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BAHIR DAR UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Political Science and International Studies

**Competing Nationalisms in Ethiopia: The Origins and Dynamics of Amhara
Nationalism**

Birhanu Bitew Geremew

**Dissertation Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of Bahir Dar
University in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in Political Science and International Studies**

**October 2025
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia**

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By

Birhanu Bitew Geremew

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October 2025

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this PhD dissertation is my original work, has not been presented for a degree in any other universities and that all sources, and materials used for the document have been duly acknowledged.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAA – Amhara Association in America
AAPO – All-Amhara People’s Organization
AEUP – All Ethiopian Unity Party
ADFM – Amhara Democratic Forces Movement
ADP – Amhara Democratic Party
AFPF – Amhara Fano Popular Front
AMC – Amhara Media Corporation
ANDM – Amhara National Democratic Movement
APP – Amhara Prosperity Party
APU – Amhara Professional Union
ARSF – Amhara Regional Special Force
BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation
BETAM – Bete-Amhara Movement
BMA – British Military Administration
CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis
EDP – Ethiopian Democratic Party
EHRC – Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
ELF – Eritrean Liberation Front
ELPP – Eritrean Liberal Progressive party
ENA – Ethiopian News Agency
EOC – Ethiopian Orthodox Church
EPDM – Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement
EPLF – Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF – Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP – Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party
ESM – Ethiopian Students Movement
FDRE – Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
IES – Institute of Ethiopian Studies
NaMA – National Movement of Amhara
ODP – Oromo Democratic Party

OFC – Oromo Federalist Congress
OLF – Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF – Ogaden National Liberation Front
OPDO – Oromo People’s Democratic Organization
OPP – Oromia Prosperity Party
PNDR – Program of National Democratic Revolution
PP – Prosperity Party
RPF – Rwandan Patriotic Front
SYL – Somali Youth League
TA – Thematic Analysis
TPLF – Tigray Peoples Liberation Front
WB – World Bank
UN – United Nations
UOG – University of Gondar
UP – Unionist Party

Abstract

The state- and nation-building approaches pursued by the imperial regime in pre-1974 Ethiopia have been subject to divergent interpretations. The role of the Amhara ruling class in this process and their use of Amharic as a lingua franca have been widely interpreted as a form of Amhara domination over non-Amhara groups. This interpretation has played a significant role in the emergence of competing nationalisms in the country. Situated within this broader context, the present study seeks to examine the factors that contributed to the shift in the modus operandi of Amhara nationalism, from peaceful to violent forms, by investigating its origins and resistance strategies. A qualitative approach was employed, using data gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, media content analysis and document review. The collected data were analyzed through a combination of thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. The study is theoretically grounded in social constructionist theory and draws on literature addressing the enduring legacy of colonialism in shaping nationalism in Africa. Findings indicate that the narrative portraying the Amhara as historical oppressors and the subsequent structural violence directed against them are at the root of Amhara nationalism. This Amhara-oppressor discourse, rooted in Orientalist interpretations of history, was instrumentalized by Fascist Italy during its occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) as a divide-and-rule tactic. Following liberation, this anti-Amhara narrative was adopted by various actors and became institutionalized within the ethnic federal architecture of post-1991 Ethiopia. In response, Amhara elites launched a resistance movement that blended both violent and non-violent tactics, contributing to the national leadership change in 2018. Although the new administration pledged to end ethnic-based attacks, structural violence against the Amhara has persisted, leading to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism. Based on these findings, the study concludes that Amhara nationalism is an evolving phenomenon, with its ideology and modus operandi continuously shifting in response to changing conditions. Moreover, the failure to address the legitimate grievances underlying Amhara nationalism risks exacerbating the broader national crisis, as reflected in the ongoing conflict between the Amhara Fano and the government. Accordingly, future research should scrutinize the nature, actors and dynamics of this conflict to inform viable pathways toward a peaceful resolution.

Keywords: Amhara Nationalism, Anti-Amhara Narrative, Colonial Thesis, Fano, Fascist Italians, Radicalization, Resistance Formation

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Background

Ethiopia is an ancient state that traces its origins back to the Aksumite Empire of the first century AD (Levine, 1974; Getachew, 1986). It is a country of remarkable ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, and is widely recognized for resisting colonialism by defeating Italy in 1896 (Rubenson, 1976; Bahru, 2002). However, these historical achievements and complex social fabric have been overshadowed by recurring challenges such as famine, drought and unemployment (Semahegn, 2014; Aaron, 2017). Among the most pressing issues is the proliferation of competing nationalisms, including Greater Ethiopian, ethnic, separatist, assertive and irredentist forms, which have significantly contributed to civil wars, ethnic violence and state fragility (Messay, 2003; Bekri, 2020; Yared, 2024). The origins and dynamics of these nationalisms remain the subject of ongoing debate among political scientists, sociologists and historians.

The contested nature of the emergence of nationalism is not unique to Ethiopia; rather, it reflects a broader global pattern, with many states across diverse historical contexts grappling with competing narratives of national identity (Brubaker, 1996; Calhoun, 1997; Ting, 2008; Özkırımlı, 2017). Even in Western Europe, a region often regarded as the birthplace of nationalism with broadly comparable historical trajectories, vigorous debates persist (Calhoun, 2007). Some argue that nationalism in the West emerged in the late eighteenth century as a product of industrialization, print capitalism and secularization (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006), while others maintain that its roots can be traced back to pre-modern political and cultural formations (Smith, 1986; Hirschi, 2012; Gat, 2013). Despite these divergent perspectives, there is consensus that nationalism played a critical role in the formation of viable nation-states in Western Europe.

The formation of nation-states with a relatively stable definition of national identity in the West was accompanied by ventures into non-Western territories, such as Africa, to exploit strategic resources (Mamdani, 1996). This process, collectively known as colonialism, led to the oppression of Africans, the exploitation of their resources and the imposition of alien institutions (Fanon, 1963; Amutabi, 2018). In response, Africans developed a resistance movement, employing various tactics such as protests and armed struggle. However, after gaining independence, African efforts

to build unified polities were undermined by sectarian nationalisms (Mamdani, 2002). These nationalisms were further entrenched through narratives constructed by colonial powers to divide societies along ethnic lines for divide-and-rule purposes, and through their adoption by post-colonial governments to consolidate power (Longman, 2017).

Like other African states, the proliferation of competing nationalisms has undermined Ethiopia's efforts to build a unified polity, though it successfully resisted colonialism (Markakis, 2011). Scholars have attributed several factors to the origin of these nationalisms, such as the appropriation of alien concepts like Marxism-Leninism (Messay, 2003; Teshale, 2008), the rise of tribalism (Getachew, 1986), ethnic marginalization during the formation of the state (Alemseged, 2010; Markakis, 2011), internal colonialism (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Asafa, 2020) and the failure of the ruling class to build a viable democratic system (Assefa, 2017). A common thread in these justifications is what Merera (2003) calls the contradictory interpretation of Ethiopian history.

Ethiopian history has been interpreted in divergent ways, with each interpretation shaped by differing visions of the state (Clapham, 2002; Marzagora, 2013). Some scholars have celebrated the long history of Ethiopia (Levine, 1974; Rubenson, 1976; Getachew, 1986; Mesfin, 1991; Haile, 2017). For these scholars, this long history is compounded by the emergence of a pan-Ethiopian identity that transcends calcified ethnic categories (Messay, 1999; Yates, 2020). According to Levine (1974), pan Ethiopian identity is rooted in the complex interactions among diverse groups, the existence of shared cultural elements and collective responses to external threats. He contends that these dynamics laid the foundation for what he terms 'Greater Ethiopia'.

The vision of preserving Greater Ethiopia from fragmentation is central to this scholarly perspective, which is commonly conceptualized as Greater Ethiopian nationalism (Marzagora, 2013). A key premise of this nationalism is that Ethiopia's current configuration emerged through organic historical development, rather than being the result of colonial imposition (Clapham, 2002). The Aksumite Empire is regarded as the direct precursor of modern Ethiopia (Tadesse, 1973). Its decline, attributed to factors such as the Islamic dominance of the Red Sea and internal threats from Beja pastoralists, was followed by the rise of the Zagwe dynasty in the eleventh century (Abir, 2013). In 1270, Yikuno Amlak, contesting the legitimacy of the Zagwe dynasty, established the Solomonic dynasty (Markakis, 1974). This dynasty maintained significant authority until the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1974.

The monarchs of the Solomonic dynasty expanded Ethiopia's territorial reach by controlling new lands, until their efforts were hindered by conflicts with Muslim sultanates and the Oromo expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Getachew, 1986). After restoring order, they continued to govern from Gondar, which became Ethiopia's capital in 1632, until it was replaced by Addis Ababa in 1886 (Habtamu, 2020). However, the Gondarian era also saw internal crises, primarily due to rising power rivalries (Abir, 2013). This led to the *Zemene Mesafint* (the era of princes) in 1769, during which the monarchy's power diminished and regional lords gained greater influence. The accession of Emperor Tewodros II in 1855 ended the *Zemene Mesafint*, followed by Emperor Yohannis IV in 1872. Finally, Menelik II, who came to power in 1889, laid the foundations for the modern Ethiopian state.

This is how advocates of Greater Ethiopian nationalism interpret history by 'rendering unity and continuity to disparate political events' (Toggia, 2008, p. 321). They are criticised for intentionally overlooking historical episodes that could be seen as hindrances to the state's continuity. Power struggles and dissident movements are viewed as anomalous events, often disregarded when the state faced external threats (Clapham, 2002). The collective resistance of Ethiopians against invasions by Egypt, the Mahdists and Italy in the nineteenth century is frequently invoked to justify this narrative (Marzagora, 2013).

While Greater Ethiopian nationalism draws legitimacy from history, it has also faced substantial criticism. As Duara (1995, p. 152) aptly noted, nationalism is 'the site where very different views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other'. Critics have characterized Greater Ethiopian nationalism as unicentric, oppressive and authoritarian (Toggia, 2008; Alemseged, 2010; Asafa, 2020). In response, alternative forms of nationalism, such as ethnic, separatist and irredentist, have emerged. These competing nationalisms are founded on the shared belief that Greater Ethiopian nationalism is a myth propagated by Amhara elites (Bereket, 1984; Alemseged, 2022). Proponents of this view reject the notion of a cohesive national identity and challenge the antiquity of the Ethiopian state, asserting instead that Ethiopia was a colonial empire forged by Menelik II in the late nineteenth century (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Asafa, 2020).

This revisionist narrative can be traced back to Western scholars who served the colonial interests of Italy in Ethiopia. Much like British and French colonial strategies elsewhere in Africa, Fascist Italy sought to foment ethnic discord among Ethiopians to undermine collective resistance

(Prochazka, 1935; Woolbert, 1936). Italian propagandists characterized the formation of the Ethiopian state as an Amhara-led colonial expansion, aiming to rally support from non-Amhara populations (Jesman, 1963). This discourse has continued to shape contemporary Ethiopian politics, having been adopted by various social groups. Among the most prominent was the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) of the 1960s, which downplayed the agency of non-Amhara groups in the making of the state (Messay, 2008). According to Yilkal (2024), ESM activists vociferously portrayed the Amhara as oppressors, supremacists and chauvinists.

This narrative, combined with the failure of ruling elites to pursue a democratic nation-building initiative, contributed to the rise of various liberation fronts during the 1970s, including the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Following a protracted armed struggle against the Derg regime (1974-1991), these fronts assumed power in 1991. The EPLF went on to establish an independent Eritrean state, while the remaining fronts took control of the Ethiopian state.

Post-1991 Ethiopia was dominated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) until its dissolution in 2019.¹ The EPRDF established an ethnic-based federal system designed to address perceived historical injustices among ethnic groups. The Amhara, who were perceived as the primary beneficiaries of previous regimes, experienced recurring structural violence, including underrepresentation in the transitional process that established the federal arrangement, as well as killings, evictions, economic marginalization and cultural stigmatization (Chuchu, 2019; Yilkal, 2024). In response, disillusioned Amhara elites founded the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) in 1992. Seeking to neutralize the influence of the AAPO, the EPRDF reconstituted the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), originally multiethnic in nature, into the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) in 1994. Continued repression by the EPRDF eventually led the AAPO to rebrand itself as the All-Ethiopian Unity Organization (AEUO) in 2002 (Vaughan, 2003). Since then, the Amhara had to wait more than a decade for the emergence of an opposition party bearing their name.

1. It was established in 1989 by the TPLF and the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement. After seizing power, it incorporated several other ethnic-based parties, including the Oromo People's Democratic Organization and the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement.

In October 2015, the Amhara diaspora in North America formed the Bete Amhara Movement (BETAM). This diaspora movement was followed by domestic resistance, including street protests, sit-ins and boycotts of party-affiliated businesses beginning in July 2016 (Solomon, 2022). These efforts culminated in the formation of political parties such as the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), business entities like Amhara Bank and civic organizations such as the Amhara Students Association (Mesganaw, 2021). Most significantly, the Amhara resistance, together with other anti-EPRDF opposition movements, forced the regime to cede power in 2018 to a new leadership under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

While the current administration has pledged to halt ethnic-based attacks, structural violence against the Amhara continues unabated (Adane, 2023; Desalegn, 2025). In response to these unfulfilled promises, the Amhara Fano has resorted to violent resistance, culminating in armed conflict with government security forces since 2023. This underscores the urgent need to explore why the Amhara Fano have turned to armed struggle rather than pursuing peaceful alternatives. Accordingly, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine the origins, resistance formation and factors that contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism. A detailed investigation of these dynamics is essential for grasping the implications of Amhara nationalism on the collective identity and future of the Amhara people, as well as its broader impact on the Ethiopian state.

1.2. Problem Statement

The central problem this dissertation aims to address is why Amhara nationalism became radicalized in post-2018 Ethiopia, by uncovering its origins and examining the modes of resistance adopted by nationalist actors. Amhara nationalism emerged in response to the institutionalization of ethnic federalism and the structural violence committed against the Amhara (Yared, 2024). Since its emergence, it has become a contested subject in both academic and political arenas. The debate revolves around three perspectives: one denies the existence of a distinct Amhara identity and views the movement as a threat to national unity (Takkele, 1994; Tegegne, 1998; Admasu, 2010); another sees Amhara nationalism as supremacist (Lemmu, 1998; Lencho, 2019; Alemseged, 2022; Asafa, 2023); and a third frames it as a messianic response to the long-standing grievances endured by the Amhara (Tezera, 2021; Solomon, 2022; Yared, 2022; Yilkal, 2024; Desalegn, 2025).

These divergent perspectives are rooted in differing interpretations of Ethiopian history and shaped by evolving political realities. Scholars have encapsulated the process that formed Ethiopia into three broad theses: the nation-building, national oppression and colonial theses (Merera, 2003). The nation-building thesis argues that the territorial expansion of the late nineteenth century aimed to create a unified Ethiopia (Teffera, 1997; Messay, 1999). This process involved the expansion of the Amharic language, Christian culture and the establishment of a centralized administration in the newly incorporated territories of the modern Ethiopian state (Getachew, 1986). In this process, cultural elements specific to the Amhara were absorbed, losing their distinctiveness and instead contributing to a broader Ethiopian identity (Takkele, 1994). Consequently, the Amhara came to view themselves simply as Ethiopians, rather than as Amhara (Michael, 2008). According to Tegegne (1998), since those identified as Amhara lacked a distinct sense of ethnicity, mobilizing them along ethnic lines would only perpetuate the tribalistic politics of the EPRDF.

The national oppression and colonial theses argue that the formation of the Ethiopian state was accompanied by ethnic-based oppression (Alemseged, 2010; Markakis, 2011) or constituted an Amhara-led colonial expansion over previously independent principalities (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Mekuria, 1997; Asafa, 2020). Predominantly advocated by Oromo scholars, these perspectives hold that Emperor Menelik II established the *neftegna* (gun-holder) system following the conquest of various groups, including the Oromo (Lemmu, 1998; Mohammed, 2022). They assert that this system, dominated by Amhara elites, institutionalized various forms of oppression against the Oromo and other so-called ‘conquered’ peoples (Lemmu, 1998). These scholars also criticize proponents of the nation-building thesis for denying the existence of an Amhara identity, arguing that such denial serves to obscure the historical injustices committed against non-Amhara populations under the guise of national integration.

Although they acknowledge the distinctiveness of Amhara identity, proponents of the national-oppression and colonial theses dismiss the grievances articulated by Amhara nationalism, portraying it instead as a movement rooted in supremacy (Lencho, 2019; Alemseged, 2022; Asafa, 2023). This perspective was reinforced in a policy paper released in June 2023 by a group of Oromo scholars, who argued that Amhara nationalism seeks to establish a ‘Greater Amhara’ state by seizing fertile Oromo land (Eskiel, 2023; Gemechu, 2023; Milkessa, 2023; Mohammed, 2023; Tsega, 2023). In line with this view, they explicitly recommended that the Oromia regional

government evict Amhara settlers from the lands they currently occupy and redistribute them to dispossessed Oromo farmers (Gemechu, 2023). Notably, the killings and evictions of Amhara in various provinces of Oromia have been among the most frequently reported incidents of violence from the time of the Italian occupation to the present day (Wood, 1983; Haddis, 1985; Birhanu, 2024; Desalegn, 2025).

The positions held by proponents of the nation-building, national-oppression and colonial theses regarding Amhara identity and nationalism are increasingly challenged by a new generation of Amhara scholars (Tezera, 2021; Solomon, 2022; Yared, 2022; Yilkal, 2024). These scholars reject claims that deny the existence of a distinct Amhara identity, arguing that such denials obstruct the community's ability to mobilize along ethnic lines in an era when ethnicity constitutes the core ideology of the state (Mesganaw, 2017; Tedla, 2018). At the same time, they criticize Oromo scholars for promoting what they describe as defamatory narratives against the Amhara (Desalegn, 2025). According to Yared (2024), this discourse has contributed to the structural violence targeting the Amhara since 1991. He views Amhara nationalism as a defensive response to ethnic profiling, killings and evictions.

Sympathetic to Amhara nationalism, this coterie of scholars endeavours to navigate the political and historical conditions that gave rise to it. According to Tezera (2021), the origins of Amhara nationalism lie in the discourse portraying the Amhara as oppressors. This discourse assigns labels such as *neftegna* and *timkhtegna* (chauvinist) to the Amhara, accusing them of inflicting oppression against non-Amhara populations (Yared, 2024). Consequently, many political groups targeted the Amhara for ethnic profiling, killings and evictions. For example, since 1991, the killing and eviction of Amhara have been frequently reported (Human Rights Watch, 1993; Daniel, 2003; Zecharias, 2021; Amnesty International, 2024). This persistent structural violence has fostered a sense of victimhood among Amhara elites, prompting them to mobilize the people by forging a collective identity (Mesganaw, 2017). Hence, Yared (2022) contends that *Amharaness* is reactive rather than imaginative, maintaining that Amhara nationalists attempt to construct Amhara identity discursively by confronting those who reject it.

While acknowledging the contributions of the growing body of literature in advancing our understanding of the dynamics of Amhara nationalism, this dissertation is particularly informed by the emerging scholarship produced by a new generation of Amhara scholars. Their work has

provided important insights into the historical and political forces shaping Amhara identity and mobilization. Building on these contributions, this study seeks to address three critical gaps that remain overlooked in the existing literature.

First, these scholars partially fall into the trap of historical essentialism by attributing the rise of Amhara nationalism solely to political developments after 1991. They argue that the EPRDF institutionalized anti-Amhara narratives, which were popularized by the ESM (Tezera, 2021; Yared, 2024; Yilkal, 2024). However, this assumption overlooks the role of colonial powers in shaping anti-Amhara narratives. Italian fascists devised an anti-Amhara policy to garner support from non-Amhara populations (Jesman, 1963; Sbacchi, 1985; Assefa, 2012). This policy fuelled separatist movements, such as Greater Somalia and Greater Tigray, which emerged immediately after Italy's withdrawal in 1941 as reactions to the allegedly Amhara-centred narrative of Greater Ethiopian nationalism.

Second, they overlooked the various forms of resistance employed by Amhara nationalists to counteract structural violence, including protests, sit-ins, participation in party politics, boycotts of party-affiliated businesses and the use of social media campaigns. Third, they failed to investigate why Amhara nationalists shifted from these peaceful methods to more violent forms of resistance, thereby contributing to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism in post-2018 Ethiopia. Since 2023, a segment of Amhara nationalists, most notably the Amhara Fano, has embraced armed struggle as a mode of resistance. The emergence of the Fano movement, rooted in a complex interplay of historical and political dynamics, has been significantly influenced by developments following Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in April 2018. This shift warrants critical inquiry into the specific political changes that contributed to the rapid radicalization of Amhara nationalism within just a few years of leadership change.

Accordingly, this dissertation examines the origins, resistance strategies and factors that radicalized Amhara nationalism by drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism. It also incorporates insights from postcolonial nationalism in Africa to situate Amhara nationalism within the context of colonial legacies. Moreover, the study challenges the prevailing Ethiopian-ethnic dichotomy of competing nationalisms that dominates much of Ethiopian scholarship by adopting Brubaker's (1996) framework, which distinguishes between state-framed and counter-state forms. Recognizing that the study of nationalism requires a

grassroots perspective (Hobsbawm, 1992), this research investigates how ordinary Amhara perceive their identity and how this influences their engagement in the movement. This approach offers a fresh perspective on Amhara nationalism, which has thus far been dominated by elite-driven discourses.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the origins, resistance strategies and driving factors behind the radicalization of Amhara nationalism. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine the politico-historical conditions that contributed to the origin and rise of Amhara nationalism.
- Assess the resistance strategies adopted by Amhara nationalists to advance their political aspirations.
- Investigate the catalysts that triggered the radicalization of Amhara nationalism in post-2018 Ethiopia.

1.4. Research Questions

- What are the key historical and political dynamics that contributed to the emergence of Amhara nationalism?
- What strategies and tactics have Amhara nationalists employed to achieve their nationalist aspirations?
- How do Amhara nationalists construct and reinforce a collective identity and what discursive strategies do they use?
- Why have post-2018 political developments contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism?

1.5. Scope of the Study

This dissertation focuses on the period following the Italian occupation of Ethiopia to illustrate the genesis of anti-Amhara narratives that laid the groundwork for the rise of Amhara nationalism. This period is particularly significant, as it was under Fascist rule that such narratives were first systematically adopted as part of a *divide et impera* strategy (Mockler, 1984; Sbacchi, 1985). Although the Fascist forces eventually left Ethiopian soil, these narratives endured, continuing to

shape political discourse in contemporary Ethiopia due to their wide acceptance by both local and international actors (Assefa, 2012). As a result, the Amhara have experienced killings, evictions, cultural stigmatization, political underrepresentation and economic marginalization. This study highlights these instances of structural violence to examine their role in inciting and radicalizing Amhara nationalism.

From the multitude of resistance strategies adopted by Amhara nationalists, this study focuses on four key forms: party politics, social media campaigns, street protests and the Fano movement. This focus is warranted because the interplay among party politics, social media activism and street protests significantly contributed to the 2018 regime change, while the Fano movement has played a central role in radicalizing Amhara nationalism in post-2018 Ethiopia. The dissertation also examines identity construction as a form of discursive resistance, through which Amhara nationalists seek to build a collective Amhara identity in response to narratives that deny its existence. Specifically, it explores three discursive strategies employed in this process: the victim thesis, the evocation of a golden age and the essentialization of Amhara identity.

1.6. Significance of the Study

This dissertation carries both academic and policy significance. In academic terms, it seeks to deepen the current understanding of nationalism by highlighting two key dimensions. First, the origins and expressions of nationalist movements vary considerably based on historical experiences, present realities and future aspirations (Özkırımlı, 2017). While some forms of nationalism advocate for unity, others promote separatism (Brubaker, 2004). Amhara nationalism, as a counter-movement to the state-framed nationalism of post-1991 Ethiopia, primarily aims to resist structural violence against the Amhara and to promote cohesion within the polity (Yilkal, 2024). By exploring the origins, strategies of resistance and radicalization of this particular nationalist movement, this study contributes to the broader literature on nationalism.

Second, by situating Amhara nationalism within the context of colonialism, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of competing nationalisms in Africa. Admasu (2010) argues that the rise of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia cannot be explained through a postcolonial lens, as the country was never formally colonized. Indeed, Ethiopia maintained its political independence by defeating Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. However, the anti-Amhara narratives propagated by

Fascist Italy in the 1930s laid the groundwork for the emergence of Amhara nationalism. By examining the lasting impact of these colonial narratives in a society that was never colonized, this dissertation offers a distinctive contribution to the broader literature on African nationalisms.

The study could also make an empirical contribution by collecting data from interviews and focus group discussions with ordinary Amhara. This would offer important insights into the nuanced understanding of Amhara identity and enrich the study of Amhara nationalism, which has previously been dominated by elite-based assessments. Policy-wise, the study could support efforts to reduce ethnic polarization in Ethiopia and encourage a re-evaluation of the ruling elites' nation-building strategies. It argues, while critically engaging with the historical contradictions surrounding the formation of the Ethiopian state, that the anti-Amhara narrative is an imported concept (McClellan, 1996). This perspective may prompt Ethiopians to reconsider prevailing views on identity, identity politics and the Ethiopian state. Furthermore, this dissertation can serve as a valuable resource for students and scholars interested in the study of Amhara nationalism.

1.7. Research Method

This section outlines the epistemological, ontological and methodological aspects of the dissertation, establishing its research paradigm, approach and design. It also discusses the data collection methods, including the types and nature of data, instruments for data collection and the selection process for participants. The section concludes with a discussion of the methods employed for data analysis and interpretation.

1.7.1. Research Paradigm

The dissertation examines how knowledge produced by power holders contributes to the victimization of marginalized groups, and how the oppressed challenge these narratives. A fitting paradigm is critical theory, a research paradigm that offers a framework for comprehending power dynamics and conceiving interventions to establish a more equitable society (Cottrell, 2023). It assumes that the existence of multiple realities must be recognized. However, it maintains that merely acknowledging diverse perspectives as equally legitimate is insufficient due to its failure to consider the detrimental consequences of disregarding the factors that grant superiority to one interpretation of reality over another (Kekeya, 2019). Critical theorists posit that the construction of reality is influenced by cultural, political, ethnic, gender and religious factors (Rehman &

Alharthi, 2016). For them, knowledge is ‘constructed through communication and historical power relations’ (Tracy, 2020, p. 53). Thus, critical researchers analyze how inequities based on gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation and socioeconomic class are reflected in asymmetric power relationships (Kekeya, 2019). They study not only the lives and experiences of oppressed groups, but also how oppression is constructed and reproduced.

In this study, the researcher investigates why and how various political actors, such as Italian fascists, ESM activists and ethnic liberation fronts, constructed and co-constructed anti-Amhara narratives. The study examines how these actors utilized social institutions, such as the media, colonial agents, indigenous leaders, the constitution and academia, to establish and reinforce this oppressive ideology within the political landscape of Ethiopia. Furthermore, the study explores how power is used to sustain power structures and economic conditions that favour certain ethnic groups, typically members of the elite, while disadvantaging the Amhara, who are marked as oppressors. This discussion is followed by a critique of the sedimented knowledge that has predisposed the Amhara to servitude. Critical theorists argue that what is assumed to be true must be rigorously scrutinized, particularly by examining its role in perpetuating oppressive social structures and practices (Tracy, 2020).

As Horkheimer (1982, p. 244) argues, a theory is critical if it ‘seeks human emancipation’, or the liberation of individuals from conditions that ‘enslave them’. This effort entails examining how oppressed groups resist, challenge and subvert repressive knowledge and practices by employing various strategies of resistance (Kekeya, 2019). Resistance arises as a response to domination and plays a crucial role in confronting and reforming power structures (Foucault, 1981). This dissertation views Amhara nationalism as a form of resistance that emerged in response to asymmetric power relations, which subjected the Amhara to structural violence. In this context, the study critically examines the strategies of resistance employed by Amhara nationalists to challenge and dismantle repressive knowledge and power structures.

1.7.2. Research Approach

The dialogic method, which blends observation, reflection, conversation and interviewing to foster engagement between researchers and participants, is common within critical theory (Cottrell, 2023). For this purpose, a qualitative approach is employed, alongside an analysis of the historical context of power relations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tracy, 2020). A qualitative study aims to

generate an in-depth understanding of the social world by examining people's social and material conditions, experiences and histories (Saldana, 2011).

Scholars studying nationalism, in particular, have utilized a qualitative approach to gain a thorough understanding of discourse, the factors influencing nationalism in various contexts, resistance formation and the identity construction strategies adopted by nationalists (Milner, 2007; Wodak et al., 2009; He, 2023). By focusing on interpreting the experiences of ordinary people, elite-based perspectives and texts, qualitative research contributes significantly to the analysis of nationalist sentiments and national identity formation. Therefore, this study used a qualitative research approach to develop an in-depth understanding of the political and historical conditions that produced Amhara nationalism and the resistance strategies employed by Amhara nationalists.

A qualitative study is conducted under the premise that 'knowledge can and should be generated through the narratives and counter-narratives that emerge from' participants (Milner, 2007, p. 391). It empowers the oppressed to speak for themselves, sharing their experiences, imaginations and discursive practices (Mason, 2002). This approach also enables researchers to interpret the social meaning that people assign to their experiences and circumstances, as well as the meanings they embed in texts, images and other objects (Hesse-Biber, 2017). In addition to examining the development and crystallization of anti-Amhara narratives through the lens of power dynamics, this study explores the suffering of ordinary Amhara caused by this dominant ideology. The researcher interprets the stories of victims, their current circumstances and their conceptions of identity. Moreover, the experiences of Amhara nationalists in their efforts to mobilize the Amhara population, along with the strategies they employ to form resistance and construct a collective identity, are meticulously examined. This examination is scrutinized and contextualized within the historical, social and political contexts that contributed to the emergence of Amhara nationalism.

1.7.3. Research Design

This dissertation adopts a case study design, which enables the researcher to conduct 'an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit' (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). This approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of the complex and context-specific nature of the selected case from multiple perspectives (Simons, 2009). Critical theorists contend that cases represent intricate systems wherein researchers engage with both empirical realities and constructed narratives (Tracy, 2020). They further argue that the strength of the case study lies in

its ability to provide a deep understanding of a program, issue, or phenomenon within its broader social and historical context (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The incorporation of multiple data sources, made possible through the case study design, supports the development of a rich, contextualized analysis of the case.

The case selected for this study is Amhara nationalism. In case study research, selection is typically purposeful, grounded in the distinctiveness of the case and its potential to yield rich insights (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Since 2015, a surge in social media activism and offline resistance efforts has sparked intense debate and divergent reactions to the rise of Amhara nationalism. For instance, during a 2018 meeting with Amhara scholars, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed expressed concern about the movement's growth, urging scholars to analyse it and propose viable solutions to the government. Similarly, Lencho Leta (2019), a prominent Oromo nationalist, characterized Amhara nationalism as a potential security threat, citing the growing number of armed actors in the Amhara region. In contrast, Amhara nationalists regard the movement as a redemptive response to persistent discursive marginalization and structural violence (Yilkal, 2024). These contrasting perspectives, compounded by the recent radicalization of the movement, underscore the relevance of Amhara nationalism as a critical case for exploring its historical origins and evolving trajectory.

1.7.4. Methods of Data Collection

The dissertation draws on both primary and secondary data sources. The use of multiple data sources facilitates what social scientists refer to as data triangulation, which primarily serves to enhance the validity and depth of the research. Primary data were collected through interviews, media platforms, focus group discussions, and the analysis of federal and regional constitutions, manifestos, newspapers and letters. Secondary sources, including books, academic articles, newspapers and online materials, were carefully examined to enrich the analytical breadth of the study. Written documents were accessed from the libraries of Bahir Dar University, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, the Ethiopian National Archive and Library Agency, as well as from academic journals and online legal archives such as Anna's Archive.

Participants for the fieldwork part of the study were selected using a purposive sampling technique. This method involves selecting participants based on explicit criteria such as their knowledge, lived experiences, specific characteristics, or roles within a group (Saldana, 2011). Criteria for selection included involvement in shaping the trajectory of Amhara nationalism, political party

membership and position, expertise on Amhara nationalism and experiences of eviction. Within this category, only individuals who self-identify as Amhara were interviewed. This selection was made because the purpose of interviewing this group was to explore the strategies employed by Amhara nationalists in constructing resistance and identity, as well as to understand how they perceive and articulate their identity.

Because counter-narratives exist within every nationalist movement, the researcher conducted interviews with individuals known for expressing views that reflect apathy or opposition toward Amhara nationalism. This category of informants included both Amhara and non-Amhara elites. To enhance the quality and depth of the study, the researcher also analyzed opinions expressed across various media platforms. Social media, particularly YouTube, along with local and international mainstream media that featured content either in support of or against Amhara nationalism, were extensively reviewed. YouTube channels featuring the perspectives of Fano leaders were especially valuable in compensating for the inability to conduct face-to-face interviews with them due to accessibility constraints.

1.7.5. Instruments of Data Collection

The researcher employed the following data collection instruments.

1.7.5.1. In-depth Interview

Interviews were conducted with Amhara nationalists, including activists, political party leaders, Fano leaders and scholars. Engaging with informants from this group provided valuable insights into the motivations, beliefs and concerns of actors involved in shaping nationalist attitudes and mobilizing the masses. Victims of eviction were also interviewed to explore their lived experiences and their conception of Amhara identity through the lens of the victim thesis. Additionally, officials from the Amhara regional government were interviewed to provide perspectives from within the state apparatus. These interviews offered insights into how the government understands Amhara nationalism and the strategies it employs to respond to the concerns raised by nationalist actors. Beyond formal interviews, the researcher also engaged in informal conversations with ordinary Amhara individuals to gain a deeper understanding of popular conceptions of Amhara identity and their sentiments toward the nationalist movement.

Furthermore, interviews were conducted with political party leaders and activists known for their apathy or opposition to Amhara nationalism. Notably, a senior leader from the Oromia Prosperity Party (OPP), who holds a high-ranking position in the federal government, and a prominent Oromo activist were interviewed. These conversations were essential for uncovering counter-narratives and alternative interpretations of the Amhara nationalist movement.

In total, thirty-one informants were interviewed using various platforms, including face-to-face meetings, phone calls, WhatsApp and email. The interview process concluded when the researcher determined that data saturation had been achieved. Interview questions were prepared in both Amharic and English to accommodate the language preferences of participants. With the consent of the interviewees, audio recordings were made to ensure accurate documentation. Additionally, the researcher took detailed notes during and after each interview, capturing key insights, themes and verbatim expressions. Observations of body language, emotional expressions and other non-verbal cues were also documented to enrich the contextual understanding of the narratives shared.

1.7.5.2. Focus Group Discussion

Conducting focus groups enables the exploration of shared values, narratives and emotions within a group, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of nationalistic sentiments. Accordingly, the researcher employed focus groups to examine how participants perceive their identity and how the concept of *Amharaness* is ‘jointly shaped and negotiated, or “coconstructed” during the discussion’ (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 107). While the initial plan was to conduct five focus groups across major towns of the Amhara region to capture provincial variation in identity perception and engagement with the movement, this was revised to a single session due to security concerns. This session was held in Bahir Dar and included participants of diverse age groups, localities, genders, professions and political affiliations. Additionally, a second focus group was conducted online via Google Meet, comprising Amhara nationalists, leaders of Amhara-based parties and scholars residing both abroad and in Ethiopia. The discussions were facilitated by a moderator hired by the researcher for this purpose. With participants’ consent, the researcher recorded the discussions and took detailed notes during the sessions.

1.7.5.3. Media Content Analysis

Media platforms such as broadcast, print and social media serve as instruments through which nationalists disseminate their messages to broader audiences (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006; Fuchs, 2020). Analyzing media narratives, therefore, supports efforts to understand the communication dynamics between elites and the general public, the ways in which ordinary people interpret the goals of nationalist movements and the counter-narratives that challenge them (He, 2023). In the context of this dissertation, the review of media narratives is particularly relevant, as it helps address data collection gaps resulting from security concerns that limited interviews and focus group discussions.

Accordingly, the researcher analyzed and interpreted content across a range of media platforms, both in support of and in opposition to Amhara nationalism. Media interviews involving leaders of the Amhara Fano, Amhara-based political parties, activists, government officials and critics of Amhara nationalist claims were extensively reviewed. Additionally, audience reactions to selected media content were examined to identify prevailing narratives and counter-narratives. This approach facilitates the investigation of how nationalist discourses are conveyed, contested and disseminated. It also provides insight into the framing of nationalistic messages, the language employed and the role of social media campaigns in shaping resistance efforts in offline contexts.

1.7.5.4. Document Review

To enhance the depth of the dissertation, the researcher conducted an extensive review of secondary sources, selected for their relevance and academic credibility. These included federal and regional constitutions, party manifestos, newspapers, letters, books, scholarly articles, personal accounts, propaganda pamphlets, conference proceedings and online materials. The document review served multiple purposes: it helped contextualize contemporary nationalist discourses within a broader historical and ideological framework; revealed continuities and ruptures in political thought over time; and facilitated the triangulation of findings from primary data. Overall, this review illuminated how historical, social and political narratives have contributed to the emergence, articulation and contestation of Amhara nationalism.

1.7.6. Methods and Procedures of Data Analysis

Following the data collection phase, the researcher employed a combination of thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis to scrutinize and interpret the data. These methods were applied sequentially, with thematic analysis serving as the initial stage of critical discourse analysis to identify key patterns and underlying themes (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024). This integrated approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of both macro-level patterns of meaning and micro-level linguistic practices embedded in the discourse.

1.7.6.1. Thematic Analysis (TA)

TA is a strategy for constructing, analysing and interpreting patterns within a qualitative data set through systematic data coding processes, with themes being generated based on the established objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2020). It is particularly valuable for identifying macro patterns of meaning and focuses on broader themes rather than micro-level linguistic practices. In this dissertation, the researcher adopted TA to organize the data and identify key patterns and themes related to the origins, strategies of resistance and factors that contributed to the radicalization of the Amhara nationalist movement. To ensure a robust analysis, the researcher follows the six recursive phases of TA formulated by Braun and Clarke (2020): data familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up. The implementation of these recursive procedures was crucial to achieving the objectives of the dissertation, as it provided a structured and rigorous framework for examining the multifaceted nature of Amhara nationalism.

1.7.6.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The writing phase of the six recursive steps of TA was complemented by CDA, a technique used by critical researchers to analyse language within its sociocultural context. CDA illuminates how meaning-making processes contribute to the social construction of reality (van Dijk, 1993). Rather than simply interpreting linguistic practices in texts, CDA goes further by revealing how discourses sustain power, dominance and inequality. It also explores how these dynamics can be challenged through similar discursive strategies (Fairclough, 1995). By critically examining discursive practices that perpetuate domination and inequality, critical discourse analysts envision possibilities for human liberation and empowerment (van Dijk, 1993). Furthermore, as Oran

(2022) highlights, CDA facilitates the exploration of the various ways in which narratives about the nation are constructed. It examines how different actors shape these narratives in varying contexts and underscores the dynamic and contested nature of national identity.

In this study, the researcher adopted CDA to analyse how various social groups, from the Italian occupation of Ethiopia to the present day, have legitimised anti-Amhara narratives within the political discourse of the country. This analysis aims to uncover the implicit motives of these groups that sustain narratives portraying the Amhara as oppressors. CDA is also employed to examine in depth the discursive strategies used by Amhara nationalists in response to both real and perceived threats emerging from the sedimentation of such narratives. Given the contested nature of Amhara identity, CDA is further used to explore the rhetorical tactics employed by Amhara nationalists in shaping a collective identity. This includes analyzing how discourse is used to construct boundaries between categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The analysis of texts, such as speeches, writings, manifestos and constitutions, produced by various social groups to either reinforce or counter anti-Amhara narratives was guided by the three steps of CDA outlined by Fairclough (1995). These steps informed the examination of how language is used to construct both anti-Amhara narratives and a collective Amhara identity. The first step, text analysis, involves scrutinising specific linguistic features such as word choice, metaphors and rhetorical devices. This phase focuses on understanding how language perpetuates narratives that depict the Amhara as oppressors while also contributing to the construction of Amhara identity. For example, the researcher:

- Examines the use of labels and narratives that characterise the Amhara as oppressors, drawing from both historical references and contemporary political rhetoric;
- Analyses how various social groups have defined Amhara identity over time, with a focus on their linguistic strategies, rhetorical manoeuvres and ideological frameworks;
- Explores the use of terms such as *neftegna* and *timkhtegna* to depict the Amhara as oppressors and cultural chauvinists;
- Investigates how Amhara nationalists have reappropriated *neftegna* and *timkhtegna* as identity markers, reclaiming them from their pejorative meanings.

The second step is discourse practice analysis, which examines how texts are produced, distributed and consumed. In this phase, the researcher analyses how various media channels, including both mainstream and social media platforms, are used to spread anti-Amhara narratives. The study also investigates how political discourse in legislative debates or public speeches either maintains or challenges these narratives. Importantly, the researcher explores how Amhara nationalists leverage social media platforms to construct a collective Amhara identity, counter narratives that deny this identity and refute discourses that portray the Amhara as oppressors.

The final step is social practice analysis, which involves examining the broader social, political and historical contexts in which these discourses operate, with a particular emphasis on their impact on the formation of Amhara nationalism. Key contexts include:

- The divide-and-rule policy of the Fascist Italians, which influenced ethnic relations and power dynamics, shaping perceptions of the Amhara identity;
- The emergence of British-backed political movements aiming to establish the independent states of Greater Somalia or Greater Tigray following the Italians' withdrawal in 1941;
- The adoption of the Marxism-Leninism thesis on the nationalities question by the ESM;
- The formation of ethnic liberation movements in the 1970s, driven by grievances against perceived Amhara dominance, culminating in their rise to power in 1991;
- The emergence of reactive Amhara nationalism since the early 1990s and the growth of popular Amhara resistance movements since 2015.

1.8. Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report (1979), a foundational document for guiding ethical decision-making in the planning, execution and evaluation of research. First, the researcher obtained informed consent from participants by clearly explaining the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and anticipated benefits. Second, the privacy of participants was protected by ensuring that their identities remained confidential, with the exception of two informants who explicitly permitted the use of their real names. All data were anonymized, securely stored and used solely for the purposes of this research. Third, the researcher acknowledged the contributions of all participants, appropriately cited the work of others, and reported the views and perspectives of participants with honesty and integrity.

1.9. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the dissertation, the researcher employed several strategies. Data were collected from multiple sources to facilitate triangulation. Following data collection, participants were given the opportunity to review and validate the transcribed data, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented. The researcher also provided detailed, context-rich descriptions of the research setting and participants during data analysis. Additionally, reflexivity was integrated throughout the research process to recognize and address potential personal biases.

1.10. Limitations of the Study

This dissertation offers a comprehensive examination of the transformation of the *modus operandi* of Amhara nationalism from peaceful to violent forms, grounded in a critical analysis of the historical and political conditions that gave rise to the movement. However, the study is not without limitations. One notable caveat is its exclusion of the assumption that Amhara nationalism has religious elements, particularly in relation to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). This exclusion is a deliberate methodological choice, made in respect of the claim by Amhara nationalists that their movement is secular and not tied to religious affiliation.

