cultural, economic, social and political repression by successive regimes failed to suppress ethno-nationalism, so that, it remains the most powerful political organizing force capable of determining the future of the Ethiopian state. Ethio-nationalists must acknowledge the positive contribution that ethnic movements have brought to Ethiopians, as well as the complexity and deepening of the multitude of crises facing the country. If Ethio-nationalists demand that ethno-nationalists move to the centre and strengthen the unity of the country, then this aspiration must be supported by empathy and understanding of the sacrifices they have made up to this point. They must come to understand that when cultural, ethnic or linguistic diversity characterizes the population of a country, the justification for giving different regions more control over their political and economic decisions gains more legitimacy. The violent, disrespectful and often chauvinistic approach to quell ethnic discontent helps fuel ethno-nationalism rather than defuse it.

By grossly underestimating the potential power of grievances, elites running the state often increase the heat by stepping repression, which helps spread resentment and spurs ethnic mobilization. This manifests itself often in the mutually exclusive political and ideological positions of the Oromo elites and the elites that now control state power. Ethio-nationalists must understand that ethno-nationalism is born not of an abstract ideological aspiration, but of identity-based injustice, political repression, economic exploitation and cultural subjugation. Instead of constantly accusing 'ethnic' elites of manipulating their people as extremists and tribalists, they should first acknowledge that Ethiopia was built and has been sustained on discriminatory system and start working to redress the injustice and grievances that make it easier for 'ethnic' elites to mobilize an ethnic support base.

In short, the current crisis in Ethiopia can be largely seen as a crisis of the state- and nation-building. The highly controversial and unsettled historical legacy of state-building has perpetuated divisions and animosities between various ethnic groups. Even though the country has been under constant reconstruction for decades, it remains an unfinished project, so that, now all its national groups must have a role in its final shape. Thus, reassessing the relationship between the state and society through mutual negotiation is essential for democracy to succeed in Ethiopia by developing a new set of legitimate and predictable institutional relationships that allow organic democracy to grow out of the multiple identities of the diverse national groups.

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Notes

1. This dichotomy between federalist and unitarist forces is relevant in the broader sense of the country's political history, but various positions have recently emerged along the spectrum of federalist and unitary poles. Much of the recent debate seems to centre around institutional designs between those who seek to maintain and democratize the current multinational federation and those who wish to replace it with geographic federalism. The debate has moved from the question of whether a country should have a federal system of government to the question of what type of federalism. Ethio-nationalists present geographic federalism as an alternative to ethnic federalism, but geographic federalism is not a solution to the problems of managing relations among territorial ethnic-nationalities to accommodate deep-rooted diversity. While ethnic federalism is not a panacea for all the political problems faced by multinational states, it is also incorrect to claim that it promotes separatism and violent conflict. But a complicating factor in this discourse was/is that those in power (the defunct EPRDF and its successor Prosperity Party), despite a federal structure, ran the country through a centralist impulse that made it difficult to find a solution to a complex political problem facing country.
2. Zewde (2002) further argued that two things stand out in this period. First, a small group of students dedicated to Marxist ideology succeeded in inspiring a generation of student activists committed to Ethiopia's socialist regeneration. Second, most of the activists and leaders of the Ethiopian student movement came from groups associated with 'historic Ethiopia', the Amhara and Tigray, as well as Eritrea, who played a critical role in this discursive shift, delegitimizing and undermining the hegemony of their Ethnic namesake in the radical politics of the student movement. Walelign Mekonnen was the quintessential representation of such Amhara student radicalism. His bold thesis 'On the question of nationalities in Ethiopia' was informed by the notion of revolutionary division of labour, which led him to criticize members of the dominant groups to which he belonged as chauvinists.
3. Most of Oromo Marxists were in the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), a Marxist–Leninist organization that played an active role in Ethiopian politics during the 1970s. The stance taken by most of the Oromo elite later is also largely the same as that of those activists who were in MEISON. However, it should be noted that the Oromo struggle also had non-Marxist roots, such as the suppression of religious (Islamic) identity and ethnic identity, as well as land confiscation that laid the foundation for the Bale Rebellion, which was a forerunner of Oromo nationalism. The ideological stance taken by the OLF comes largely from this non-Marxist root but has mostly been fragmented to the point where it could not hold the front together, leading to splits at different times.
4. See also Cohen, Herman. 'Press Release on the London Conference'; 28 May 1991.
5. For detailed analysis, see Clapham (2002), Rewriting Ethiopian history. Clapham argued that the existence of written language and a long-established set of historical myths of statehood compounded with the teaching of Orthodox Christianity gave Abyssinians a sense of seeing themselves as a more civilized nation, destined to govern the territories around them. These myths, which represent the supremacist self-image of people destined to rule over their neighbours, seem to aggrandize the status of Abyssinians as the only true bearers of Christianity and an 'exceptional nation'. The neighbouring communities might have viewed the Abyssinians' self-created belief with benign curiosity before they acquired modern firearms in the second half of the 19th century. Lata (2006) also argued that with the acquisition of the firearms, this supremacist belief subsequently turned into a total disaster, cementing a centuries-old obsession for dominance over numerous adjacent societies. The same sentiment, depicting Ethiopia as a Christian Island besieged by Islamist states, persists under the guise of regional security concerns, and is often touted as a justification for Ethiopia's encroachments on neighbouring countries, such as the US-backed global war on terrorism in Somalia in 2006.
6. Conversation with Jawar Mohammed, Oromo protest architect and opposition politician, London, 13 June 2022.

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