Another caveat is methodological in nature. Due to the ongoing conflict between the Amhara Fano and government forces, the researcher was unable to conduct a sufficient number of face-to-face interviews and focus groups with ordinary Amhara across various parts of the Amhara region. This limitation hindered the ability to fully capture the emotions, feelings, body language and facial expressions of participants, which are crucial in studying the dynamics of nationalist movements. However, the researcher made efforts to overcome this limitation by conducting interviews and focus groups in more accessible locations such as Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar and Debre Markos, while also using phone conversations. Another challenge was accessing members and leaders of the Amhara Fano, as many are operating from the bushes, making them difficult to reach. While some interviews with leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam were conducted through personal networks, opinions and views from other Fano factions were gathered from interviews their leaders had with various YouTube journalists.

1.11. Structure of the Study

The dissertation is structured into seven chapters. The next chapter outlines the theoretical framework and conceptual clarifications of the study. It critically reviews scholarly works on key concepts and debates surrounding nation and nationalism, as well as perspectives on their rise and emergence. After a meticulous review, the chapter identifies an appropriate theoretical framework to support the effort to scrutinize Amhara nationalism.

Chapter Three examines the formation and construction of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia across different historical epochs. Particular emphasis is placed on how power holders have attempted to legitimize their own versions of nationalism and how these have been contested by opposition elites. The aim is to position Amhara nationalism within this broader context. Hence, the chapter tests the applicability of the theoretical framework established in Chapter Two within the Ethiopian context, thereby setting the stage for the subsequent discussion of Amhara nationalism.

Chapter Four delves into the origins of Amhara nationalism. It examines various perspectives on its emergence and the politico-historical conditions that contributed to its rise. The chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the invention of anti-Amhara narratives, the actors involved in their crystallization and institutionalization and the subsequent structural violence perpetrated against the Amhara people.

Chapter Five explores the resistance strategies adopted by Amhara nationalists. It explores the ideologies of various Amhara-based political parties and the strategies they employed to construct and promote Amhara identity. The chapter also discusses both peaceful forms of resistance, such as social media campaigns and public protests, and violent forms that were adopted by Amhara nationalists to advance their aspirations.

Chapter Six brings the radicalization of Amhara nationalism in post-2018 Ethiopia under scrutiny. It details the factors that contributed to the movement's radicalization to the point where peaceful alternatives became unfeasible, culminating in the militarization of the Fano. Chapter Seven, the final chapter, presents a broad discussion and synthesis of the overall findings drawn from the three empirical chapters. The conclusion is informed by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks established in the dissertation.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2. Introduction

This chapter lays out the conceptual clarifications and theoretical framework that underpin the dissertation. The study of nationalism is often complicated by disagreements over its origins and nature. This complexity stems primarily from the conceptual ambiguity of the term nation and the contested narratives surrounding its emergence. Consequently, many scholars argue that any attempt to theorize the origins, ideologies and dynamics of nationalism must begin with a clarification of the concept of the nation (Calhoun, 2007; Smith, 2010). This is a reasonable approach, given that nationalism is fundamentally anchored in the concept of the nation.

This chapter is organized into six sections. The first surveys the scholarly literature on the definition of the nation. The second section addresses the concept of nationalism. Acknowledging the difficulty of arriving at a universally accepted definition, it refrains from proposing a definitive one. Instead, it develops a working definition grounded in existing academic debates. The third section examines various typologies of nationalism and identifies the most suitable framework for contextualizing the Ethiopian case. The fourth section engages with the major theoretical approaches to nationalism and establishes the conceptual foundation for the study.

The fifth section investigates the emergence of sectarian nationalisms in postcolonial Africa, with particular emphasis on colonial legacies. It examines how colonial powers reinforced ethnic identities through divide-and-rule strategies and how these externally imposed constructs were later appropriated by postcolonial elites. The final section summarizes the chapter's key arguments and sets the stage for the subsequent analysis.

2.1. Conceptualizing Nation: Definitions and Debates

Scholars in the field of nationalism studies generally agree that the concept of a nation is inherently complex and multifaceted (Anderson, 2006; Brubaker, 1996; Greenfeld, 1992; Malešević, 2011; Özkirimli, 2017). Despite recognizing this complexity and the challenges it presents, no universally accepted definition has emerged. Three key factors contribute to the difficulty of distilling the concept into a single, comprehensive definition.

The first factor is the historical and spatial variability in the use of the term nation itself. In the Old Testament, for instance, it denotes a range of meanings: a descendant group (Genesis 35:10–11), a chosen people (Exodus 19:5–6), conspirators against God (Psalm 2:1) and anti-Israelite peoples (Jeremiah 46–51). During the European Middle Ages, the term referred to students sharing a common language or geographical origin within universities (Smith, 2010). With the advent of modernity in Europe, it came to signify a people possessing a sovereign state (Anderson, 2006). Beyond temporal shifts, the meaning of nation also varies across geographical contexts (Breuilly, 1993). Kohn (1944), for example, underscores the contrast between Western and Eastern European understandings of the nation. He argues that while the Western tradition tends to define the nation in civic terms, grounded in shared citizenship, legal equality and political participation, the Eastern conception emphasizes ethnic, linguistic and cultural commonalities as the basis of nationhood.

The second factor is the multidisciplinary nature of nationalism studies. This field spans multiple disciplines, including history, political science, anthropology and sociology. Each discipline brings its own perspectives and methodologies, resulting in varying interpretations of what constitutes a nation (Özkirimli, 2005; Calhoun, 2007). The third factor is the ideological interests of elites leading nationalist movements. Smith (1991) argues that the nation is an abstract and flexible concept that reflects the political and ideological agendas of nationalists. As a result, any definition put forward by nationalists often serves the interests and identities of one political group, sometimes at the expense of others.

The conceptual amorphousness of the nation, arising from these factors, has prompted scholars to develop their own working definitions. These definitions typically incorporate objective markers, subjective awareness, or a combination of both. The list of objective markers used to define nations includes ethnicity, language, religion, territory, shared history, common descent, or, more generally, common culture (Özkirimli, 2005). An illustrative example of an objective definition comes from Stalin (1936, p. 7), who defined a nation as ‘an historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture’. Stalin argues that if any one of these characteristics is lacking, the entity ceases to be a nation.

According to Bahru (2014), the ESM of the 1960s embraced Stalin’s definition in its struggle over the question of nationalities. Walelign (1969), one of the prominent activists, argued that Ethiopia

is not a single nation but a conglomerate of dozens of nations, each with its own language, territory, dress, history and social organization. In this interpretation, Walelign accorded nation status to the Amhara, though he did not clearly define the characteristics that distinguish them from other purported nations, apart from mentioning the Amharic language. This understanding of the nation has profoundly shaped the contemporary political economy of the Ethiopian state, particularly after its institutionalization in the 1994 Constitution (Messay, 2008; Tezera, 2021). Grounded in rigid ethnic categories, the Constitution established ethnically defined administrative units.

The constitutional formation of ethnic homelands has been criticized for disregarding the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in Ethiopia (Daniel, 2003; Assefa, 2006). Historically, interethnic interactions through marriage, migration, war and trade have shaped Ethiopian society, often blurring otherwise rigid ethnic boundaries (Levine, 1974; Getachew, 1986; Tadesse, 1988; Haile, 2017). Barth (1969) contends that relying on objective markers to define national identity underestimates the malleability of cultural traits. In a similar vein, Özkirimli (2005) stresses that the characteristics employed in defining a nation are not merely a collection of objective differences, but rather those deemed meaningful by the actors themselves.

Barth (1969) suggests that national groups should be understood in an ‘organizational sense’, wherein individuals strategically emphasize or downplay certain cultural traits depending on their relevance in specific contexts. He contends that scholarly focus should be placed on the boundaries that define a group, rather than the cultural content it encompasses. This approach foregrounds the role of agency in the construction of national identity. Eley and Suny (1996, p. 7) articulate this notion effectively, asserting that ‘creative political action is required to transform a segmented and disunited population into a coherent nationality’. Accordingly, the mere existence of objective markers is insufficient to establish nationhood; rather, these markers must be actively cultivated and mobilized by nationalists to generate a shared national consciousness.

Collective consciousness is central to the subjective definition of nations, the second approach scholars use to define what constitutes a nation. Proponents of this view argue that while objective markers alone do not make a nation, they are essential ingredients for fostering the sense of commonality that sustains it (Geertz, 1993). At this intersection, the role of agency becomes crucial, as it involves selecting and emphasizing particular elements from these markers to cultivate shared solidarity, collective will and loyalty among members of an imagined nation (Eley

& Suny, 1996). This collective sentiment is expressed through a sense of shared sacrifice and commitment to a common future (Renan, 1990), a specific feeling of solidarity in contrast to other groups (Weber, 1970) and the imagination of a political community (Anderson, 2006).

Although the subjective definition of the nation is helpful for understanding what constitutes a nation, it is not without its criticisms. The first criticism concerns the issue of ‘specifying the right unit’ (Özkirimli, 2005, p. 19). Özkirimli argues that while we may accept that a group of people becomes a nation when its members share a sense of solidarity, collective consciousness and common will, the question of ‘which people’ remains unresolved. In other words, determining the boundaries of a national group is inherently challenging, as subjective feelings of belonging can be fluid and overlapping. The second criticism involves the difficulty of distinguishing nations from other social groupings (Calhoun, 1997). Solidarity, self-awareness and loyalty are not unique to nations but are also characteristic of other social groups, such as families, religious communities, city-states and empires.

A third criticism targets Anderson’s (2006) theory, which argues that sovereignty is a constitutive element of the nation. Smith (2006) critiques this view, asserting that it excludes stateless nations, such as the Catalans and Quebecois, who claim their identity as nations despite lacking sovereign states. He claims that a nation does not require its own state but should instead seek autonomy and physical residence in its perceived homeland. For Smith (2010, p. 13), a nation is ‘a named human community living in a perceived homeland and having common myths and history, a distinct public culture, and common laws and customs for all members’. Smith argues that this definition resolves the issues arising from treating objective and subjective definitions separately.

While Smith claims that his definition is comprehensive, it has been criticized for merely combining objective and subjective elements. Some leading theorists have criticized that conceptualizing the nation based on objective markers, subjective consciousness, or a combination thereof can lead to the reification of nations (Brubaker, 1996; Calhoun, 1997; Finlayson, 1998; Ting, 2008). Brubaker (1996) suggests that nationalism theorists should avoid reifying nations, a task typically undertaken by nationalists themselves. He contends that instead of asking, ‘What is a nation?’ scholars should focus on how nationhood, as a political and cultural form, is institutionalized within and among states (1996, p. 16). This approach is valuable for

understanding the historical, political, cultural and ideological processes that contribute to the formation of national identity.

In this dissertation, no attempt is made to conceptualize *Amharaness* through objective markers or subjective consciousness. Instead, the focus is on examining the historical processes and political conditions within the broader Ethiopian state that contributed to the formation of a distinct Amhara identity. Understanding these processes is crucial to comprehending what people assert about their identity (Calhoun, 1997). People articulate different interpretations of their social world, themselves and their collective experiences (Oran, 2022). A narrative of identity is a specific form of storytelling that highlights how collective experiences are expressed, discussed and negotiated among members of a particular community. Therefore, following Ting (2008, p. 453), the researcher argues that the nation is ‘a mental construct, and the formation of national identity [is] a dynamic, contested historical process of social construction’.

Since national identity is dynamic, there may be different and unstable discursive constructions of national identities depending on the context (Oran, 2022). Various historical events and political dynamics – such as the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the proliferation of movements aiming to establish independent states like Greater Somalia and Greater Tigray, the ESM and the ethnicized politics of the post-1991 era – have all shaped our understanding of *Amharaness*. Equally important in understanding Amhara identity is how the people categorized as Amhara expressed themselves. As Connor (1978, p. 380) aptly states, ‘when analyzing sociopolitical situations, what ultimately matters is not what is but what people believe it is’. This dissertation, therefore, does not aim to define what an Amhara nation is, but rather to examine how people narrated, expressed and understood their identity through discursive practices. To achieve this, the study draws on Anderson’s (2006, p. 3) suggestion that, to understand nationness, ‘we need to consider carefully how [it has] come into historical being, in what ways [its] meanings have changed over time, and why, today, [it commands] such profound emotional legitimacy’.

2.2. Nationalism: A Concept in Flux

Nationalism is a complex and often elusive phenomenon, marked by ambiguity and contested interpretations (Snyder, 1990). This complexity arises in part from the inherently normative stance of nationalist actors, who tend to frame their own nationalism as just, virtuous and legitimate,

while casting others' nationalisms as extremist, authoritarian, or expansionist (Smith, 2010; Özkırımlı, 2017; Oran, 2022). Recognizing these conflicting and often irreconcilable narratives, Seton-Watson (1977, p. 5) famously lamented that 'no scientific definition' of nationalism could be devised. Similarly, Smith (1971, p. 165) cautioned against the pursuit of 'the chimera of universally valid, once-for-all definitions of nationalism'. These reflections underscore the difficulty of pinning down a universally accepted definition of nationalism and point to the need for context-sensitive, analytical frameworks.

In response to this challenge, scholars have proposed various definitions that reflect the multifaceted nature of nationalism. For instance, Snyder (1990, p. 245) describes it as 'a form of consciousness by which the individual proclaims his supreme loyalty to the nation'; Gorski (2006, p. 154) defines it as 'any form of political practice that deploys the nation'; Arnason (2006, p. 44) calls it 'the explicit and affirmative articulation of national identity'; and Kohn (1965, p. 9) characterizes it as 'a state of mind in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation-state'. While these conceptualizations underscore the inextricable link between the nation and nationalism, they tend to overlook the processes through which collective national consciousness, strong emotional attachments and supreme loyalty to the nation emerge. These foundational aspects of nationalism are shaped by the complex interplay of historical developments, political transformations and cultural interactions. Any meaningful attempt to conceptualize nationalism must therefore account for this dynamic politico-historical process.

In this regard, the attempt by Breuilly (1993) can be cited. He defines nationalism as a political movement whereby sub-elites mobilize populations, coordinate the diverse interests of social groups and legitimize their actions in pursuit of gaining or maintaining power. According to Breuilly, nationalist movements seek to unify an existing state, reform or renew it, or – most commonly – oppose it. He further asserts that the nation for which nationalists struggle 'must be as independent as possible' (Breuilly, 1993, p. 2). While this definition offers a strategic understanding of nationalism as a political instrument, it remains problematic in at least two respects. First, it primarily associates nationalism with sovereign statehood, thereby overlooking the nationalism of stateless or subnational communities. Second, it attributes agency almost exclusively to political elites, neglecting the roles played by non-elite and apolitical actors in the construction and expression of nationalist movements.

For Smith (2010), nationalism is not confined to movements that seek to consolidate or contest an existing nation-state. It also encompasses efforts to establish new independent states or to achieve autonomy and self-rule within existing federal arrangements. For instance, Quebec and Catalan nationalism are not expressions of sovereign statehood; rather, they seek varying degrees of political autonomy and cultural recognition within the nation-states of Canada and Spain, respectively (Özkirimli, 2017). These nationalist movements are not solely driven by political elites; they also involve the active participation of artists, historians and ordinary citizens, each contributing to the articulation and expression of national identity. Accordingly, Smith (2010) characterizes nationalism as a social movement, a symbolic language and an ideology.

Nationalism, according to Smith, can be viewed as a social movement that emerged with the advent of literacy societies, historical research, music festivals and cultural journals. This also includes street protests, armed struggles, sit-ins and other forms of resistance to enforce nationalist aspirations. The role of the media, both mainstream and social media platforms, has been crucial to the success of nationalist movements by helping political elites disseminate nationalist narratives to a wider audience (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006; Fuchs, 2020). Nationalist practices such as rediscovering the history of imagined nations, reviving vernacular languages, cultivating literature and restoring indigenous arts, crafts, music, indigenous dances and folk songs are brought to the target audience through these platforms.

Nationalism as symbolism refers to the use of symbolic elements such as flags, national anthems, myths, rituals and cultural practices to express, represent and reinforce the boundary definition of the nation (Smith, 2010). In his earlier work, Smith (2006, p. 175) defined nationalism as ‘the reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of symbols, myths, memories, values and traditions that constitute the heritage of the nation’. The use of these symbols evokes emotions, memories and shared values that bind people together as members of a particular national community.

The conceptualization of nationalism as a social movement and a symbolic language is incomplete without considering the ideological foundation that lends them coherence and direction. Smith (2010) contends that the goals of a nationalist movement are not primarily defined by the activities it undertakes or the individuals involved, but by the foundational ideals and tenets of nationalist ideology. Similarly, the distinctive symbols and discursive practices associated with nationalism derive their significance from the role they play in articulating the nation’s ideals and advancing

the objectives defined by this ideology. As an ideology, nationalism is understood as a set of beliefs and doctrines that legitimize and promote nationalist aims (Smith, 2010). These aims, chiefly national autonomy, national unity and national identity, constitute the core concepts of the ideology. It is precisely these goals, Smith argues, that distinguish nationalist movements from other forms of social mobilization.

After examining nationalism as a movement, symbolism and ideology individually, Smith (2010) developed what he considered a comprehensive definition. He defines nationalism as ‘an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation’ (Smith, 2010, p. 9). According to Smith, this definition effectively links the ideological framework of nationalism to a goal-oriented movement, as nationalism, in its ideological form, advocates specific actions aimed at achieving these objectives.

The approach Smith takes to conceptualizing nationalism is particularly useful for this study for two fundamental reasons. First, it recognizes the existence of forms of nationalism that extend beyond the sovereign nation-state. Amhara nationalism, for instance, is a political, social, and cultural movement that articulates the interests and identity of the Amhara within the sovereign framework of the Ethiopian state. Second, Smith’s approach treats nationalism as both a social movement and a symbolic language. Amhara nationalists attempt to mobilize individuals and groups to advocate for the political, economic and cultural rights of the Amhara. This mobilization has taken both peaceful forms, such as protests, social media campaigns, sit-ins and boycotts of party-affiliated businesses, and, in more recent years, violent forms, particularly as peaceful resistance has failed to achieve the desired outcomes.

This dissertation examines the transformation of mobilization strategies from peaceful resistance to violent contention through the lens of radicalization. In this study, radicalization refers to the process by which political moderates become militant or shift from nonviolent methods to armed struggle (Brighton, 2007; Fraihi, 2008). This analytical lens is particularly useful for examining the conditions that contribute to the militarization of nationalist groups and for understanding the point at which negotiated compromise breaks down between those who control the state and nationalist actors (Florea, 2017). Specifically, the study investigates the factors that have led to the militarization of the Amhara Fano in post-2018 Ethiopia and the radicalization of the broader

Amhara nationalist movement. It also explores the symbolic language, such as historical figures, iconic battles, flags and cultural practices, that Amhara nationalists adopt to construct and articulate a collective Amhara identity.

One limitation of Smith's approach, however, lies in his reification of the nation, treating it as a fixed and given entity, without sufficiently acknowledging its fluid nature. This essentialist view does not adequately capture the complexity of Amhara nationhood and Amhara nationalism. To address this gap, the present study draws on Brubaker's (1996) argument that the nation should be treated not as a substantive entity, but as a category of practice. This concept highlights how the nation is actively constructed and invoked by various social actors to interpret the world, mobilize support and legitimize their actions. It also underscores the ways in which national identity is negotiated and reproduced in everyday life, political discourse and institutional settings.

In this sense, 'nationalism is not engendered by nations', contrary to Smith's assertion, but is rather 'produced – or better, it is induced – by political fields of particular kinds' (Brubaker, 1996, p. 17). This conceptual shift has important implications for the study of Amhara nationalism, as it directs attention to the practices, discourses and events that constitute and shape Amhara identity. By focusing on how nationalist categories are invoked and performed in specific political and social contexts, this approach allows for a more nuanced examination of the particularities of Amhara nationalism – its underlying causes, driving motives, modes of resistance and the roles various social actors play in the production and reproduction of nationalist discourses.

Discourses are central to understanding the dynamics of nationalist movements, as they shape narratives, mobilize support and legitimize actions (Hall, 1998). Discourse is understood not merely as a collection of ideas, but as encompassing institutions, structures, everyday practices and specialized rituals that constitute and mediate social relationships (Roseberry, 1996). Drawing on Foucault (2002), this dissertation treats the emergence and prominence of discourse not simply as the outcome of deliberate strategies by dominant groups, but as the product of complex interactions among multiple social actors. As Foucault (2002, p. 345) observes, 'the analysis of power relations within a society cannot be reduced to the study of a series of institutions or even to the study of all those institutions that would merit the name "political". Power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social'. Furthermore, discourses should not be reduced to language or isolated statements; rather, they are contextually embedded practices, statements

enacted and rendered meaningful within specific social settings (Özkirimli, 2017). In this regard, Foucault's (2002) notion of the 'archaeology of knowledge' is particularly valuable, as it seeks to uncover the historical and social conditions that make the emergence and dominance of particular discourses possible.

This study uncovers the complex historical, political and cultural conditions that enabled the emergence and sedimentation of the discourse portraying the Amhara as oppressors within the political vocabulary of Ethiopia. It also examines how these discourses have been challenged and rearticulated by Amhara nationalists. In doing so, the study highlights the role of power relations and the agency of diverse social groups in the production, negotiation and maintenance of these discursive formations. As Cousins and Hussain (1984) suggest, a discursive formation arises when a group of discourses address the same object, share a common style and *modus operandi*, and are embedded within similar institutional and administrative frameworks. Hall (1998) further elaborates that discursive formations consist of statements about particular objects, topics, or bodies of knowledge; they entail rules that define what can be said or thought at a given historical moment, how such knowledge gains authority and the institutional practices through which it is managed. Crucially, Hall notes that different discourses, or epistemes, emerge and dominate at different historical junctures, each shaping and reshaping the field of meaning.

Hence, this study assumes that Amhara nationalism can be understood as a discursive formation, a specific way of seeing and interpreting the world that both shapes and is shaped by the socio-political context of Ethiopia. As Calhoun (1997, p. 3) observes, nationalism is a 'discursive formation, a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness'. Within this framework, Amhara nationalism emerges as a counter-discourse, one that seeks to contest the dominant narrative that portrays the Amhara as oppressors, expansionists, or colonialists. It proposes an alternative interpretation of historical and contemporary events, aiming to reframe Amhara identity in a more affirmative and dignified light. This reformulation is not merely reactionary but also constitutes a proactive effort to reshape Ethiopia's political and social terrain.

However, the treatment of nationalism as a discursive formation is not without its critics. As Özkirimli (2017) notes, two major criticisms have been raised by scholars. The first contends that viewing nationalism as a form of discourse risks denying the tangible reality and emotional resonance of the nation and nationalism (Roshwald, 2006; Gat, 2013). Özkirimli responds to this

concern by emphasizing that conceiving nationalism as discourse does not negate its power or presence; rather, it underscores that nationalism and its associated symbols, practices and narratives are not inherently given, but are socially constituted and sedimented over time. Once sedimented, as Finlayson (1998) argues, nationalism acquires material force – it shapes identities, influences political behavior, mobilizes collective action and imbues these processes with profound emotional significance.

The second criticism concerns the difficulty of distinguishing nationalism from other ideologies that are also conceptualized as forms of discourse. Critics argue that if all ideologies are discursively constructed, then treating nationalism as a discursive formation risks analytical vagueness (Hastings, 1997; Hirsch, 2012). However, as Özkırımlı (2017) contends, the discourse of nationalism is distinct because it makes three interrelated claims that set it apart. The first are identity claims, which divide the world into binary categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The second are temporal claims, which draw upon both the past and the future to assert the nation’s continuous, linear and diachronic existence. The third are spatial claims, marked by an obsession with territory and the quest for a real or imagined homeland. It is the intersection of these three dimensions that gives the discourse of nationalism its specificity and distinguishes it from other ideological discourses. This study therefore explores how these three interrelated claims are articulated within Amhara nationalism and how they shape and are shaped by the broader socio-political dynamics of contemporary Ethiopia.

2.3. Typologies of Nationalism

Given the conceptual amorphousness of nation and nationalism, scholars have sought to bring analytical clarity by classifying nationalism into various typologies based on divergent experiences, goals, forms and intensities of nationalist expression. For instance, Wirth (1936) distinguished between hegemony nationalism, particularist nationalism, marginal nationalism and minority nationalism in the European context. Others have proposed additional classifications, such as primitive and developed nationalism (Smith, 1969), hot and banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), ethnic, social and official nationalism (Kellas, 1998), and state-building, peripheral, irredentist and unification nationalism (Hechter, 2000). While these typologies serve important heuristic functions, their boundaries are often blurred, as different nationalisms may overlap in their forms, goals and expressions.

These conceptual convergences are also reflected in the influential ethnic-civic distinction, which has long dominated the study of nationalism (Maxwell, 2010; Karolewski & Suszycki, 2011). Although he did not explicitly use the terms ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’, Kohn (1944) is widely regarded as the intellectual pioneer of this binary. He classified nationalism into ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ forms, a typology that has captivated generations of scholars not only for its regional demarcations but also for its deeper conceptual implications.

Kohn proclaims that Western nationalism possesses a civic character, emerging as a political phenomenon following the formation of the state. He characterizes it as rational, with an emphasis ‘on the rights of the free citizen in a democratic association of citizens whose group sovereignty is a logical extension of individual freedom’ (1944, p. 7). This ideology was largely a product of the middle class that came to power in France, Britain and the United States in the late eighteenth century. The rise of the middle class in these states contributed to the proliferation of what Kohn described as ‘benign’ forms of nationalism, grounded in Enlightenment principles of universality, inclusivity and liberalism.

In contrast, Kohn describes Eastern nationalism – what some scholars refer to as the non-Western model (Smith, 2010) – as a more virulent form that emerged east of the Rhine River. He argues that it originates in societies perceived to be at a less advanced stage of political and social development. The nations that developed in these contexts are characterized by an ‘ethnic’ conception of the nation, grounded in shared ancestry, culture and language (Kedourie, 1960). The absence of a robust middle class capable of facilitating an ‘enlightened’ transformation of society, akin to that of the West, created fertile ground for organic and primordial understandings of nationhood (Kohn, 1944). Following Kohn, Smith (1991) contends that while Western nationalism permitted individuals to choose their national identity, its non-Western counterpart offered little to no such agency. Furthermore, unlike the Western variant, Kohn asserts that Eastern nationalism, as manifested in Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe and later in parts of Africa and Asia, was inherently particularistic, illiberal, exclusionary and collectivist.

Building on Kohn’s work, major academic contributions to contemporary nationalism studies have largely focused on classifying nationalist movements into ethnic and civic categories (Plamenatz, 1973; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1991; Greenfeld, 1992). A particularly noteworthy aspect of these scholars’ work is Kohn’s moral distinction between the ‘good’ nationalism of the West and the

‘bad’ nationalism of the non-West. For Plamenatz (1973), civic nationalism is ‘good’ as it is rooted in shared territory and citizenship for national inclusion. In contrast, he argues that ethnic nationalism is always hostile and illiberal, as it emerges in societies that have experienced colonial domination or other forms of subjugation. Greenfeld (1992) further reinforced the ethnic-civic distinction, characterizing civic nationalism as open, voluntarist and inclusive, while ethnic nationalism is exclusive, restricting membership to those who share a common ethnicity. On this basis, she concludes that civic nationalism is more conducive to democratic governance, while ethnic nationalism is more prone to authoritarian tendencies.

A more nuanced interpretation of the civic-ethnic distinction is offered by Anthony Smith, who does not uncritically adopt Kohn’s dichotomy but instead provides a critical appraisal. Smith (1986) introduces the term territorial to characterize Western nationalism, thereby categorizing nationalism into territorial and ethnic types. According to Smith (1991), the defining features of territorial nationalism include a historic territory, a legal-political community, the legal-political equality of members and a shared civic culture and ideology. In contrast, ethnic nationalism is distinguished by genealogy and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, and shared customs and traditions.

For Smith, excessive reliance on a rigid territorial-ethnic dichotomy is problematic, as most nationalist movements ‘often partake of elements of both types’, thereby rendering ‘the original analytic distinction’ of limited practical value (Smith, 2010, p. 44). He similarly critiques the binary opposition between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ nationalism as flawed. Even civic nationalism, typically regarded as liberal, universal and inclusive, may produce quite illiberal, xenophobic policies (Spencer & Wollman, 2002; Smith, 2010). Smith illustrates this with the case of French nationalism – often hailed as the archetype of civic nationalism. The French Assembly’s 1790 declaration, which proclaimed, ‘to the Jew as an individual we give everything, to the Jew as a Jew nothing’, exposed the exclusionary undercurrents within the French civic model (Smith, 2010, p. 44). Other scholars have also criticized Kohn’s distinction for privileging the Western model of liberalism and its associated civic nationalism (Özkırımlı, 2017). As Calhoun observes:

His [Kohn’s] story of nationalism is a story of liberal achievement and an illiberal challenge to it. It is a story in which the West – represented principally by England, France, and the United States – represents

the universal and the rest of the world, frequently identified with the East, represents innumerable particularisms (2007, p. 118).

Brubaker (1998) also highlights both the analytical and normative shortcomings of Kohn's classification. Analytically, he argues that the ethnic-civic dichotomy is inherently ambiguous, particularly when examining the role of culture in shaping national identities. The common assumption that civic nationalism is acultural, while ethnic nationalism is rooted exclusively in ethnocultural elements, does not withstand historical scrutiny (Brubaker, 2006). He argues that even paradigmatic cases of civic nationalism, such as France and the United States, fall short of this strict definition due to their deeply embedded cultural components. For example, France's assimilationist model, which elevates French culture above minority identities, and the United States' melting-pot ideal, historically privileging White Anglo-Protestant norms over Black, Indigenous and Asian cultures, underscore how such nation-building projects are far from culturally neutral (Spencer & Wollman, 2002). These examples reveal that assimilationist strategies, often presented as civic, in fact operate through culturally exclusionary logics.

At the same time, Brubaker (1996) argues that certain non-Western states have adopted what he refers to as a dissimilationist strategy, which, from an analytical perspective, can be understood as civic. He finds the Soviet Union particularly illustrative, describing its approach as a 'unique accommodation to ethnonational heterogeneity' through the institutionalization of ethnic differences (Brubaker, 1996, p. 23). This approach involved the formal recognition, delineation and governance of diverse ethnic groups within the state apparatus. While this model incorporated aspects of ethnic nationalism, such as acknowledging the collective national status of constituent groups, it also emphasized individual citizenship within the overarching Soviet polity (Hirsch, 2005). For this reason, Brubaker (2006) cautions against characterizing the Soviet strategy as purely 'ethnic'; rather, he argues, it embodied both civic and ethnic dimensions.

The normative distinction that characterizes civic nationalism as liberal, voluntarist, universalist and inclusive, while portraying ethnic nationalism as illiberal, ascriptive, particularist and exclusive, is also problematic for Brubaker. He contends that privileging or condemning one side of this dichotomy is both analytically and normatively flawed, as all forms of nationalism entail elements of inclusion and exclusion (Brubaker, 1996). What distinguishes them, Brubaker (2006) argues, is not the extent of inclusion or exclusion, but rather the specific criteria used to draw such

boundaries. Civic nationalism, despite its theoretical commitment to universalism, often marginalizes those who fail or refuse to assimilate into the dominant culture (Özkirimli, 2017). Moreover, as Brubaker (1998) argues, the wholesale repudiation of ethnic nationalism unjustly delegitimizes ethnocultural forms that may merit normative sympathy, particularly when they arise as defensive reactions to oppression.

To overcome the conceptual ambiguities and normative biases associated with the civic-ethnic dichotomy, Brubaker proposes a typology that distinguishes between state-framed and counter-state-framed nationalisms. In state-framed nationalism, the concept of the nation is articulated in alignment with the state, both institutionally and territorially (Brubaker, 1998). Here, it is the state that becomes the primary locus of national identity and legitimacy (Heiskanen, 2021). This perspective enables a more nuanced analysis of how linguistic, cultural, and even ethnic dimensions of nationhood are constructed, mediated and institutionalized by the state (Brubaker, 2006). As a result, state-framed nationalism often carries a pronounced cultural content, highlighting how the culture deemed essential to national identity is closely intertwined with the discourses of the state.

In counter-state-framed nationalism, the nation is envisioned in opposition to the institutional and territorial structures of the state (Brubaker, 1998). What is crucial is not whether nationalist movements are defined in ethnic or non-ethnic terms, but that they emerge in reaction to, and in contestation of, the state's institutional framework (Brubaker, 2006). In resisting state authority, these movements often mobilize populations through appeals to territorial, cultural, or ethnic distinctiveness. Overall, according to Heiskanen (2021), these counter-state nationalist movements aim to reconfigure existing political boundaries through secession or unification.

Building on this analytical lens, this dissertation challenges the prevailing binary of 'Ethiopian versus ethnic nationalism' that characterizes much of the Ethiopian scholarly discourse. Many scholars characterize the nation-building efforts of pre-1991 Ethiopia as civic, inclusionary, and label them as Ethiopian nationalism (Teffera, 1997; Daniel, 2003). In contrast, the post-1991 nation-building effort is labeled ethnic nationalism, often characterized as ethnocentric and exclusionary (Assefa, 2017; Haile, 2017). At this stage, two key issues with this claim are worth highlighting. First, the tendency to label the pre-1991 nation-building efforts as civic overlooks the cultural component of the process. Similar to the French or United States models, the Amharic

language and Christian culture were the predominant tools of nation-building, at least during the monarchical era (Clapham, 1988; Markakis, 2011). Second, labeling the post-1991 ethnic federal arrangement as solely ethnic is inaccurate, as it also incorporates citizenship components (Smith, 2013). The central premise of this system, much like the Soviet model, involves the formal recognition of diversity to embed ethnonational categories into the bureaucratic and territorial organization of the state.

Both nation-building efforts have faced opposition. The pre-1991 effort was criticized for marginalizing non-Amhara populations and non-Christians (Alemseged, 2022; Asafa, 2023). In response, competing nationalisms emerged, each with different goals, such as secession or state reform through accommodative strategies (Gebru, 1991; Andargachew, 1993). Similarly, opposition in post-1991 Ethiopia remains strong, with opposing groups pursuing divergent goals, such as the restoration of the old order or the establishment of a viable Ethiopian state that treats all its people equally (Teffera, 1997). One clear conclusion here is that the opposition to the nation-building efforts of both pre- and post-1991 systems is not merely ethnic or civic; rather, it incorporates both elements. The common denominator is that these movements seek to reconfigure the Ethiopian state according to their own vision, making the state the center of contestation.

To this end, this dissertation examines competing nationalisms in Ethiopia through the lens of state-framed and counter-state-framed nationalisms. This framework allows for a nuanced analysis of the different nationalist ideologies espoused by various actors within Amhara nationalism. While some political groups, such as NaMA, seek to reconfigure the Ethiopian state to treat the Amhara as equals with other constituent national groups, others, such as BETAM, advocate for a secessionist ideology (Mesganaw, 2021). Additionally, the AAPO opposed the ethnic federal arrangement, advocating instead for the restoration of the pre-1991 political order as a means to preserve the unity of the Ethiopian state (Merera, 2003). These divergent nationalist ideologies within the same broader movement raise an important question about the appropriateness of Kohn's classification for understanding Amhara nationalism. Labeling it as purely ethnic risks overlooking its Ethiopianist dimension, while categorizing it as Ethiopian nationalism fails to acknowledge its Amhara-centeredness. Therefore, a more suitable conceptualization is to frame Amhara nationalism as a counter-state-framed nationalism, one that challenges the narratives

underpinning the ethnic federal arrangement – particularly the portrayal of the Amhara as an oppressor nation – and critiques the structural violence that has resulted from these narratives.

2.4. Theories on the Origins and Development of Nationalism

The conceptual fluidity and ambiguity surrounding the notions of nation and nationalism derive from divergent theoretical perspectives on their origins and development (Kedourie, 1960; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1986; Hobsbawm, 1992; Geertz, 1993; Brubaker, 1996; Anderson, 2006; Roshwald, 2006; Gat, 2013; Özkırımlı, 2017). Central to the debate is whether nations are primordial entities with ancient roots, products of modernity, or constructs shaped by social and political processes. These theoretical perspectives are commonly categorized into four broad schools of thought: primordialism, modernism, ethnosymbolism and social constructionism. The following section offers a brief overview of each to assess which provides the most appropriate analytical lens for understanding Amhara nationalism.

Although this study adopts social constructionism as its theoretical framework, engaging with the other three perspectives remains essential for several reasons. First, the evolution of any given theory often emerges through critique and dialogue with alternative approaches. Second, social constructionism does not categorically dismiss the premises of primordialism, modernism, or ethnosymbolism; rather, it acknowledges their potential relevance in explaining specific cases. Third, it recognizes the analytical utility in examining how nationalists essentialize the nation, whether by invoking primordial origins or by mobilizing modern conditions. This, however, does not imply that social constructionism merely synthesizes the claims of other theories. Instead, it offers a distinct analytical lens, primarily through its critique of the reification of the nation.

2.4.1. Primordialism

Primordialism is ‘an umbrella term used to describe the belief that nationality is a natural part of human beings, as natural as speech, sight, or smell, and that nations have existed from time immemorial’ (Özkırımlı, 2017, p. 51). Primordialists argue that individuals’ loyalty to their nation arises from objective, deeply rooted bonds such as language, religion, or common descent (Smith, 2010). This view is strongly upheld by nationalists and forms a fundamental cornerstone of their ideology. As Gellner (1983, p. 6) famously put it, ‘a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears’. Central to this perspective is the reification of the nation as a natural, historic

and observable entity (Brubaker, 1996). Nationalists reinforce this perception through the selective interpretation of history and the appropriation of myths, symbols and collective memories to serve contemporary political and ideological needs.

It is important to note, however, that the reification of the nation is not solely the domain of political elites; social scientists have also played a role in this process. In this regard, Johann Gottfried Herder, an eighteenth-century German scholar, is particularly noteworthy. Herder, who was deeply involved in the intellectual efforts to consolidate the unification of Germany, contributed significantly to the idea of the nation as a natural and organic entity. He believes that ‘the separation of Prussians from the rest of Germans is purely Artificial...the separation of the Germans from the other European nations is based on nature’ (Heater, 1998, p. 79). Herder opposed the idea of one nation conquering another, asserting that nothing is more contrary to the aims of political governance than the artificial expansion of states and the chaotic amalgamation of different nationalities under a single rule.

While Herder advocates for the givenness of the nation, others critically examine the works of those who promote this perspective and the beliefs of nationalists. Clifford Geertz is one such scholar, often mistakenly perceived as a proponent of the view that ‘primordial identities or attachments are ‘given’, a priori, underived, prior to all experience and interaction’ (Ellen & Coughlan, 1993, p. 187). In reality, Geertz (1993) explores the significance of shared elements such as blood, language, religion and specific social practices in fostering primordial attachments. He argues that it is not the inherent nature of these attachments that makes them ‘given’; rather, it is human beings who perceive these ties as innate. As Brubaker (2006, p. 83) writes, ‘it is participants, not analysts, who are the real primordialists’.

Participants in nationalist movements claim that the nation is not only a naturally occurring entity but also has ancient origins. The sub-theory of primordialism that asserts the antiquity of the nation is referred to as perennialism (Özkırımlı, 2017). As Smith (1998, p. 159) explains, perennialists ‘do not treat the nation as a fact of nature, but they see it as a constant and fundamental feature of human life throughout recorded history’. While perennialists do not agree on the exact ‘when’, they assert both the ancientness of the nation and the deep historical roots of nationalism. Some scholars trace it to ancient Israel, Greek city-states and ancient Egypt (Grosby, 2005; Roshwald, 2006; Gat, 2013), while others locate its origins in the European medieval period (Hastings, 1997;

Hirsch, 2012). In this latter view, Hastings identifies Great Britain as the birthplace of nationalism, whereas Hirsch attributes its origins to Catholic Europe.

Perennialists identify various parameters that they believe support their claims. Grosby (2005), for example, points to the presence of self-designated names, written histories, cultural uniformity, legal codes, authoritative centres and conceptions of bounded territories in ancient Israel as indications of their nationness. For Gat (2013), the tradition of collective resistance to foreign invasion in ancient Israel and Greek city-states signifies the presence of collective national consciousness among their members. Roshwald (2006) highlights the extensive use of vernacular language in these societies to facilitate the impersonal mechanisms for the broad dissemination of standardized myths, traditions, memories, values and laws.

Although primordialism is powerful in explaining the beliefs of nationalists, it has several limitations. Özkırımlı (2017, p. 73) argues that primordialists' understanding of national identities is 'static, at times blatantly essentialist; their account of nation formation is reductionist and teleological'. He further notes that they tend to minimize, or entirely overlook, the significance of contingency, plurality and ambivalence in the development of nations. Additionally, Brass (1991) argues that primordialists fail to address issues of power, neglecting struggles for dominance, acts of resistance and subversion, various accommodations and compromises and unsuccessful nation-building efforts. This oversight, as Barth (1969) contends, prevents primordialists from examining the shifting boundaries of nations and the changing content of nationalism.

2.4.2. Modernism

Modernists argue that nations are not naturally occurring entities but are instead the products of modern processes such as capitalism, industrialization, urbanization and secularism (Kedourie, 1960; Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006). They maintain that nations did not exist in premodern times, when the absence of a centralizing, bureaucratic state made the development of a collective national identity unlikely. For modernists, Western Europe, where these characteristics coalesced in the late eighteenth century, is regarded as the birthplace of nationalism.

Although modernists agree on the modernity of nations and nationalism, they differ on the specific factors that led to their emergence. Some emphasize economic forces (Hechter, 1975), while others focus on political dynamics (Brass, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1992) and still others highlight cultural

elements (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2006). In his seminal work *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966*, Hechter (1975) examines how economic transformations within the United Kingdom exacerbated regional disparities between England and the Celtic regions, such as Scotland and Wales. He argues that during the early modern period, England emerged as an industrial and economic powerhouse, often at the expense of Scotland and other regions within the British Isles. To explain this, Hechter introduces the concept of internal colonialism, where the core region subjugates and exploits peripheral areas. Nationalism, he contends, emerged in these peripheral regions as a reaction to this internal colonialism, with marginalized groups asserting their distinct identities in opposition to the dominant core.

Since the publication of Hechter's book, his theory of internal colonialism has been widely adopted by students of nationalism to analyze centre-periphery relations (Ozkirimli, 2017). However, its heavy reliance on the economic aspect is criticized for neglecting the political and cultural dimensions of nationalist movements. Scholars such as Brass (1991), Hobsbawm (1992) and Breuilly (1993) argue that political transformations since the 18th century – such as the rise of the bureaucratic state, the expansion of the franchise and the growing role of elites – are crucial to understanding the rise of nationalism.

The liberal character of the modern state led to the emergence of mass politics that enabled previously excluded societies to participate in state affairs (Hobsbawm, 1992). Breuilly (1993) writes that this change brought unprecedented problems for rulers, who found it increasingly difficult to maintain the obedience, loyalty and cooperation of their subjects. To counter the threat of mass democracy, these ruling elites invented traditions aimed at promoting a collective national identity. In this context, Hobsbawm (1992) identifies three major innovations as particularly relevant: the development of primary education, the invention of public ceremonies and the mass production of public monuments. As a result of these processes, 'nationalism became a substitute for social cohesion through a national church, a royal family, or other cohesive traditions, or collective group self-presentations, a new secular religion' (Hobsbawm, 1983a, pp. 303).

Brass (1991) views the emergence of nationalism as a result of elite competition for control of the modern state. He argues that the uneven processes of modernization, such as unequal access to economic opportunities, education and political power, often favour certain groups while marginalizing others. Elites from marginalized groups capitalize on these perceived disparities to

garner support by framing their struggles in terms of national or ethnic identity. However, Brass contends that neither the existence of ethnic differences nor elite competition alone is sufficient to initiate the transformation of ethnic identity. The key conditions for this transformation, he argues, are 'the existence of means to communicate selected symbols of identity to other social classes within the ethnic group, the existence of a socially mobilized population to whom the symbols may be communicated, and the absence of intense class cleavage or other barriers to communication between elites and other social groups and classes' (Brass, 1991, p. 65). For Brass, then, ethnic identities are not fixed; rather, they are shaped and reshaped by political elites through the strategic selection of symbols that serve specific interests.

This purely political explanation, however, is insufficient for some scholars in explaining the origin of nationalism. Gellner (1983), for instance, argues that nationalism was an inevitable consequence of the cultural transformation that accompanied industrialization. He classifies human societies into three historical stages: hunting and gathering, agrarian and industrial. In Gellner's view, social organization in pre-industrial societies does not support the nationalist principle, as it fails to bring together political and cultural units or create the homogeneity and school-transmitted culture necessary for nationalism. Nations, he contends, emerge only 'when general social conditions make for standardized, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations and not just elite minorities' (Gellner, 1983, p. 40). Such conditions are possible only within an industrial social organization, where:

work ceases to be physical...and society itself is highly mobile. Under these circumstances, a shared and standardized, codified culture, inculcated by formal education, becomes a precondition of social participation and employability. When shared, literacy-linked culture is very important, people identify with it and thus become 'nationalists' (Gellner, 1993, p. 341).

Hence, for Gellner, both the nation and nationalism are phenomena of industrial society that first emerged in Western Europe. Once nationalism took root there, it spread to the rest of the world through colonialism and imperialism. The rise of nationalism in Africa, Asia and Latin America can therefore be traced to reactions against colonialism, as well as nation-building efforts during the post-independence period (Gellner, 1983). These efforts were heavily influenced by political ideals adopted from Western Europe.

Another scholar who emphasizes cultural transformations is Benedict Anderson. In his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006), Anderson links the origins of nationalism to the interaction of print capitalism, homogeneous empty time and the decline of religious and monarchical orders. The rise of print capitalism, marked by the mass production and distribution of printed materials like books, newspapers and pamphlets, played a pivotal role in strengthening vernacular languages. The widespread circulation of newspapers and books allowed people to consume the same information simultaneously. This shared access to national events and narratives fostered a stronger connection to a broader, imagined community. Furthermore, Anderson (2006) argues that the destruction of traditional social orders and the decline of religiosity led to the rise of secular ideologies like nationalism, which provided a new sense of community and belonging. Greenfeld (1992), another influential modernist, suggests that nationalism offered modern citizens a new source of status and dignity, compensating for the loss of premodern social hierarchies based on aristocracy, the church and wealth.

While modernist perspectives have significantly influenced the study of nationalism, they are not without criticism. As van den Berghe (2005, p. 113) argues, ‘the very concept of modernity [is] one of the least useful in our analytical arsenal, precisely because it is so Euro- and temporocentric’. He contends that the forces of modernity, which laid the groundwork for nationalism in Western Europe, may not fully explain all instances of nationalism globally. Instead, the emergence of nationalism is often intertwined with a complex web of factors, including historical grievances, geopolitical dynamics and power struggles, the significance of which varies depending on the specific context (Özkırımlı, 2017). Moreover, the treatment of nations as real entities and substantial collectives is not confined to primordialists but is also evident in modernist approaches (Brubaker, 1996). This overlooks the contested nature of nations and the existence of competing nationalist narratives.

2.4.3. Ethnosymbolism

A strong critique of the modernist orthodoxy emerged from a group of scholars known as ethnosymbolists (Smith, 1986; Hutchinson, 2004). Smith, often regarded as the founding father of ethnosymbolism, argues that nations should not be viewed in the modernist sense as entities that materialize from nothing, but rather as social formations that have developed from pre-modern ethnic cores, or *ethnies*. An *ethnie* is a community defined by a common collective name, a shared

myth of common descent, shared historical memories, elements of common culture, an association with a particular territory and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1986). Nations, formed around these ethnic cores, inherit key features such as common names, shared myths and memories and a sense of territoriality from *ethnies* (Smith, 2003). However, they differ in critical aspects, such as the level and nature of group solidarity, the existence of a public culture, a unified legal system and a single economy, characteristics that *ethnies* typically lack.

The emergence of the highest levels of solidarity, public culture, a unified legal system and a single economy – attributes that distinguish nations from their ethnic roots – was driven by the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth century (Smith, 1986). This rise did not signify a creation of new entities but rather a transformation of pre-existing ethnic cores, or *ethnies*, into more complex national formations (Smith, 2003). While Smith (2010) acknowledges that nationalism emerged through modern processes such as political mobilization, state bureaucratization and standardized education, he argues that it did not appear as a *deus ex machina* or represent a complete ideological rupture from the past. Instead, nationalists selectively chose and reinterpreted elements from pre-existing symbolisms, mythologies, attachments and beliefs rooted in traditional religions and outlooks, thus legitimizing their movements by referencing historically significant belief systems. Thus, Smith (2016) concludes that ethnosymbolism emphasizes the enduring role of myths, symbols, memories, values and traditions in the formation, persistence and evolution of nationalism.

Guided by a shared reverence for the past, ethnosymbolists contend that the emergence of today's nations cannot be fully understood without reference to their ethnic antecedents (Armstrong, 1982; Smith, 1986, 2003, 2016). Smith (2010) argues that this approach offers a more effective explanatory framework than alternatives such as modernism in at least three key respects. First, it helps identify which populations are most likely to initiate nationalist movements under particular conditions and what the content of those movements would entail. Second, it illuminates the central role of collective memories, values, myths and symbols. Third, it clarifies how and why nationalism is capable of mobilizing deep and widespread popular support.

However, ethnosymbolists have faced considerable criticism (Calhoun, 1997; Laitin, 2001; Malešević, 2006; Özkırımlı, 2017). Laitin (2001, p. 177) argues that ethnosymbolist perspectives are 'trapped in assumptions', selectively highlighting the *ethnies* that evolved into nations while

ignoring the ‘dogs that did not bark’. Similarly, Calhoun (1997, p. 49) points out that ‘noticing the continuity in ethnic traditions does not explain either which of these traditions last or which become the basis for nations or nationalist claims’. Rather than emphasizing the continuity of ethno-histories, Malešević (2006) contends that dominant interpretations of the ‘national’ are shaped by the strategic efforts of social movements and cultural or political elites to articulate and institutionalize the national idea. What matters, then, is not merely the presence of premodern cultural materials, but the process by which elites select, reinterpret and deploy these materials (Özkırmı, 2017). This perspective resists the tendency to reify the nation, instead framing it as a dynamic and constructed social phenomenon.

2.4.4. Social Constructionism

A single-factor explanation for the emergence of nations and nationalism, as proposed by primordialists, modernists and ethnosymbolists, is considered inadequate by a group of scholars collectively identified as social constructionists (Brubaker, 1996; Calhoun, 1997; Finlayson, 1998; Ting, 2008; Özkırmı, 2017; Ming, 2022). These theorists contend that the rise of nationalism cannot be reduced to ‘some primordial attachments’ (Ting, 2008, p. 456), ‘the logic of modernization, atavism, [or] deformation of class interests’ (Finlayson, 1998, p. 103), or to structural factors such as industrialization, capitalism, or state formation (Calhoun, 1997). For social constructionists, attributing nationalism’s origins solely to these structural or institutional drivers poses three fundamental problems they aim to address.

First, single-factor explanations obscure the dialogic process through which individuals transmit, negotiate and internalize collective identities, thereby overlooking the role of agency. Social constructionism, by contrast, emphasizes that national identity emerges through ‘the dialectical and contested nature of the social process of the constitution of national identity’ (Ting, 2008, p. 460). Rather than viewing nationalism as merely an imposition from above, this approach sees it as co-created and continuously negotiated by a range of social actors, including intellectuals, activists and ordinary citizens. It also rejects the notion of nationhood as a fixed or singular moment of emergence, instead framing it as a gradual, evolving process shaped by historical contingencies (Ting, 2008). In doing so, social constructionism highlights the cultural, political and social dimensions of nationalism and its intersections with power, inequality and diversity

(Brubaker, 1996). As Brubaker underscores, understanding the formation of nationalism requires tracing long-term transformations in political, economic and cultural spheres.

Second, single-factor explanations tend to reify nations, thereby obscuring the dynamic and contested nature of national identity formation. Reification involves treating ‘a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural, [and] outside of time’ (Thompson, 1990, p. 65). This analytical error assumes that nations are ‘real entities, as communities, as substantial, enduring collectivities’ (Brubaker, 1996, p. 13). Such assumptions are precisely what ethnopolitical entrepreneurs seek to promote by invoking myths, symbols, shared culture, golden ages and historical narratives to construct an imagined sense of national unity (Calhoun, 1997; Özkirimli, 2005). When these narratives resonate, ‘the political fictions of the unified group can be momentarily yet powerfully realized in practice’ (Brubaker, 2006, p. 166). Yet, the constructed nature of these narratives must not be mistaken for inherent truths. Successful mobilization does not render the nation a fixed or essential entity, nor does it eliminate internal contestation or the multiplicity of interpretations that surround national identity.

Social constructionists instead argue that analysts should investigate how the practice of reification operates, rather than participating in the nationalist project of reifying nations themselves. As Brubaker (1996, p. 3) insists, the central analytical question is not what the nation is, but rather, ‘how does an individual become national?’. He advocates a developmentalist approach that examines the long-term political, economic and cultural transformations underpinning the emergence of nations and nationalism (Brubaker, 1996). This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how nations are narrated, the existence of counter-narratives to dominant nationalist ideologies, and the mechanisms nationalists use to construct and naturalize their imagined communities. By uncovering the *modus operandi* of nationalist discourse – the various processes through which individuals are made ‘national’ – scholars can better explain the deep emotional appeal that nationalism continues to wield (Özkirimli, 2017).

Refraining from reifying nations in the analysis of nationalism does not suggest that social constructionists deny the reality of nations. Rather, it entails conceptualizing that reality by exploring the processes through which nations are institutionalized and individuals come to identify as national (Brubaker, 1996). Once a particular national identity is firmly institutionalized, it often evolves into a hegemonic ideology (Özkirimli, 2005), narrowing the space for alternative

narratives and obscuring the contingent nature of its origins. Over time, this process results in what Finlayson (1998) refers to as sedimentation: through repetition, concealment and forgetting, contingent practices are naturalized and come to be perceived as objective and self-evident realities.

Third, the reliance on a single, purportedly universal factor to explain the origin of nationalism overlooks the unique characteristics of different forms of nationalism. While primordialists and modernists may provide explanations for certain instances of nationalism, their frameworks fail to account for the full range of nationalist movements (Calhoun, 2007). Social constructionists contend that each nationalism possesses distinct ‘content’, aiming to shape the culture and values of the ‘national’ people (Finlayson, 1998). Therefore, as Finlayson suggests, understanding the form and function of specific nationalisms necessitates an exploration of the ‘concrete contents’ of their national claims. This approach calls for a focus on the particular factors that drive the emergence of individual nationalist movements.

This study posits that the factors contributing to the rise of Amhara nationalism, the methods used to construct Amhara identity and the forms of resistance employed by nationalists to achieve their goals are distinctive within the broader context of nationalism. To explore these aspects, the study is guided by social constructionism, which challenges the essentialist, universalist and determinist approaches put forth by primordialism, modernism and ethnosymbolism. Following the social constructionist view that the factors contributing to nation formation should be analyzed on a case-by-case basis (Özirimli, 2005; Calhoun, 2007), this study emphasizes the unique politico-historical conditions that underlie the rise of Amhara nationalism.

However, studying the particularities of nationalism does not imply that all forms of nationalism are devoid of commonalities (Ting, 2008; Ming, 2022). All nationalist movements, policies and ideologies share one fundamental element: the discourse of nationalism (Calhoun, 2007; Özirimli, 2017). This discourse asserts that humanity is divided into distinct nations, each with its own unique past, present and destiny. It is through this discourse that diverse movements, ideologies and policies are classified as nationalism (Calhoun, 2007). The discourse of Amhara nationalism, for instance, asserts the existence of an Amhara nation, distinct from significant ‘others,’ with its own history, culture, language, symbols, homeland and myths. Moreover, this

discourse emphasizes that the Amhara nation faces a collective threat from anti-Amhara political groups, such as the TPLF and OLF, as well as from the Ethiopian state.

While Amhara nationalists argue that there is a distinct Amhara nation whose survival is ‘threatened’ by the state, thereby justifying the legitimacy of their movement, many political elites and academics reject this claim (Getachew, 1992; Admasu, 2010). These critics vehemently oppose the emergence of Amhara nationalism, asserting that ‘Amhara’ is not an ethnonym but refers to all Amharic speakers in Ethiopia (Takkele, 1994). As Wodak (2006) notes, there is no single definition of national identities; their meanings are discursively constructed based on context, including the audience to whom narratives, speeches, or texts are addressed. Indeed, identity is a process of identification, ‘something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference’ (Hall, 1996, p. 344). This fluid nature is why the nation cannot be treated as a stable entity from which to observe fixed characteristics (Ming, 2022). Therefore, the conceptualization of the Amhara nation is examined from this perspective, focusing on when and how people identify themselves as Amhara.

2.5. The Colonial Imprint on Postcolonial Nationalisms in Africa

Social constructionists’ view that national identities are socially constructed is particularly evident in postcolonial Africa, where both history and identity have been profoundly shaped by the legacy of colonialism (Yeros, 1999). Colonial powers deliberately fostered ethnic divisions among African populations to implement the Roman imperial strategy of *divide et impera* (Mamdani, 2012). This strategy not only disrupted the emergence of a unified national consciousness but also laid the groundwork for sectarian forms of nationalism, especially when appropriated by postcolonial nationalist elites (Blanton, Mason & Athow, 2001). The significant role of colonial policies in shaping divergent postcolonial nationalisms is often overlooked by primordialist, modernist and ethnosymbolist theories.

The only exception is modernists, who argue that colonialism served as the conduit through which Western models of nationalism were transmitted to Africa (Kedourie, 1960; Gellner, 1983). Yet beyond this linear account, they tend to neglect the enduring legacy of colonialism in shaping the histories, identities and subjectivities of African societies (Puri, 2004). They also overlook the profound damage wrought by colonial-imposed ethnic divisions on the development of a collective

national consciousness across the continent (Davidson, 1993; Mamdani, 2001; Badru, 2010). In contrast, social constructionists underscore the need to analyze the complex relationship between colonial rule and national identity formation in postcolonial Africa, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the distinctiveness of each nationalist experience (Calhoun, 2007; Özkırımlı, 2017). As a result, the debate surrounding the specificities of colonial legacies and their long-term impacts on formerly colonized societies has become a defining theme in postcolonial scholarship.

Scholars of postcolonial studies broadly align with the core assumptions of social constructionism, particularly in their rejection of the essentialist tendencies found in primordialist, modernist and ethnosymbolist accounts (Dinter, 2021). They contend that the administrative systems and territorial boundaries imposed by European colonialism were artificial constructs, engineered to facilitate imperial, colonial and metropolitan domination (Davidson, 1993). These externally imposed identities, often solidified through colonial policies, were further entrenched in the postcolonial period by a fragile bourgeoisie and a politically and economically disillusioned society (Fanon, 1963; Mamdani, 2020). As a result, ethnic identities were politicized and weaponized, fuelling xenophobic tensions that have erupted into genocide, ethnic cleansing and secessionist movements across several postcolonial African states.

These conflicts, which supplanted a sense of collective national consciousness with sectarian forms of nationalism, are deeply rooted in the racialized historiography propagated by colonial powers (Longman, 2017). As Mamdani (2012) explains, this racialized interpretation of African history was formulated in the nineteenth century by Western missionaries, anthropologists and historians. Central to this historiography is what many scholars have identified as the Hamitic thesis (Sanders, 1969; Mamdani, 2001). According to this thesis, ‘everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by the Hamites, allegedly a branch of the Caucasian race’ (Sanders, 1969, p. 521). The term ‘Hamites’ was drawn from the biblical figure Ham, who was portrayed by colonial writers as the progenitor of Black Africans.

In Genesis 9 of the Bible, it is recounted that Ham showed disrespect for his father, Noah, by seeing him drunk and lying naked. Unlike his brothers, Shem and Japheth, who respectfully covered their father without looking at him, Ham did not avert his gaze. As a result, Noah blessed the descendants of Shem and Japheth but cursed those of Ham. Although Genesis does not specify the race of Ham’s descendants, proponents of the Hamitic myth depicted Ham as the ancestor of

the Negroid people (Seligman, 1930). According to this myth, Noah's curse purportedly placed Black people in an inferior position within the human race, characterizing them as lacking intellectual and conceptual abilities and incapable of rational thought or producing civilization. Europeans used this myth to justify the enslavement of Black people to work on plantations in the Americas, citing the Genesis verse, 'Cursed be Canaan [one of the sons of Ham]; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren'.

The Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 transformed the Hamitic myth from a mere biblical narrative into a pseudo-scientific justification for racial prejudice (Sanders, 1969). Archaeologists and scientists who accompanied Napoleon discovered a complex socio-political system, advanced culture and a powerful civilization in Egypt (Mamdani, 2001). This discovery was ironic to them because they came from a part of the world where racial prejudice against the Black was deeply ingrained. They questioned how such an advanced civilization could have emerged in the so-called 'Black world', where people were believed to lack the intellectual capacity to produce a powerful civilization. In response, they formulated a theory asserting that Egyptian civilization was not created by people of Negroid descent, and they published academic works aimed at proving 'in some way that the Egyptians were not Negroes' (Sanders, 1969, p. 525). Their goal was to categorize Egyptians as part of the Caucasoid race, attributing their achievements to an inherent racial superiority, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion of Black people's supposed inferiority, thereby denying them any potential for accomplishment.

This theory had far-reaching consequences on nineteenth-century colonial and racial ideologies in Africa in two key ways. First, colonial powers used the alleged racial inferiority of Black people to justify their mission to 'civilize' Africa. For example, Benito Mussolini attempted to justify the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 by portraying the country as barbaric, a mere collection of tribal groups engaged in internecine conflict, with slavery as a predominant institution (Woolbert, 1936). He propagated that Italians had a moral obligation to bring the light of Western civilization to Ethiopia (Sbacchi, 1985). Second, European powers employed this theory to divide their colonies along the dichotomy of civilized versus non-civilized, facilitating their divide-and-rule strategies. It is this second implication of the Hamitic myth that has significantly shaped the social structure, identity and collective consciousness in postcolonial African states.

Colonial powers such as Britain, Belgium and Italy used the narratives of the Hamitic thesis to divide Africans along ‘tribal’ lines from the late nineteenth century onwards (Sanders, 1969). Another related myth, known as the migration hypothesis, supported the Hamitic myth by claiming that the advanced cultures and powerful civilizations in Africa were the result of non-Black people who migrated from Asia and Europe to Africa (Mamdani, 2001). Seligman, a proponent of the migration thesis, wrote that these newcomers to Africa intermingled with the indigenous Negro populations to form ‘civilized Black Caucasians’ on the ‘darkest continent’ (Seligman, 1930, p. 96). These so-called Black Caucasians were considered superior by colonial scholars, who believed that they brought the benefits of their civilization to the indigenous Black populations.

Upon arriving on the African continent, colonial powers employed these racial classifications for administrative purposes. They favoured the so-called Hamites over ‘others’ in leadership positions, as well as in educational and economic opportunities (Ali et al., 2019). Elites from the Hamitic category were often selected to act as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the indigenous populations (Longman, 2017). These auxiliary elites developed a sense of superiority and believed that they were naturally suited to rule, even after independence (Blanton, Mason, & Athow, 2001). This dynamic is particularly evident in Rwanda, where the Hamitic myth contributed to the occurrence of one of the most tragic genocides in human history.

Although precolonial Rwandan society did not emphasize ethnicity as a primary marker of social differentiation, Belgian colonial administrators reconfigured local identities into rigid racial categories – Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – based on European racial science (Sanders, 1969). Embracing the pseudoscientific framework of the Hamitic hypothesis, the Belgians assumed that the Tutsis were ‘Caucasoid Hamites’ who migrated from Northeast Africa over a millennium ago, bringing with them cattle and a complex, centralized political system (Mamdani, 2001). As a result, the Tutsi were considered a superior race – intelligent and destined to rule over the Hutus and Twa. This racial distinction was institutionalized through censuses, identity cards and by privileging the Tutsi in administrative, economic and educational opportunities (Mamdani, 2020). The Hutus and Twa, perceived as inferior, simple and sturdy, or lazy and untrustworthy, were excluded from the moral realm of humanity (Longman, 2017). As Longman notes, Tutsi elites exploited these racial prejudices to their advantage, helping to craft a historical narrative of Rwanda’s past that aligned with European racist assumptions.

One of the devastating consequences of the pseudo-anthropological Hamitic hypothesis, according to Keita (2020), was its contribution to the conditions that led to the 1994 genocide. After independence, President Kayibanda (1962-1973) continued to perpetuate the historical narrative of Tutsi conquest and exploitation of the Hutu, using it to justify the consolidation of his power as a defender of Hutu interests (Longman, 2017). This narrative fuelled frustration among Tutsi elites, who sought to mobilize their community against the Hutu-dominated government. Invoking the alleged historical superiority of the Tutsi over the Hutu, they argued that power should be returned to its 'legitimate' rulers (Mamdani, 2001). They formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Uganda and launched an attack against Juvenal Habyarimana's government in 1990. The ensuing civil war intensified anti-Tutsi propaganda by the government, ultimately culminating in the 1994 genocide that resulted in the deaths of more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

The discussion of the Rwandan context serves as an illustrative case to highlight how the Hamitic thesis complicated nation-building efforts in postcolonial Africa. However, Rwanda is not the only example; the racist legend of the Hamitic myth also contributed to genocidal violence in Darfur and the secession of South Sudan in Sudan (Mamdani, 2012), as well as the massacres of Igbos in Nigeria (Badru, 2010). In these contexts, the problem arises from postcolonial nationalists' tendency to consolidate power by reshaping society to fit their envisioned notion of the nation. This was often attempted by employing colonially created racist narratives to suppress alternative views of the nation. These contests over national belonging led to the proliferation of multiple forms of nationalism, each with differing ideologies, historical narratives and visions of the nation within a single postcolonial African state. The rise of irreconcilable nationalist movements caused postcolonial nationalism to become deeply violent.

This study seeks to situate the emergence of Amhara nationalism within the broader context of the enduring legacy of the Hamitic hypothesis in Africa. Despite the thesis's profound influence on shaping identity, historiography and power relations in Ethiopia, it has received minimal scholarly attention within Africanist literature. Even Mahmood Mamdani, among the most prominent scholars in this field, largely overlooks the Ethiopian case – mentioning it only in passing in his most recent work. There, he observes that the supposed outsiders credited with bringing civilization to Ethiopia are identified as Semites (Mamdani, 2020). These Semitic groups, believed to have arrived in the Horn of Africa during the first millennium BCE, were portrayed by Western

anthropologists, historians and Western-educated Ethiopian elites as civilizing agents who brought culture, statehood and religion to the ‘barbaric’ indigenous populations (Trimingham, 1952; Ullendorff, 1960; Taddesse, 1973). Teshale (1995) characterizes this dominant interpretation of Ethiopian history as the Orientalist Semitist paradigm.

The thesis posits that the Semites, whom scholars refer to as the Abyssinians proper, were deemed superior to non-Semitic groups such as the Agaw and Beja, largely because of their Christian heritage, literacy, lighter complexion and historical continuity of statehood (Ullendorff, 1960). These Semites were believed to belong to the Caucasian race, having intermingled with local populations to form what colonial scholars described as a society marked by ‘racial and religious confusion’ (Seligman, 1930, p. 103). As the supposed distant ancestors of Semitic-speaking Ethiopians, including the Amhara and Tigreans, the Semites are believed to have introduced ‘civilization, script, and the knowledge of agriculture’ to the indigenous people (Teshale, 1995, p. xvii). Some scholars have described this historical process as a ‘Semitic colonization’ of Ethiopia, with the alleged migrants framed as ‘settlers and colonizers’ (Trimingham, 1952, pp. 32-33). According to Messay (2003, p. 8), this narrative construct:

the picture of an alien, racially distinct minority imposing its culture and interests on conquered peoples. Accordingly, the Ethiopian state is nothing but the tool of conquest and subjugation of native peoples considered inferior and rebellious against advanced civilization.

This dissertation argues that such historical interpretations have significantly contributed to the proliferation of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia, as these narratives have been selectively appropriated by various political actors. The first political group to strategically deploy the Orientalist-Semitist paradigm was the Italian Fascist Party during its colonial ambitions in Ethiopia. Prior to their 1935 invasion, Italian Fascists undertook detailed ethnographic studies of Ethiopia’s diverse populations (Sbacchi, 1985). They concluded that the Amhara had long exercised cultural and political dominance over other groups and that Amhara culture had been instrumental in the construction of Ethiopian national unity. To effectively colonize the country, Fascist strategists argued that this unity had to be dismantled (Lapiso, 1991). They also anticipated fierce resistance from the Amhara, whom they identified as ‘the warrior races of Ethiopia’ (Gooch, 2007, p. 400). In response, the Fascists sought to mobilize non-Amhara populations by presenting their military campaign as a liberation movement aimed at freeing these groups from Amhara

domination (Prochazka, 1935). This divide-and-rule strategy proved effective in securing the cooperation of certain chiefs, such as Aba Jobir of Jimma, who saw the Italian presence as an opportunity to settle historical grievances and gain political advantage (Haddis, 1985).

While the Fascists gained some support, they also faced fierce resistance from Ethiopians of diverse ethnic backgrounds. This resistance prevented them from establishing a stable colonial administration, which is why their five-year presence in Ethiopia is often referred to as an occupation rather than colonization. Despite this, their presence ‘increased ethnic consciousness’ among Ethiopians (Gebru, 1991, p. 48). This rise in ethnic consciousness stemmed from the Fascists’ heavy promotion of the oppressed-oppressor dichotomy, a concept rooted in the Orientalist-Semitist paradigm. This dichotomy has continued to influence Ethiopian politics since Italy’s withdrawal in 1941, contributing to ongoing structural violence against the Amhara.

Against this backdrop, the study seeks to situate the rise of Amhara nationalism within the context of colonialism while also acknowledging its distinctiveness. The specificity of this case revolves around two central themes. First, colonialism inflicted profound damage on the Amhara, despite their not undergoing the conventional process of colonization. This study is informed by the notion that ‘colonialism is not just an oppressive system of economic and political exploitation. It is also an epistemological system that redefines identities and histories’ (Yates, 2021, p. 60). This epistemological framework introduced European concepts such as race and colonialism, reframing Ethiopian history through a racial lens, depicting it as a history of colonizers and the colonized. This reframing contributed to the emergence of counter-state-framed nationalism, which developed in opposition to the state-framed nationalism of Greater Ethiopia.

Second, the TPLF has consistently portrayed the Amhara as enemies of the Tigreans, despite the commonalities that the two peoples shared, most notably, a cultural heritage rooted in Christianity (TPLF, 1976). Elites from both groups have historically competed for dominance over the centre of power, often invoking the Solomonic myth to legitimize their claims to authority (Clapham, 1988; Teshale, 1995). As a result, the transformation of two groups, who share similar cultural traits and once collaborated as junior and senior partners in state formation, into adversaries presents a unique case in Africa (Messay, 1999; Teshale, 2008). This study seeks to explore the deeper roots of the divergent paths and competing visions held by Amhara and Tigrean elites, with the aim of understanding how these dynamics have shaped the rise of Amhara nationalism.

Summary

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework of the study by engaging with existing literature. The multidisciplinary nature of nationalism studies, the differing ideological interests of nationalists and the historical and temporal variability in the emergence of nations complicate the effort to provide a single, all-encompassing conceptualization of the nation. The conceptual complexity of the nation has hindered scholars' efforts to formulate a coherent definition of nationalism that applies to different cases. Consequently, theorists and researchers have been compelled to develop working definitions specific to their particular studies.

Some scholars, such as Rogers Brubaker, contend that it is unnecessary for theorists to ask 'what' a nation or nationalism is. Instead, Brubaker emphasizes the importance of examining the processes through which nations are constructed and individuals come to see themselves as national. Following this line of thinking, rather than asking what the Amhara nation is, this study focuses on how Amhara identity has been constructed, the political and historical conditions that have shaped its formation and the key agents involved in this process.

The most suitable approach for understanding the processual nature of the nation and nationalism is social constructionism, which emerged in response to primordialism, modernism and ethnosymbolism. Social constructionism contends that these theories reify the nation, reducing the rise of nation and nationalism to a single factor, whether natural traits, ethnic roots, or modern social conditions. While acknowledging that these factors may be relevant in specific cases, social constructionism argues that they do not have universal applicability. To fully understand the origins of nationalism, the unique political, economic and social processes that shaped its development must be thoroughly examined.

The study thus adopts social constructionism to put the case of Amhara nationalism into perspective. It also situates the rise of Amhara nationalism within the broader framework of colonial legacies, particularly the divisive narratives employed by colonial powers, while acknowledging that Ethiopia did not undergo the actual process of colonization. Social constructionism is valuable in demonstrating how colonial powers sought to establish entrenched boundaries among their colonies, and how postcolonial political elites later expanded these divisions to consolidate power, form new states and advocate for the rights of those oppressed by authoritarian regimes.

Chapter Three

Competing Nationalisms in Ethiopia

3. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study, identifying social constructionism as a compelling lens for theorizing Amhara nationalism. It also introduced the concepts of state-framed and counter-state-framed nationalism as useful structures for analyzing the competing nationalisms in Ethiopia. Building on these foundations, the present chapter explores the socially constructed nature of these competing nationalisms and examines the typologies of nationalism. The aim of this discussion is to situate Amhara nationalism within the broader landscape of competing nationalisms in the country. Amhara nationalism is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is embedded within the broader contestations over historical narratives.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section explores how nationalist ideologies are socially constructed and legitimized by their proponents, with particular emphasis on the role of elites in shaping historical narratives to justify their respective visions of nationalism. The second section elaborates on the various typologies of nationalism in Ethiopia, examining how successive regimes have adopted distinct forms of nationalism to advance their visions of state identity. The analysis focuses on three key periods: the imperial era (pre-1974), the Derg regime (1974-1991) and the EPRDF-PP era (post-1991). Each period is followed by a discussion of the counter-nationalistic ideologies articulated by opposition political groups. The final section synthesizes the overall arguments and insights presented.

3.1. The Making of Competing Nationalisms in Ethiopia

The emergence of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia can be attributed to what Oran (2022, p. 71) describes as ‘different narrations of nationhood’. At the heart of these divergent narrations lies the contested interpretation of the historical process that shaped the current territorial configuration of the state. This configuration emerged during the late nineteenth-century expansion under Emperor Menelik II (Bahru, 2002). As this expansion incorporated a vast array of territories inhabited by ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse groups, it has remained susceptible to conflicting, and at times irreconcilable, interpretations (Teshale, 1995). Scholars, political elites and practitioners have framed this historical episode in ways that often align with their respective political interests

(Zahorik & Godesso, 2023). Consequently, understandings of the Ethiopian state, and the degree of emotional attachment or detachment individuals feel toward it, are largely shaped by the meanings ascribed to this formative historical process.

While various scholars have offered differing characterizations of the territorial expansion – ranging from settler colonialism (Asafa, 2020), enlargement of the state (Markakis, 2011) and restoration of medieval Ethiopian territories lost after the Oromo expansions (Tefferu, 1997) to dependent colonialism (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990), imperial expansion (Donham, 1986) and military feudal colonialism (Addis-Hiwot, 1975) – the categorizations proposed by Daniel (2020) and Merera (2003) offer particularly illuminating frameworks for understanding the broader debate.

Daniel (2020) classifies the competing interpretations into modernist and critical perspectives. He notes that modernists acknowledge the antiquity of the Ethiopian state but argue that it was transformed into a modern state system through extensive contact with European powers. This contact introduced key institutional features such as a standing army, ministerial bureaucracies, national taxation and codified laws designed to protect landed elites (Donham, 1986), along with the transformation of traditional elites into European-educated bureaucrats. These developments, facilitated by statist institutional practices, conquest and war, played a significant role in the formation of the modern Ethiopian state (Teshale, 1995; Bahru, 2002). From the modernist perspective, this transformation represents a natural stage in state formation, experienced by many countries throughout history.

Critical approaches challenge the narrative of Ethiopia's ancient origins, contending instead that the state was formed through a process of colonial expansion enabled by alliances between Emperor Menelik and European powers such as Italy, Britain and France (Daniel, 2020). From this perspective, Ethiopia is viewed as a colonial empire, its formation comparable to that of other African states (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Asafa, 2020). The critical paradigm places particular emphasis on issues of ethnic identity, nations and nationalities, portraying Emperor Menelik and his associates as agents of ethnic and cultural oppression (Toggia, 2008). The emergence of powerful counter-state nationalisms in response to the nationalistic ideologies of the imperial and Derg regimes is thus closely tied to this critical perspective on Ethiopian state formation.

One significant issue with Daniel's modernist-critical dichotomy is that his analysis focuses primarily on the works of scholars, without taking into account the perspectives of political elites

who played a central role in shaping nationalist narratives. As direct participants in the creation of these narratives, the views of political elites should also be considered in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of competing nationalisms. In this context, Merera's (2003) classification of the contradictory interpretations of Ethiopia's formation proves to be particularly valuable.

Merera divides the debate into three main theses: the nation-building thesis, the national oppression thesis and the colonial thesis. The nation-building thesis argues that Menelik's expansion was an effort to reunite the Ethiopian state, which had fragmented into semi-autonomous principalities during the *Zemene Mesafint* (Getachew, 1986; Teffera, 1997; Messay, 1999). According to Merera (2003), proponents of this view failed to acknowledge any flaws in the state-formation process. However, this criticism is somewhat unrealistic, as scholars within this stream did recognize the injustices that occurred during Ethiopia's formation (Getachew, 1986; Haile, 2017). What they contested was the claim that ethnic-based oppression existed prior to 1991, arguing instead that ethnic consciousness was largely absent in historic Ethiopia. Acknowledging that Ethiopia has never had a democratic political system, Haile Larebo writes:

There was no emperor or political elite who seized power in the name of a single ethnic group prior to 1991...there is no historical evidence to suggest that Ethiopian rulers implemented policies that favored certain ethnic groups while marginalizing others (2017, p. 10).

Complex forms of interaction and integration have uniquely characterized the long course of Ethiopian history (Tadesse, 1988). Through this intricate web of interactions, Ethiopians have developed a common cultural community (Yates, 2020) and a Pan-Ethiopian identity (Levine, 1974) that transcends rigid ethnic boundaries. This overarching identity is reflected in the country's cherished independence, preserved sovereignty and shared history (Getachew, 1986). Echoing this sentiment, politician Andualem Aragie (2018) stated in an interview: 'we Ethiopians have many more things in common than our differences. We must strengthen our bonds while closing the gaps that have divided us'. Contemporary politicians aligned with the nation-building thesis frequently make such assertions to reaffirm what they perceive as a weakened Ethiopianist sentiment, resulting from the ethnicized political order introduced after 1991.

The ethnicized politics of the post-1991 era is rooted in what Merera (2003) termed the national-oppression or colonial theses. The national-oppression thesis argues that state builders engaged in

economic marginalization, cultural stigmatization and political oppression against non-Amhara populations (Alemseged, 2010). This thesis claims that the Amhara ruling class played a central role in these actions, advancing an extreme version of the colonial thesis that frames the relationship between the Ethiopian state and non-Amhara populations as one of colonizer and colonized (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Asafa, 2020). These theses directly challenge the state-framed Ethiopian nationalism of the imperial and Derg regimes (Toggia, 2008). For proponents of this view, the long-standing Ethiopian metanarrative is, at best, a myth, and at worst, a tool used to perpetuate the Amhara's hegemonic mindset (Sorenson, 1993). In a broadcast interview, Kejela Merdasa (2020), former Minister of Culture and Sport, asserted that Ethiopia never existed as a state prior to Menelik's annexation of independent entities. He further claimed that all symbols associated with Ethiopian identity, such as the Solomonic myth and the national flag, were fabricated by Amhara rulers to sustain their domination. This statement reflects an effort to deconstruct Ethiopia's historical narrative, which is naturally followed by the construction of 'historical narratives based on each ethnic group's collective memory' (Triulzi, 2002, p. 280).

It is widely argued among social constructionists that nationalists interpret history in ways that downplay others' narratives while glorifying their own in order to legitimize their nationalistic beliefs (Ting, 2008; Özkirimli, 2017). Often, it is the narratives of the dominant group or those in power that become the official nationalism, pushing alternative nationalisms into the background. In response, marginalized groups develop counter-narratives to challenge the dominant narrative and reclaim their historical experiences and identities (Oran, 2022). Until it was challenged, the state-framed nationalism of the imperial and Derg regimes was the dominant ideology, overshadowing other identities by emphasizing a unified Ethiopian identity (Keller, 1988). During the Haile Selassie regime, for example, public expression of one's ethnic identity was not only legally censored, but also socially classified as tribalistic (Bahru, 2014). However, various social groups, including the Italian Fascists, the ESM and the EPRDF portrayed this strand of nationalism as Amhara nationalism writ large (Sbacchi, 1985; Belachew, 2009; Bahru, 2014). Public expression of ethnic identity has since become the most commonly accepted discourse in Ethiopian socio-political life after it was institutionalized by the EPRDF in 1991.

The changing nature of hegemonic ideologies that govern state-society relations is attributed to the vision of those in power, their interpretation of history and their political interests (Özkirimli,

2017). During the imperial and Derg regimes, preserving the territorial integrity and ‘indivisible’ unity of the state was prioritized – a vision that continues to be shared by present-day advocates of what Merera (2003) terms the nation-building thesis. This group often describes proponents of the national oppression and colonial theses as secessionists who pose a threat to Ethiopia’s imagined unity. In contrast, supporters of the latter two theses argue for the ethnicization of politics, promote ethnic nationalism, and assert that oppressed ethnic groups should have the right to self-determination, including the option of secession (Alemseged, 2010). They simultaneously criticize those who advocate for the ‘indivisibility’ of the state, accusing them of advancing a unitarist agenda aimed at reinstating perceived Amhara dominance.

The rise of Amhara nationalism can thus be understood within the context of these contradictory interpretations of history and the contested ideological landscape. It represents a movement to reclaim Amhara history, which proponents of the national oppression and colonial theses are perceived to have denigrated, an ongoing process seen as contributing to the societal insecurities the Amhara have experienced since 1991.

3.2. Typologies of Nationalism in Ethiopia

The binary distinction between Ethiopian nationalism and ethnic nationalism is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it oversimplifies a wide range of diverse and often conflicting nationalist ideologies by collapsing them into rigid, all-encompassing categories. For instance, under the broad label of ethnic nationalism, one can find separatist, accommodationist, assertive and irredentist tendencies. Likewise, within the broader framework of Ethiopian nationalism, there exist reactionary, unificationist, accommodationist, and even assertive strands. As such, the simplistic ethnic-Ethiopian dichotomy fails to account for the varying political orientations of different groups, whose programs and actions resist neat classification as either purely Ethiopianist or purely ethnic nationalist.

To illustrate this empirically, consider Oromo nationalism, a movement within which both separatist and assertive currents coexist. The OLF, which characterizes the relationship between Ethiopia and the Oromo as one of colonizer and colonized, adopts a separatist orientation (Asafa, 2020). In contrast, the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) seeks to advance Oromo interests within the framework of the Ethiopian state (Jawar, 2024). However, in an interview, a political scientist

contended that ‘although the OFC calls for the preservation of the Ethiopian state, its agenda is largely aligned with the formation of an Oromo-dominated Ethiopian state’.² Based on this view, the interviewee classified OFC’s position as a form of assertive nationalism – one that demands ‘greater political, cultural and economic autonomy for the Oromo within Ethiopia, without rejecting the state’s legitimacy’.³

At the same time, classifying political groups as either Ethiopianist or ethnic nationalist solely based on the inclusion of terms like ‘Ethiopia’ or ‘Amhara’ in their names overlooks the nuanced positions these groups hold. The political programs of the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) and the AAPO illustrate this complexity. Both parties opposed the restructuring of the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines while affirming that the rights of ethnic groups should be respected within the framework of the state (Joireman, 1997; Abbink, 2006). The key difference between them lies in their focus: the AAPO specifically emphasized the protection of the Amhara from killing and eviction, whereas the EDP promoted the rights of Ethiopia’s ethnic groups more broadly. However, this differentiation does not justify categorizing the EDP as purely Ethiopian nationalist and the AAPO as solely ethnic nationalist, especially considering that the AAPO’s political orientation was also firmly Ethiopianist. As a former member of the AAPO explained, ‘while our concern was ensuring the survival of the Amhara, we did not advocate for secession or the formation of an Amhara-dominated state’.⁴

The second problem with the Ethiopian-ethnic nationalism dichotomy lies in its inability to account for the nationalist ideologies of post-1991 power holders, such as the EPRDF and PP. These actors claim to uphold the unity of the Ethiopian state while simultaneously affirming the right of ethnic groups to self-determination, including the right to secession. This right was framed as a safeguard against oppression, particularly in response to perceptions of Amhara dominance under previous regimes (Markakis, 2011). Although the EPRDF and PP position themselves as Ethiopian nationalists committed to preserving the unity of the state, their conceptualization of Ethiopian statehood diverges significantly from that of the imperial and Derg governments.

2. Interview with a political scientist from Addis Ababa University, November 2024.

3. Ibid.

4. Interview with a former member of the AAPO at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Unlike earlier regimes that framed the state as a monolithic entity, the EPRDF and PP envision Ethiopia as a federation of distinct ethnic groups, asserting that the unity of the state can only be maintained through the recognition and protection of ethnic group rights (Vestal, 1999; Abbink, 2024). Categorizing these parties solely as ethnic nationalist therefore oversimplifies their ideological stance and fails to account for their proclaimed commitment to Ethiopian unity. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Two, the imperial regime's reliance on Christian culture and the Amharic language as instruments of nation-building reveals the cultural exclusivity underlying its version of nationalism. This sharply contrasts with the assumption that the nation-building efforts of the imperial era were inclusive and constituted a civic model of nationalism.

These normative problems can be addressed by adopting Brubaker's approach, which uses the state as the primary unit of analysis. Brubaker (1998) argues that it is the state, rather than concepts such as citizenship or culture, that provides a meaningful basis for categorizing nationalism. The core distinction, he suggests, lies not in cultural markers or legal membership but in the different ways 'the same nation is imagined...at different times [and] often at the same time by different peoples' (Brubaker, 2004, p. 122).

In Ethiopia, conceptions of the state have varied both historically and among different groups. This fragmented imagination of the state has fuelled competing nationalisms. Upon attaining state power, ruling groups seek to legitimize their version of nationalism through media narratives, constitutional frameworks and administrative practices. Meanwhile, marginalized groups continue to contest state-framed nationalism, striving for recognition until they either ascend to dominance or face repression. For instance, Amhara nationalism represents a counter-state-framed nationalist movement that seeks to reclaim a positive collective identity for the Amhara within an ethnically restructured political order, which they feel has disadvantaged them.

3.2.1. State-Framed Nationalism during the Imperial Era

Until 1974, Ethiopia was governed by a monarchical system in which emperors derived their legitimacy from divine authority, styling themselves as the King of Kings and Elect of God. This system sought to unify the Ethiopian state by transcending entrenched ethnic categories (Levine, 1974). To achieve this vision, those in power sought to construct their own version of nationalism, primarily by inventing myths, legends and histories that reinforced their authority and vision of unity. As Hobsbawm (1983) argue, nationalists often engage in the invention of traditions to create

the illusion of historical continuity, legitimizing authority, reinforcing social cohesion and establishing collective identity. These invented traditions are infused with symbols, ceremonies and rituals that link the present to a mythical past (Hobsbawm, 1992). Through repetition, these nationalist narratives and practices are sedimented into public consciousness.

The systematic use of invented traditions was a central strategy for the Ethiopian monarchy in consolidating power and sustaining a unified state (Levine, 2011). Among these traditions, history played the most significant role. Sorenson (1993), in his assessment of the role of history in supporting nationalist efforts, compellingly argues that the past is often emphasized to legitimize a specific vision of the future. Ethiopian history, as constructed and framed by the imperial regime, occupied a privileged position as an uncontested source of knowledge, truth, legitimacy and national identity (Toggia, 2008). For the monarchs, history was not merely a record of events, but an authentic foundation for the state's legitimacy.

The imperial system portrayed Ethiopia as an ancient polity, tracing its origins to the Aksumite Empire. Aksum was regarded as the bedrock of Ethiopian civilization, credited with laying the foundations for key institutions and cultural practices (Clapham, 2002). These included the office of the emperor, the EOC, the ox-ploughing agricultural system and the Ethiopic script (Daniel, 2020). In the monarchical narrative, all socio-political systems that emerged after the fall of Aksum were seen as extensions of its legacy. For instance, the Zagwe Dynasty, which rose to prominence in the tenth century, was celebrated for constructing the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, viewed as a continuation of Aksumite architectural achievements (Haile, 2017). The fall of the Zagwe Dynasty in 1270 marked the restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty, which positioned itself as the rightful heir to the Aksumite empire. This dynasty ruled Ethiopia until the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.

In the narratives of the imperial regime, Ethiopia's history was presented as linear, starting with Menelik I, the son of Queen Sheba of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel. This tradition, which upheld the notion that the rightful rulers of Ethiopia must descend from this bloodline, was institutionalized within the legal and constitutional frameworks of imperial system (Levine, 1974). Article 2 of the 1955 Constitution declares, 'The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the Haile Selassie I, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen Sheba, and the King Solomon of Jerusalem'. This divine

lineage was further protected by the country's first penal code of 1957. Article 249 of the code stipulated that any act of outrage against this dynasty would be punishable 'with rigorous imprisonment from five years to life, or in cases of exceptional gravity, with death'. These codifications underscore the imperial regime's efforts to maintain its legitimacy through the sanctity of the Solomonic lineage while simultaneously cementing the unity of the state.

Periods of discontinuity or fragmentation were often dismissed as anomalous events (Toggia, 2008). For instance, the sixteenth-century war with Ahmed Gragn and the subsequent Oromo expansion were framed as divine punishment for the public's disobedience to God's commands. Abba Bahrey, in his *Zenahu Le'Galla* (The News of the Galla), written in 1593, attributed the Oromo's military victories not to their superiority but to God's wrath against Christians (Maimire, 2012). Similarly, the *Zemene Mesafint* period, marked by Ethiopia's division into semi-autonomous principalities, was interpreted by monarchs as another instance of divine punishment rather than a fundamental disruption of national unity (Abir, 2013). Despite these interruptions, the monarchy worked to sustain a narrative of continuity by constructing historical narratives. In an undated speech, Prince Makonnen, a grandson of Emperor Haile Selassie, remarked:

Ethiopia is an ancient land and one of a few whose history as a nation-state can be traced back to antiquity...Its borders covered most of the Horn of Africa and the western portion of the Arabian Peninsula...For millennia, Ethiopians have preserved their independence, and few countries over the centuries have so zealously protected themselves from foreign invasions (Sorenson, 1993, p. 40).

In addition to emphasizing the continuity of the state, the speech highlights another central ideology of imperial-era nationalism: exceptionalism. Ethiopian exceptionalism is evident in two key respects. First, it is rooted in the belief that Ethiopia is one of the few nations in the world chosen by God as a promised land. Ethiopian monarchs claimed that Ethiopians were elected by God as His chosen people, replacing the Israelites, who were cursed for their disobedience (Levine, 2011). This narrative draws heavily from the *Kibre Negest*, a 14th-century document that Levine (1974) aptly described as Ethiopia's national epic. The *Kibre Negest* centres on the story of Queen Sheba's visit to King Solomon. According to this account, the queen bore Solomon a son, Menelik, who became the first emperor of the Solomonic dynasty. When Menelik journeyed to Ethiopia, he brought with him the Ark of the Covenant, an event depicted as divinely orchestrated to transfer God's covenant from the Israelites to the Ethiopians. This narrative of divine selection was further

bolstered by Ethiopia's prominence in the Bible, where it is mentioned more than seventy times across various verses.

Labelled as a Christian nation, Ethiopia was governed for centuries under the cultural and spiritual influence of the EOC. The EOC provided legitimacy to emperors, sanctioned deviance and mobilized the populace against rulers deemed unworthy (Levine, 2011). A notable example is Emperor Tewodros II, who ended the *Zemene Mesafint* by defeating powerful regional lords in 1855. Born Kassa Hailu, he adopted the coronation name Tewodros, inspired by a medieval prophecy that foretold a leader named Tewodros would bring Ethiopia out of chaos. This move was intended to solidify his legitimacy as a Christian ruler with a divine mandate to govern the nation. In recognition of this, he was crowned by Pope Abune Selama at the local church of Derasge Mariam (Bahru, 2002). However, when Tewodros clashed with the church over his reformist policies, such as limiting the number of priests in a church to five and redistributing vast tracts of church-owned land to peasants, the EOC turned against him. It mobilized the populace in opposition, contributing to the challenges that marked the final days of his reign.

Levine (2011) observes that the EOC not only legitimized authority but also that its institutions, such as churches and monasteries, served as communication channels for disseminating nationalist messages. During times of external threats, for example, these religious institutions played a crucial role in mobilizing the populace against invaders. A notable example is Emperor Menelik's mobilization against Italy in 1895, where the campaign prominently featured religious elements that were disseminated to broader society with the help of churches.

Enemies have now come upon us to ruin our country and to change our religion...our enemies began the affairs by advancing and digging into the country like moles. With the help of God, I will not deliver my country to them...Today, you who are strong give me of your strength, and you who are weak, help me by prayer (Smuts, 1929, p. 77).

Following this call, Menelik successfully rallied support from Ethiopians of diverse ethnic groups to defeat Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. This battle stands as a cornerstone of the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era, solidifying the second aspect of the Ethiopian exceptionalism. This theme highlights Ethiopia as one of the few nations worldwide, and the only one in Africa, to preserve its independence from Western colonialism (Levine, 2011). As such, Adwa remains a lasting source of pride for Ethiopians (Bahru, 2002). Advocates of this form of Ethiopian

nationalism contend that such a remarkable achievement was not coincidental but stemmed from the unity of Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups.

Trevaskis (1960) highlights the solidarity demonstrated during the Battle of Adwa, particularly in the collaboration between the Tigrean and Amhara nobilities, despite the antagonism that had emerged following the death of Tigrean Emperor Yohannis in 1889. He notes that Italy attempted to exploit the rivalry between these ruling houses to sow discord and implement a divide-and-rule strategy. However, figures like Ras Mengesha, the son of Yohannis, joined Menelik's forces in resisting the Italian invasion. Trevaskis (1960, p. 9) aptly captures the essence of Ethiopian unity with these words: 'Once again the endemic xenophobia of the Abyssinian had triumphed over his factiousness; once again a foreign invader has failed to understand the latent strength of Abyssinian patriotism'. Sven Rubenson (1976, p. 107) further emphasizes this unity, noting that Menelik 'commended the loyalty of every important chief in the country'. The political cohesion with which Ethiopia confronted the Italian invasion has been interpreted as evidence of a shared sense of Ethiopianness among the imperial leadership.

Levine (2011) observes that Ethiopian nationhood was further consolidated in the aftermath of the Battle of Adwa through several transformative developments. These included the establishment of a national system of secular schools, the creation of a national bank and postal service, the expansion of a national road network, the formation of a standing national army, and the emergence of modern cultural expressions in areas such as athletics, literature, music and the visual arts. These transformations were complemented by efforts to reunify fragmented territories, notably through Emperor Menelik II's territorial expansions and Emperor Haile Selassie's modernization policies. Key initiatives during this period included the formal delimitation of Ethiopia's borders, the promulgation of constitutions, and efforts to enhance Ethiopia's international presence, exemplified by its membership in the League of Nations in 1923.

The nationalist content of the imperial era was disseminated to the broader Ethiopian society by emperors and intellectuals through various media platforms. For instance, Emperor Haile Selassie established magazines such as *Sendek Alamachin* to spread nationalist messages to the public. *Sendek Alamachin* was launched immediately after the withdrawal of Fascist forces to promote unity among Ethiopians, aiming to counter the divisive seeds sown by the Fascists to fracture

Ethiopian society.⁵ In his founding speech, Haile Selassie proclaimed: ‘every Ethiopian, whether [they are] Christian, Muslim, Amhara, or Galla; though [they are] different in province, [has] lived in a united Ethiopia under the Ethiopian flag as a family’ (Sendek Alamachin, 1942, p. 1).

Challenging the notion of Ethiopia as exclusively a Christian nation, the magazine echoed Haile Selassie’s assertion that ‘as religion is a private matter, everybody [has] the freedom to follow what he believes is right’ (Sendek Alamachin, 1942, p. 1). To reinforce nationalist ideals in the minds of Ethiopians, the magazine consistently reminded readers of the indivisible unity of the state and urged the populace to protect it from disintegration. For instance, *Sendek Alamachin* (1942, June 7, 1(10)) featured headlines brimming with nationalist rhetoric, including phrases such as ‘Long live Ethiopia’, ‘We Ethiopians are a family’, ‘Let the freedom of Ethiopia be protected forever’, and ‘Death to those who threaten the sovereignty of Ethiopia’.

In addition to media platforms, academic sessions also played a crucial role in disseminating nationalist consciousness. For example, the organizers of the Third International Conference on Ethiopian Studies, held in 1966, urged scholars to move away from focusing on the histories of individual ethnic groups, stating: ‘Let us leave the writing of the histories of separate ethnic groups and divisions in the hands of foreign scholars and strengthen the foundation of modern Ethiopian people taken as a whole’ (Hess, 1970, p. 102). This nation-building initiative, Markakis (2011) writes, was complemented by policies such as expanding the use of the Amharic language into non-Amhara areas, promoting interethnic marriage and establishing a national army composed of members from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

3.2.2. Counter-State-Framed Nationalisms during the Imperial Era

While many scholars assert that the state-framed nationalism of imperial Ethiopia faced significant challenges only after the 1960s, driven by the nationalities question raised by the ESM (Levine, 2011; Marzagora, 2013; Assefa, 2017), this perspective overlooks earlier instances of counter-state-framed nationalisms, such as the Eritrean and Somali nationalist movements, which gained momentum immediately after the withdrawal of Fascist Italy in 1941. Drawing lessons from the Ethiopian unity that had contributed to Italy’s defeat at Adwa, the Fascists sought to exploit internal divisions through propaganda designed to sow discord among Ethiopians (Sbacchi, 1985).

5. The magazine was published in both Amharic and Arabic to instill nationalist ideologies among both Christian and Muslim communities.

These sustained efforts eroded collective resistance, ultimately enabling Mussolini's army to defeat Ethiopian forces in March 1936.

Following their occupation of Ethiopia, the Fascists pursued policies designed to deepen ethnic and religious divides. For example, they deliberately promoted Islam to incite rebellion among Muslim communities, who they believed felt marginalized by a state perceived as privileging Christians (Lentakis, 2005). Additionally, they provided financial incentives and political power to various local chiefs to secure their collaboration. Haddis Alemayehu (1985), a prolific writer and participant in the war on the Ethiopian side, recorded an instance where Aba Jobir, the chief of Jimma, sided with Italy against the Ethiopian state after being bribed with financial rewards and political authority.

However, many Ethiopians, irrespective of ethnicity, demonstrated their loyalty to the state by resisting the Italian Fascists (Gebru, 1991). The relentless struggle of Ethiopian patriots, famously known as the *Arbegnoch*, significantly undermined Italian efforts to establish a stable colonial administration (Bahru, 2002). Ultimately, their resistance culminated in the expulsion of the Italians in 1941. While the Fascists were physically driven out, their divisive ethnic policies left a lasting legacy on Ethiopian state-society relations (Messay, 2003). For instance, Eritrean and Somali nationalisms were rooted in colonial policies initiated by Italy and later supported by the British Military Administration (BMA), which was established as a protectorate following the withdrawal of Fascists. As discussed below, these political movements, along with the nationalities question raised by the ESM, challenged the central premises of state-framed nationalism in imperial Ethiopia.

3.2.2.1. Eritrean Nationalism

Many scholars argue that Eritrea was historically part of Ethiopia until its colonization by Italy in 1890 (Mesfin, 1964; Getachew, 1986; Mesfin, 1990). Italy ruled this region of the Horn of Africa until 1941, designating it as Eritrea while uniting nine distinct ethnic groups under its administration. During this period, the Italian colonizers sought to cultivate a distinct Eritrean identity, deliberately ignoring the region's historical ties to the Ethiopian state (Erich, 2024). This strategy influenced the identity of Eritreans who aspired to establish a separate entity, particularly after the territory was liberated by the combined forces of Ethiopia and Great Britain.

The involvement of Great Britain was prompted by Mussolini's decision to ally with Hitler against the Allied Powers during the Second World War (Spencer, 2006). Following the withdrawal of Italian forces, Britain established the BMA in Eritrea and other areas previously occupied by Italy, treating them as enemy territories (Ellingson, 1977). The BMA's opening of political space in Eritrea, something that had been impossible under Italian colonial rule, enabled Eritreans to form political parties for the first time (Hess, 1970). According to Asnake (1994), these political parties were divided into two factions: unionists, who sought unification with Ethiopia, and separatists, who aspired to an independent Eritrea.

The unionists were represented by the Unionist Party (UP), which received support from the Ethiopian government for the obvious purpose of facilitating Eritrea's union with Ethiopia (Ruth, 1995). To promote the UP's agenda, the Ethiopian government launched a newspaper called *The Voice of Eritrea* in 1944, in collaboration with the Society for the Unity of Ethiopia and Eritrea, which had been established in 1943. In its inaugural edition, *The Voice of Eritrea* asserted: 'Eritrea needs no definition other than being a part of northern Ethiopia that endured the oppressive rule of a foreign power for fifty years' (1944, p. 4). It further declared that what Eritreans truly needed was 'absolute freedom, which is realized through unconditional union with their motherland, Ethiopia' (ibid). The newspaper consistently advocated that Eritrea's myths, history, psychology, people, culture, language and civilization were inseparable from Ethiopia.

The advocacy of the UP and the Ethiopian government through *The Voice of Eritrea*, however, was unacceptable to some Eritrean elites. This group of elites established various political parties, including the Muslim League, the Eritrean Liberal Progressive Party (ELPP) and the Pro-Italy Party. The common thread among these parties was their rejection of the UP's claims and their unwavering aspiration to establish an independent Eritrean state (Ellingson, 1977). This aspiration found support from the BMA, which envisioned the creation of a Greater Tigray by merging Ethiopia's Tigray region with Eritrea (Getachew, 1986). The BMA is believed to have facilitated the establishment of the ELPP for this purpose in 1946 (Spencer, 2006). According to Alemseged (1998, p. 51), the ELPP aimed to 'patch Eritrea and Tigray together to create an independent' Tigray-Tigrignie state, rallying behind the slogan 'Eritrea for Eritreans.'

This agenda was bolstered by the BMA, which endorsed the publication of *The Gazette of Eritrea*, a Tigrigna-language periodical that supported the separatist claims of the ELPP. While

encouraging the publication of this newspaper, the BMA banned the circulation of *The Voice of Eritrea* within Eritrea (Asnake, 1994). Additionally, the BMA prohibited the display of the Ethiopian flag, punished individuals found in possession of *The Voice of Eritrea*, and intimidated leaders and members of the UP (The Voice of Eritrea, 1944). Beyond supporting separatist political parties, Britain sought to influence the international community by advocating for Eritrea's independence at the United Nations General Assembly (Spencer, 2006). However, these efforts ultimately failed due to opposition from big powers, including the United States, the Soviet Union and France, who feared that Eritrean independence would bolster British influence in the Horn of Africa (Ellingson, 1977). Finally, in 1952, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia by a United Nations resolution, marking the failure of Britain's ambitions.

Nevertheless, the idea of forming an independent Eritrea persisted until it was finally realized in 1993. Hess (1970) observes that the dissolution of the federation in 1962, initiated by the Eritrean Parliament under pressure from the Ethiopian government, intensified separatist sentiments. This shift, Hess writes, transformed the movement from focusing on secession to framing Eritrean independence as a colonial question. While Hess's observation is valid in highlighting how the dissolution of the federation radicalized Eritrean nationalism, it overlooks the fact that the colonial question was not merely a post-1962 phenomenon. Political parties such as the Muslim League had already raised this issue in the 1940s, accusing Ethiopia of being a 'black colonizer' seeking to replace the 'white colonizer' (Trevaskis, 1960). The Muslim League, according to Trevaskis, portrayed the Eritrean movement as part of the broader African struggle for independence.

Following the Muslim League, liberation fronts of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the ELF and EPLF, framed the Eritrean issue through a colonial lens (Sherman, 1980). Pro-EPLF scholars, such as Bereket Habeselassie, rejected the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era by characterizing its core principles as mere myths. Bereket (1984) argues that if Eritrea had truly been part of Ethiopia, Emperor Menelik II would not have recognized Italian rule over the territory in the Wuchale Treaty of 1889. Similarly, Alemseged (1998) contends that Menelik's failure to compel the Italians to withdraw from Eritrea after the Battle of Adwa further signified that Eritrea was not considered part of Ethiopia.

In contrast to the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era, which depicted Eritrea as an integral part of the ancient Aksumite kingdom, Eritrean nationalists constructed a distinct historical

narrative for their imagined state. The foundational elements of Ethiopian nationalism, antiquity, unity and authenticity, were dismissed by Eritrean nationalists as myths propagated by Ethiopian rulers to justify the colonization of Eritrea (Asnake, 1994). Instead, Eritrean nationalists emphasized the transformative effects of Italian colonialism, which they believed had elevated Eritrea into a modern state. They regarded this transformation as a decisive break from the past and the genesis of a new national identity (Marzagora, 2013). To that end, Eritrean identity was constructed in direct opposition to Ethiopia, which was portrayed as the ‘other’, a backward state with which Eritrea had no viable future (Garcetti & Gruber, 2000). This binary opposition is vividly illustrated in a letter from the Muslim League to the United Nations in 1946, which stated:

Is it just that a still barbaric and primitive nation such as the Ethiopians – whose government is unable to improve the lot of its own people – should come into possession of a territory which is far more disciplined, advanced and civilized than Abyssinia? (Hess, 1970, p. 273).

Through such rhetoric, Eritrean nationalists sought to solidify a collective identity rooted in modernity and resistance to Ethiopian rule. Their efforts ultimately succeeded in challenging the indivisibility of Ethiopia’s territorial integrity, as framed by the imperial regime, culminating in the establishment of an independent Eritrean state after thirty years of armed struggle. This transformation highlights the malleable boundaries of identity and the ways in which historical, political and social forces can reshape collective self-perceptions. Once part of historic Ethiopia and referred to as Ethiopians, the Eritrean people are now distinctly Eritreans, with their own national anthem, flag and education system, as well as a unique vision for their future.

3.2.2.2. Somali Nationalism

Another example of counter-state-framed nationalism, which gained momentum immediately following the withdrawal of Fascist Italy, was Somali nationalism in the Ogaden region. Similar to the Eritrean case, the Ogaden was placed under the administration of the BMA. Somali nationalism was irredentist in nature, seeking to create a Greater Somalia by annexing territories from Ethiopia into the Somali state. The Ogaden, which Somali nationalists sought to incorporate, had been brought under Ethiopian control during Emperor Menelik’s territorial expansion, based on his claim that the region was historically part of Ethiopia dating back to the Aksumite Kingdom (Mesfin, 1964; Greenfield, 1969). Somali nationalists, however, rejected this narrative as a myth fabricated by Abyssinians to justify their colonization of Somali-speaking peoples.

Somali nationalists argued that the Ogaden and other Somali-inhabited areas in Ethiopia were historically part of a unified Somali state before being divided among colonial powers such as Britain, Italy and Ethiopia (Ali, 2022). According to Ali, this narrative symbolized resistance against the institutionalized hegemony of Greater Ethiopian nationalism. In response, Somali activists sought to realize the vision of a Greater Somali state by establishing various political organizations, most notably the Somali Youth League (SYL), which was founded with British support in 1943 (Spencer, 2006). The SYL's political goal, as noted by Hagmann (2014), was to secure self-determination for the Somali-speaking people of Ethiopia. In 1947, SYL members proposed achieving this goal by placing the Ogaden and other Somali-inhabited territories under a UN trusteeship alongside ex-Italian Somalia (Barnes, 2007). However, tensions arose between the BMA and the SYL due to their conflicting interests, particularly as Britain explored the possibility of creating a Greater Somalia administration under its trusteeship (Spencer, 2006). Ultimately, both parties were unsuccessful in achieving their goals. Britain was compelled to transfer the Ogaden to Ethiopia in 1948, as its plans faced opposition from the United States, the Soviet Union, and France, powers that also opposed the idea of a Greater Tigray for similar geopolitical reasons.

The vision of establishing a Greater Somalia, often in conflict with the nationalist aspirations of Greater Ethiopia, persisted into the 1950s and beyond (Ali, 2022). As Hagmann (2014) notes, by the mid-1950s, a clandestine group in the Ogaden, known as *Nasrallah* (Victory of God), began mobilizing nationalists in the region to challenge Ethiopian authority. This movement reached its peak in 1960 with Somalia's independence (Barnes, 2007). The newly established Somali government faced accusations of providing ideological and material support to clandestine groups in Ethiopia as part of its efforts to advance the Greater Somalia project. It portrayed Ethiopia as *gumeysiga madow* (Black colonialist), equating Ethiopian rule with colonialism (Ali, 2022). In 1962, the Somali Prime Minister, in the introduction to a detailed exposition on the Greater Somalia cause, stated, 'almost all European colonial powers have surrendered their colonial possessions, [but] Ethiopia, together with her French ally, still clings to the ill-gotten gains of her imperial past' (Greenfield, 1969, p. 108). He urged Ethiopia to grant freedom to Somali-speaking people, drawing a parallel to Britain and Italy, which had relinquished control and granted independence to their former colonial territories.

Likening the possession of the Ogaden and other Somali-inhabited territories to colonial domination challenges the myth of Ethiopian state unity by articulating alternative territorial narratives. This strategy aimed to produce alternative knowledge and construct a distinct identity for Somalians living in the eastern part of Ethiopia, contrasting with the official Ethiopian narrative, which asserted that ‘these provinces formed an integral part of Ethiopia but were torn away from her by force of aggression’ (Mesfin, 1964, p. 209). As Wodak et al. (2009) argue, discourses of identity and difference rely on the construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’, often presenting a positive self-image in opposition to a negative portrayal of the other. For instance, a 1940s letter from the SYL to its members in Mogadishu warned against cooperating with Ethiopians, stating, ‘the Ethiopians are colonisers... they are barbarous and arrogant, they will consume you, they want to cheat you, to take the land’ (Barnes, 2007, p. 282). More broadly, as Ali (2022) observes, Somali nationalists employed songs, poems and music to instil pride and unity among Somalians, portraying them as pure Islamic people deserving liberation from what they perceived as the impure, Christian Ethiopians.

However, the Somali nationalists’ aspiration to create a Greater Somalia by annexing all Somali-speaking peoples has yet to be realized. It has remained a persistent source of interstate conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. The 1977 Ogaden War, mutual destabilization through the support of opposition groups and ongoing verbal attacks among political elites have all characterized the hostile relationship between the two states. While the Somali government has been accused of supporting liberation fronts such as the ONLF, the Ethiopian state has also been criticized for contributing to the crisis in Somalia’s territorial integrity by attempting to form diplomatic relations with the de facto Somaliland state.

3.2.2.3. The Question of Nationalities as Counter to State-Framed Nationalism

The nationalities question entered Ethiopian political discourse through the activism of the ESM in the 1960s. Comprised of students frustrated by the backwardness of their country, especially in comparison to newly independent African nations, the ESM initially focused on issues such as land reform, gender equality and education as part of their push for social justice (Bahru, 2014). However, their early demands were met with indifference by the Haile Selassie regime. Frustrated by the lack of response, the students escalated their activism, beginning in 1969, to challenge the

very legitimacy of the Ethiopian state (Messay, 2008; Gebru, 2009). It was during this phase that the nationalities question became a central concern.

Students approached the nationalities question through the lens of Leninist Marxism. Influenced by the political realities of the Russian Empire, Lenin (2002) sought to reconcile national liberation with class struggle. He argued that in a multinational state composed of numerous oppressed nationalities, the right to self-determination, including secession, was essential to combating national oppression. Denying this right, Lenin contended, would only perpetuate the dominance of one nation over another. To Lenin, the recognition of this right was a means rather than an end. Its ultimate purpose was to eliminate distrust between the proletariats of the oppressed and oppressing nations, thereby fostering unity in the broader struggle against class exploitation.

In alignment with this perspective, Ethiopian students divided the populace into binary categories of oppressor and oppressed nations (Messay, 2008). This framing reinterpreted Ethiopian history through a rigid Stalinist conception of a nation, disregarding the ‘socially constructed, contingent, porous, and continually negotiated’ nature of identity (Gebru, 2009, p. 32). The students overlooked Ethiopia’s history of interethnic interaction, including trade, interethnic marriages and wars, which, as Levine (1974) argues, contributed to the formation of a pan-Ethiopian identity. Rejecting the imperial era’s emphasis on ‘national unification and homogenization’, the students instead advocated for the protection and preservation of the languages and cultures of Ethiopia’s diverse nations and nationalities (Gebru, 2009, p. 31). In making this claim, they challenged the imperial-era conception of Ethiopian nationalism.

Students viewed the Ethiopian state as a polyglot empire, arguing that its history did not originate in the Aksumite era but was instead a creation of Emperor Menelik (Gebru, 2009). They contended that this historical process forged an aggregate of disparate nations, each fulfilling the Stalinist criteria of a true nation, such as language, culture, psychological make-up, history and social organization (Bahru, 2014). Consequently, students believed that Ethiopia was a mere collection of discrete nations. This perspective gained prominence with the publication of a seminal article by Walelign Mekonnen, a fourth-year political science student at Addis Ababa University, in 1969. In his article, Walelign (1969) boldly declared his intent ‘to provoke discussion’ on what he referred to as the ‘sacred’ issue of the country. Prior to this, discussions of nationality were dismissed as ‘tribalism’ and excluded from public discourse within the ESM (Messay, 2008). As

Bahru (2014) notes, Walelign's article succeeded in sparking debates on the nationalities question, framing it within a Leninist lens and challenging prevailing narratives of Ethiopian unity.

To Walelign (1969), the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era was a façade crafted by the Amhara ruling class to consolidate their dominance. This 'fake' nationalism, Walelign argued, compelled diverse nations to 'speak Amharic, listen to Amharic music, and accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity'. Consequently, he asserted that oppressed nations and nationalities had the right to self-determination, including secession. Aligning with Lenin's framework, the student groups' commitment to this right arose from socialist solidarity, which they believed essential for constructing a viable Ethiopian state. Walelign (1969), for instance, emphasized that this recognition aimed to establish a 'genuine nation-state' where all nations would have 'equal opportunity to preserve and develop their language, music and history'.

However, within student circles, it was debated that if the Ethiopian state could not be restructured to treat its constituent nations equitably, secession was a preferable alternative. In a sentiment comparable to the proverb 'a little bad is better than a heavy bad', the Ethiopian Students Union in North America wrote in an editorial for *Struggle*, one of the movement's publications, that 'secession is much better than a nationally oppressive government' (Struggle, 1969). Consistent with this stance, the same institution expressed full support for 'the armed struggle of the Eritrean people against feudal oppression and imperialist exploitation' (Challenge, 1970, p. 60). Even Walelign, despite his belief in the necessity of constructing a viable Ethiopian state, regarded the Eritrean secessionist movement as progressive.

While the students were the primary actors in challenging the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era and the power of Emperor Haile Selassie, they failed to seize power. Their inability to establish a cohesive political organization capable of guiding the popular revolution of 1974 to their advantage was a key factor in their failure (Messay, 2008). Instead of uniting under a viable political framework, the students were plagued by factionalism and sectarianism, stemming from their diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, divergent experiences and views, and conflicting goals and tactics (Gebu, 2009). This disunity created an opening for the military, the only institution with a strong hierarchical organization at the time, to overthrow the Haile Selassie regime in September 1974 (Andargachew, 1993). The military junta, known as the *Derg* in Amharic, rose to power and framed its own version of nationalism.

3.2.3. State-Framed Nationalism During the Derg Regime

Frustrated by the Haile Selassie's indifference to demands for reform, various groups, including drivers, students, teachers, factory workers and soldiers, organized a series of strikes, demonstrations and mutinies in 1974 (Reid, 2011). These widespread actions, coupled with the absence of strong political organizations, created a political vacuum that soldiers capitalized on to seize state power (Markakis, 1987). On September 12, 1974, the military deposed the imperial regime and established a provisional military administration.

The Derg regime introduced several reforms aimed at addressing the concerns raised by students and other social groups. In the proclamation establishing the provisional military administration, the regime abolished remnants of the imperial order, such as the parliament and the constitution, labelling them as instruments of oppression (Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia Proclamation, 1974). Additionally, the regime nationalized rural and urban lands to dismantle feudal relations and undermine the aristocratic class (Bereket, 1980). Markakis (1987) observes that the Derg implemented these reforms to achieve national unity by addressing the problem of class contradictions in the country.

In addition to class contradictions, the Derg regime sought to resolve national contradictions, a challenge that had been detrimental to the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era (Teffer, 1997). It attempted to grant the right to self-determination to constituent nationalities through the Program of National Democratic Revolution (PNDR). Devised on April 20, 1976, the PNDR aimed to guide Ethiopia toward the establishment of a people's republic by placing the country on a socialist path of development (Bereket, 1980). By declaring socialism as the guiding principle of the revolution, the PNDR (1976, p. 13) asserted:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism.

Overall, the nationalism of the Derg was built on three essential elements. The first was rooted in the principle of Ethiopian Socialism, officially proclaimed on December 20, 1974. According to the proclamation, Ethiopian Socialism was defined as embracing 'equality; self-reliance; the dignity of labor; the supremacy of the common good; [and] the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity' (Henze, 1985, p. 10). The second and third principles stemmed from this foundational definition

of Ethiopian Socialism. The second element emphasized the equality of the Ethiopian people in all respects. Most notably, the Derg focused on addressing issues of nationality, which were extensively covered in the PNDR, as well as matters of religion.

To address the question of nationalities, the Derg implemented several measures, including the establishment of the Institute of Nationalities Studies in 1983 to research the culture, history and languages of nationalities. The regime also permitted printing and broadcasting in multiple languages and organized ethnic and cultural shows to promote diversity (Markakis, 1987). In terms of religion, the Derg declared equal status for all faiths. According to Henze (1985), one aspect of this principle was the formulation of state nationalism that transcended the imperial-era association of Ethiopian nationalism with the EOC. This included redistributing vast tracts of church land to peasants, thereby diminishing the economic power of the EOC (Ottaway, 1978). Simultaneously, the regime sought to elevate the status of Islam by recognizing Muslim festivals as official holidays. While implementing these reforms, the Derg consistently accused the Haile Selassie regime of favouring one group over others as part of a divide-and-rule strategy (Tatek, 1981). By contrast, the Derg boasted of its efforts to establish equality among Ethiopia's people, framing its policies as a corrective to the inequities of the past.

Although the Derg recognized the equality of all nationalities and religions, its commitment to preserving the unity of the state – the third principle of its nationalism – closely mirrored that of the imperial regime. In his inaugural address, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the long-serving president, declared that Ethiopians faced a stark choice: 'Unity or death' (Markakis, 1987). For the Derg, Ethiopia took precedence over everything – nationality, class and religion. This prioritization was echoed in the official narrative, as reflected in an editorial from *Addis Zemen*, a government-owned newspaper, which asserted: 'Basically, Ethiopia has existed as a nation since prehistoric times...The religion of Christianity and Islam came after Ethiopia and Ethiopianism' (Markakis, 1987, p. 245). To instil this imagined sense of Ethiopianness, the Derg regime adopted the slogan *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia First) from the early days of its establishment.

According to Teffera (1997), the central theme of *Ethiopia Tikdem* encapsulated the need to preserve the territorial integrity of the state, ensure equality among all peoples in the country, and provide equitable access to education, healthcare and development opportunities. Within the philosophy of *Ethiopia Tikdem*, the territorial integrity of the state was viewed as absolute and

indivisible, to be safeguarded at any cost (Sorenson, 1993). This form of nationalism was effectively employed to rally support against the regime's domestic and foreign adversaries. Mengistu Haile Mariam, in his address to the Eritrean people opposing the secessionist goals of the EPLF, often proclaimed, 'As Ethiopia's territorial integrity was proudly preserved by our forefathers, we have the duty to preserve her unity from secessionists' (Tatek, 1981, p. 8). This rhetoric illustrates the regime's tendency to reify history, using it as a cornerstone to justify and reinforce its version of nationalism.

In fact, the Derg regime adopted a linear and uninterrupted narrative of Ethiopian history, much like its predecessor. To safeguard this narrative and uphold the unity of the state, the regime eliminated the concept of secession from official speeches, policy documents and proclamations (Keller, 1985). References to secession were confined to mocking groups like the EPLF and OLF, which were actively advocating for it (see Annex VI). The Derg maintained that national contradictions could be resolved within the territorial boundaries of the state (Markakis, 1987). In its pursuit of preserving Ethiopia's territorial integrity, the regime resorted to intimidation, torture and killings against opposition groups and civilians accused of supporting them.

3.2.4. Secessionist Movements as Counter-State-Framed Nationalism

The recognition of the right to secession for allegedly oppressed nationalities was a central point of debate among opposition political groups during the Derg regime. Some political parties, such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopian Socialist Party, supported the principle of recognizing this right, albeit conditionally. For instance, the EPRP, in its newspaper *Democracia*, emphasized the need to legally recognize the right to secession, drawing an analogy with the legal recognition of divorce. It argued, 'Since the law grants this right, does it mean that it supports divorce? Not at all' (Markakis, 1987, p. 244). As Markakis observed, the EPRP believed that advancing fundamental societal and state transformations through a socialist revolution could mitigate the secessionist aspirations of oppressed nationalities.

In contrast, liberation fronts such as the EPLF, OLF and ONLF advocated for the unconditional implementation of the right to secession. These groups framed the relationship between the Ethiopian state and the peoples they represented as one of colonizer and colonized (Bereket, 1980; Asafa, 2020). From their perspective – and that of scholars supporting their claims – Ethiopian history begins with Emperor Menelik's conquests in the late nineteenth century, contending that

Ethiopia has a history of no more than 100 years (Mohammed, 1990; Sorenson, 1993). Bereket (1980), a staunch supporter of the EPLF's cause, rejected the ancient history of the Ethiopian state, championed by both the imperial regime and the Derg, as a fabricated myth. Asafa (2020) argues that this myth was perpetuated by successive regimes to justify the subjugation of nationalities forcibly incorporated into the Ethiopian state.

To that end, the political objectives of the liberation fronts that proliferated during the Derg regime were deeply rooted in their respective interpretations of Ethiopian history. The OLF, for example, argued that, prior to their forced incorporation into Ethiopia, the Oromo were an independent people governed by their own institutions. As one OLF member succinctly stated: 'The objective of the OLF struggle is to enable the Oromo to exercise their right to self-determination. This involves ending Ethiopian colonial rule imposed on our people through armed conquest and sustained by force' (Ebba, 1991, p. 47). Similarly, in its 1977 program, the EPLF declared that its goal was to establish 'a free Eritrean state' by dismantling the 'Ethiopian colonial state administration in the region' (EPLF, 1977, p. 23). The ONLF, established in 1984, also sought to liberate the Somali-speaking people from what it regarded as Ethiopian colonial rule (Shehim, 1985). These liberation fronts shared a common narrative of resistance against Ethiopian state structures, portraying their struggles as movements for independence.

A more moderate political stance toward the colonial thesis was the national-oppression thesis advanced by the TPLF (Teshale, 2008). The TPLF argued that the Tigrean question was not a colonial issue but a national one, rooted in the subjugation of the Tigrayan people by their own state (Messay, 2008). This perspective did not, however, preclude the TPLF from initially harbouring secessionist ambitions. Its 1976 manifesto explicitly declared its objective to establish an independent Republic of Tigray. According to Aregawi (2008), a senior member of the TPLF, the organization officially renounced its secessionist goal later in 1979 to collaborate with other political groups in pursuit of a democratic Ethiopia. However, Aregawi noted that the idea of secession continued to linger among high-ranking TPLF members. This was evident in the TPLF's official statement, which declared:

If there is a democratic atmosphere, then...self-determination means the creation of VOLUNTARILY integrated nations and nationalities whose relations are based on equality and mutual advantages.

However, if the present oppression and exploitation continue or intensify, it means the creation of an independent...Republic of Tigray (Young, 1997, p. 100).

To achieve their objectives, the liberation fronts waged armed resistance against the Derg regime for seventeen years. In its effort to preserve the territorial integrity of the state and combat what it labelled as ‘secessionists’, the Derg diverted the country’s human and financial resources to the war front (Andargachew, 1993). However, these efforts ultimately failed. The combined forces of the liberation fronts decisively defeated one of the strongest armies in Africa in May 1991, forcing Mengistu Haile Mariam to flee to Zimbabwe. In the end, it was only the EPLF that succeeded in establishing an independent state, Eritrea. The TPLF, in collaboration with other political groups such as the EPDM, took control of the Ethiopian state in 1991 after forming the EPRDF.

3.2.5. Ethnic Federalism and the Pursuit of Unity: Redefining State-Framed Nationalism in Post-1991 Ethiopia

After seizing power, the EPRDF, in collaboration with other fronts such as the OLF, convened a peace conference during the first week of July 1991. The conference resulted in the adoption of the Transitional Charter, which established a transitional government tasked with governing the state until elections could be held within two years. The Charter also reorganized the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines, shifting from centuries of nation-building efforts focused on centralization to a decentralized federal system.

To delineate the borders of the new political units, the transitional government established a Boundary Commission tasked with implementing the principles outlined in the Proclamation to Provide for the Establishment of National/Regional Self-Government, enacted in 1992 (Markakis, 2011). As Vaughan (2003) notes, the commission relied heavily on rudimentary ethnographic and historical data gathered by the Institute for the Study of Nationalities in the 1980s. Based on the commission’s recommendations, and, crucially, aligned with the interests of the EPRDF, the country was divided into fourteen ethnically-based regions.

Within the official narrative of the EPRDF, the reorganization of the state along ethnic lines had two main objectives. The first was to address the nationalities question by granting ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ the right to self-determination, including the right to secession (Merera, 2003). While the right to self-determination was widely accepted among Ethiopians, the inclusion of the secession clause sparked significant concern, as many feared it could lead to the

disintegration of the state (Markakis, 2011). However, the EPRDF argued that the right to secession would reassure oppressed nationalities and encourage them to voluntarily remain part of the Ethiopian state. Meles Zenawi, who chaired the July peace conference, used a metaphor to explain the necessity of this policy to participants:

If you don't open the doors and windows of a house, those confined within will break the doors and walls and run out to get fresh air. So, leave the doors and windows open for the people to feel free and relax inside the house (Markakis, 2011, p. 232).

To that end, the EPRDF established this principle as a democratic right of Ethiopians in the 1994 Constitution. Article 39 (1) of the Constitution explicitly grants 'the unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession [for] every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia'. However, this provision overlooks the fluid and contested nature of identity, instead adopting a Stalinist definition of the nation, without clearly distinguishing between nation, nationality and people. According to Article 39 (5), nations, nationalities and peoples are defined as 'group[s] of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identity, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory'. Furthermore, Article 47 of the Constitution established nine regional states, 'delimited on the basis of settlement patterns, identity, language and the consent of the people concerned'. Despite this multifaceted approach, language was predominantly used as the criterion for establishing these regional states.

The second justification for allowing the right to self-determination, according to the EPRDF's narrative, was to preserve the unity of the state. The EPRDF argued that previous nation-building efforts had failed because they did not acknowledge the pluralistic nature of Ethiopian society. As stated in *Abiyotawi Democracy* (1994, p. 7), the EPRDF's newspaper, 'the unity of Ethiopia is expressed through its diversity', emphasizing that 'in terms of identity, every nation, nationality and people is distinct from one another. True unity can only be achieved by embracing and respecting these differences'. The same newspaper criticized opponents of the right to secession as chauvinists who 'prioritize territorial integrity at the expense of genuine unity among the peoples' (ibid). It argued that the version of Ethiopian nationalism promoted by pre-1991 regimes was fundamentally flawed, as it sought to create an artificial unity by assimilating oppressed

nationalities into what was perceived as the dominant Amhara culture. This critique was used to legitimize the EPRDF's approach to nation-building.

According to Markakis (2011), the theme of unity serves as the leitmotif of the Constitution. He notes that terms such as political community, common interests, common destiny and collective promotion of our interest appear as recurring phrases in the preamble. These expressions culminate in the declaration: 'We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia, strongly committed, in full and free exercise of our right to self-determination, to building a political community'. In alignment with this theme, the November 1995 edition of *Abiyotawi Democracy* featured an article titled *The Right to Secession: A Path to Strengthening National Unity*. The article emphasizes the EPRDF's commitment to preserving the unity of the state, arguing that it is more beneficial for Ethiopia's diverse peoples to coexist than to pursue ethnic division. Furthermore, it asserts that genuine unity can only be achieved when all peoples are granted the right to self-administration, the preservation of their distinct cultures and histories and the use of their own languages.

Facing criticism from many Ethiopians for overemphasizing differences, the EPRDF appeared to recognize the risks of this approach at the turn of the century (Markakis, 2011). Beyond these criticisms, the Ethio-Eritrean War (1998–2000) marked a significant rhetorical shift in the EPRDF's narrative – from celebrating ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity to emphasizing the unity of the Ethiopian people (Clapham, 2002). This shift was a deliberate strategy to mobilize the population for the war effort against a common enemy (Belachew, 2009). Amidst the war, government-affiliated newspapers began publishing articles that glorified the country's ancient history, which had previously been side-lined in the official narrative. Themes such as sovereignty, unity, pride, Ethiopia's undefeated history and a sense of *Ethiopianness* dominated headlines. For instance, *The Voice of the Peoples of South*, a regional government-affiliated newspaper from the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State – previously known for mocking Ethiopian history as merely the history of monarchs – published an article stating: 'As it is known in history, Ethiopia has never been defeated by foreign enemies' (1998, p. 3). The publication urged Ethiopians to march collectively to the warfront to preserve the sovereignty of the state against what it referred to as 'foreign aggression'.

The mobilization of the Ethiopian people enabled Ethiopia to defeat Eritrea. While the EPRDF succeeded in this effort, it failed to establish a democratic political system capable of fostering an

open political space (Aalen, 2019). Critics argue that the EPRDF exploited the ethnic federal system for divide-and-rule purposes, and that the system was widely perceived as being dominated by the TPLF (McCracken, 2004; Abbink, 2006). This perception of dominance fuelled discontent among Ethiopians, culminating in widespread protests in Oromia and Amhara, the two largest ethnic regions in the country, beginning in 2014.

These protests ultimately led to the rise of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister in 2018. In his inaugural speech, Abiy emphasized Ethiopia's rich historical legacy and articulated an ambitious vision for national unity, which he argued had been undermined by the EPRDF regime. He highlighted the dangers of interethnic contestation and called for new, inclusive and forward-looking Ethiopian narratives that acknowledged past grievances while striving to transcend them. Abiy underscored the importance of national consensus, reconciliation and a sense of connectedness among all Ethiopians. However, Abiy's administration made no significant changes to the institutional structures of the post-1991 ethnic-based federal arrangement. Instead, his government dissolved the EPRDF to form the PP. Despite this rebranding, the PP retained much of the ethnic-based structure of its predecessor, with its regional affiliate parties adopting ethnic names, such as the Amhara Prosperity Party (APP) and OPP. Consequently, it can be argued that, apart from the brief honeymoon period during the transition, the narrative of Ethiopian nationalism framed by the EPRDF remained largely unchanged under the administration of Abiy.

3.2.6. National Unity at Risk? Counter-State-Framed Nationalism in Post-1991 Ethiopia

When the transitional conference was held in 1991, the majority of participants were ethnic-based parties advocating for the reorganization of the state along ethnic lines. The only exceptions were representatives from Addis Ababa University and a few trade unions, who opposed the emphasis on ethnic pluralism, arguing that it could jeopardize the unity of the state (Walle, 1992; Vaughan, 1994). However, their concerns went largely unheard, as ethnically affiliated groups dominated the conference (Markakis, 2011). This dominance effectively side-lined dissenting voices and paved the way for the adoption of ethnic federalism.

While intimidated by those in power, dissident forces continued to advocate for reducing the polarization of ethnic identity throughout the post-1991 era. The opposition to the ethnic-based federal arrangement extended across various social groups, including academics, journalists and political elites. Journalists established newspapers, magazines and blogs to express dissenting

views, and scholars produced academic works challenging the philosophical foundations of ethnic federalism. Political parties were also formed to propose alternative policies for reorganizing the state. Although these efforts have not succeeded in overturning the ethnic-based federal system, a brief discussion of their concerns is crucial to illustrate how nationalist ideologies are not fixed but are continually negotiated and shaped by power dynamics.

According to Özkirimli (2017), nationalist ideologies that once served as the legitimate governing principles of a state can become marginalized and replaced by new nationalist narratives over time. This dynamic unfolded in Ethiopia in 1991, when the EPRDF and its allies entirely rejected the elements of pre-1991 official nationalism. For instance, Meles Zenawi is remembered for dismissing the Ethiopian flag as merely a piece of cloth, fragmenting the country's history along ethnic lines without recognizing its shared past, and redefining the beginning of Ethiopian history to the late nineteenth century (Daniel, 2003). In response, opposition groups sought to defend the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state from antiquity, while acknowledging the socio-economic and political challenges embedded in its long history.

Haile Larebo (2017), a staunch defender of Ethiopia's ancient history, argues that while the country has faced misgovernance, chronic economic challenges and social crises, ethnic oppression has never been a defining feature of its political culture. Maimire (2005) traces the origins of the claim that pre-1991 governments ruled Ethiopia along ethnic lines to the colonial thesis. This thesis, he asserts, 'ontologizes ethnic identity and falsely represents Ethiopia as a collection of discrete, ethnic communities brought together by Amhara colonialism' (p. 270). He vehemently critiques this thesis, arguing that it stems from a lack of proper understanding of Ethiopian history. According to him, this flawed theory has had devastating consequences for contemporary Ethiopia, including the emergence of ethnic liberation fronts, the secession of Eritrea and the institutionalization of ethnic politics in the 1994 Constitution.

The central issue with the colonial thesis lies in its flawed application of European colonial frameworks to the Ethiopian context (Messay, 1999). In seeking historical parallels, Addis-Hiwot (1975, pp. 3-4) argues that 'the same historical forces that created the Gold Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Sudan, and Kenya were the very ones that created modern Ethiopia'. Hence, he asserts, 'the conceptual tool that best describes the whole social-economic structure' of Ethiopia is 'military-feudal-colonialism'. However, many scholars dismiss this claim as an inappropriate projection of

historical experiences from an entirely different context onto Ethiopia, which follows its own distinct historical trajectory (Maimire, 2005; Yates, 2021; Zahorik & Godesso, 2023). As the colonial thesis centrally portrays Emperor Menelik II as a colonizer (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Sorenson, 1993), its critics seek to refute this interpretation by defending his administration as a uniquely Ethiopian phenomenon devoid of colonial characteristics.

Yates (2021) notes that a defining feature of European colonial administration was the emphasis on racial purity. Europeans prohibited interracial marriage, propagated the ideology of white supremacy in public discourse and enforced segregation between colonizers and the colonized (Mamdani, 2020). In stark contrast, Menelik II's system promoted social integration through interracial marriage and fostered social institutions like godparenthood to strengthen bonds among different ethnic groups (Messay, 1999; Yates, 2021). This approach is exemplified in a letter Menelik wrote to his nobles tasked with administering newly incorporated territories:

You are now to stay and live here...Marry into the local people and have plenty of children. I will also send you priests to teach them, and I will build churches for you so that your children will become Christians (Lentakis, 2005, p. 7).

This directive underscores Menelik's commitment to fostering unity and inclusion, contrasting sharply with the segregationist policies of European colonial powers. Indeed, this reflects the philosophical foundations of Ethiopia's administrative system throughout the centuries, which, according to Yates (2021, p. 56), defined identities in Ethiopia as 'not racial, calcified, tribal, or locked, [but rather] fluid, cultural, and by no means colonial'.

Social interactions were not confined to ordinary people but also extended to the ruling class. Messay (1999) argues that the Ethiopian ruling elite was a diverse amalgamation of ethnicities, forged through intermarriage, personal loyalty and exceptional contributions on the battlefield. This dynamic indicates that individuals from humble backgrounds could ascend to positions of nobility. A prominent example is Fitawurari Habtegiorgis, a war captive with neither Amhara heritage nor hereditary ties to the aristocracy (Bahru, 2002). Nevertheless, he rose to become Minister of War during Menelik's reign.

To apply the colonial thesis to the Ethiopian context is, therefore, regarded as an uncritical understanding of Ethiopian history. One indisputable fact, however, is that Menelik's territorial

expansion incorporated the spread of the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity (Markakis, 2011). This process should be examined from the perspective of nation-building, where Menelik sought to construct a common Ethiopian identity (Assefa, 2017; Yates, 2021). Hence, for opponents of the state-framed nationalism of post-1991 Ethiopia, granting the right to secession is viewed as offering an inappropriate remedy for a misdiagnosed problem.

In *Menelik* (1998, p. 3), a newspaper established in the memory of Emperor Menelik, the columnist argues that the right to secession is an outdated Stalinist policy that must be eliminated from the political discourse of Ethiopia. He raises critical questions: ‘what does the extreme polarization of ethnic identity bring us?’, and ‘does it bring the intended unity, or does it create a disintegrating narrative that has not occurred in Ethiopia before?’. After posing these questions, the columnist contends that ethnic federalism breeds internal discord among Ethiopians, leading to incessant ethnic conflicts and secessionist movements. In support of this, *Moreshe* (1998), another newspaper established to critique the ethnic-based federal arrangement, argues that if secession were a viable solution for creating peace, the Ethio-Eritrean war would never have happened.

Despite fierce opposition from various social groups, the ethnic-based federal arrangement remains intact. The constitution, which grants the right to secession, is unchanged, and the ethnic regions continue to serve as the legitimate administrative framework. These entrenchments can largely be attributed to a combination of factors: repressive measures employed by the ruling regime, including arrests, torture and violence, and the fragmented nature of the resistance, which prevented the emergence of a collective effort against ethnic politics (Abbink, 2006). Moreover, the role of ethnic federalism in consolidating support among ethnic entrepreneurs who have benefitted from the EPRDF’s narrative of self-determination has been crucial (Yates, 2021). These ethnic entrepreneurs argue that those who oppose the ethnic-based arrangement are advocating for the restoration of an oppressive, centralized system. This perception has further marginalized opponents, limiting their ability to gain widespread support.

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated how successive regimes constructed and legitimized their visions of the Ethiopian state by selectively drawing on historical narratives. Political elites who seized power institutionalized their own version of nationalism as the official narrative, while those who

lost power were marginalized, with their nationalistic ideologies evolving into counter-narratives that challenged the prevailing state-framed nationalism.

The state-framed nationalisms of the imperial and Derg regimes were rooted in centralized visions of Ethiopian unity. In contrast, counter-state-framed nationalisms emerged as critiques of these dominant narratives, challenging them by emphasizing historical grievances, ethnic oppression and the right to self-determination. The post-1991 ethnic federal arrangement, shaped by counter-state-framed nationalism, marked a radical departure from earlier frameworks by institutionalizing ethnic diversity as the foundation of Ethiopian identity.

However, the reconfiguration of the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines, ostensibly aimed at addressing historical grievances and fostering voluntary unity, has not been without challenges. Critics argue that the ethnic federal arrangement overemphasized differences while neglecting the commonalities forged through centuries of interaction. This critique primarily comes from those who advocate for the indivisibility of the state's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, the nationalistic ideologies of those opposing the official nationalism of the post-1991 era have struggled to gain legitimacy, as they, too, have been shaped and constrained by the effects of ethnic federalism.

These dynamics underscore that nationalism in Ethiopia is neither static nor monolithic, but rather a socially constructed and contested site of power. This chapter is premised on the assumption that understanding these shifting dynamics is crucial for comprehending the rise of Amhara nationalism. Historically linked to the imperial state identity, the Amhara have found themselves both central and contested within successive national projects. The imperial era's portrayal of a unified Ethiopian nation, the Derg's socialist reinterpretation of national identity and the ethnic federal restructuring of the post-1991 era each reshaped the emergence of Amhara nationalism in distinct ways. Building on these trajectories, the next chapter explores how Amhara nationalism emerged and evolved in response to these shifting political and ideological landscapes.

Chapter Four

The Origins of Amhara Nationalism

4. Introduction

This chapter examines the historical and political conditions that gave rise to Amhara nationalism. It situates this particular form of nationalism within the broader context of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia, as it emerged in response to the state-framed nationalism of the post-1991 era. As discussed in Chapter Three, the nationalism promoted by the EPRDF and its successor, the PP, has faced numerous challenges. Among the most significant is Amhara nationalism, which perceives the state-framed narrative as a threat to both the survival of the Amhara and the unity of the state.

Although Amhara nationalism emerged in response to the ethnicization of Ethiopian politics, its origins can be traced back to the anti-Amhara narratives propagated by Fascist Italians in the 1930s (Yared, 2024). The institutionalization of these narratives played a key role in fostering recurring structural violence against the Amhara (Birhanu, 2024; Desalegn, 2025). This chapter explores the main actors involved in the construction of anti-Amhara narratives and their underlying motives. It also examines how these ideas were institutionalized within the Ethiopian state and how the resulting structural violence contributed significantly to the emergence and consolidation of Amhara nationalism

The chapter is organized into five sections. The first section examines the debate surrounding the formation of Amhara nationalism. The second section analyzes the factors that contributed to its rise, with particular emphasis on the construction of anti-Amhara narratives within the framework of the colonial thesis and the key actors involved in their entrenchment. The third section explores the institutionalization of these narratives within the political landscape of Ethiopia since 1991. The fourth section investigates the patterns of structural violence directed against the Amhara. Finally, the fifth section summarizes the main findings of the chapter.

4.1. Perspectives on the Rise of Amhara Nationalism

Two views dominate the debate over the rise of Amhara nationalism. The first is the claim that Amhara nationalism emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. This perspective portrays Emperor Tewodros as the first Amhara nationalist, asserting that he rose to power by opposing the Oromo-dominated system during the *Zemene Mesafint* (Merera, 2003). It further

argues that Tewodros mobilized his Amhara counterparts to challenge the Yejju dynasty, an influential Oromo dynasty that surrounded the Emperor at the Fasil Palace (Asafa, 2020). This view culminates in portraying Emperor Menelik, who came to power two decades after the fall of Tewodros in 1868, as an Amhara nationalist.

Portraying Menelik as an Amhara nationalist is the central theme of the colonial thesis. This thesis depicts Emperor Menelik, similar to Kitchener of Britain, Bugeaud of France and Baratieri of Italy – who led their respective national armies to colonize Africa – as the commander-in-chief of an Amhara army tasked with subjugating non-Amhara populations (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Sorenson, 1993; Asafa, 2020). This view, though dominant in shaping the current politics of Ethiopia, can be proven wrong both theoretically and empirically.

As discussed in Chapter Two, nationalism is a discursive formation, a specific way of seeing and interpreting the world (Calhoun, 1997). As a discourse, it serves as a framework that shapes how we understand and organize the realities that surround us (Özkırımlı, 2017). If we approach Amhara nationalism as a discursive formation, a particular mode of interpretation shaped by and shaping the socio-political context of Ethiopia, important questions arise. How can figures like Tewodros and Menelik be seen as embodying Amhara nationalism during a period when the concept of ethnicity had limited salience? How can they be said to have viewed and interpreted the world through the lens of *Amharaness*, at a time when provincial identities were more pronounced, even among Amharic speakers themselves?

To associate Amhara nationalism with Tewodros or Menelik, one must acknowledge that such an identification would require them to have organized and mobilized the Amhara specifically against a defined ‘other’. This, however, appears unlikely, as the state-framed nationalism of the imperial era was anchored in three core pillars: the Solomonic myth, Orthodox Christianity and the unity of the Ethiopian state. When Tewodros rose to power, his primary objective was the unification of the Ethiopian state through the suppression of provincial rulers and the defence of the EOC against Islamic threats (Bahru, 2002). This vision is clearly articulated in a letter he sent to Queen Victoria of Britain in 1862, which reflects the broader worldview that guided his political project:

Because my forefathers violated the commands of God, He gave their right to rule the state to the Gallas and the Turks until these days. But today, by His grace, God has given me the power to sit on the throne of my forefathers, raising me from the dust. I have removed the Gallas through the power granted to me by God. However, the Turks have refused my request to withdraw from Ethiopian territory, leaving me no choice but to confront them in battle...Mr. Plowden and Priest John Bell have informed me that you are a Christian leader who cares deeply for Christians... [Hence], I appeal to you to support me in my efforts to protect Christians from the threats posed by Islam (Paulos, 1993, Pp. 183-184).

It is this letter that Oromo scholars cite to argue that Tewodros was an Amhara nationalist. Merera (2003), for instance, asserts that the term 'Galla' in the letter refers to the Oromo, suggesting that Tewodros's ambition was to dismantle the power of the Yejju dynasty. However, this argument overlooks two key historical facts. First, it ignores the fact that Emperor Tewodros rose not only against the Yejju dynasty but also against Amharic-speaking provincial leaders (Bahru, 2002). Second, it misrepresents the letter's message, as the term 'Galla' in this context refers to non-Christians (Tekletsadik, 1988). Tekletsadik argues that Tewodros's primary ambition was to protect Christianity from both internal and external threats. This positions Tewodros as a religious nationalist, committed to preserving what he described as the faith of his forefathers. Yet, his nationalism was not solely religious; it also encompassed a form of nationalism aimed at safeguarding the territorial integrity of the state. This broader vision is best captured in his self-description as 'the husband of Ethiopia and the fiancé of Jerusalem' (Bahru, 2002).

Similarly, Menelik is remembered for his vision of a unified Ethiopia. In a letter to the European powers in 1891, he declared, 'I shall endeavour, if God gives me life and strength, to restore the ancient frontiers of Ethiopia' (Greenfield, 1969, p. 96). To achieve this goal, he collaborated with generals of diverse ethnic backgrounds, such as Ras Gobena of the Oromo, while also engaging in fierce conflicts with nobles from Amharic-speaking communities (Bahru, 2002). Moreover, the ethnic composition of Menelik's army was not limited to Amharas; it included individuals from various ethnic groups (Messay, 1999). This raises an important question: if Menelik was an Amhara nationalist, why did he choose to build a multinational army? The answer is clear: he sought to build the Ethiopian state, rather than establish an Amhara colonial empire (Kymlicka, 2006). Moreover, his worldview was shaped by the broader Ethiopian state and, as one might expect, by considerations of consolidating his own power.

One argument that proponents of the colonial thesis use to justify the claim that Menelik was an Amhara nationalist centres on his efforts to spread the Amharic language and Christian culture to non-Amhara populations (Alemseged, 2010). However, this effort should be viewed through the lens of nation-building, as Menelik sought to forge a common Ethiopian identity (Messay, 1999; Yates, 2021). This process was not unique to Ethiopia but was also a hallmark of nation-building efforts in many other countries.

An Italian nationalist, Marquis d’Azeglio, for example, is remembered for saying shortly after Italy’s unification in 1861: ‘We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians’ (Hobsbawm, 1983a, p. 267). D’Azeglio was concerned about the fragmented nature of Italian society, which had merely been brought together through the unification process (Gilmour, 2011). He emphasized the need to establish a cohesive Italian identity through education, language standardization and the promotion of national consciousness among people who still identified primarily with their local affiliations.

Concomitantly, Menelik sought to establish a common Ethiopian identity by spreading Christian culture and the Amharic language after bringing various ethnic groups into the centre (Getachew, 1986). In fact, this practice had been a consistent tradition since 1270, regardless of whether the rulers were Amhara or not. Even during the Zemene Mesafint, a period dominated by the Yejju dynasty, Christian culture and the Amharic language were promoted in official contexts (Abir, 2013). Emperor Yohannis, a Tigrean, also used Amharic for official communication and enforced the conversion of Muslim Ethiopians to Christianity (Erlich, 2024). Given these historical patterns, Yates (2020) concluded that, irrespective of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, emperors of the imperial era were compelled to use Amharic as the official language and uphold Christianity as a central element of state identity.

Even in the post-1941 era, a period marked by the rise of counter-state-framed nationalisms, neither the ruling class nor the Amhara elites who opposed the Haile Selassie and Derg regimes sought to mobilize the Amhara along ethnic lines. The only, albeit unsuccessful, attempt occurred in 1973, when frustrated members of the Amhara ruling class convened to address the proliferation of anti-Amhara narratives since the late 1960s. That year, Dejazmach Tsehay Enquelassie, Mr. Dagnew, Colonel Molalign Belay and Birhanu Asress – leading figures from the Haile Selassie government – met in Addis Ababa (Birhanu, 2013). Birhanu recounts in his memoir that the

principal aim of the gathering was to mobilize the Amhara collectively in response to mounting threats posed by groups advancing anti-Amhara narratives. During the meeting, Dejazmach Tsehay, who presided over the session, made the following poignant remark:

We must understand that, from this point on, all political groups are united in their opposition to the Amhara – not targeting us as Shewa, Gondar, or Gojjam, but as Amhara as a whole. Whether we accept it or not, we must acknowledge that the Amhara have one neck. Therefore, it is imperative that we cooperate (Birhanu, 2013, p. 367).

Birhanu continues to recall that, at the end of the discussion, they promised to contribute to organizing the Amhara along ethnic lines. Although this was the only formal meeting on the matter, Birhanu notes that prominent figures from Shewa also engaged in informal discussions on the issue. However, the attempt to organize the Amhara ultimately failed until the establishment of the AAPO in 1992.

The second perspective in the debate over the emergence of Amhara nationalism focuses on the formation of the AAPO under the leadership of the late Professor Asrat Woldeyes. Advocates of this view argue that attributing the origin of Amhara nationalism to the reign of Emperor Tewodros is a deliberate construction intended to support the portrayal of Ethiopia as a colonial empire forged by the Amhara (Admasu, 2010). Instead, they argue that Amhara nationalism emerged as a reaction to the state-framed nationalism of the EPRDF regime (Tegegne, 1998; Admasu, 2010). Two key points are advanced in support of this claim. First, the AAPO's establishment as an officially registered political party with the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia signalled a significant institutional milestone. Prior to its formation, there was no organized political entity explicitly founded in the name of the Amhara.

Second, the AAPO was formed in a political environment that prioritized ethnic-based political mobilization. With the institutionalization of ethnic federalism, the post-1991 era witnessed the creation of the Amhara region, with its own flag, map and defined territory. This period also saw mass killings, massacres and evictions targeting the Amhara, as ethnic federalism rendered them non-indigenous in various parts of the country (Bekalu, 2018; Amare, 2022). These developments led Amhara elites to adopt the concept of the 'Amhara nation' as what Brubaker (1996) describes as a category of practice, a conceptual tool used to interpret political realities, mobilize collective identity and legitimize political action.

4.2. Drivers Behind the Emergence of Amhara Nationalism

Many scholars argue that the institutionalization of ethnic federalism and the subsequent structural violence against the Amhara are the primary factors behind the rise of Amhara nationalism after 1991 (Admasu, 2010; Tezera, 2021). While this view is not entirely incorrect, it overlooks earlier political processes that embedded anti-Amhara narratives into the country's political discourse. In fact, these scholars acknowledge that the seeds of anti-Amhara sentiment were sown in the 1960s by the ESM (Yared, 2022; Yilkal, 2024). This assertion is also problematic because it neglects the role of colonial powers such as Great Britain and Italy in entrenching anti-Amhara narratives.

This section, therefore, examines how these colonial powers implanted anti-Amhara sentiments during the 1930s and 1940s and how these narratives were subsequently adopted and propagated by domestic actors. It begins by defining what constitutes anti-Amhara narratives, followed by an analysis of the key actors responsible for their propagation.

4.2.1. Anti-Amhara Narratives: Origins and Motives

Dismantling anti-Amhara narratives is a central concern of Amhara nationalism, as nationalists believe these narratives are at the root of the structural violence against the Amhara. Tilly (1975) observes that perceived or actual false narratives play a crucial role in the emergence of nationalism, especially when a group believes it has been wronged by state policies or broader social forces. Similarly, Brubaker (1996) contends that such narratives can serve as a tool for legitimizing nationalist movements by creating a sense of urgency for the group to organize politically, seek recognition and demand equality. In this context, anti-Amhara narratives have provoked nationalist reactions aimed at reclaiming stigmatized cultural and political spaces.

Various political groups formed on behalf of the Amhara have often used anti-Amhara narratives as a rallying point for mobilization. Belete Molla (2018), chairman of NaMA, once remarked, 'the root of the problem that the Amhara suffer from is embedded in the anti-Amhara narratives that we seek to erase from Ethiopia'. Similarly, an interviewee from the Amhara Fano articulated this sentiment succinctly, stating, 'false historical narratives against the Amhara must be eradicated not only from media discourse but also from the minds of those who uphold them'.⁶ These narratives, which Amhara nationalists reject as false, were aptly summarized by Demeke

6. Interview with one of the leaders of Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

Mekonnen, who was serving as Deputy Prime Minister at the time, in his speech at a public rally in support of the transitional leadership in June 2018:

The Amhara are among the most ancient inhabitants of Ethiopia, with a proud and storied history. This nation has played a pivotal role in the formation of the Ethiopian state... Yet, due to the actions of past Amhara emperors, often in collaboration with nobles from other ethnic groups, the Amhara have been unfairly perceived as sole beneficiaries of the previous system.

Captivated by the applause of the crowd, Demeke vowed to ‘rectify these distorted narratives’ so that ‘the pride of both the Amhara nation and the Ethiopian state may be restored’. One such narrative that requires correction is the claim that, during the imperial era, ‘public policy favoured economic and educational investment in Shewa and other Amhara regions’ (Alemseged, 2004, p. 598). It suffices to note that no territorial province named ‘Amhara region’ existed in Ethiopian history before 1991 to argue that such claims are historically inaccurate.

If Alemseged’s claim is understood in terms of provinces where the Amhara predominantly resided, the historical record contradicts the notion of preferential treatment. As Teshale (1995, p. 177) notes, ‘the overwhelming majority of the Amhara have been more poverty-stricken than their non-Amhara counterparts’. Assefa (2017) further reinforces this argument, highlighting that the imperial regime did little to improve the living conditions of those residing in historically Amhara-inhabited areas, such as Gojjam, Wollo, Shewa and Begemdir. He justifies this claim, stating:

The beneficiaries of the modernization of Ethiopian agriculture, which was launched in the early 1950s with aid from the United States, resided all in the southern provinces, especially Kefa, Harar, Sidamo, Illubabor, and Arsi... Some of the earliest manufacturing plants were in Addis Ababa, Akaki, Dire Dawa, Adama and Wonji. The lion’s share of the investment in the commercialization, modernization, and mechanization of agricultural enterprises went to southern regions... Few to none of such modern investments were located in Begemdir, Gojjam, Wollo, or Tigre (Assefa, 2017, p. 60).

The only legitimate concern, if one accepts the notion of Amhara domination, is what Teshale (1995, p. 180) describes as ‘the cultural hegemony of the Amharic language over other languages’. The continued use of Amharic as the official medium of communication, according to Bereket (1984, p. 255), ‘puts members of other minorities at a disadvantage in schools and the government’. However, responding directly to this claim, Getachew (1986, p. 471) argues that ‘no critic has suggested any workable alternative to this over 700-year-old tradition in a country where

100 languages are spoken, and where Amharic...has rescued the Ethiopian state from the fate of the Tower of Babel'. He further contends that the presence of a predominant language in a multiethnic state reflects its unity and strength.

It is also important to note that most countries in the world adopt a national language to facilitate communication and governance. This practice helps states avoid what Getachew (1986) metaphorically referred to as the fate of the Tower of Babel. According to Norman (2006), the creation of a viable nation-state is often enabled through the standardization of a national language, achieved through instruments such as education, media and other institutional mechanisms. This perspective aligns with the nation-building thesis, which informs certain interpretations of Ethiopian history (Getachew, 1986; Mesfin, 1990; Maimire, 2005; Haile, 2017; Assefa, 2017). Scholars who support this view argue that the expansion of Amharic by imperial regimes was not aimed at marginalizing other ethnic groups, but rather at fostering a unified state.

This, however, is unacceptable to proponents of the colonial and national oppression theses, who view the expansion of Amharic as cultural imperialism (Mekuria, 1997; Asafa, 1996; Lemmu, 1998; Alemseged, 2010; Alemayehu, 2013). They argue that this cultural imperialism accompanied Menelik's territorial expansion, which established Amhara colonial settlers among non-Amhara populations. These alleged colonial settlers, referred to as *neftegna* by these scholars, are described as having brutally killed, exploited and enslaved the colonized communities.

While *neftegna* originally referred to all ethnic groups who owned guns, in the current political context, the term has been adopted to demean the Amhara (Lentakis, 2005). Even within the ruling PP, which initially promised to dismantle the divisive historical narratives, certain factions continue to employ the *neftegna* discourse to rally support from their constituencies. In his speech on the eve of the 2019 Hora Finfinnee Irrecha festivity, the President of the Oromia Region, Shimeles Abdisa, stated: 'we defeated the *neftegna* in the very place where they once defeated us 150 years ago. We will break it down so that it never rises again...We will never allow them to repeat what they did to us in the past'.⁷ This speech has been widely circulated by Amhara nationalists on social media platforms as a tool for mobilization, evoking collective emotion, consolidating support and lending legitimacy to their movement.⁸

7. For a recording of the speech, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ONfEPFEMLk>.

8. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

Invoking the *neftegna* narrative to rally political support is a strategy reminiscent of the EPRDF, which weaponized it to portray the Amhara as remnants of a bygone system of oppression. One of the prominent members of the EPRDF, Sebhat Nega, is remembered for his speech in which he claimed that his party had ‘broken the backbone’ of the *neftegna*, to the point that they only reserved their *eskista* (dance).⁹ The *neftegna* narrative was used by the EPRDF as a tool to discredit Amhara-based political parties and critics of the ethnic federal arrangement (Vestal, 1999; Abbink, 2006). It branded political parties such as the AAPO and AEUP as *neftegnas*, accusing them of seeking to restore the oppressive system of the imperial past (Semahegn, 2014). Vestal (1999) observed that prominent members of the AAPO were intimidated and arrested by EPRDF security forces after being labelled as *neftegna*.

Nevertheless, the use of *neftegna* to ridicule and vilify the Amhara is not an invention of the EPRDF; rather, it is part of a broader historical process that has framed the Amhara as oppressors and beneficiaries of the imperial system. Nammuna Dilliso, a member of the Hadiya ethnic group, responded to Braukämper’s (2011, p. 168) inquiry about the selective execution of Amhara during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia by recalling, ‘We finished all the *neftegna* without any pit, and I am not afraid to confess this deed’. Ethiopian collaborators with the Fascist Italians, such as Aba Jobir of Jimma province, engaged in the eviction and killing of Amhara as an act of retaliation for what they perceived as Amhara domination (Haddis, 1985). According to Sbacchi (1985), these actions were actively supported by Italian colonial agents. In fact, Fascist Italy deliberately propagated anti-Amhara narratives as part of the classic Roman imperial strategy of *divide et impera*. The following section discusses how colonial powers, such as Fascist Italy and Great Britain, instilled anti-Amhara narratives into the political discourse of Ethiopia.

4.2.1.1. Colonial Powers and the Invention of Anti-Amhara Narratives

The construction of anti-Amhara narratives by colonial powers is reinforced by interpretations of Ethiopian history framed through what Teshale (1995) refers to as the Oriental Semitist Paradigm. As discussed in Chapter Two, this paradigm classifies Ethiopians into so-called ‘civilized’ Semitic and ‘barbaric’ non-Semitic groups. Semitic-speaking peoples, such as the Amhara, are believed to have migrated from South Arabia during the first millennium BCE. Trimingham (1952) described this movement as a form of Semitic colonization, portraying the migrants as settlers who

9. Interview with one former member of EPDM at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

dominated the indigenous populations. However, Tadesse (1972) rejected this colonial framing, contending that the migration was largely private and not an official act of imperial expansion. He nevertheless acknowledged that these settlers played a formative role in Ethiopia's cultural and political development, culminating in the establishment of the Christian kingdom in 1270. While the post-1270 period was marked by the ascendancy of an Amhara ruling class, the socio-political order that emerged was not structured along ethnic lines (Getachew, 1986). The racialization of Ethiopian history, by contrast, was a construct introduced by European colonial scholars in the nineteenth century through a deliberate denial of this historical complexity.

The Battle of Adwa marked the beginning of the racialization of Ethiopian history (Marcus, 2005). Since Africans were not perceived as capable of defeating Europeans, Western writers reframed Adwa as a battle between Whites. The New York World, a newspaper published from 1860 to 1931, reported shortly after the battle that 'the majority of the inhabitants of Abyssinia [Ethiopia] are of Caucasian descent' (Jonas, 2011, p. 269). In this interpretation, Menelik II, who led Ethiopia to victory, was portrayed not as an African but as a member of the Caucasian race (Marcus, 2005). Since Menelik had an Amhara background, 'Europeans imagined the Amhara as settlers, civilized, and non-African in order to reaffirm notions of white supremacy' (Yates, 2021, p. 57). Meanwhile, they portrayed the southern peoples of Ethiopia, such as the Oromo, as backward, claiming they 'had nothing to contribute to the civilization of Ethiopia' (Ullendorff, 1967, p. 21). In this framework, Menelik's late nineteenth-century territorial expansion into southern Ethiopia was likened to the Western civilizing mission in Africa.

The invention of anti-Amhara narratives can, therefore, be attributed to the beginning of the racialization of history. Yet, the narrative has given blood and flesh during Italy's second attempt to colonize Ethiopia in the mid-1930s (Sbacchi, 1985). In addition to using sophisticated arsenals, Mussolini ordered his generals 'to be guided by the ancient Roman *divide et impera* principle of War' (Mogess, 1959, p. 59). In *Ye Mussolini Mestir* (The Secret of Mussolini), Mogess (1959) writes that Mussolini sent colonial agents and scholars to study the people of Ethiopia.

These colonial agents enabled the Fascist Party to gather extensive knowledge about Ethiopia's various ethnic groups, concluding that the Amhara had long dominated the state (Sbacchi, 1985; Gooch, 2007). As a result, the Fascists sought to mobilize non-Amhara populations against the Amhara by portraying them as internal colonizers and presenting themselves as liberators.

However, it would be overly simplistic to claim that this narrative was merely ‘the product of Italian machinations’ (McClellan, 1996, p. 57). Rather, the Fascists strategically exploited historical processes that had shaped modern Ethiopia, particularly the influential role of the Amhara ruling class (Sbacchi, 1985). In doing so, they racialized Ethiopian history by emphasizing three key historical contexts.

First, they questioned the concept of Ethiopia as a nation-state, portraying it as a colonial empire. Leading proponents of this theory were Italian colonial scholars and agents such as Carlo Conti-Rossini and Baron Roman Prochazka. Conti-Rossini presented Ethiopia as *un museo di popoli* in his attempt to characterize Ethiopian ethnic groups as ‘bearers of a bounded system and a unique culture’ (Levine, 1974, p. 20). Conti-Rossini’s assumption, as Levine commented, ‘leads to the erroneous view that before the conquest of Menelik... [the] peoples of Ethiopia had lived independent and self-sufficient lives’ (ibid, p. 21). Levine’s concern is justified when one reads Prochazka’s claim that ‘Emperor Menelik established his rule over peoples and tribes differing entirely from each other in race, religion, and history’ (Prochazka, 1935, p. 54). Prochazka goes on to argue that the Italians had an equal right to rule Ethiopia as the Amharas.

Second, the Fascists propagated the idea that Menelik had established Amhara colonial settlements in the conquered territories. They claimed that Amhara soldiers who settled in these areas were granted authority over specific lands and their inhabitants (Woolbert, 1935). The Fascists exploited this unequal land distribution system to their advantage. They sought to undermine the Christian and Amharic-speaking populations while actively courting Muslims with promises of religious equality and land redistribution for non-Amharic speakers (Ostebo, 2020). In this process, Ostebo notes, the Amhara were dispossessed of their land. Many fled, while those who remained became subject to vengeful actions from those favoured by the Italians (Lentakis, 2005). Third, the Fascists portrayed Menelik’s territorial expansion as a form of cultural imperialism. They argued, as Woolbert (1935, p. 71) observes, that the Amhara regarded those who did not ‘profess Christianity and speak the Amharic tongue’ as inferior.

This recurring narrative partly contributed to Fascist Italy’s defeat of Ethiopia in 1936. Their success was facilitated by the collaboration of elites from non-Amhara populations, though some Amhara elites were also among the collaborators (Seltene, 2003). Ostebo (2020) notes that the Arsi Oromo refused the local Amhara administration’s call to take up arms against Italy, with some

local Oromo chiefs even sending a letter of invitation to the Italians. For instance, as Ostebo (2020) records, Fitawurari Nuho Dhadhi traveled to Somalia, pledging Oromo support to the Italians.

Most importantly, the ‘anti-Amhara’ narrative propagated by Fascist Italians culminated in acts of ‘eliminating Amhara’ from different parts of the country (Sbacchi, 1985, p. 160). The leading members of the Fascist Party instructed their subordinates to execute Amhara (Mockler, 1984). A telegram from General Graziani to General Nasi exemplifies this directive:

Extermination of Amhara chiefs, great and small, must be speeded up, for if this is not done, we can only expect further trouble. Once chiefs are executed, the Amhara will be absorbed by us without difficulty. Along with chiefs, Amhara officials and military commanders must be executed. None should be spared out of a feeling of false pity (Del Boca, 1969, p. 225).

Nasi reported on April 23, 1937, that ‘600 chiefs’ who had surrendered or ‘submitted had been executed in accordance with instructions’ (Mockler, 1984, p. 178). Local officials who collaborated with the Fascists were also involved in the killing and eviction of the Amhara (Haddis, 1985). Aba Jobir gained notoriety for issuing a decree offering a reward of 30 Ethiopian birr to anyone who killed an Amhara (Tadesse, 2012). In general, according to Lapiso (1991), approximately 600,000 to 800,000 Amharas were evicted by the Fascists and their collaborators. Additionally, the Fascists enacted laws outlawing the employment of Amharas in non-Amhara areas and displacing Amharic as a legal language (Sbacchi, 1985).

Beyond taking immediate measures to undermine the human, cultural and political foundation of the Amhara, the Fascists ‘strived to create anti-Amhara nations’ in the Horn of Africa (Jesman, 1963, p. 34). For example, they promoted the idea of forming a Greater Somalia by annexing the Ogaden region to Italian Somaliland (Tibebe, 1991). Similarly, they pursued the creation of Greater Tigray by merging Ethiopia’s Tigray province with Eritrea (Sbacchi, 1985). These attempts to reconfigure states in the Horn further contributed to regional crises, with the pogrom against the Amhara emerging as a particularly significant aspect.

This is because anti-Amhara narratives continued to shape Ethiopian politics even after the withdrawal of Fascists in 1941. Shortly thereafter, Great Britain – through the establishment of the BMA – reinforced these narratives to advance its own geopolitical objectives (Spencer, 2006). This does not mean, however, that Britain remained uninvolved in Ethiopian affairs during the Italian occupation. Following Haile Selassie’s flight to Britain and before the Italian advance into

the southwest, British authorities sought to preempt Italian control by proposing to place the region under British protection (Markakis, 2011). As part of this effort, they encouraged Oromo chiefs from Wollega, Jimma and Illubabor to sign a petition advocating for the formation of a Western Oromo Confederation under British rule (Spencer, 2006). The British Consul in the Horn of Africa reported to London:

The Galla provinces have disarmed the Amhara officials and soldiers in their areas, and the Galla hereditary chiefs have assumed control of the government in their areas. All Galla chiefs have sent seals and signatures and delegations asking the League of Nations to place the provinces of Western Abyssinia under British mandate (Markakis, 2011, p. 113).

Yet, the formation of the Western Oromo Confederation was ultimately unsuccessful, as Fascist Italian forces swiftly advanced into the region (Ezekiel, 2002). However, by establishing the BMA, Britain made another unsuccessful attempt to create new states in the Horn of Africa by carving out provinces from Ethiopia (Getachew, 1986; Spencer, 2006). Political parties formed with British backing to facilitate this effort developed strong anti-Amhara sentiments. For instance, the ELPP blamed Menelik for the suffering inflicted upon Eritreans by the Italians, asserting that he had ‘sold us to the Italians and accepted the price for us’ (Alemseged, 1998, p. 38). As a result, they vociferously depicted ‘the Amhara as the worst enemy’ of Eritreans (ibid, p. 43). While anti-Amhara sentiment was strong among certain Eritrean elites, Asnake (1994) notes that there is no historical evidence of physical attacks against the Amhara during the 1940s.

A strong anti-Amhara sentiment, compounded by physical attacks, was perpetrated by Somalis in the eastern Ethiopia, where Britain maintained a strong presence (Mesfin, 1964; Tibebe, 1991; Ostebo, 2020). One of the deadliest incidents occurred during what became known as the Jeegir War (1942–1944), in which various Somali clans, primarily the Marehan and the Ogadenis, revolted against Haile Selassie’s government (Matshanda, 2019). Many of the insurgents had previously fought alongside the Italians, giving them access to arms and military skills that enabled them to launch a highly organized rebellion (Ostebo, 2020). According to Matshanda (2019), the uprising began with targeted intimidation of the Amhara. She further notes that Britain supported the rebellion, particularly by supplying weapons to the SYL, a party notorious for inciting hostility against the Amhara among the Somali population.

Tibebe (1991) similarly observes that the British government prevented Haile Selassie's troops from expelling the attackers from areas under British control and allowed the rebels to take shelter in these territories. Frustrated by the deteriorating situation, the governor of Harrarge wrote a letter to Addis Ababa, warning that conditions were spiralling out of control. In his report, he stated, 'Some Amhara women were beaten in the market during a routine trade exchange...Many Amhara individuals, feeling threatened by the new circumstances, were leaving the town to settle elsewhere with relatives' (Tibebe, 1994, p. 999).

One thing must be made clear, however: the British were not the sole actors in fostering anti-Amhara sentiment among Somalis. The Haile Selassie government's attempt to reinstate Amhara peasants in fertile areas also contributed to tensions between the Amhara and Somali communities. Mockler (1984) states that the government justified this initiative by claiming that the land in question had been forcefully taken from the Amhara by Italian Fascists and redistributed to Somalis as part of their colonial strategy. However, the forceful implementation of this policy created resentment and provided an opportunity for the British to exploit the situation. Moreover, as Tibebe (1991) notes, the Ethiopian state's failure to provide adequate social services and fully integrate the region into the state further fuelled a sense of alienation and hostility toward the Amhara among the Somali population.

4.2.1.2. Anti-Amhara Narratives in the Era of the ESM

Anti-Amhara narratives became central to the activism of the ESM in the late 1960s. Echoing the interpretations of colonial powers, ESM activists framed Ethiopian history through a lens closely aligned with the Oriental Semitist Paradigm. For example, the May 1970 edition of *Struggle* claimed that 'when Semitic Sabeans crossed from Yemen to the Ethiopian highlands, they displaced Afro-Asiatic-speaking Cushitic groups such as the Oromos'. The publication further argued that 'the Cushitic peoples were pushed southward by Amhara expansion in the 13th century, and their counter-offensive in the 16th century largely restored their original homeland'.

The author of the piece, whose name is not mentioned, seeks to portray the territorial expansion led by the Amhara ruling class since 1270 as a colonial conquest in which the 'migrant' Amhara allegedly subjugated the 'indigenous' Oromo. By contrast, the Oromo migration of the sixteenth century is framed as a legitimate effort to restore their lost land. However, the author does not provide any sources to substantiate their claim. Many writers claim that the Oromo were not

indigenous to Ethiopia but rather migrated from somewhere in Northeast Africa in search of water and grazing land (Yilma, 1966; Levine, 1974; Getachew, 1986). As noted by James Bruce (1804), a Scottish traveller who visited Ethiopia in the eighteenth century, the Oromo committed massacres against non-Oromo populations and engaged in the destruction of the cultures of the communities they encountered along their path.

To Oromo writers, however, what the Oromo perpetrated against the culture of others is framed as the ‘Oromo genius of assimilation’ (Mohammed, 1990), whereas similar actions by the Amhara ruling class are labelled ‘Amhara cultural imperialism’ (Asafa, 2020). The pamphlet titled *The Voice of Oromo*, distributed in Addis Ababa in June 1972, states that ‘to preserve the hegemony of the Amhara, the Amhara ruling class inflicted cultural imperialism by oppressing the culture, language and religion of the Oromo’ (Teglachin, 1972). In fact, this perspective was not exclusive to Oromo students but was also embraced by non-Oromo student activists within the ESM.

The popularity of this perspective was reinforced by the activists’ embrace of Marxism-Leninism, an ideology that provided a method of social analysis for many national liberation movements in the Third World (Bereket, 1984). Hobsbawm (1992) contends that liberation movements in the global South frequently adopted basic concepts and principles as tools of social analysis within different contexts. For example, ESM activists incorrectly applied the Ge’ez word *biher* to represent the English word ‘nation’. In Ethiopian vocabulary, *biher* means ‘place, region, and subdivisions within a region, town and rural area’ (Kidanewold, 1948, p. 66). It refers to the whereabouts of the people, not the people themselves. Historically, Ethiopians have identified themselves through their *biher*, rather than ‘the language they speak, the culture they follow, or the religion they practice’ (Teshale, 2008, p. 366). However, in an attempt to align their activism with Marxism-Leninism, the students used *biher* to symbolize the Stalinist concept of a nation.

This reinterpretation allowed student activists to frame Ethiopian society through an oppressor-oppressed binary. As discussed in Chapter Three, they challenged the legitimacy of Ethiopian nationhood in various mediums, asserting that Ethiopia was merely a collection of disparate ethnic groups forcibly unified through Amhara colonialism. In the September 1969 edition of *Teglachin*, Haile Fida supported Conti-Rossini’s description of Ethiopia as *un museo di popoli*, underscoring the country’s linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. According to him, the imperial regime’s

failure to acknowledge this diversity facilitated the imposition of Amharic and Orthodox Christianity under the pretext of preserving Ethiopian unity.

Haile further developed his argument in the June 1970 edition of *Teglachin*, asserting that the monarchy was not only responsible for cultural imperialism but also complicit in economic exploitation. He accused Emperor Menelik of expropriating land from southern populations and redistributing it to Amhara settlers. The southern peoples, he argued, ‘found rest during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, as the Fascists returned land from the *neftegnas* to the original owners’. However, he argued that this reprieve was short-lived, as the Haile Selassie regime subsequently reinstated the previous landholding system, thereby entrenching the suffering of southern communities. On this basis, Haile concluded that ‘in the current Ethiopia, Amhara national oppression is a fact; hence, oppressed nationalities have the right to self-determination’.

Though Haile Fida wrote extensively on the claim that the Amhara were oppressors, it was Walelign’s (1969) article, discussed in detail in Chapter Three, that sparked a broader and more sustained discussion. Two key factors contributed to the article’s impact. First, it was initially presented to students at Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University), thereby reaching a wide audience (Bahru, 2014). Second, unlike Haile Fida, who was Oromo, Walelign was an Amhara and a member of the ruling class. His bold stance in accusing his own ethnic group and class was perceived by many students as a validation of the nationalities question and as evidence of its legitimacy.

Walelign argued that the so-called Ethiopian nationalism was essentially an extension of Amhara nationalism, compelling other nationalities to ‘speak Amharic, listen to Amharic music, and accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity’. By articulating this position, Walelign echoed the arguments of Carlo Conti-Rossini and Baron Roman Prochazka, whose works in the 1920s and 1930s were widely interpreted as attempts to undermine Ethiopian unity. However, it is important to distinguish Walelign’s motivations from those of colonial agents. While the latter sought to exploit ethnic divisions to facilitate Fascist Italy’s colonization of Ethiopia, Walelign’s aim was to establish a genuine nation-state in which all nations would enjoy equal rights to preserve and develop their languages, cultures and histories.

Although this was Walelign’s objective, current Amhara nationalists ridiculed him as *banda*, an Italian term used by Ethiopians to refer to someone who collaborated with the Fascists. They

attributed this label to him because he was an Amhara who worked with students exhibiting strong anti-Amhara attitudes.¹⁰ Indeed, following the publication of his article, the question of nationalities became a widely accepted worldview for both Amhara and non-Amhara students in defining their actions. However, the adherence of Amhara students, such as Walelign, to the Amhara-oppressor discourse stemmed from Leninist appeals for socialist solidarity, which aimed to foster trust between the working classes of both oppressed and oppressor nations. In the eleventh meeting of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe, held in August 1971, then-president Negede Gobeze advised Amhara students to remove what he called ‘the Amhara chauvinistic mentality’ from their minds (Teglachin, 1971). For Amhara students to have good relations with others, Negede continued, they must fight the chauvinistic sentiment that had possessed the Amhara nation.

Amhara students’ acceptance of the theory that labelled their own nation as an oppressor was thus considered progressive behaviour at the time. If this is the case, then the condemnation of Walelign as *banda* is misplaced. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the discussion sparked by his piece contributed to the formation of liberation movements in the 1970s, which accused the Amhara of perpetrating the wrongs they believed had befallen the ethnic groups they sought to represent.

4.2.1.3. Ethnic Liberation Movements and the Crystallization of Anti-Amhara Narratives

Liberation fronts such as the EPLF, TPLF, ONLF and OLF adopted anti-Amhara narratives to mobilize the populations they aimed to represent (Markakis, 2011). Scholars supporting the agendas of these liberation fronts have also depicted the Amhara as ‘demon enemies’ (Gilkes, 1991, p. 624). For example, Bereket (1984) argues that the Amhara sought to denigrate Eritrean culture and assimilate Eritreans into their own cultural sphere. Similarly, Alemayehu (2013, p. 1123) claims that the Amhara colonized the Oromo, disrespectfully referring to Emperor Menelik as ‘the butcher of the Oromo’.

To that end, the political programs of these liberation fronts have framed their struggles as resistance against Amhara national oppression (Asafa, 1996; Alemseged, 1998). Providing a detailed account of each front’s program is a daunting task. Therefore, this section focuses on the political program of the TPLF to offer a deeper understanding of the context in which anti-Amhara

10. Email interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

narratives were adopted by the group. The selection of the TPLF is based on two key factors. First, the Tigray and Amhara peoples have historically dominated the country's political economy as senior and junior partners (Markakis, 1974). As discussed in Chapter Two, proponents of the Oriental Semitist Paradigm even attributed a Sabeian origin to both groups, claiming they share the same ancestry (Trevaskis, 1960). Examining the TPLF's political program and actions, therefore, provides insight into how it constructed 'ethnic enmity' and the narratives it adopted to create a bifurcation between ethnic groups historically perceived as having common origins.

Second, after capturing power in 1991, the TPLF dominated Ethiopia's political economy until its removal in 2018. It has been widely criticized for institutionalizing ethnic federalism, perpetrating genocide against the Amhara and fomenting ethnic strife among Ethiopians (Birhanu, 2024; Desalegn, 2025). The TPLF was also accused of collaborating with the OLF to kill and evict Amharas in the Oromia region, backing political parties with anti-Amhara sentiments and intervening in the affairs of regional states in violation of a fundamental principle of federalism, self-rule (Vestal, 1999; McCracken, 2004; Abbink, 2011; Bekalu, 2018). Moreover, institutional practices that the TPLF established, such as the 1994 Constitution and the ethnic-federal arrangement, which Amhara nationalists repudiated for exposing the Amhara to structural violence, have continued unchanged in post-2018 Ethiopia. These concerns necessitate a detailed examination of the TPLF's political programs to understand how anti-Amhara narratives were institutionalized in post-1991 Ethiopia.

The TPLF was established in February 1975 to launch an armed struggle (Aregawi, 2008). Its primary objective was to mobilize the Tigrean population in a collective struggle against the perceived existential threat (Young, 1997). This threat was indiscriminately attributed to the Amhara, who were believed to be intent on 'crushing Tigrean national aspirations, and even more so, wiping out their cultural identity' (Markakis, 2011, p. 189). This characterization explicitly framed the Amhara and Tigreans as historically distinct, rival groups.

A key strategy in the formation of resistance by nationalist movements is the construction of a unique identity, often achieved by framing a significant 'other' (Ting, 2008). The TPLF, drawing on Stalinist rhetoric, asserted that 'the Tigrean people have remained distinct with their own language, culture, internally integrated economy and psychological identity' (Markakis, 2011, p. 189). The Amhara, along with the Ethiopian state they believed to dominate, were designated as

their significant ‘other’ (Young, 1997). This strategy echoed the divisive tactics employed by Italian colonizers in the 1930s to create discord between the Tigray and Amhara. As Parlesak (2002) notes, Italian fascists distributed letters to the Tigrean people, claiming they were sent by God to liberate them from Amhara oppression. The letter, Parlesak further records, urged Tigreans to support the Italian government’s efforts to ‘free’ them. Similarly, the TPLF exploited this constructed enmity to mobilize the Tigrean population for its cause.

The construction of the ‘Amhara enemy’ by the TPLF began with the evocation of what Smith (2003) has called ‘golden ages’ for the Tigreans. The manifesto it adopted in 1976 declared that the Tigray people boast a 3,000-year history. This glorious past, the manifesto claimed, continued uninterrupted until the death of Emperor Yohannes IV in 1889, after which the ‘oppressor’ Menelik came to power. For the TPLF, Menelik’s rise marked the beginning of a historical decline, which Özkırımlı (2017, p. 53) terms a ‘recess or somnolence,’ in Tigrean greatness.

Accordingly, the TPLF called on Tigreans to awaken their nation from the agony inflicted by the Amhara, whom it accused of having ‘undermined the autonomy of Tigray and pushed Tigreans to the brink of ignorance, ailments and starvation’ (TPLF, 1976). In making this claim, the TPLF framed the relationship between Tigray and the Ethiopian state through the Leninist theory of the nationality question. However, it remained sceptical about the feasibility of uniting Ethiopia’s various nationalities in a common struggle against shared enemies. Its 1976 manifesto outlined three reasons for this. First, it argued that ‘contradictions between nations in Ethiopia’s present situation are significant’. Second, it asserted that ‘national sentiment, particularly in Tigray, surpasses class consciousness’, making nationality-based mobilization more effective than class-based struggle. Third, it declared that a joint struggle with the Amhara was impossible because the two peoples ‘have developed a bitter hatred towards each other’.

The last point, in particular, is critical, as it disregards the shared history and commonalities that the Amhara and Tigreans have developed over time. To challenge the TPLF’s claim, one need only consider their cooperation during times of external aggression. As Hess (1970) argues, the victory at Adwa would have been unthinkable without their joint efforts. Moreover, they share various cultural and historical ties, including common religious adherence to Orthodox Christianity (Ullendorff, 1967; Markakis, 1974). Tigreans played a junior role alongside the

Amhara in the formation of the Ethiopian state (Messay, 2008). In this process, elite competition for dominance in central politics was not only common between the Amhara and Tigray ruling families but also within the same ruling dynasties. In terms of administration, neither the Amhara nor the Tigrean ruling class governed Ethiopia explicitly in the name of their respective ethnicities (Messay, 1999). Instead, both traced their ancestry to Israel through King Solomon.

To the TPLF's nationalist myth, however, these historical facts are deemed unacceptable. Identity construction is a 'self-conscious and manipulative project carried out by elites seeking to secure their power by mobilizing followers on the basis of nationalist ideology' (Calhoun, 1997, p. 30). After denying their commonalities, the TPLF goes so far as to claim that the Amhara and Tigray are completely distinct peoples, each deserving their own state. The goal of its struggle was to end 'Amhara national oppression' by establishing 'an independent republic of Tigray' (TPLF, 1976). To achieve this goal, the TPLF blocked any democratic solutions that viewed Ethiopians as equal juridical subjects, with shared achievements and failures in addressing the country's problems. As Aregawi points out, 'whenever they found events that served their purpose of fuelling conflict among different nationalities, they magnified them, and whenever they encountered conditions that indicated historical connections, they chose to ignore and downplay them' (Aregawi, 2008, p. 201). He further notes that during the armed struggle, 'anti-Amhara propaganda was subtly encouraged...Cultural events, theatrical performances, jokes, and derogatory remarks were used to disseminate this poisonous attitude (ibid). For instance, here is a lyrical excerpt from a song sung by TPLF fighters:

Those Amhara oppressors spoiled our history,
By denying us our right to live.
Dear esteemed sons of Tigray,
Let us unite together,
To preserve our history from extinction.
Let us fight until our last breath,
To spare our people from disgrace.
Let us reclaim our glory,
By the graves of those Amhara oppressors.¹¹

11. My interviewee from EPDM in November 2024, who fought the Derg regime in collaboration with the TPLF, recalled many songs with lyrics expressing anti-Amhara sentiment that TPLF fighters sang.

The lyrics frame the TPLF's armed struggle as not only a fight to protect the Tigrean people from suffering and deprivation but also a battle to safeguard their history and culture from erasure. The use of 'graves' as a metaphor underscores that the TPLF's rhetoric was not merely about resisting an ideology perceived as oppressive but also about justifying violence against those categorized as Amhara. This process of legitimization was reinforced through systematic indoctrination. Senior TPLF officials fostered resentment by portraying the Amhara as privileged, telling fighters, 'While the Amhara people prosper, you suffer from hunger... While the language of the Amhara is spoken all over the country, your language is confined to Tigray and Eritrea' (Tefera, 2020, p. 325).

This ideological framing lies at the heart of Tigrean nationalism, which, according to Teshale (1995), lacks historical validity. He argues that under Haile Selassie and earlier rulers, Tigray was 'one among equals', at times more privileged and at other times less so. Thus, he contends, Tigrean nationalism should be understood as a fusion of hegemonic aspirations and resistance to Amharic linguistic dominance. While TPLF leaders may have been aware of these historical nuances, they relied on 'invented traditions' to mobilize the Tigrean population against the so-called Amhara-dominated Ethiopian state. This narrative proved effective, attracting youths, intellectuals and peasants to join the armed struggle (Young, 1997; Aregawi, 2008). The culmination of this mobilization was witnessed in May 1991 when the TPLF-led EPRDF made its triumphant entry into Addis Ababa.

4.3. The Institutionalization of Anti-Amhara Narratives under Ethnic Federalism

After consolidating its grip on power, the TPLF-led EPRDF institutionalized anti-Amhara narratives through two key mechanisms: the introduction of ethnic federalism and the promulgation of the 1994 constitution that enshrined it. By design, the ethnic federal arrangement marginalized the Amhara, particularly those residing outside the Amhara region, by categorizing them as non-indigenous.¹² This classification effectively delegitimized their historical presence and undermined their rights to land and political representation in areas they had inhabited for generations.¹³

12. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

13. Ibid.

A fundamental flaw of ethnic federalism, as noted by Assefa (2006, p. 135), is its assumption that ‘every ethnic group is found inhabiting a territorially defined geographical area’. In reality, a considerable portion of the Ethiopian population resides outside the regions predominantly associated with their ethnic group (Semahegn, 2014). Historically, Ethiopians have migrated for diverse reasons, some voluntarily, in pursuit of economic opportunities, and others forcibly, particularly due to state-led initiatives such as the Derg’s resettlement program.

Designed to relocate populations affected by recurrent drought and famine, the Derg’s resettlement program moved large numbers of Amharas to regions such as Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (Abbink, 2009). In addition to state-led resettlement, many Amharas also migrated voluntarily to these areas in search of fertile land and better living conditions. Over time, in certain localities, the Amhara population grew significantly, even surpassing that of the so-called indigenous groups. For example, the 2007 national census indicated that the Amhara population in the Harari region reached 40,279, thereby outnumbering the Harari, who numbered only 11,757. Despite this demographic reality, the Harari regional constitution designates the Harari as the sole ‘owners’ of the region.

Granting exclusive ownership of multiethnic regional states to a single ethnic group is not unique to the Harari regional constitution. The Oromia regional constitution, for example, proclaims the Oromo as the sole owners of the region. Likewise, the Benishangul-Gumuz regional constitution recognizes only so-called indigenous groups, such as the Berta, Shinasha, Gumuz, Mao and Komo, as the owners of the region. As a result, the Amhara, who accounted for 22% of the region’s population (142,557 people according to the 2007 census), are classified as non-indigenous.

More broadly, the 2007 national census reported that approximately 3.5 million Amharas reside outside their designated regional state. However, Amhara nationalists dispute this figure, arguing that the census was manipulated by the ruling party.¹⁴ They contend that many Amharas concealed their true identity out of fear of violence by local authorities.¹⁵ Notably, even the commissioner of the National Population Census acknowledged these concerns to the national parliament, stating that around 2.5 million Amharas were missing from the estimated population.¹⁶ The official

14. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

15. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

16. This became controversial after the Commissioner officially reported it. She stated, ‘we observed a systematic reduction of the Amhara population’. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9r_S-iBY7I

explanation attributed this discrepancy to factors such as epidemic diseases (malaria and HIV) and the expansion of birth control programs in the Amhara region.¹⁷

Amhara nationalists, however, view this population decline as a deliberate act orchestrated by the TPLF-led EPRDF to reduce the demographic weight of the Amhara.¹⁸ Many argue that this decline has significant budgetary implications, as the federal government allocates subsidies partly based on population size.¹⁹ Consequently, they contend that the Amhara region receives minimal federal funding, which adversely affects the expansion of essential social services such as health care, roads, electricity, water and education.²⁰ To support their claims, Amhara nationalists often cite reports by international institutions, arguing that these documents reveal the relative deprivation of the region compared to others.²¹ A frequently cited source is the World Bank (2016), which they claim described the Amhara region as ‘the darkest’ in the country in terms of electricity access. However, a closer reading of the report shows that it does not make such a sweeping claim. Instead, it highlights that while the Amhara region lags behind areas such as Tigray, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, it performs better than several other regional states.

In addition to the budgetary implications, Amhara nationalists argue that the politics of population has been deliberately manipulated by the TPLF to serve its long-term objectives. A leader from NaMA, for instance, claimed that ‘one of the TPLF’s objectives in reducing the Amhara population is to annex more territories from the Amhara region and facilitate the creation of a Tigray Republic’.²² Given the sensitivity of such claims, uncovering concrete evidence remains challenging, as any policy of this nature would likely have been concealed by those involved. Presenting these allegations as established fact risks descending into conspiracy theories, potentially exacerbating interethnic tensions. Nonetheless, some sources suggest that the TPLF forcibly administered birth control measures to Amhara women in areas such as Wolkayt, Tegede, and Telemt. A 65-year-old man, speaking to me over the phone, shared his account:

17. Ibid.

18. Email Interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

19. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025; Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

20. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

21. Email interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

22. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Many Ethiopians, perhaps even Amharas outside Wolkayt, might struggle to believe the atrocities committed against our women...The TPLF forced them to take birth control for three to six years, especially if they refused to marry Tigrean men. As a result, many of them remain childless to this day. I am convinced that the drugs they were given caused infertility.²³

Wolkayt, Tegede and Telemt are fertile provinces that, prior to the TPLF-led EPRDF's rise to power, were part of Begemdir (John, 2021). However, the TPLF forcibly annexed these areas into the Tigray region without consulting the local population. An investigation conducted by scholars from the University of Gondar (UOG) in 2022 suggests that, in an effort to reduce the Amhara presence in these areas, the TPLF carried out targeted killings of Amhara civilians. The report details multiple forms of oppression, including economic marginalization (such as the expropriation of Amhara-owned land for Tigreans) and cultural suppression (exemplified by the forced renaming of children from Amharic to Tigrigna).

These inhumane actions, as Mesganaw (2017) writes, clearly reflect the TPLF's true intentions in instituting ethnic federalism. Mesganaw argues that the TPLF designed it to maintain Tigrean minority rule through a divide-and-rule strategy, specifically aimed at weakening the Amhara. This policy closely resembled the administrative system introduced by the Fascists in the 1930s (Assefa, 2012). The Fascists divided Ethiopia into six administrative units based on ethnic categories: Amhara, Oromo-Sidama, Harar, Somali (including Ogaden), Eritrea (including Tigray and Danakil) and Shewa (Lentakis, 2005). Their primary objective in implementing this division was the 'elimination of the Amhara's claim to superiority over other populations' (Sbacchi, 1985, p. 159). In non-Amhara areas, Amharas were excluded from government positions, and the use of Amharic was prohibited (Aalen, 2011). Beyond these immediate effects, the ethnic consciousness instilled by the fascists in non-Amhara populations contributed to the resentment their elites developed toward the Amhara, and the institutionalization of anti-Amhara narratives under the ethnic-based federal arrangement.

This arrangement, akin to the colonial policy of fascists, prioritized access to education, employment and investment for those classified as 'sons of the land' in non-Amhara areas (Assefa, 2012). Immediately after seizing power, the EPRDF dismissed Amhara civil servants under the

23. I met this elder in Humera during my visit to the area in October 2021, a visit sponsored by Debre Markos University.

guise of civil service reform (Vaughan, 2003). However, the true motive behind this was not administrative reform, but the targeting of an identity explicitly labelled as an ‘enemy’ (Mesganaw, 2021). Chuchu (2019) notes that Arkebe Oqubay, the former mayor of Addis Ababa, evicted a large number of Amharas, justifying the move by stating that approximately 65% of the city administration’s employees were Amhara, making the city administration an epicentre for chauvinistic beliefs. The justification Arkebe used to legitimize his action was part of the broader TPLF-led EPRDF strategy to discredit Amharas, Amhara-based political parties and any institution opposing the ethnic-based federal arrangement.

The terms *neftegna* and *timkhtegna* have been employed to denigrate what is perceived as the exclusive domain of the Amhara. Historically, under Menelik’s administration, *neftegna* referred to ‘soldiers who were stationed and eventually settled in the conquered territories’ (Markakis, 1974, p. 106) to ‘discourage disorder and assist local administration’ (Marcus, 1994, p. 105). Notably, there were no ethnic criteria for recruitment into Menelik’s army (Messay, 1999). Nonetheless, this historical reality was disregarded by the EPRDF and its ideological allies, who ethnically re-coded the term to associate it exclusively with the Amhara (Alemseged, 2022; Asafa, 2023). The October 1993 edition of *Abiyotawi Democracy* contends that ‘when the *neftegna* system was established by Menelik, the major actors were predominantly members of the Amhara nation’. The newspaper further alleges that the ruling elite not only dehumanized ‘the conquered peoples of the south as speaking animals rather than human beings’, but also deliberately ‘mobilized the Amhara whenever it faced resistance from them’.

The Ethiopian past is a ‘contested terrain, selectively remembered, conveniently forgotten, or sometimes invented to the exclusion and silencing of certain voices and the substitution of a hegemonic mythology’ (Sorenson, 1993, p. 38). The EPRDF was particularly successful in discrediting the imperial regime, transforming its interpretation of the past into a hegemonic myth that continues to shape contemporary political narratives. While these accounts contain elements of truth, they are also grounded in unsubstantiated claims. Historical records do not indicate that the imperial regime mobilized the Amhara along ethnic lines, as state-led ethnic mobilization was largely absent before 1991 (Haile, 2017). Moreover, the EPRDF’s position is internally inconsistent. In the January 1994 edition of *Abiyotawi Democracy*, it stated that ‘the *neftegna* system precluded the Amhara from living for themselves by attributing their identity as the domain

of the whole Ethiopians...Now, they have been endowed with the right to administer themselves for the first time'. However, if the Amhara had in fact been mobilized along ethnic lines during the imperial era, as the EPRDF narrative implies, then the claim that they are only now administering themselves for the first time becomes fundamentally flawed.

What is accurate, as discussed above, is that Amhara cultural traits, such as the use of Amharic, were utilized for nation-building purposes. Individuals who opposed the ethnicization of Amhara identity, maintaining that it was historically inseparable from a unified Ethiopian identity, were pejoratively labeled by the EPRDF as *timkhtegna* (Daniel, 2003). At this point, *timkhtegna* was used alongside *neftegna* to ridicule the Amhara. While *neftegna* framed the Amhara as alleged historical oppressors, *timkhtegna* specifically targeted them for perceived cultural chauvinism. The booklet outlining the history of the ANDM defines *timkhtegna* as 'the belief that Amharic and other Amhara cultural traits are superior to other languages and cultures' (ANDM, 2016, p. 149). It further argues that this belief extends beyond mere cultural pride to an intention of imposing Amhara culture on non-Amhara populations. Although the booklet claims that *timkhtegna* applied specifically to the Amhara ruling class, the EPRDF extended its use to encompass the entire Amhara people. This broader application became evident in Alemnew Mekonnen's (2014) remarks during a meeting, where he justified why the Amhara were being targeted. He stated:

Being barefoot, the Amhara have developed a chauvinistic sentiment that we had struggled against and will fight to avoid. As Amhara, we must fight this chauvinistic sentiment...Amhara need to avoid their stingy, chauvinistic attitude if they want to coexist peacefully with others.

This speech was shocking, as it came from the highest official of the ANDM, a party that claimed to represent the Amhara. In response, Amhara nationalists organized protests demanding his dismissal and a formal apology to the Amhara people.²⁴ Protesters carried slogans such as 'Being barefoot is better than an empty mind', directly condemning his disparaging remarks.²⁵ Although the protests did not result in his removal, they caused him significant frustration. As noted by a senior official from the APP, this frustration ultimately led Alemnew to make an unsuccessful request for an ambassadorial appointment.²⁶

24. Email Interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

25. Ibid.

26. Interview with senior official from APP at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

Though the protests occurred immediately after Alemnew's speech due to its direct disparagement of the people, an Amhara activist noted, 'it has long been common among the highest officials of the EPRDF to ridicule Amhara-based political parties, prominent figures and human rights activists'.²⁷ A notable example is the AAPO, which became a target of these labels, accused of attempting to restore the oppressive rule of the imperial era (Vestal, 1999). Vestal observed that leaders of the AAPO, such as Professor Asrat Woldeyes, and other party representatives were accused of being *neftegna*, kidnapped and subjected to unsafe arrest conditions.

The tendency to ridicule prominent Amhara figures was most evident during the 1994 meeting on the draft constitution, a document that many Amhara nationalists believe institutionalizes anti-Amhara narratives.²⁸ The meeting minutes reveal that when non-EPRDF representatives voiced concerns about the draft provisions, EPRDF participants quickly labeled them as *neftegna*, *timkhitegna* and nostalgic for the old oppressive system. According to Asrat (2015), the accusations were particularly intense when opposition came from individuals of Amhara background.

Shaleqa Adimase Zeleke was one of the victims who was forced to temporarily withdraw from the meeting due to the disparaging acts of EPRDF representatives. Frustrated by repeated ridicule, he appealed to the chairperson. According to the meeting minutes, whenever Shaleqa questioned the viability of certain provisions, he was labeled *neftegna* and *timkhitegna*. In his appeal, he stated, 'I am not even a member of the AAPO, so why is the *neftegna* label attached to me?'. In response, Tefera Meskele dismissed his concerns, remarking, 'whether it lives in every corner of the world, *neftegna* does not lose its attributes'. This statement implied that anyone opposing constitutional provisions that contradicted the interests of the EPRDF was labeled *neftegna* and *timkhitegna*, regardless of their actual political affiliation.

Issues like land ownership, the formation of ethnic-based regions and the right to secession emerged as the most contentious topics during the discussions. For instance, Article 40 of the constitution states that land shall not be subject to sale or exchange. When the draft of this provision was under scrutiny, Shaleqa raised concerns that it contradicted the principles of liberalism, which the EPRDF had claimed to uphold at the time. He suggested amending the provision to allow for the sale and exchange of land. In response, an EPRDF participant remarked,

27. Interview with one former member of EPDM at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

28. Email Interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

‘if we allow the right to sell land, those *neftegnas* will make peasants landless by buying it with the money they stole when they were in power’. According to Asrat (2015), before the discussion on this provision, Meles Zenawi voiced a similar concern, asserting that denying the right to sell land was essential to protecting the peasants of oppressed nations and nationalities. Asrat further recounts Meles’s argument, noting that granting this right would enable *neftegnas* to exploit the opportunity by acquiring land at low prices, ultimately impoverishing the local populations.

Meles Zenawi’s speech suggests that this was the official stance of the EPRDF. The principle of democratic centralism within the party made it virtually impossible for members to oppose its position (Bach, 2012). As a result, EPRDF representatives not only rejected arguments against the draft constitution but also disparaged those who voiced opposition (Asrat, 2015). With approximately 86% of the 543 members of the Constitutional Assembly belonging to the EPRDF, opposition voices had little to no influence on the discussion. Consequently, Article 40 was approved without any consideration for the concerns raised by the opposition.

This provision granted ownership of land to the state and to nations, nationalities and peoples. Article 46 reinforced this principle by legitimizing ethnic-based territorial ownership. According to the meeting minutes, discussions on this provision were also contentious, with figures like Shaleqa Adimase warning that prioritizing identity in state restructuring could exacerbate ethnic tensions. In response, Abate Kisho dismissed these concerns, arguing that opposition to the ethnic-based arrangement was ‘tantamount to demanding that the questions of nations, nationalities and peoples remain unanswered’. He accused opponents of acting in the interest of ‘*neftegnas* who seek control over the land of the peoples in the south’. Similar to the approval process of other constitutional provisions, Article 46 was also passed, leaving millions of Amharas categorized as non-indigenous in their country.

It was through this exclusionary process that the constitution was promulgated on December 8, 1994. For Amhara nationalists, this event marked the institutionalization of anti-Amhara narratives by ‘those parties who harbour hatred toward the Amhara’.²⁹ Beyond the rhetoric expressed during the meetings, Amhara nationalists point to specific provisions that they argue systematically marginalize the Amhara from the political economy of the country.³⁰ One of their primary concerns

29. Email Interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

30. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

is the preamble of the constitution, which states that ‘our common destiny can best be served by rectifying historically unjust relationships’. Given the EPRDF’s official narrative that an Amhara ruling class had dominated Ethiopia, the Amhara were presumed to have been the primary beneficiaries of that system. The constitution, therefore, sought to redress this alleged ‘unbalanced relationship’ to secure a better future for Ethiopia.

4.4. Structural Violence against Amhara

The constitutional promise of creating a better future for Ethiopia by addressing past imbalances has proven illusory. In the years following its promulgation, the country has witnessed incessant ethnic conflicts, civil wars and high levels of youth unemployment (Daniel, 2003; Aaron, 2017; Abbink, 2024). These problems have been particularly severe for the Amhara, who have faced various forms of structural violence rooted in entrenched anti-Amhara narratives (Yilkal, 2024). While certain forms of structural violence were referenced in the discussion of the construction and institutionalization of anti-Amhara narratives to illustrate how these discourses are reinforced, this section offers a more detailed examination of structural violence as a foundational cause of Amhara nationalism.

Structural violence is ‘the intentional or unintentional violation or limitation of the rights of individuals or groups resulting from systematic conditions’ (Chrobak, 2022, p. 175). This form of violence is deeply embedded in the social and political structures that shape society. In the case of the Amhara, structural violence is closely linked to anti-Amhara narratives institutionalized through the ethnic federal system and the 1994 constitution. Although these frameworks claim to uphold ethnic self-determination, they have, in practice, politically, economically and socially marginalized the Amhara (Sewale, 2023). It is important to recognize, however, that structural violence against the Amhara predates the post-1991 period. For example, the Derg regime perpetrated systemic violations that contributed to the historical injustices endured by the Amhara.

Although many scholars argue that the Derg regime was dominated by the Amhara (Alemseged, 2022; Asafa, 2023), the regime in fact marginalized Amhara elites by labelling them as part of the ‘enemy class’. Dawit (1989), an insider to the regime, notes that Mengistu Hailemariam was chosen by his comrades to lead the country precisely because he did not have an Amhara background and harboured deep resentment toward the perceived Amhara-dominated imperial

past. Upon assuming power, Mengistu targeted Amhara elites with particular severity, executing and imprisoning many under the pretext of defending the revolution from so-called reactionary forces (Andargachew, 1993). Teffera Degife's experience while in prison exemplifies this treatment. He recalls that most non-Amhara prisoners had the best chance of being:

freed one way or another presumably to avoid the implications that anyone is oppressing 'the minorities'. The only 'minorities' who are scorned are the hopeless Amhara for their past privileges. They have to pay for it now in lost jobs and positions for their hateful identifications to a past now seen as distasteful to the military junta (Teffera, 2003, p. 285).

It is, therefore, ironic to claim that the Derg was an Amhara-dominated system. On one hand, it targeted the Amhara by associating them with the past; on the other, the regime had a multiethnic nature (Kissi, 2006). Nonetheless, as Teshale (1995) noted, the TPLF, OLF and several other liberation fronts adopted the flawed assumption that the Derg represented a continuation of Amhara dominance. Through this hateful propaganda, they perpetrated structural violence that remains less known to the international community (Assefa, 2012; Bekalu, 2018; Birhanu, 2024). If nationalism has an immediate catalyst for its emergence, it is this structural violence that spurred the rise of Amhara nationalism. Its goal is clear, as reflected in the political program of the AAPO (1992): to counter the structural violence against the Amhara.

This objective underscores the profound suffering endured by the Amhara at the hands of political groups espousing anti-Amhara ideologies. The brutality committed by the TPLF and OLF, in fact, predated their rise to political power. For instance, the OLF was accused of massacring 300 Amhara civilians in a single day in Assosa in 1989 (Young, 1996). Similarly, after seizing control of Wolkayt in 1980, the TPLF reportedly targeted and killed numerous Amhara individuals, including businessmen, community leaders, civil servants and landowners (John, 2021; UOG, 2022). During my visit to Wolkayt in 2021, I spoke with an elderly woman who recounted the trauma her community suffered under the TPLF. She recalled:

There was a prominent businessman in our village. When the TPLF fighters first arrived in the village, they approached his house. The businessman welcomed them, offering food and local beverages. Yet, the next day, they returned, killed him and brutally burned his body.³¹

31. Interview with an elderly woman at Maicadra, October 2021.

During my encounter with the local community, they often mentioned a place known as Ghineb (hell), named for the brutal killings carried out by TPLF fighters. The TPLF kidnapped prominent Amharas who were knowledgeable about the history of Wolkayt and interrogated them about the area's historical affiliation.³² When these individuals asserted that Wolkayt was not part of Tigray, they were taken to Ghineb, forced to stand at the edge of deep gorges, and then pushed to their deaths.³³ A 2022 study conducted by the UOG uncovered skeletal remains at the site and documented the findings in a published report.

These brutal forms of structural violence persisted after the TPLF-led EPRDF and OLF jointly formed a transitional government in 1991. A political scientist who witnessed these events noted that the violence appeared to have been legitimized during this period.³⁴ He argued that the violence began with the exclusion of the Amhara from the process of forming the transitional government.³⁵ Amhara nationalists attribute this exclusion to the fact that those in power were liberation fronts with a strong anti-Amhara stance.³⁶ However, many scholars argue that the underrepresentation stemmed from the absence of an Amhara-based political party, as Amhara elites largely opposed the ethnic-based federal arrangement (Admasu, 2010; Markakis, 2011). For example, Getachew (1992) warned the Amhara against engaging in the EPRDF's ethnic politics, asserting that doing so would lead them to 'abandon [their] Ethiopianness and lure [them] into the dead-end street of ethnic mentality'. Regardless of the reason, the Amhara were not formally represented in the process of forming the government that would ultimately decide their future.

An attempt to represent the Amhara within the EPRDF system began in 1994 when the multiethnic EPDM was rebranded as ANDM (Markakis, 2011). However, ANDM has been widely criticized for collaborating with the perpetrators of structural violence. Tamirat Layine, then chairman of ANDM, is remembered for his inflammatory rhetoric, in which he incited violence against the Amhara by asking Somali residents, 'why are you letting these *neftegna*, who used to call you camel herders, live here?'.³⁷ Similarly, Addisu Legese, another key figure in ANDM, is known for his statement: 'we are not responsible for the people outside the Amhara region...They are

32. Interview with one member of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee at Humera, October 2021.

33. Interview with one member of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee at Humera, October 2021.

34. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

35. Ibid.

36. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

37. Interview with one former member of EPDM at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

neftegnas who migrated there to exploit others’.³⁸ Amhara nationalists argue that such remarks reflect the true nature of the ANDM, suggesting that the transformation of the EPDM into the ANDM was orchestrated by the TPLF as a strategic move to counter the growing influence of the AAPO in the Amhara region.

Moreover, most senior members of the ANDM at the time of its transformation were non-Amharas, rendering the party’s representation of the Amhara superficial (Chuchu, 2019). This can be considered one of the factors behind the ANDM’s silence when the OLF and TPLF inflicted brutal killings and mass evictions of the Amhara (Mesganaw, 2017; Sewale, 2023). Another factor is that those who raised concerns were kidnapped and killed by TPLF intelligence forces. A case in point is the deliberate killing of Colonel Lenin Arega, who was known for his opposition to the TPLF’s dominance within the EPRDF and the selective targeting of Amharas. As one former member of the EPDM recounts:

Colonel Lenin was killed on the orders of General Samora Yenus, chief of staff of the Ethiopian army, during the Ethio-Eritrean war [1998–2000]. At the time, General Samora and his TPLF comrades, who dominated the army, deliberately assigned Colonel Lenin to lead a small, ill-equipped unit against the strongest division of the Eritrean army. Their plan was to ensure that he would be killed by Eritrean forces. When the colonel managed to escape the trap, TPLF intelligence agents were instructed to assassinate him and fabricate the story that he had died at the front.³⁹

This interviewee despondently asserts, ‘as a result, we were frightened to oppose the killing and eviction of our people, as we wanted to live for our family’.⁴⁰ This left the Amhara without anyone to formally speak on their behalf when they were subjected to killings and mass evictions across various parts of the country.⁴¹ Yet, human rights institutions such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council reported incidents of eviction and killing to prompt the international community to pressure the TPLF-led EPRDF. For instance, Human Rights Watch (1993) reported that:

In December 1991, OLF cadres repeatedly provoked attacks on Amhara settlers. Villages were burned and civilians were killed. One hundred and fifty-four Christians, mostly Amhara, were killed in Arba

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Gugu, and another forty-six were murdered in a neighbouring area of Harrarge. In July and August 1992, another round of attacks was launched.

Documenting the atrocities against the Amhara is a challenging task, yet a few examples illustrate the scale of the violence. The TPLF evicted approximately 500,000 Amharas from Wolkayt and resettled Tigreans in their place (Bekalu, 2018). In Arba Gugu, around 320,000 Amharas were evicted by the OLF since 1991 (Daniel, 2003). Furthermore, the U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants (2002) reported that over 10,000 Amharas were evicted from Wollega of the Oromia region in 2001. The violence continued in November 2020 when TPLF militiamen massacred approximately 1,565 Amharas in Maicadra (UOG, 2022). In addition, on November 1, 2020, 54 Amharas were killed, followed by the massacre of 400 more on June 18, 2022, in Wollega (Amnesty International, 2020, 2022). Amnesty International (2024) reported another incident of massacre in which government security forces killed more than 50 people in Merawi, located in the Amhara region, on January 30, 2024.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the structural violence against the Amhara is the construction of narratives designed to legitimize such violence. When OLF fighters killed Amharas, they would say *Amartitin nema miti*, Amhara is not a human being (Assefa, 2012). A survivor recalled that during the killings and evictions in Wollega, local officials told them they were ‘*metie* (newcomers) and rootless trees’.⁴² He added that they frightened ‘us by asserting that they had the right to do whatever they wanted’.⁴³ Meles Zenawi’s response in parliament to the issue of the eviction of more than 78,000 Amharas from Guraferda in 2012 also remains memorable:

This is an issue raised by *timkhtegna* politicians. It is an effort to deceive us into believing that Amhara were the target of eviction. The truth is that the eviction was not directed against Amhara, but against recent immigrants from the East Gojjam Zone.

In addition to killings and evictions, these discursive defamations have been used to legitimize economic marginalization, particularly through the dispossession of land from Amhara peasants and urban dwellers. Oromo scholars have advised the Oromia regional government to remove the Amhara from the land they occupy and redistribute it to Oromo farmers (Asafa, 1996; Alemayehu, 2013; Gemechu, 2023). Asafa (2023), a sociologist known for his controversial publications

42. Interview with an Amhara survivor at Debre Markos, December 2024.

43. Ibid.

against the Amhara, argues that dispossessing Amhara peasants of their land is justifiable, as they are remnants of colonial settlers dating back to Menelik's era. These recommendations have been brutally implemented by the Oromia regional government, in collaboration with the OLF and other militant groups (Assefa, 2012; Sewale, 2023). The ultimate goal of these actions is to pave the way for the formation of an independent Oromia Republic, a vision that Oromo nationalists have harboured since the late 1960s.⁴⁴

To further their political agenda, Oromo elites have incited youths to either destroy or seize property belonging to the Amhara (Gemechu, 2023). This is epitomized by the recurring slogan *lafa kana keenyaa dha* (this land is ours), which is frequently waved by youth during protests. The underlying message of *lafa kana keenyaa dha* is a declaration that, since the land belongs to the Oromo, non-Oromos should vacate the region. A notable example is the influential Oromo politician, Jawar Mohamed, who is widely recognized for his provocative slogan, *Oromia out of Neftegna* (Mesganaw, 2017). This rallying cry has been embraced by youth to become a prominent slogan during protests advocating for Oromo nationalist causes.

Fuelled by the *keenyaa* (ownership) mentality, Oromo elites assert that renowned cities, historical sites and provinces in Ethiopia belong to the Oromo (Asebe, 2023). Whenever they encounter a place, city or province with an Oromo name, they unashamedly claim that it was once inhabited by the Oromo and, therefore, belongs to the Oromo regardless of its current inhabitants.⁴⁵ If existing names contradict their narrative, they often introduce new names to reinforce the claim that the area was taken from the Oromo by the *neftegna*.⁴⁶ A prominent example is Addis Ababa, which Oromo nationalists claim as part of Oromo historical territory. They argue that the city, originally called Finfinnee, was renamed Addis Ababa by the *neftegnas*.

The OPP, which currently governs the Oromia region, faces criticism for engaging in the cleansing of non-Oromos from the city and its surroundings to alter the demographic composition. While the EHRC (2023) reported that the cleansing has ethnic elements, the Amhara Association in America (AAA), in its 2023 report, claims that it specifically targeted the Amhara to settle Oromos in their place. AAA's claim can be corroborated by former Oromia region President Lemma

44. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

Megersa, who admitted that the government had resettled ‘more than 500,000 Oromos in Addis Ababa and its surroundings’ (Melaku, 2019). Additionally, the OPP provides lucrative investment opportunities to Oromo businessmen by offering preferential treatment, such as land allocations, loans and tax reductions (Meskerem, 2024). Under the pretext of corridor development, historic villages predominantly inhabited by the Amhara have also been completely demolished (AAA, 2023). In a leaked speech, Shimeles Abdisa stated, ‘in the name of beautifying the city, we removed *neftegnas* from the centre of the city’.⁴⁷

Summary

This chapter examines the debates over the rise of Amhara nationalism and identifies the factors that contributed to its emergence. It argues that Amhara nationalism emerged as a counter-state-framed nationalism in response to the official nationalism of the post-1991 Ethiopia. Those who seized power in 1991 institutionalized anti-Amhara narratives initially constructed by colonial powers to undermine collective resistance. The institutionalization of these narratives was facilitated by the creation of ethnic-based federal arrangement. Ethnic federalism rests on the flawed assumption that all ethnic groups in Ethiopia are territorially contiguous. Legally reinforced by the 1994 constitution, this system grants ethnic groups the right to own an ethnic homeland. Consequently, millions of Amhara living outside the Amhara region are rendered non-indigenous, depriving them of recognition as rightful owners of the places they have long settled in their country. This exclusion serves as the basis for structural violence against the Amhara, encompassing political underrepresentation, economic marginalization, killings, evictions and cultural stigmatization. However, the roots of such violence extend beyond the post-1991 era. Italian fascists, Great Britain and the Derg regime also, intentionally or unintentionally, perpetrated or supported structural violence against the Amhara. The emergence of Amhara nationalism since 1991 can be understood as a response to these entrenched anti-Amhara narratives and the subsequent structural violence.

47. For a translation of the speech from Afan Oromo to Amharic, see:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCqgCwYUMT0>

Chapter Five

Amhara Nationalism in Motion: Ideology, Identity and Repertoire of Contention

5. Introduction

The previous chapter argued that Amhara nationalism has burgeoned since 1991 in response to the structural violence stemming from entrenched anti-Amhara narratives. To counter this violence, Amhara nationalists have employed various forms of resistance formation, which the present chapter discusses in detail. The concept of resistance formation refers to the process by which marginalized groups develop, organize and sustain opposition against dominant structures, ideologies and systems of power (Foucault, 1975). When political, religious, or ethnic minorities perceive themselves as oppressed, they mobilize to challenge their subjugation, assert their identity and pursue recognition and autonomy (Denzin, 2017). These groups may adopt different mechanisms of resistance, including discursive, ideological, institutional and armed strategies.

Amhara nationalists have similarly adopted multiple resistance tactics to counter what they perceive as an anti-Amhara system that marginalizes the Amhara. Their resistance formation encompasses discursive resistance, such as redefining *Amharaness* and reclaiming history; everyday resistance, including social media campaigns and street protests; and armed resistance, exemplified by the Amhara Democratic Forces Movement (ADFM) and the Fano movements. This suggests that while Amhara nationalists share the common goal of ending structural violence against the Amhara, they employ diverse tactics in their resistance efforts.

Beyond tactical differences, Amhara nationalists also diverge ideologically, ranging from advocating for an independent Amhara state, as reflected in BETAM's political program, to seeking the survival and protection of Amharas within the Ethiopian state, as seen in the manifestos of AAPO, ADFM and NaMA. This chapter examines the ideological complexity within Amhara nationalism and the diverse resistance tactics adopted by Amhara nationalists.

The first section offers a critical assessment of the Amhara democratic nationalism promoted by the ruling ANDM, followed by a discussion, in the second section, of the various nationalist ideologies advanced by Amhara-based opposition political parties. Given that nationalism, as an ideology, assumes the world is divided into nations and that their existence is a prerequisite for nationalist movements (Freeden, 1998), the third section explores how Amhara nationalists seek

to construct and define Amhara identity. The fourth section approaches Amhara nationalism as a social movement, highlighting the emergence of Amhara-centered artistic expressions, festivals, academic journals and historical research as manifestations of nationalist sentiment. It also examines the tools and strategies employed by Amhara nationalists to mobilize the public, including the use of social media campaigns. This is followed by an analysis of the repertoire of contention adopted by Amhara nationalists, encompassing both non-violent and violent tactics. The final section summarizes the central arguments of the chapter.

5.1. ANDM's Amhara Democratic Nationalism: A Nationalist Ideology?

Many theorists argue that nationalism is an ideology that constructs the idea of the nation and uses it as a foundation for political action (Kellas, 1998; Malešević, 2006). Smith (2010) describes nationalism as an ideological movement aimed at attaining autonomy, unity and identity for the imagined nation. As such, nationalism as an ideology consists of three key elements (Smith, 1986; Özkirimli, 2005). First, nationalists prioritize the nation as the primary framework for human identity and practice. Second, they ascribe a positive valorization to their own nation. Third, they seek to translate these principles into political and institutional expressions. Freeden (1998) argues that such institutional expression is realized through territorial claims, which are framed as historically rooted and long-standing. By asserting territorial and historical continuity, nationalists deliberately cultivate a sense of belonging among members of the nation.

Although providing institutional expression to a 'national homeland' is typically the task of nationalists from within the nation (Smith, 2003), the case of the Amhara presents a distinct trajectory. As discussed in Chapter Four, the first attempt to establish a defined constituency for the Amhara was initiated by Fascist Italy in the 1930s (Sbacchi, 1985). The Fascists sought to create an Amhara region by merging the provinces of Gojjam, Gondar, Wollo and Shewa, where the Amhara predominantly resided (see Annex II). However, this project was abandoned following the Fascists' withdrawal in 1941 and the subsequent restoration of the pre-1935 administrative structure by the Haile Selassie government (Jesman, 1960). Decades later, the idea of an Amhara homeland was revived and institutionalized in 1991 under the TPLF-led EPRDF.

The intention of both political groups was not to uphold the Amhara's right to self-determination. As Bahru (2014) notes, the ethnic formula used by the Fascists to establish governates in Italian

East Africa was not designed for genuine self-determination but rather as a divide-and-rule strategy. Similarly, the TPLF-led EPRDF's approach was not aimed at empowering the Amhara but at consolidating TPLF dominance over the political economy of the country (Semahegn, 2014; Bekalu, 2018). In both cases, the Amhara were framed as historical oppressors (Aalen, 2011). The strategy employed by both the Fascists and the EPRDF to rally non-Amhara populations centered on the claim that their mission was to liberate them from alleged Amhara domination (Assefa, 2012). Thus, the institutionalization of an Amhara national homeland was not intended to promote self-determination, cultural revival, or identity recognition. Instead, it served to render the Amhara politically vulnerable and subject them to structural violence.

Even what the ANDM termed 'Amhara Democratic Nationalism' was not designed to genuinely advocate for the concerns of the Amhara. The November 1995 edition of *Abiyotawi Democracy* stated that 'one of the major goals of Amhara democratic nationalism is to ensure that the Amhara masses can be represented in deciding the affairs of the country'. The newspaper further argued that 'this nationalism allows the Amhara to reclaim their own identity, live equally with other nations, nationalities and peoples, and dismantle the superiority complex instilled in the minds of the people'. Thus, according to the ANDM, Amhara democratic nationalism was a means through which the Amhara could administer themselves for the first time, overthrow the *neftegna* system and dismantle the chauvinistic nationalism associated with this system (Abiyotawi Democracy, 2016). In its official narrative, the ANDM claimed that this form of nationalism enabled the Amhara to develop their own language, culture and history, elements it argued had been obscured for centuries under the broader Ethiopian identity.

Yilkal (2024) appears to characterize the so-called Amhara democratic nationalism as official Amhara nationalism, primarily by relying on party-produced documents. While he claims to reinterpret the development of Amhara nationalism from the perspective of participants, an academically sound approach, the lack of critical engagement with both written narratives and ground realities weakens the credibility of any scholarly analysis. One of the central challenges in the study of nationalism is that every political group asserts itself as the legitimate representative of the people, and the ANDM is no exception. However, a closer examination of the party's origins (see Chapter Four), the predominance of non-Amhara figures in its leadership (Yared, 2019) and its silence – or tacit approval – of various forms of structural violence against the Amhara (Bekalu,

2018; Chuchu, 2019), suggests that Amhara democratic nationalism functioned less as a genuine emancipatory project and more as a façade aimed at maintaining Amhara political subordination.

Moreover, the role of the ANDM ranged from silence to active cooperation when Amhara lands, such as Wolkayt, Telemt and Raya, were annexed to the Tigray region, Metekel was incorporated into the Benishangul-Gumuz region, and Addis Ababa and Dera were officially recognized as the historic land of the Oromo (Chuchu, 2019). What is even more perplexing is that the OPDO, which governed the Oromia region as part of the EPRDF, had never anticipated gaining control over the capital city and its surrounding areas (Daniel, 2011). In an interview with Daniel, Negaso Gidada, Ethiopia's president from 1995 to 2001, stated that Meles Zenawi orchestrated the decision to prevent the Amhara from maintaining territorial contiguity with Addis Ababa.

Why, then, is the so-called Amhara democratic nationalism of the ANDM considered an official form of Amhara nationalism? While the party administered the Amhara region with its own flag and anthem, and established institutions bearing the name Amhara, such as the Amhara Media Corporation, the Amhara Development Association and the Amhara Credit and Saving Institution, which reinforced Amhara identity in everyday practice, the underlying worldview of the ANDM diverged significantly from its rhetoric.

Anderson (2006) defines a nation as an imagined community, where members feel a sense of belonging and act on behalf of one another, even without direct contact. However, as discussed in Chapter Four, key ANDM personnel openly stated that they were not responsible for representing Amharas residing outside the Amhara region. This stance contradicts the fundamental expectation of nationalists – to act on behalf of all members of the nation. There has also been longstanding suspicion that influential figures within ANDM were not Amhara but rather political opportunists installed in leadership by the TPLF (Yared, 2019; Chuchu, 2019). Yared (2019), who served as the chairman of the EPDM in its early years, writes that during the armed struggle, key EPDM figures who later came to dominate ANDM identified themselves as non-Amhara. For example, Yared recorded that Addisu Legese identified himself as Oromo, Tamirat Layne as Gurage and Bereket Simon as Eritrean. Their non-Amhara background, some argue, explains their silence, or even cooperation, when the Amhara became victims of structural violence.⁴⁸

48. Interview with a former member of EPDM at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

This does not mean, however, that Amharas were entirely absent from the ANDM or the government it established in the Amhara region. A former ANDM member recalled in an interview that when the EPDM transformed into the ANDM, ‘most of its members were Amharas. However, the majority were peasants with little educational background and limited awareness of the broader Ethiopian political economy’.⁴⁹ He further asserted that ‘educated Amharas who raised concerns were either eliminated by the TPLF-led EPRDF intelligence or remained submissive, either out of fear for their lives or in pursuit of political and economic gains’.⁵⁰ The latter perspective is echoed by contemporary Amhara nationalists, who argue that ‘self-serving political and economic interests led Amhara elites within the ANDM to remain silent or even collaborate in the killing and eviction of Amharas’.⁵¹ These individuals, often labeled by critics as ‘black Amharas’, are regarded as betrayers of their own people.⁵² This phenomenon can be understood through Primo Levi’s (1988) concept of the ‘gray zone’, which describes how some Jews collaborated with Nazi policies designed to exterminate Jewish communities across Europe.

It is therefore untenable to categorize the so-called Amhara democratic nationalism promoted by the ANDM as part of Amhara nationalism, whether official or otherwise. Instead, it was an invention designed to rule the Amhara by instilling a sense of shame over the alleged actions of past Amhara ruling elites.⁵³ In doing so, the Amhara democratic nationalism repudiated one of the central elements that define nationalism as an ideological movement: assigning a positive valorization to one’s own nation. The *timkhtegna* and *nefteгна* labels have frequently been used in the official documents of the ANDM to ridicule what has been perceived as the domain of the Amhara (Abiyotawi Democracy, 1995, 2016; ANDM, 2016). In addition, Amhara democratic nationalism does not succinctly define *Amharaness* (Yilkal, 2024), and without such a definition, mobilizing the people along nationalist lines becomes an impossible task.

5.2. Amhara-Based Opposition Parties and Their Nationalist Ideologies

The post-1991 period in Ethiopia witnessed the emergence of Amhara-based opposition political parties seeking to end structural violence against the Amhara. One of the earliest of these was the

49. Interview with a former member of ANDM at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

50. Ibid.

51. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

52. Ibid.

53. Interview with an Amhara sociologist at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

AAPO, founded on January 13, 1992. The party's core goal was to ensure that 'the interests, aspirations, democratic rights and freedoms of the Amhara people are respected wherever they are found' (AAPO, 1992). During AAPO's second anniversary, then-chairman Professor Asrat Woldeyes reflected on the party's formation, stating that it was necessitated by 'the brutal massacre of the Amhara at the hands of the EPRDF and the OLF, as well as the existential threats to the territorial integrity of Ethiopia' (AAPO, 1994). This suggests that AAPO's nationalist ideology centered on advocating for the interests of the Amhara within the framework of the Ethiopian state.

To counter the structural violence, the AAPO engaged in various political activities, including mobilizing the Amhara along ethnic lines, reporting massacres committed against them to the global community and fostering Amhara identity consciousness. Professor Asrat, regarded as a martyr by contemporary Amhara nationalists, played a crucial role in urging the international community to pressure the EPRDF regime to halt its attacks on the Amhara. In a letter sent to U.S. Congressman Mervyn D. Dymally on September 17, 1992, Professor Asrat provided extensive documentation of massacres committed against the Amhara in the Oromia region. He reported that authorities in the region had 'officially announced that the Amhara must evacuate or else face extermination' (Asrat, 1992). He further asserted that the EPRDF and OLF had deliberately targeted the Amhara with the intent to eliminate the people and eradicate their culture. Professor Asrat, therefore, urged the congressman to press the U.S. State Department to take action against what he described as the genocidal acts perpetrated by Ethiopia's Stalinist-style government.

At the domestic level, the AAPO engaged with ordinary Amhara through meetings, urging them to struggle for their survival (Joireman, 1997). These meetings aimed to instill Amhara consciousness in the minds of the people (AAPO, 1994). This effort was driven by the fact that, at the time, a significant portion of Amhara elites rejected the notion that the Amhara constituted a distinct ethnic group (Getachew, 1992; Takkele, 1994). Professor Asrat delivered a well-known speech in which he remarked, 'although some believe that there is no unique Amhara identity, perpetrators of killings never fail to identify the Amhara people'.⁵⁴ He also fiercely criticized Professor Muse Tegegne, who had claimed that the people of Gojjam were not Amhara but Falasha

54. This speech is widely quoted by Amhara nationalists to reject the claim that Amhara is not a distinct nation. I learned that Professor Asrat said this during an interview I conducted with a former member of AAPO in Addis Ababa in November 2024.

of Israelite origin (AAPO, 1994). To Professor Asrat, such assertions were deliberate attempts to divide the Amhara and render them more vulnerable to subjugation and mistreatment.

The process that formed the current Ethiopian state, which the TPLF, OLF and other liberation fronts depicted as a history of subjugation, was reframed by the AAPO as part of the Amhara's historic role in building the Ethiopian state. For instance, Professor Asrat asserted that 'the Amhara cannot be accused of being oppressors because of their role in protecting Ethiopia from foreign invaders and in safeguarding its territorial integrity' (AAPO, 1994). This perspective embodies a nationalist ideology in which Professor Asrat aimed to promote a positive portrayal of the Amhara as a response to external vilification.

The nationalist movement initiated by the AAPO, nevertheless, was not welcomed by the TPLF-led EPRDF regime. Security forces intimidated AAPO members, arresting and killing some of them (Joireman, 1996). Professor Asrat was subjected to unsafe arrest conditions until his death in 1999. The EPRDF even tended to attribute the structural violence against the Amhara to the AAPO. The October 1993 edition of *Abiyotawi Democracy*, for example, reported that 'the eviction and killing incident that happened in Arba Gugu of the Oromia region resulted from the AAPO's political propaganda'. According to the newspaper, the propaganda incited that 'since the Amhara are being massacred by the pastoralist Oromo, they must rise together to avenge it'. Verifying the reality of such a report is impossible, but as one former AAPO member claims, 'such claims are mere accusations and are intended to give the ethnic-based eviction the character of a civil war'.⁵⁵ The interviewee stated that such accusations contributed to the transformation of the AAPO into AEUP in 2002 to avoid becoming a scapegoat for the EPRDF's mistreatment of the Amhara.⁵⁶

After the transformation of AAPO into AEUP, the Amhara waited for an opposition party bearing their name until the formation of BETAM in October 2015. The only exception during this period was the ADFM, established in February 2010, to launch an armed struggle from Eritrea. A closer look at the ADFM manifesto indicates that its nationalist ideology was closely aligned with that of AAPO. The only difference, according to Denekew Biabale, who was the head of ADFM's international affairs, was the mode of operation, as they preferred armed struggle.⁵⁷ Yet, ADFM

55. Interview with a former member of the AAPO at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

56. Ibid.

57. Interview with Denekew Biabale at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

abandoned its commitment to armed struggle after Prime Minister Abiy came to power in 2018.⁵⁸ Upon its return to Ethiopia in September 2018 after negotiations with the Ethiopian government, the party commenced its involvement in peaceful political struggle. Yet, its political program remained unchanged, focusing on safeguarding Amhara interests within the territory of Ethiopia.⁵⁹

A more radicalized nationalist ideology within Amhara nationalism emerged with the formation of BETAM, founded by Amhara diaspora communities from North America, Europe and Australia. Mesganaw Andualem, BETAM's chairman, argues that the primary obstacle hindering the success of the Amhara nationalist movement is its failure to distinguish itself from Ethiopianist perspectives.⁶⁰ In an email interview, he said that by introducing a radical ideology advocating for an independent Amhara state, BETAM aimed to carve out space for the Amhara, independent of concerns for the Ethiopian state.⁶¹ He contends that the responsibility for preserving Ethiopia's unity should rest with all Ethiopians, not solely with the Amhara.⁶² However, in his 2021 memoir, Mesganaw acknowledges that many Amharas react with frustration when confronted with the idea of secession. He views this reaction as justified, asserting that 'the Amhara have strong historical, cultural, psychological and natural ties to Ethiopia'.⁶³ Yet, he maintains that ensuring the state's survival first requires recognizing a fundamental truth: the Amhara must survive.⁶⁴

The idea of forming an independent Amhara state not only frustrated many Amharas but also alarmed TPLF supporters, who viewed this radical ideology as a potential threat capable of spreading across Ethiopia.⁶⁵ This fear materialized when the social media mobilization initiated by BETAM's founders played a crucial role in fostering Amhara consciousness, even after the party's dissolution on March 6, 2016 (Mesganaw, 2021). By July 2016, public protests, sit-ins and boycotts targeting party-affiliated businesses erupted throughout the Amhara region (Solomon, 2022). These sustained opposition movements, alongside resistance from other ethnic groups, ultimately contributed to the TPLF's relinquishment of power, paving the way for Abiy Ahmed and his allies to assume leadership in 2018.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Email Interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

In addition to ushering in new leadership in national politics, post-2015 Amhara activism played a key role in the proliferation of several Amhara-based political parties. For instance, the dissolved AAPO was reestablished as the Second AAPO, NaMA was formed in 2018 and the Amhara Ghion Movement emerged in 2019. The political programs of these parties focus on ending the structural violence against the Amhara within the Ethiopian state. The idea of forming an independent Amhara state, which had gained traction among many Amhara activists, was sidelined due to the new leadership's promise to end ethnic-based attacks.⁶⁶ The justification for this shift in focus was further reinforced by the renaming of the ANDM to the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), which pledged to protect the interests of the Amhara nationwide (Yilkal, 2024). These political promises even led Mesganaw, the pioneer of the secessionist movement, to abandon his position. In an interview, he explained, 'we raised the issue of forming an independent Amhara state for tactical purposes, to mobilize the Amhara and demonstrate to the TPLF that secession is not their exclusive domain'.⁶⁷ He argued that one of the TPLF's strategies to deter Amhara mobilization was the threat, 'if we lose power, we will secede from Ethiopia'.⁶⁸ The fear of Ethiopia's disintegration, according to Mesganaw (2021), prevented the Amhara from mobilizing along ethnic lines. Hence, he claims that they shattered this fear, enabling the Amhara to carve out space for themselves.

The experience of Amhara nationalism aligns with Smith's (2009) assertion that nationalist movements are rarely homogeneous; they encompass competing narratives and divergent visions of the nation's past, present and future. Connor (2004) writes that nationalism is often shaped as much by elite rivalry and personal ambition as by deep-seated ideological commitments. This dynamic is evident within Amhara nationalism. As one of the highest-ranking leaders of NaMA explained, elite competition extends beyond ideological differences to struggles for control over key leadership positions and financial resources.⁶⁹ These internal rivalries have made these parties susceptible to interference from the ruling party, which has sought to co-opt or destabilize them.⁷⁰ This has significantly weakened these parties, ultimately leading to their complete dissolution. A notable example is BETAM, where, according to Mesganaw (2021), competition for leadership

66. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

67. Email Interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024.

68. Ibid.

69. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

70. Ibid.

positions, the misuse of party funds for personal gain and the infiltration of ANDM personnel all contributed to its collapse.

5.3. Identity Construction as Resistance Formation

The most significant challenge Amhara nationalists have faced in mobilizing the Amhara toward common goals is the contested nature of Amhara identity (Mesganaw, 2017). Both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian historians, anthropologists and sociologists have debated whether the Amhara constitute a distinct identity (Hoben, 1973; Levine, 1974; Baxter, 1978; Takkele, 1994; Tegegne, 1998; Michael, 2008; Admasu, 2010; Yared, 2022; Yilkal, 2024). Beyond scholarly debates, politicians have also sought to define Amhara identity in ways that often align with their own political motives. This debate intensified following the institutionalization of ethnic federalism, which linked political representation and resource allocation to ethnic identity.

The first debate was aired on Ethiopian Television in July 1991, featuring the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and Mesfin Woldemariam. In response to a question about why the Amhara were not represented in the transitional conference that established the ethnic-based federal arrangement, Mesfin (1991) asserted, ‘representation is possible for things that are alive...There is no distinctive Amhara ethnicity, hence it cannot be represented’. He argued that the Amhara do not constitute a distinct ethnic group but rather encompass all Amharic speakers in the country. His position was grounded in the historical significance of Amhara cultural traits, which had been widely adopted across Ethiopia during the lengthy process of state formation. Regarding self-identification, Mesfin contended that most Amhara primarily identify based on their place of birth rather than their ethnic background.

Meles (1991), by contrast, argued that the Amhara existed as a distinct identity, ‘just like other ethnic groups in the country’. In response to the question of why the Amhara were not represented, he contended that, first and foremost, it was ideas rather than ethnicity that were represented. Secondly, even if an effort had been made to represent the Amhara, there was no Amhara-based political group to assume that role. According to Getachew (1992), Meles’s recognition of Amhara identity was rooted in his interpretation of Ethiopian history through an oppressor-oppressed framework. In this view, Meles sought to define the Amhara as a distinct ethnic category and use

this classification as a strategic move to legitimize his efforts in rallying support from non-Amhara populations by constructing an enemy nation.

These popular debates were followed by the publication of academic works. However, this does not imply that no scholarly discussions on the status of the Amhara as a distinct ethnic group existed before 1991. In his seminal study on land tenure among the Amhara, Hoben (1973, p. 3) described them as ‘a self-conscious ethnic and linguistic group’. Similarly, Levine (1965, p. 5), in *Wax and Gold*, characterized the Amhara as a distinct ethnic group, portraying them as ‘practical-minded peasants, austere religionists, and spirited warriors’. In another seminal work on the evolution of Ethiopia as a multiethnic polity, Levine (1974, p. 118) observed that, in terms of self-identification, the Amhara ‘identify themselves either on a regional basis – Gojjame vs Gondare – or by means of the supraethnic term Habesha’.

Most writers in post-1991 Ethiopia have cited Levine’s latter argument to support the claim that the Amhara do not constitute a distinct ethnic group (Takkele, 1994; Tegegne, 1998; Admasu, 2010). Michael (2008), for instance, referenced Levine to argue that most individuals labeled as Amhara by outsiders identify simply as Ethiopian or by their province. Similarly, Takkele (1994, p. 185) described the Amhara as ‘a supraethnically conscious ethnic Ethiopian serving as the pot in which all the other ethnic groups are supposed to melt’. However, these interpretations misrepresent Levine’s position. He explicitly acknowledged that ‘despite the pervasiveness of regionalism among Amhara...some sense of a truly national consciousness seems to have been present at least since the fourteenth century’ (Levine, 1974, p. 118). He then concluded that the Amhara belonged to a national community, possessing their own language, culture, history, symbols and political traditions.

Those who wrongly quote a single sentence from Levine to support their claim, therefore, are committing academic obfuscation. If we accept their assertion at face value, they overlook the fact that self-identification begins at the micro-level. As Lewis (1996, p. 39) explains, ‘ethnicity begins at home – but can be extended to others who are seen to share at least some of the same characters and symbols’. This idea resonates with an observation made by an Amhara activist during a Google Meet focus group discussion, where she shared, ‘when I meet a person from Wollo, I used to introduce myself as Gondare. When I meet a Tigrean, I used to introduce myself as an Amhara.

When I meet an African brother, I used to introduce myself as Ethiopian'.⁷¹ She continued, 'my identity expanded from my locality at the microlevel to a broader human identity in the international community'.⁷² This assertion illustrates how identity can shift based on context and circumstances. In this regard, Hall (1996) is correct in claiming that identity is always in a process of becoming and is subject to constant transformation in response to changing situations.

The other problem with proponents who claim the Amhara are not a single ethnic category is the inconsistency in their argument. Although they identify themselves as constructivists, they often fall back into the trap of primordialism, which views an ethnic group as an aggregate of people with common ties such as language, a myth of common origin, shared historical memories and customs. Tegegne, for instance, initially embraced a constructivist approach but later rejected the distinctiveness of Amhara identity by citing elements from primordialism:

The Amhara do not have a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, a link with homeland (they have several homelands), but they do have elements of common culture, specifically language, and a sense of solidarity among at least some members of their group (1998, p. 117).

While Tegegne falls into the trap of primordial identification, he simultaneously overlooks the fact that having multiple homelands is a common phenomenon in human societies. Can we reject Israel as a nation simply because its people were dispersed across Europe before the formation of their state in 1948? The case of Israel further challenges another argument by Tegegne (1998), which asserts that minimal solidarity among the Amhara prevents them from being considered a distinct nation. As Özkirimli (2017) argues, every nationalist movement has been initiated by a small group of elites who mobilize the masses in the name of the nation. When Israeli nationalism emerged, it was initially spearheaded by a handful of elites in Europe who sought to awaken the dormant identity of the Israelites (Heller, 2012). Identity, therefore, is not static; it can become silent or dormant due to various factors, only to be reawakened under changing circumstances (Hall, 1996). In the case of the Amhara, their identity remained dormant largely due to their strong attachment to the Ethiopian state (Clapham, 1988). However, as political conditions shifted and the Amhara experienced structural violence at the hands of different political actors, a group of Amhara elites began mobilizing their community to revive their unique identity. A historical precedent for this

71. Activist focus group discussant via Google Meet, December 2024.

72. Ibid.

phenomenon can be seen in the early 1970s, when influential figures during Haile Selassie's era convened to deliberate on the need to rally the Amhara along ethnic lines.

Another key aspect overlooked by those who reject the existence of a distinct Amhara nation is that national identity is shaped not only through self-identification but also through the way others define and categorize a group (Wodak et al., 2009). A historical example of this can be found in James Cowles Prichard's work, originally published in 1813, where he defined the Amhara as a dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia. During the Italian occupation, Fascists explicitly labeled the Amhara as an oppressor nation to rally support from non-Amhara populations. From that point onward, as discussed in Chapter Four, various political groups in Ethiopia have continued to frame the Amhara as an enemy nation. If this is the case, how should one refer to those who have been killed or forcibly displaced after being labeled as an oppressor nation since the mid-1930s? For Amhara nationalists, they are Amhara individuals who have been subjected to structural violence due to their distinct identity at the hands of various political groups.⁷³

Considering that the mobilization of the Amhara along ethnic lines is a result of structural violence, more recent writers argue that the construction of Amhara identity is reactive rather than imaginative (Admasu, 2010; Tezera, 2021; Yilkal, 2024). However, this perspective overlooks the imaginative aspects of *Amharaness*, wherein Amhara nationalists have used shared history, myths of common ancestry, language and culture as justifications for the existence of a distinct Amhara identity. National identity is a 'purely discursive construct' (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 28), shaped by 'multiple and competing discourses' (Brubaker, 2006, p. 35). It is continuously constructed through negotiation and renegotiation, and thus remains malleable, fragile, and, frequently, ambivalent and diffuse (Wodak et al., 2009). Amhara nationalists, for instance, strive to construct an imagined Amhara in opposition to positions espoused by various social groups. First, while they acknowledge Meles and his counterparts' assertion that the Amhara constitute a distinct ethnic group, they reject their characterization of the Amhara as 'the oppressors'.⁷⁴ Second, they criticize those who deny the existence of a unique Amhara identity for 'preventing the Amhara from organizing along ethnic lines in an era when ethnic politics is prevalent'.⁷⁵ Therefore, they

73. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024., Email Interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024., Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

74. Interview with an Amhara sociologist at Addis Ababa, December 2024.

75. Email Interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024.

endeavor to construct an imagined Amhara identity that is not associated with oppression, but instead frames the culture and language of the Amhara as unifying forces for the Ethiopian state.

This suggests that Amhara nationalists use identity construction as a form of discursive resistance by challenging efforts to homogenize or suppress the presence of a distinct Amhara identity. The process of constructing an imagined nation, according to Hobsbawm (1992), is conveyed through various social forms, including events, symbols, practices, media systems and specific occasions such as national holidays. Amhara nationalists attempt to construct an Amhara identity by engaging with ordinary Amhara through various channels, such as social media platforms, sporting events, Victory Day celebrations, and incidents of massacres and evictions. These strategies aim to shape perceptions and cultivate solidarity among the Amhara, emphasizing historical continuity, cultural pride and resilience in the face of adversity. In general, Amhara nationalists employ three key discursive strategies to construct a collective Amhara identity: essentializing Amhara identity, invoking themes of golden ages and presenting the victim thesis.

5.3.1. Essentializing Amhara Identity

The essentialist representation of Amhara identity is a key aspect of identity construction by Amhara nationalists. Nationalists believe that ‘nations are organic communities, united by shared biology, culture and history stretching back centuries, if not millennia’ (Mole, 2007, p. 6). When questioned by a YouTuber about *Amharaness*, Belete Molla (2019), chairman of the NaMA, stated that ‘when we identify as Amhara, we mean that we are distinct from Tigre, Oromo, or Gurage’. He emphasized that ‘we possess unique characteristics that distinguish us from others, including our culture, language, history and mythology’. However, the YouTuber expressed concern that attributing Amhara culture to any particular ethnic group might be problematic due to its widespread acceptance among different ethnic groups in the country. This concern was quickly dismissed by the audience, as evidenced by the following responses:

C1: Wait, where do we stand now? They mocked us for claiming our Ethiopian identity, treating us as oppressors. Yet, when we assert our Amhara identity, they reject it.

C2: Seyoum [the Youtuber], I thought you were sincere. Let me ask you this: Can you call a Kenyan who speaks fluent English a Briton? No! Similarly, not all Amharic speakers should be labeled as Amhara just because they speak the language.

C3: Why are Amhara individuals being killed here and there? Why do the assaults against the Amhara

continue, despite their role in saving Ethiopians of all ethnicities from Italian colonialism? I am inherently Amhara, regardless.

In these reactions, the attempt to reify Amhara identity emerges as a recurring theme. C3's comment, for instance, takes a more personal and visceral approach, presenting *Amharaness* as an inherent characteristic. This is a strong affirmation of essentialism, which asserts that being Amhara is a core, unchangeable identity, regardless of external opinions or historical context. Similarly, C2 offers an interesting analogy with the Kenyan and British example, drawing attention to the complexity of identity based solely on language. This challenges the idea that Amharic speakers should automatically be considered Amhara, pushing back against the reductionist view that linguistic affiliation alone can define ethnicity. In doing so, C2's comment also hints at the fluidity of identity, suggesting that it cannot be simply constructed or imposed based on superficial characteristics like language alone.

Nationalist writers such as Mesganaw (2017, p. 30) reinforce this essentialist view by claiming that 'Amharaness is inherent and cannot be altered'. Tedla (2018) also posits that the Amhara are an ethnic group descended from the earliest Agazian-Sabean tribes. Both authors present an indigenous origin for the Amhara in Ethiopia, contrasting with the perspective advanced by the Oriental-Semitist scholarship. Proponents of the Oriental-Semitist paradigm argue that the Amhara descended from Sabean tribes who migrated from South Arabia to Ethiopia in the first millennium BC (Tadesse, 1972; Ullendorff, 1960). This claim is adopted by Oromo writers to portray the Amhara as colonizers oppressing allegedly indigenous communities, such as the Oromo (Asafa, 2020). For Amhara nationalists, however, the claims made by Oromo scholars are mere fabrications intended to justify the eviction and killing of Amharas in the Oromia region.

5.3.2. The Theme of Golden Ages

Amhara nationalists attempt to construct an imagined nation by evoking a bygone golden age. Smith (2003) argues that nationalists mobilize members for collective action by drawing on myths, symbols, historical memory and core beliefs. In this context, Amhara nationalists glorify the past greatness of the Amhara, asserting that their ancestors were the custodians of Ethiopian civilization, sacrificed their lives for Ethiopia's independence and played a central role in forming the Ethiopian state (Mesganaw, 2017). For them, landmarks such as the Fasil Palace, the victory at Adwa, the Amharic alphabet and the Ethiopian calendrical system serve as enduring testaments

to Amhara's illustrious history (Tedla, 2018). This narrative directly challenges the dominant discourse in contemporary Ethiopian politics, which portrays Amhara rulers and the system they established as oppressive. In this regard, one of the founders of BETAM stated:

Modern Ethiopia was formed under the leadership of Amhara rulers, with no ethnic group depicted as an enemy. The process of state formation was not aimed at eradicating people, their cultures, languages, or ways of life. Instead, it shielded them from Italian colonization and preserved their culture from the erosion caused by Western cultural influence.⁷⁶

However, the historical narratives propagated by Amhara nationalists to construct a glorious past have been met with strong opposition from non-Amhara elites. For instance, Oromo scholars view the process that formed present Ethiopia as an Amhara colonial expansion over non-Amhara populations (Mekuria, 1997). Yet, Tedla (2018) fiercely criticizes them for starting history in the late nineteenth century while overlooking historical processes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Citing David Buxton (1970) and Jean Doresse (1959), he argues that Amhara civilization reached its peak in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, marked by territorial expansion and the emergence of Amharic literacy. However, the invasion of Ahmed Gagn and the subsequent Oromo expansion disrupted this civilization, halting the progress initiated by Amhara rulers (Tedla, 2018). Doresse (1959) specifically describes the Oromo expansion as a period of immense chaos and bloodshed, leading to the devastation of a significant portion of the Amhara population.

This historical process, according to Mesganaw (2017), continued until the arrival of Emperor Tewodros, who defeated provincial leaders such as the powerful Yejju dynasty to reunify the Ethiopian state. Interestingly, some Amhara nationalists align with Oromo scholars in portraying Tewodros as an Amhara nationalist. Tedla (2018), for instance, argues that Tewodros's efforts to unify provinces predominantly inhabited by the Amhara reflect a nationalist agenda. Similarly, Emperor Menelik is also labeled an Amhara nationalist for reclaiming historic Amhara lands lost during the Oromo expansion. Indeed, Buxton (1970, p. 57) notes that 'Oromo tribes invaded the plateaus in the sixteenth century, pushing the Amhara into gorges'. However, after regaining these lands, Tedla (2018) argues that Menelik ruled Ethiopia without granting special privileges to the Amhara. This raises questions about Tedla's argument that, if Menelik was truly an Amhara nationalist, as asserted in Chapter Four, one would expect him to prioritize Amhara interests. His

76. Email interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

equal treatment of all ethnic groups challenges the idea that he governed the polity primarily in the interest of the Amhara.

Another image that Amhara nationalists attribute to Menelik is the claim that his leadership genius saved the Oromo and other Ethiopians from Italian colonization. An Amhara political scientist critiques Oromo nationalists for attempting to deconstruct this glorious past to construct their own version of history.⁷⁷ This sentiment is echoed by an interviewee from NaMA, who notes that their objective is to protect the Amhara's glorious past from denigration, positioning them as witnesses to the survival of the Amhara as a nation throughout history.⁷⁸ In this context, NaMA's motto, *so shall Amhara renovate its history and former glory by its children*, encapsulates a powerful call to reclaim and reconstruct the Amhara identity through a revival of its past greatness.⁷⁹ This motto is not merely a sentimental expression of nostalgia but a strategic mobilization of historical memory, leveraging the idea of a golden age to build a cohesive and resilient Amhara identity.

5.3.3. The Victim Thesis

The victim thesis played a central role in the process of constructing an imagined nation by nationalists. In their creative analysis of how Austrian national identity is discursively constructed, Ruth Wodak and her colleagues argue that 'Austria, as having been the first victim of Nazi Germany, occupied a central place in the construction of Austrian identity up to 1986' (Wodak et al., p. 5). A similar process can be observed in the construction of Amhara identity, where the victim thesis also plays a crucial role. Amhara nationalists claim that the Amhara have been the target of structural violence since the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.⁸⁰ They attribute this victimization to the unique identity of Amhara.

In this context, the question posed by C3, *why are people being killed here and there just because they are Amhara?*, illustrates an effort to conceptualize Amhara identity through a shared experience of victimization. This question serves as a poignant reminder that Amhara identity is not solely shaped by their glorious past, but also by ongoing experiences of structural violence. The audience's inquiry, *why the continued attacks on the Amhara people, even though they saved*

77. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

78. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

79. Ibid.

80. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

Ethiopians of all ethnic groups from Italian colonialism?, attempts to draw a direct connection between the Amhara's historical contributions and their present victimization. This rhetorical question underscores the perceived injustice of the ongoing violence against the Amhara, despite their significant role in protecting Ethiopia's sovereignty during the colonial era.

Such a strategy is emblematic of a broader effort to solidify Amhara identity, intertwining past achievements with present suffering. By invoking both the glory of historical contributions and the pain of ongoing victimization, Amhara nationalists aim to create a cohesive narrative that not only celebrates their resilience but also justifies their claim to distinctiveness. According to an interviewee from BETAM, this effort to reify Amhara identity has recently gained momentum.⁸¹ He argues that this is evidenced by the emergence of Amhara-based political parties, business ventures such as Amhara Bank and civic organizations like the Amhara Students Association.⁸² These developments suggest a growing institutionalization of Amhara identity, reinforcing both its political and socio-economic dimensions.⁸³

The mobilization by activists has even influenced some renowned personalities, who once doubted the existence of an Amhara identity, to alter their views. A notable example is the late Getachew Haile, who in 1992 authored a short piece that strongly criticized the recognition of the Amhara as a distinct nation. He argued that 'Amhara is an ethnic name created...by those who desire an "Amhara" enemy, just because they speak Amharic'. However, in a short piece written for an internet blog in 2019, Getachew reversed his stance, affirming the existence of an Amhara identity. He cited the Amharic adage *qal kale neger ale*, which literally means that the existence of the word indicates the presence of what it refers to, to justify the existence of a distinctive Amhara identity. The existence of 'Amhara' in the world of 'words', for him, represents the presence of something to be named after it, and that something is the Amhara people.

Getachew summed up his piece with a tone of regret, acknowledging the politically motivated rejection of a unique Amhara identity by some Amhara elites, including himself. He notes, 'we held a firm belief that if we were to organize the Amhara along ethnic lines, it would be incongruous for us to denounce the ethnic-based federal arrangement' (Getachew, 2019). This

81. Email interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

82. Ibid.

83. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

reflects his recognition of the complex internal dynamics that had previously hindered Amhara elites from fully embracing their ethnic identity. Moreover, his shift in perspective represents both a personal transformation and a broader shift in how Amhara identity is understood in contemporary Ethiopia.

5.3.4. Reverse Discourse in the Construction of *Amharaness*

One of the key resistance strategies within nationalist movements is discursive resistance, which uses discourse as a ‘point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (Foucault, 1981, p. 101). The goal of discursive resistance is to establish an alternative truth to the prevailing discourse, with reverse discourse being an essential component. Coined by Foucault (1981), reverse discourse refers to how the subaltern repurposes oppressive language and categories, transforming them into tools to assert their own legitimacy and demand recognition. Foucault illustrates this strategy in the case of lesbian and gay movements, where homosexuality began to articulate its own narrative by challenging the medical and societal norms that pathologized it.

Similarly, nationalist movements can adopt reverse discourse to subvert oppressive discourses by constructing alternative truths. An example of this can be seen in the strategy employed by the founders of the Négritude movement, who sought to counter colonial powers’ denigration of black identity (Lilja, 2022). The term Négritude itself originates from the French word *nègre*, which was used by white supremacists to insult black people. As Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the Négritude movement, explains, ‘the word *nègre* was thrown at us as an insult, and we picked it up and turned it into a positive concept’ (Fretheim, 2018, p. 376). Amhara nationalists have embraced a similar strategy, with the key distinction being that while African nationalists resisted colonial powers, the Amhara nationalists oppose state-imposed oppression. They have redefined terms like *neftegna* and *timkhtegna*, once wielded to marginalize the Amhara, transforming them into symbols of pride and identity. This reclamation serves as a potent form of resistance against the dominant narrative that seeks to vilify and suppress the Amhara.

By appropriating and redefining *neftegna* and *timkhtegna*, Amhara nationalists aim to neutralize their negative connotations and infuse them with positive meanings. In this regard, many of the interviewees argue that using these terms as insults is a deliberate attempt to downplay the significant contributions of the Amhara ruling class in the formation of the Ethiopian state. As an Amhara sociologist observes, this is ‘an attempt carried out by anti-Amhara political groups to

make us ashamed of our forefathers' role in founding Ethiopia'.⁸⁴ In a similarly poignant manner, a poet shared this perspective, articulating it with striking clarity:

Those who attribute negative connotations to *neftegna* and *timkhtegna* must be ashamed of themselves, for their claims are asserted without properly understanding what these terms actually mean. For me, *neftegna* denotes courage and obviously symbolizes the Amhara's fortitude... They used to refer to the Amhara as *timkhtegna*. Yes, Amhara is a *timkhtegna* people, who sacrificed their precious lives to defend Ethiopia from foreign enemies. One's life is given up for a country out of a *timkhtegna* heart.⁸⁵

When Amhara youths gather to celebrate public occasions, they eloquently chant, 'I am *timkhtegna*, the son of *neftegna*'.⁸⁶ Both amateur and professional Amhara musicians have also released songs under the title I am *Neftegna*. According to Fanon (1963, p. 240-241), asserting 'a positive self-image through folktales, literature, art, and other forms of cultural expression' is one way to combat oppression. Music, in particular, plays a vital role in constructing collective identity. It not only expresses and maintains pre-existing identities but also provides resources for contesting, negotiating and constructing new ones (Lidskog, 2017). Through their songs, Amhara musicians challenge the derogatory usage of *neftegna* and assert its positive meanings. One such example is Shambel Belayneh, a renowned Amhara singer, who released an Amharic single titled *I am Neftegna* in 2019. A piece of the song's lyrics, translated, reads:

They called me *neftegna*,
Yes, I am *neftegna*,
The son of those heroes,
Of Tayitu Bitul, of Amoraw Wubineh, of Emperor Menelik,
Yes, I am *neftegna*,
Whom I killed enemies,
Whom I full-heartedly died,
For the unity of my country,
For the survival of Ethiopia.

The potent message that the song aims to convey may be somewhat diluted by the literal translation of the poem from Amharic to English. However, it is clear in the lyrics that Shambel portrays

84. Interview with an Amhara sociologist at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

85. Interview with an Amhara poet at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

86. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

himself as a *neftegna* in opposition to the negative connotations that anti-Amhara political groups have attached to the term. He commemorates the Amhara rulers and patriots who have been accused of being oppressors, perpetrators of genocide and bloodthirsty predators. According to the lyrics, Ethiopia's unity and its long history of survival are sources of pride for those who identify as *neftegna*. Amhara nationalists argue that it is through the *neft* (gun) of the Amhara that Ethiopia's long history of survival and its cherished unity were preserved. According to Mesganaw (2017), the Amhara protected the territorial integrity of the state and preserved the cultural identities of the constituent ethnic groups from foreign contamination through unwavering sacrifice. To this end, Amhara nationalists hold Amhara emperors in high regard, asserting that their administrative brilliance, capacity to mobilize their people during external threats and their sincere leadership and military prowess during times of war were essential in maintaining Ethiopia's independence.

Emperor Menelik is among the rulers most revered by Amhara nationalists for his role in defending the sovereignty of the Ethiopian state, particularly through his leadership in the victory over Italy at the Battle of Adwa. This triumph spared Ethiopians of all ethnic backgrounds from the hardships experienced by other African societies during the height of colonialism (Marcus, 1994). The language and culture of various ethnic groups, which anti-Amhara political groups believe Menelik had attempted to erase, were safeguarded from the imposition of Italy's foreign culture at Adwa (Mesganaw, 2017). To honor Menelik's achievement in preventing the infiltration of Italian culture into Ethiopian society, Amhara nationalists often quote the following public poetry:

Had Menelik not been born to wield the gun,
It would have been an egg that Habesha paid as tribute.

Before the emergence of capitalism in Ethiopia, tribute was typically paid in the form of honey, butter, cereal crops and livestock (Markakis, 1974). This practice was not only a reflection of the scarcity of capital in the market but also deeply rooted in Ethiopia's dietary system. Italians were often seen consuming eggs with bread, a dietary habit not commonly practiced in Ethiopia. The poem, therefore, draws from this cultural observation to convey that had Menelik not defeated Italy with his *neft*, Ethiopians would have been forced to pay eggs as tribute to the Italian colonizers. Amhara nationalists, however, use the poem in a broader context, extending its message beyond its literal interpretation. In this broader interpretation, Menelik is viewed as a protector of the broader cultural systems of Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups, shielding them from assimilation

by Italian culture.⁸⁷ To that end, Amhara nationalists ascribe the term *neftegna* to Menelik, claiming that he wielded his *neft* to protect all Ethiopians from foreign aggression.⁸⁸

Moreover, Amhara nationalists oppose those who claim that Menelik established the *neftegna* system to subjugate non-Amhara populations. They argue that Menelik ruled the entire nation without ethnic-based discrimination and that the system he established was a non-ethnic (Tedla, 2018). Hence, *neftegna* is given a positive meaning to reinforce the Amhara's glorious past. For example, an informant from NaMA defined it as a 'patriot who held a gun to defend his/her motherland from foreign attacks'.⁸⁹ Another informant posed the question, 'who is *neftegna*?' and responded, 'yes, Belay Zeleke⁹⁰ is *neftegna*. Hero! Sharpshooter...who inflicted death on enemies'.⁹¹ When Amhara youths declare, 'I am the son of *neftegna*', they assert their identity as descendants of heroes who sacrificed their lives for Ethiopia.

The dictum 'I am the son of *neftegna*' is often followed by the affirmation of *timkhitegna* as another identity marker for the Amhara. In the lexicon of Amhara nationalists, *timkhitegna* signifies 'a manifestation of love for one's country, a pathway to defend a nation from foreign invaders'.⁹² An Amhara political scientist suggested that *timkhitegna* reflects a tendency to 'care for oneself and possess self-assurance'.⁹³ These definitions have become widely accepted and Amhara youths declare themselves as *timkhitegna* during various social events such as sports tournaments.

Accepting the contention made by anti-Amhara political groups that Ethiopia is a state created by the Amhara, Amhara nationalists assert that 'we love Ethiopia because it is handmade by our emperors'.⁹⁴ An interviewee from NaMA stated that 'Amhara takes a lion's share in the process of forming Ethiopia. Because of this, it has a strong attachment to the state. Consequently, the people call themselves patriotic, which is a source of their *timkhitegna* mentality'.⁹⁵ He added that Amhara's complex set of historical ties to Ethiopia has prevented them from 'developing a sense

87. Email interview with one of the founders of BETAM, September 2024.

88. Interview with an Amhara poet at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

89. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

90. Belay Zeleke was one of the prominent leaders of the patriotic resistance during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

91. Interview with an Amhara poet at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

92. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

93. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

94. Email interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024.

95. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

of hatred toward Ethiopia'.⁹⁶ The affection that Amhara holds for Ethiopia, as argued by Amhara nationalists, has, in their view, deterred both the TPLF and OLF from destroying their own country.⁹⁷

5.4. Amhara Nationalism as a Social Movement

Many scholars have recently emphasized the need to conceptualize nationalism within the framework of social movements (Smith, 2010; Muro, 2015; Goodman, 2017). Tarrow (2011, p. 4) defines a social movement as 'collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities'. Social movements are distinguished from other forms of resistance by their capacity for grassroots participation. According to Tilly (1999), mass participation is facilitated through successive campaigns, which involve sustained and organized public efforts to make collective claims on a target authority. These efforts are expressed through a repertoire of contention, including the formation of specialized associations, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, pamphleteering, and even violent confrontation (Johnston, 2014). Tarrow (2011) argues that this process mobilizes the public for a shared purpose, strengthens solidarity between elites and society, and fosters sustained interaction to collectively challenge those in power.

According to Smith (2010), one of the leading theorists of nationalism, nationalism can be understood as a social movement facilitated through literacy societies, historical research, music festivals, cultural journals, protests, armed struggles, sit-ins, and other forms of resistance to advance nationalist aspirations. This suggests that, like other social movements, nationalist movements involve the collective mobilization of the masses through political activism and often emerge in response to real or perceived injustices against the nation (Muro, 2015). Muro further argues that the significance of situating nationalism within the context of social movements extends beyond its similarity in repertoires of contention. It also aligns with the social constructionist perspective by identifying the mechanisms through which identities are formed and translated into political action.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

The mobilization efforts of Amhara nationalists suggest that Amhara nationalism can be understood as a social movement. However, the nationalist movement initiated with the formation of AAPO is not considered a social movement, as it was primarily elite-driven. Unlike grassroots movements, elite-driven nationalism often lacks organic, bottom-up mobilization, instead relying on formal political structures to advance its agenda (Goodman, 2017). AAPO's efforts to mobilize the Amhara were constrained by several structural and contextual challenges, including limited access to media channels capable of reaching diverse communities, the absence of a relatively literate society and government intimidation (Joireman, 1997). Moreover, AAPO faced strong opposition from a majority of Amhara elites, who resisted both its formation and its approach to mobilizing the Amhara along ethnic lines.

Mass mobilization emerged only after February 2015, driven by the global expansion of social media platforms and their widespread use by the Amhara youths. The role of the media has been crucial to the success of nationalist movements by helping elites disseminate nationalist narratives to a wider audience (Anderson, 2006). Nationalist practices, such as rediscovering the history of nations, reviving vernacular languages, cultivating literature, and restoring indigenous arts, crafts, music, dances and folk songs, are communicated to the target audience through various media platforms (Fuchs, 2020). Among these platforms, social media has been particularly effective in supporting nationalists' efforts to disseminate information. In contrast to traditional media platforms, which offer a centralized, one-to-many mode of communication that implies nationalism is imposed from above (Gellner, 1983), social media platforms have facilitated the amplification of voices that were previously silenced (He, 2023). These platforms have facilitated the dissemination of nationalist ideas by enabling effective engagement with youth, one of the most active segments of society.

The social media campaign for the Amhara cause was initiated by the Amhara diaspora in 2015, predominantly those living in North America. The main goal of the campaign, according to one of the activists, was to raise awareness about the actions of the TPLF-led EPRDF against the Amhara people.⁹⁸ Additionally, it aimed to collectively mobilize the Amhara by highlighting the uniqueness of their identity.⁹⁹ According to Mesganaw (2021), one of the activists, the campaign even

98. Interview with an Amhara nationalists via WhatsApp, September 2024.

99. Email interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024.

encouraged the Amhara to question the Ethiopian state and consider the possibility of establishing an independent Amhara state. The idea of forming an independent state was first posted on a Facebook account called Melekhara on February 18, 2015 (Mesganaw, 2021). Melekhara was a pseudonym for Mesganaw Andualem, who played an active role in the social media campaign and in the formation of BETAM. The choice of the name Melekhara, as explained by Mesganaw (2021), was inspired by its historical significance.

Melekhara is literally interpreted as ‘king’s army’, which was established by Emperor Ze Dengel (1603-1604). The creation of this army was necessitated by the need to restore lands that the Christian highland kingdom had lost to the Oromo expansion (Habtamu, 2020). As the war tactics of the Oromo involved attacking their enemies *en masse*, their movement outpaced the army of the emperors, which consisted only of specialized soldiers (Crummey, 2000). Understanding this problem, Ze Dengel attempted to mobilize his subjects, calling them:

If every man who is of age, who lives in any land of my kingdom, does not come to me, not only the *c’awa*, whose task has always been warfare, but also the farmer as well as the retainers of the ladies and the retainers of the monks; if anyone stays behind and does not heed this call-up, his house shall be pillaged and his property confiscated (Crummey, 2000, p. 63).

Through this call, Ze Dengel mobilized a large number of soldiers, which he referred to as Melekhara. This enabled him to contain the Oromo migration until his death (Habtamu, 2020). The selection of Melekhara as a pseudonym by Mesganaw is inspired by this historical event, drawing contemporary relevance from it. He writes that the structural violence experienced by the Amhara today bears a direct similarity to the suffering of the people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Mesganaw, 2017). Just as Ze Dengel attempted to contain the Oromo expansion into the heartlands of Amhara lands through mass mobilization, addressing the current challenges faced by the Amhara people similarly requires broad-based mobilization (Mesganaw, 2021). Hence, Mesganaw writes that he sought to construct ethnic consciousness among the Amhara so that the people would rise together to struggle against the TPLF-led EPRDF regime.

To foster a collective Amhara identity, social media activists like Melekhara have worked to explore and share the traditions, way of life, history, folklore, music and crafts of the Amhara through their social media accounts. According to Mesganaw (2021), this initiative led to the

formation of a group called the Amhara Army of Pen in 2015. The group's mission was to steer online interactions in favor of the Amhara cause. One of the group's most significant nationalist efforts was the organization of Amhara Month, which took place from May 13 to June 12, 2015 (Mesganaw, 2021). The goal of Amhara Month was to utilize social media to honor Amhara heroes and heroines, delve into the history of the Amhara, and showcase their unique culture, traditions and folklore.¹⁰⁰ Throughout the month, traditional Amhara dress styles such as *shema*, *kererto* (war song), notable historical figures and other cultural aspects were highlighted and shared on Facebook.¹⁰¹

Such an effort, according to one activist, has succeeded in cultivating a 'generation that embraces its Amhara identity'.¹⁰² In fact, results from informal conversations and focus group discussions indicate that the social media mobilization led by activists introduced the concept of *Amharaness* to the youth. One focus group discussant from Bahir Dar shared:

Had it not been for the Facebook pages that continuously propagated the uniqueness of the Amhara identity, I would have never known that I am an Amhara. Previously, I identified myself as either Ethiopian or the son of Bahir Dar. Being the son of Bahir Dar was even a unique identity to me, for I believed that I was more of a 'city-guy' than the surrounding locales.¹⁰³

At the same time, a historian sympathetic to Amhara nationalism reiterated in an informal conversation that his sense of Amharaness was shaped by the mobilization efforts of Amhara activists and his personal engagement with leaders from NaMA. He explained:

To tell the truth, I knew about the existence of an Amhara nation, but I did not feel it before the campaign. I thought the deaths of people in different parts of the country were not due to their identity, and that the issue would be resolved once our political system became democratic. However, after closely engaging with social media activists and NaMA leaders, I realized that people are killed in Wollega or elsewhere because of their identity...This made me believe in the necessity of ethnic-based mobilization for the Amhara. Considering that I am an Amhara who might be a victim if I were in Wollega, I got involved in political activities by joining NaMA to end the structural violence against our people.¹⁰⁴

100. Interview with an Amhara nationalists via WhatsApp, September 2024.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid.

103. Youth focus group discussant at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

104. Informal conversation with a PhD candidate of history at Bahir Dar, January 2025.

The experiences of the two individuals, both of whom shifted their perspective on identity through engagement with activists and leaders of a nationalist party, illustrate a process of identity formation. This aligns with the social constructionist approach, which posits that identity is not an inherent or fixed characteristic but rather a social construct shaped by historical contexts and social environments (Brubaker, 2004; Ting, 2008). Initially, these individuals identified themselves as a ‘city-guy’, ‘Gojjame’, or ‘Ethiopian’, identities likely reinforced through local social networks, national education systems and cultural upbringing. However, their continuous exposure to activists’ narratives and collective representations of Amhara identity prompted them to reevaluate their previous self-conception and adopt another sense of belonging. Their transformation exemplifies what Brubaker (2004) describes as the contingent and situational nature of identity, where national belonging is shaped by ongoing political and social processes. In this case, social media platforms serve as critical arenas for what Özkırımlı (2017) terms the ‘narration of the nation’, where collective identity is actively constructed and reinforced through discourse.

5.4.1. Non-Violent Repertoire of Contention

The social media campaign launched by Amhara activists coincided with the eruption of protests, riots, sit-ins, demonstrations and boycotts targeting party-affiliated businesses. This wave of contention was ignited on July 12, 2016, when government security forces attempted to abduct Colonel Demeke Zewudu from his home in Gondar (Alene & Mbabazi, 2025). As the head of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee, established in 2015 to reclaim Amhara lands annexed by the TPLF to the Tigray region, Colonel Demeke was branded a terrorist by the TPLF-led EPRDF (Mesganaw, 2017). In a covert midnight operation, government security forces stormed his home and ordered him to surrender (John, 2021). Refusing to comply, Colonel Demeke opened fire and killed several of the intruders. As gunfire echoed through the city, Gondar residents rushed to the streets, determined to prevent the abduction of the colonel.

The following day, enraged protesters blocked roads, hurled stones at soldiers, set fires and destroyed property believed to belong to the TPLF (Makahamadze & Muluken, 2022). Two weeks after the violent clashes, protests erupted in Gondar and rapidly spread across the Amhara region. Demonstrators voiced grievances over identity, territorial disputes, corruption, ethnic federalism and the TPLF’s dominance in the country’s political and economic spheres (Mesganaw, 2017). They chanted slogans such as ‘I am an Amhara’, ‘Death to the TPLF’, ‘Wolkayt is my blood’, and

‘ANDM is the agent of the TPLF’.¹⁰⁵ One particularly provocative slogan, ‘The Oromo blood is mine’, frustrated the TPLF, as it signified growing solidarity between Amhara and Oromo youth.¹⁰⁶ The Oromo protests against TPLF dominance had begun in 2014 (Mebratu, 2025). Met with a violent government response, the movement drew support from Amhara youth, who adopted the slogan to denounce the indiscriminate killings of their Oromo counterparts (Abbink, 2024).

Getachew Reda, then Communication Minister, is remembered for his metaphorical remark: ‘how fire and straw go hand in hand’, adding that the cooperation between the youth of the two nations suggested ‘we are not doing our work effectively’.¹⁰⁷ While he did not explicitly clarify what ‘work’ was not being done properly, his statement can be interpreted as an acknowledgment that the TPLF’s divide-and-rule strategy was becoming ineffective. In the TPLF’s narrative, Amhara and Oromo youth were ideologically irreconcilable.¹⁰⁸ The Amhara were portrayed as nostalgic for a past they sought to reclaim, while the Oromo remembered that same past as a period of oppression under the Amhara ruling class.¹⁰⁹ The unexpected solidarity between the two groups, despite these ideological differences, posed a significant threat to the TPLF’s political strategy.¹¹⁰ This fear materialized when ANDM and OPDO collaborated to curb TPLF’s dominance and showed solidarity with the protesters.

In addition to pressuring ANDM into offering half-hearted support for the Amhara cause, the youth movement at home was bolstered by protests from the Amhara diaspora in global cities such as London, Washington, D.C. and Berlin. These demonstrators expressed solidarity with the domestic movement by seeking to shape international perceptions of the structural violence against the Amhara.¹¹¹ Diaspora protesters employed two key mechanisms to reach a global audience. First, they staged demonstrations in front of prominent political landmarks, such as the White House, to maximize visibility and draw media attention.¹¹² Second, they submitted signed petitions and

105. Interview with an Amhara nationalists via WhatsApp, September 2024.

106. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

107. This speech was delivered at a press conference to journalists, and I heard it at the time. However, while searching for it now, I was unable to find it, as it has been removed from YouTube. I include it in this study because an Amhara activist recalled it in an interview conducted in Bahir Dar.

108. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

109. Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

110. Ibid.

111. Interview with an Amhara nationalists via WhatsApp, September 2024.

112. Ibid.

letters to various statesmen, aiming to raise awareness of the situation and urge international actors to take action.¹¹³

Intellectual efforts have also played a crucial role in advancing the Amhara nationalist movement. Scholars and activists engaged in rigorous historical research, producing publications aimed at reclaiming history, challenging dominant narratives and providing ideological foundations for the movement (for a comprehensive list of publications, see Annex I). Works such as *Ghionawinet: YeAmhara Meneshana Mediresha* (Mesganaw, 2017), *Kibre Amhara: Yemannetachn Amed* (Tedla, 2018) and *Berrara – Kedamit Addis Ababa (1400-1887): Edget, Wudmet ena Dagm Ldet* (Habtamu, 2020) sought to eulogize the Amhara past, reinforce the legitimacy of Amhara identity and assert its historical continuity as a nation. Beyond historical documentation, these intellectual efforts also served as a counterweight to competing nationalist discourses.

Habtamu's work is particularly notable not only for its direct response to the claims of Oromo nationalists but also for its academic credibility. Drawing on original archival materials, he argues that the area now known as Addis Ababa was once home to a royal city called Berrara. This city, according to Habtamu, was destroyed during Gragn Ahmed's invasion and later seized by Oromo tribes. By presenting this historical narrative, Habtamu challenges the Oromo nationalist claim that Addis Ababa belongs to the Oromo, which he criticizes as a myth fabricated by Oromo-centered historians. Moreover, Habtamu's work is significant in questioning the tendency to frame Ethiopian history as starting in the late nineteenth century, a perspective that often overlooks earlier historical developments, such as the Oromo expansion. For those interested in understanding the impact of the Oromo migration on what Habtamu refers to as 'native peoples', including the cultural genocide and violence it caused, his book provides invaluable insights.

The intellectual movement within Amhara nationalism reached a significant milestone with the establishment of the Journal of Amhara Studies in 2024. According to its homepage, the quarterly, multidisciplinary journal publishes articles in both Amharic and English to provide a platform for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and critical analyses on issues affecting the Amhara. Its inaugural article, titled *From Defeating Colonialism to Facing Genocide: Historical Precedents and Prospects of the Amhara Existential Struggle in Ethiopia*, was published on February 24, 2025.

113. Ibid.

The article explores what the author describes as the existential threat facing the Amhara, delving into the historical, political and ideological factors that have marginalized them (Desalegn, 2025). In addition to these publications, the Amhara Professional Union (APU) organized the first international conference on the Amhara survival struggle, held on March 22–23, 2025, in Arlington, United States. The theme of the conference, *Preserving Heritage, Defending Rights: Scientific Insights into the Amhara People's Fight for Justice and Survival*, underscores the importance of both remembering past injustices and actively defending the future of the Amhara as a distinct nation.

5.4.2. Violent Repertoire of Contention

The non-violent repertoire of contention within Amhara nationalism has frequently been met with government repression. Reports indicate that the EPRDF arrested Amhara journalists, politicians and activists (Human Rights Watch, 2018). When protesters took to the streets, government security forces responded with lethal force. For instance, on August 7, 2016, government forces killed more than fifty protesters in Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara region (Amnesty International, 2016). In Gondar, security forces not only attempted to kidnap protest organizers but also carried out extrajudicial killings of protesters (Al Jazeera, 2016). Beyond physical repression, the government implemented various measures to disrupt activism, including an internet shutdown (Amnesty International, 2016). These sustained crackdowns and violent responses led some Amhara nationalists to reconsider their commitment to non-violent resistance and contemplate the necessity of armed struggle to achieve their aspirations.

Armed struggle, however, is not a phenomenon that emerged in 2016; earlier attempts had already been made by disaffected Amharas. One such instance was the *kefagn* (I am disgruntled) movement of the 1980s in Wolkayt. While its reach was confined to Wolkayt, preventing it from being considered part of the broader Amhara nationalist movement, the *kefagn* movement arose in response to the annexation of the area and the targeted killings of Amharas by the TPLF (UOG, 2022). Initially, the people of Wolkayt supported the TPLF, viewing it as a liberator from the oppressive rule of the Derg.¹¹⁴ However, after gaining control of Wolkayt, the TPLF engaged in anti-Amhara practices, including killings, kidnappings and persecution (Chuchu, 2019). In response, the people of Wolkayt established the Kefagn Patriotic Front, which grew to include

114. Interview with an elder who was the Member of the Kefagn movement at Humera, October 2021.

3,000 armed fighters (Alene & Mbabazi, 2025). Despite engaging in fierce battles against the TPLF, the movement was ultimately dismantled in the 1990s following the TPLF's rise to power.¹¹⁵ Using state apparatus, the TPLF systematically isolated the fighters from the local population, killed the majority of them and forced the remaining members to flee the area.¹¹⁶

Another armed struggle was initiated by the ADFM in 2010 from Eritrea. This movement can be regarded as the first Amhara nationalist movement to adopt a violent repertoire of contention. As Deneke noted, the ADFM included experienced Amhara men in uniform who had been removed from the Ethiopian army by the TPLF due to their identity.¹¹⁷ He recalled that ADFM primarily employed guerrilla warfare tactics against the Ethiopian defense forces.¹¹⁸ Additionally, efforts were made to infiltrate insurgent groups within Ethiopia to recruit fighters and carry out targeted attacks.¹¹⁹ ADFM also sought collaboration with the BETAM to coordinate efforts against the TPLF-led EPRDF regime. This initiative is better documented in Mesganaw's memoir, where he recounts that the founders of BETAM believed armed struggle was necessary to complement social media campaigns and street protests (Mesganaw, 2021). In pursuit of this strategy, they approached ADFM personnel to discuss potential collaboration. However, as Deneke explained, the initiative failed due to disagreements over political and military control, with BETAM's founders seeking to dominate the political leadership while relegating the military role to ADFM.¹²⁰ Beyond such elite rivalries, BETAM's short-lived existence further undermined the cooperative effort (Mesganaw, 2021). Ultimately, ADFM returned to Ethiopia in 2018 after negotiating with the Ethiopian government to transition into a peaceful political struggle.

Before its restoration, the ADFM led a small-scale insurgency that emerged alongside the protests in July 2016. According to Deneke, this insurgency was led by ADFM members who had infiltrated and established communication with the leaders of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee.¹²¹ He further recalls that the EPRDF's attempt to capture Colonel Demeke was motivated by 'leaked information' obtained by the National Intelligence and Security Service

115. Ibid.

116. Ibid.

117. Interview with Deneke Biabale at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

118. Ibid.

119. Ibid.

120. Ibid.

121. Ibid.

from a phone conversation between one of their members and a committee leader.¹²² Viewing the Wolkayt Committee's ties to what it classified as a terrorist group and the Eritrean government as a threat, the regime sought to dismantle it by targeting key personnel.¹²³ In response, Deneke asserts, ADFM infiltrators were ordered to take action against government forces.¹²⁴ Their strategy involved responding to excessive force by security forces through shielding demonstrators and launching retaliatory attacks. Makahamadze & Muluken (2022) also observed that the insurgency emerged as a direct response to the state's indiscriminate use of violence, though they do not specify the insurgent leaders involved.

Regardless of who led it, the insurgent movement proved to be the most effective strategy for forcing the government to reconsider its use of force and pressuring the ANDM to at least partially align with the protesters' demands.¹²⁵ Several ANDM leaders were reported to have sided with the protesters due to three key factors: fear that their own relatives might be targeted by insurgents, shared grievances over Amhara marginalization and dissatisfaction with TPLF dominance.¹²⁶ However, some prominent figures within the party opposed the demands of the protesters, fearing that supporting them would result in a loss of power.¹²⁷ By collaborating with the OPDO, the faction within the ANDM that supported the protests played a key role in dismantling TPLF dominance and facilitating the rise of Abiy Ahmed to power as Prime Minister.

Abiy's rise to power initially brought hope to Ethiopians in general and the Amhara people in particular. His inaugural speech, in which he pledged to dismantle interethnic polarization, preserve national unity and end ethnic-based violence, fostered optimism that Ethiopia was entering a new era of democracy (Abiy, 2018). However, over time, his administration began to mirror the authoritarian practices of the TPLF-led EPRDF, including the arrest of journalists, activists and politicians (Abbink, 2024). Meanwhile, attacks against Amharas continued unabated across different parts of the country, further deepening frustrations (Aljazeera, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022). Disillusioned with Abiy's leadership, Amhara nationalists launched another round of armed struggle in 2023.

122. Interview with one member of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee at Humera, October 2021.

123. Ibid.

124. Interview with Deneke Biabile at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

125. Interview with a senior official from APP at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

126. Ibid.

127. Ibid.

Led by the paramilitary group known as the Amhara Fano, this phase of armed struggle is the most organized, yet remains hierarchically unstructured. The immediate trigger for this escalation was the government's decision to disarm regional special forces (Adane, 2023). Amhara nationalists perceived this move as a targeted effort to weaken the Amhara Regional Special Force (ARSF) and leave the Amhara people vulnerable.¹²⁸ Their suspicions were further fueled by the government's reluctance to disarm the Oromia Regional Special Force, reinforcing claims that the policy was selectively applied to dismantle the ARSF.¹²⁹

When news of the ARSF disarmament spread, Amhara youth protested by blocking major roads and expressing solidarity with demobilized personnel. Amidst this turmoil, Girma Yeshitla – a senior leader in the Amhara region and a central figure in the controversial disarmament decision – was assassinated on April 27, 2023 (Addis Insight, 2023). The Ethiopian government accused armed militias, commonly known as Fano, of carrying out the attack and vowed to take serious measures in response (Ibid). Reports of clashes between what the government labeled as extremists and state security forces quickly spread across social media and blogs.

The most notable clash occurred at a local monastery in Debre Elias at the end of May 2023 (Addis Standard, 2023). The government deployed troops to the monastery, alleging that it was being used by armed groups to orchestrate terrorist activities (Deutsche Welle, 2023). According to Deutsche Welle, over 200 government security personnel were injured and treated in a local hospital. However, the casualties among non-combatants were significant. The European Center for Law and Justice (2023) estimated that government forces indiscriminately killed around 570 priests, monks and children raised by the monastery.

Another skirmish between the Ethiopian government and the Fano erupted in August 2023, when Fano fighters ambushed a federal army convoy in West Denbiya (International Crisis Group, 2023). Following this incident, the Amhara Fano launched coordinated attacks across the Amhara region and temporarily seized control of key towns. In response, the federal government declared a six-month state of emergency on August 3, 2023 (Dawit, 2023). This decision paved the way for a large-scale military offensive against the Amhara Fano, eventually forcing them to withdraw

128. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

129. Ibid.

from urban centers and revert to guerilla warfare. The conflict continued at the time of writing, leaving non-combatants in dire conditions.

Summary

This chapter supports the theoretical assumption that even a single nationalist movement does not have a homogeneous ideology or mode of resistance, using Amhara nationalism as an empirical case. In terms of ideology, Amhara nationalism encompasses the façade of Amhara democratic nationalism promoted by the ruling ANDM, the call for an independent Amhara state by BETAM and the push to address structural violence against the Amhara within the Ethiopian state through political parties such as AAPPO. The modes of resistance employed by Amhara nationalists to combat this structural violence are also diverse, ranging from discursive and non-violent means to more direct, armed forms of struggle.

The discursive resistance employed by Amhara nationalists is twofold. First, they challenge the claim that the Amhara are not a distinct nation. To construct a collective identity, they utilize three discursive strategies: essentializing Amhara identity, tracing the theme of a golden age and advocating the victim thesis. Second, they resist the claim that the Amhara were historically oppressors. Amhara nationalists argue that, rather than oppressing non-Amhara populations, the Amhara, through the leadership of their ruling class, spared them from colonial subjugation. In this context, Amhara nationalists embraced the terms *neftegna* and *timkhtegna*, which were originally used by the TPLF-led EPRDF as derogatory labels, as identity markers for the Amhara. The chapter conceptualizes this effort from the perspective of reverse discourse after Foucault.

In addition to discursive resistance, Amhara nationalists adopted both non-violent and violent repertoires of contention. The non-violent wave of contention included social media campaigns, protests, intellectual movements such as the publication of history books and the establishment of an Amhara-based academic journal, as well as cultural movements, like the revival of traditional dress and music. However, as this peaceful resistance was met with violent repression by the government, some Amhara nationalists turned to armed struggle. This insurgent trajectory spans from the formation of the ADFM in 2010 to the emergence of the current Fano movement. The next chapter explores the factors that contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism, culminating in the militarization of the Amhara Fano.

Chapter Six

Radicalizing Nationalism: The Militarization of the Fano Movement

6. Introduction

This chapter examines the factors that led the Amhara Fano to opt for armed struggle as a form of resistance, situating the movement within the broader context of political developments following 2018. Widespread popular protests and internal power struggles within the EPRDF culminated in a leadership transition that brought Abiy Ahmed to the position of Prime Minister in April of that year (Aalen, 2019). His rise to power was initially met with widespread optimism, as he pledged to end ethnic polarization, authoritarian governance and maladministration. Moreover, his promises to preserve national unity, build a democratic political order and revitalize the economy strengthened his appeal across a broad spectrum of social groups.

Among the groups that strongly supported Abiy Ahmed were Amhara nationalists, who hoped that his administration would bring an end to the structural violence against the Amhara (Tesfaye, 2022). In the early phase of his leadership, Amhara nationalists were granted greater freedom to mobilize. For instance, the new administration permitted Amhara youth to establish civic associations such as the Amhara Students Association and the Amhara Youth Association (Daniel, 2024). Similarly, NaMA was able to expand its outreach, conduct indoctrination campaigns, and open offices not only in the Amhara region but also in other regional states (Tezera, 2021). Amhara journalists, politicians, activists and military personnel who had been imprisoned under the TPLF-led EPRDF were released (Gardner, 2024). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Five, the government facilitated the return of ADFM from Eritrea.

Despite these initial openings, the evolving political landscape soon strained the relationship between Amhara nationalists and Abiy Ahmed's administration, prompting some to view armed resistance as the only viable path to realizing their nationalist aspirations. This chapter explores the key political developments in post-2018 Ethiopia that contributed to this rupture, posing the central question: what specific dynamics and events led to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism?

Although often conceptualized in relation to religious extremism and terrorism, the notion of radicalization also provides a valuable framework for examining the rise of nationalist armed

groups and their ability to mobilize around national grievances (Cederman, Wimmer & Min, 2010). It also helps in understanding the factors underlying these grievances and the broader process leading up to the outbreak of actual violence (Neuman, 2013). Analyzing the entire trajectory leading to armed struggle aligns closely with the social movement approach to studying nationalism (Florea, 2017). As Bosi, Porta and Malthaner (2019, p. 134) assert, ‘social movement studies look at how oppositional groups and movements often shift between various violent or non-violent forms of action, or use them simultaneously’. They further contend that these choices are not predetermined by values, goals, or identities but emerge through processes of contention, shaped by adaptation to changing political environments.

In this respect, this chapter explores how shifting political dynamics, unmet expectations and escalating tensions contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism, ultimately leading to the militarization of the Fano movement. A key structural factor in the onset of armed struggle is a crisis in state legitimacy, which occurs when multiple power contenders challenge the authority of the government (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). However, the social movement approach argues that this decline alone is not sufficient to trigger armed conflict. Instead, armed struggle emerges ‘only after the opponents radicalize their demands to the point where compromise becomes unrealistic, and a security dilemma leads to a spiral of militarization’ (Florea, 2017). The eruption of armed struggle within the Amhara nationalist movement in 2023 can be best understood through this processual lens. This chapter explores the processes that contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism and the militarization of the Amhara Fano.

The first section examines the political promises and actions taken by Abiy’s administration to enhance its legitimacy. The second section delves into the emergence of the Fano insurgency. The third section analyzes the factors that contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism, ultimately leading the Amhara Fano to resort to armed struggle. The final section summarizes the main findings of the chapter.

6.1. The Promises of Change

Protests that spread across the Amhara and Oromia regions beginning in 2014 demanded genuine self-determination in both economic and political terms (Aalen, 2019). Demonstrators voiced grievances over the narrowing political space and the power asymmetry within the EPRDF, which

was dominated by the TPLF (Abbink, 2024). In response to mounting pressure, the government declared a state of emergency in October 2016 (BBC, 2016). However, this measure failed to quell the unrest and instead exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, leading to widespread arbitrary arrests and indiscriminate killings (Human Rights Watch, 2018). According to Gedu (2024), then-president of the Amhara region, these developments ultimately compelled the EPRDF to initiate a self-evaluation among its members in 2017.

Known as *Tilk Tehadiso* (deep renewal), the self-evaluation initiative aimed to identify irresponsible party leaders by compelling them to list their own misdeeds (Aalen, 2019). The program was designed based on the EPRDF leadership's belief that governance failures were the primary cause of public grievances (Abbink, 2022). Gedu (2024) recalled that rent-seeking, narrow ethno-nationalist tendencies, chauvinistic mentality and anti-democratic outlooks were identified as key drivers of the protests. However, this explanation was rejected by many prominent figures within the EPRDF, particularly those who dominated Ethiopian politics after the 2018 leadership change. A leader from the OPP, for instance, argued that the TPLF's political and economic dominance, coupled with ethnic-based marginalization, was at the core of the protests.¹³⁰ Similarly, a key figure from the Oromo protests stated in an interview:

Obviously, governance issues such as corruption, rent-seeking and maladministration were concerns of the protests. Yet, the TPLF exaggerates these issues to obscure the real sources of public grievances. Ethnic grievances were central to the protests, driven by land grabbing by senior TPLF leaders, the control of key institutions, such as the military, by TPLF personnel, and the ethnic-based persecution of political opponents, particularly from the Oromo and Amhara... That being said, this does not mean that the TPLF acted alone. As we all know, collaborators from OPDO and other constituent members of the EPRDF coalition played a role in facilitating the TPLF's grip on the country's political economy.¹³¹

These concerns, according to Gedu (2024), were shared by disgruntled leaders of the ANDM and OPDO. To counterbalance the TPLF's dominance, they formed what Gardner (2024) describes as the common front against the TPLF in the autumn of 2017. That year, a delegation led by Lemma Megersa, then president of the Oromia region, traveled to Bahir Dar to strengthen political ties and discuss issues affecting the country (Aalen, 2019). During the meeting, both Gedu Andargachew

130. Interview with Senior official from OPP at Addis Ababa, December 2024.

131. Interview with an Oromo activist at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

and Lemma Megersa emphasized the need to reinforce a shared sense of *Ethiopianness*, advocate for equal status and establish a genuine partnership (Lyons, 2019). Lemma's eloquent speech, in which he asserted that *Ethiopianness is an addiction*, introduced a new tone to the official narrative, which had previously been dominated by ethnic discourse (Gardner, 2024). His message resonated widely, breaking away from the prevailing ethnic rhetoric that had shaped political discourse for decades. Inspired by these Ethiopianist ideals, Ethiopians from diverse ethnic backgrounds rallied behind the then-progressive leadership of ANDM and OPDO, seeing them as a viable alternative to the TPLF-led status quo.

Amid these developments, the ruling coalition began introducing reforms across various sectors in late 2017. It unveiled a reform agenda aimed at broadening the political space, releasing political prisoners and engaging with opposition voices (Yohannis, 2018). At the same time, as Gedu (2024) notes, it recognized the need for leadership change, which resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in January 2018 and his replacement by Abiy Ahmed.

As a leader who emerged from both popular uprisings and internal party struggles, Abiy introduced a series of reforms, many of which were more aspirational than concrete (Lyons, 2019). In his inaugural speech, Abiy (2018) invoked Ethiopia's historical greatness and framed its decline as a consequence of ethnicized politics. He issued a public apology for the injustices committed by the TPLF-led EPRDF against Ethiopians. He also vowed to expand political freedoms, emphasizing that differences were not inherently problematic but could be constructive if properly managed. In a notable rhetorical shift, he referred to non-EPRDF parties as competitive rather than opposition parties, signaling a departure from the party's previous approach to political dissent. Abiy also introduced his *medemer* (synergy) philosophy, which, as he described in his 2019 book, emphasized unity, interconnectedness and collective progress.

Pragmatically, Abiy's administration welcomed exiled opposition parties, delisted the OLF and Ginbot 7 from the terrorist list, released political prisoners, abolished draconian laws such as the anti-terrorism and civil society proclamations, and expanded media freedom by granting access to previously restricted blogs, radio stations and TV shows (Aalen, 2019). As Aalen observed, like many reformist leaders, Abiy sought to build a strong bond with society through direct engagement in public meetings. In an effort to distance his administration from the EPRDF's ethnic-based rhetoric, Abiy dissolved the coalition and established the PP in December 2019 (Gardner, 2024).

The new party was envisioned as a replacement for the hierarchical structure of the EPRDF, aiming to create a more cohesive and unified political entity (Gedu, 2024). Constituent parties also rebranded themselves by appending their ethnic identifiers to the new party name – for instance, the ADP became the APP.

These ambitious political promises and pragmatic actions enabled Abiy Ahmed to garner both domestic and international support. One of the most significant endorsements from the global community came from the Norwegian Nobel Institute, which awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. The institute stated that Abiy was honored with this prestigious prize ‘for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighboring Eritrea’ (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2019). Indeed, shortly after assuming office, Abiy brokered peace with Eritrea, bringing an end to the two-decade-long diplomatic deadlock characterized by a ‘no war, no peace’ situation. However, the institute emphasized that his recognition was not solely based on international diplomacy but also on domestic reforms. It highlighted that Abiy ‘also focused on empowering women’ (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2019). In a short time, the institute observed, women assumed key leadership roles, including the positions of the country’s president and the Federal Supreme Court president.

The domestic support for Abiy as a reformist leader was immense. Following his widely acclaimed inaugural speech, his photos were prominently displayed in taxis, private homes, and both government and non-government offices.¹³² Prominent figures, such as Asaminew Tsige, an Amhara general released from a decade-long imprisonment as part of Abiy’s reforms, viewed him as an Ethiopian Moses, capable of leading the nation toward progress.¹³³ Public demonstrations in support of the new leadership took place in various cities, including Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar and Adama. In Bahir Dar, where I participated as an observer, the rally drew senior politicians such as Demeke Mekonnen and Gedu Andargachew from the ruling party, along with figures from opposition groups. Youth participants carried images of Abiy, Lemma and Gedu to symbolize their solidarity, while simultaneously displaying photos of TPLF leaders with their heads lowered, denouncing them as corrupt, racist and authoritarian.¹³⁴

132. Interview with Senior official from OPP at Addis Ababa, December 2024.

133. He made this statement during a rallying protest in support of Abiy Ahmed, held in Bahir Dar on July 1, 2018. see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX25XTRYQEc>

134. Ibid.

The demonstrations also echoed Amhara nationalist rhetoric, with slogans such as ‘We are Amhara’, ‘Amhara will never be killed again’, and ‘Death to those who killed innocent Amhara’.¹³⁵ Addressing the crowd, Demeke and Gedu reassured the Amhara people that they would no longer endure structural violence. Gedu, for instance, declared, ‘the Amhara people will never again face the conditions that have subjected them to suffering’.¹³⁶ His statement aligned with the aspirations of Amhara nationalists, who had previously criticized his administration for collaborating with the TPLF. Notably, the rally in Bahir Dar was organized by Amhara activists in collaboration with state authorities. Reflecting on the moment, one activist recalled, ‘our hopes were high with the new leadership. We believed this political shift would put an end to the inhumane treatment of the Amhara’.¹³⁷ This sense of optimism was so strong that armed groups such as the ADFM agreed to disarm. According to Denekew, the central condition of the agreement between ADFM and the government was a firm commitment to ending crimes against the Amhara, a promise the government pledged to uphold.¹³⁸

6.2. The Fano Insurgency

Despite initially supporting the new leadership, Amhara nationalists radicalized their *modus operandi*, with the Amhara Fano at the forefront of this shift. Fano is a historical term in Ethiopia, traditionally associated with resistance against injustice and foreign invasions (Girma, 2022). According to Tsehai (2018, p. 13), the term literally means ‘someone who travels of their own volition’ or ‘a band of leader-less soldiers who are not accountable to anybody’. This suggests that Fano fighters were volunteers, mobilized by personal conviction rather than formal command structures. The word Fano itself is derived from the Amharic verb *fenene*, meaning ‘to leave one’s homeland’, signifying those who departed to fight for independence, justice and freedom.

Fano has played a significant role in preserving Ethiopia’s territorial integrity. In the nineteenth century, for example, they engaged in military activities along border areas such as the Ethio-Sudan and Ethio-Kenya frontiers, acting as guardians of the state’s territorial claims (Tsehai, 2018). Their presence in these remote borderlands was instrumental for Ethiopian monarchs, who used them as a legitimizing force to assert control over contested areas. Additionally, Fano served as a

135. Interview with an Amhara activist who participated in organizing the event in Bahir Dar, January 2025.

136. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX25XTRYQEc>

137. Interview with an Amhara activist who participated in organizing the event in Bahir Dar, January 2025.

138. Interview with Denekew Biabale at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

vital source of armed labor for provincial rulers, who could mobilize them when needed in pre-twentieth century (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024). In the twentieth century, Fano fighters were at the forefront of the resistance against the Fascist Italian occupation of Ethiopia (Girma, 2022). Commonly known as *Arbegnoch*, these volunteer fighters demonstrated remarkable resilience in their struggle to restore Ethiopian sovereignty. As Aregawi (2015) notes, their relentless efforts destabilized the Italian administration and contributed to the liberation of Ethiopia in 1941.

Fano was associated not only with resistance against foreign invaders but also with struggles against domestic oppression. A notable instance of this was during the ESM of the 1960s, which opposed the personal rule of Haile Selassie. Students adopted the term Fano to describe their members, reinforcing its historical significance as a symbol of resistance. One of the slogans chanted during the student protests explicitly invoked Fano: ‘Fano, go to the bushes; Fano, go to the bushes; like Ho Chi Minh, like Che Guevara’ (Bahru, 2014). Due to their role in resisting both foreign invasion and domestic injustice, Fano earned widespread community support and recognition (Tsehai, 2018). This societal admiration has been expressed through poetry, music, *kererto* and *fukera*. One such public poem is recorded by Girma (2022, p. 1):

I love Fano; I do not hate Fano.
I admire the sharpshooter; I do not despise the sharpshooter.
I rested in the shadow of his flowing hair.

Similarly, one of the most renowned Ethiopian musicians of his time, Ketema Mekonnen, paid tribute to the Fano who sacrificed their lives for freedom and justice in his 1980 album:

Fano left for his homeland without bidding me farewell.
I had to see him off, despite my weariness.
I admired Fano as he took up arms at dawn,
As effortlessly as a host welcoming his guests.¹³⁹

These public poems and song lyrics reflect the deep and unwavering admiration that many Ethiopians hold for the Fano. They highlight the Fano’s courage, selflessness and bravery, while simultaneously reinforcing the profound respect and honor associated with their actions. The comparison to a host welcoming a guest, as seen in the final line of the lyrics, underscores the idea

139. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqQ0oDJUmJI>

that fighting for justice is not merely a duty but a natural and expected responsibility, an integral part of what it means to be Fano.

The historical use of Fano to describe volunteer fighters carries no ethnic connotation; rather, it refers to all Ethiopians who share a similar fighting spirit (Tsehai, 2018; Girma, 2022). Throughout Ethiopia's long history, volunteers from various ethnic groups have fought on behalf of the state, both against foreign enemies and domestic oppression. This was evident in the patriotic resistance of the *Arbegnoch* against the Fascist Italian occupation. Despite being strongest in predominantly Amhara-inhabited areas such as Gojjam, Gondar and Shewa (see Annex IV), the movement had a diverse ethnic composition (Sbacchi, 1985; Seyoum, 2020). Similarly, given that the student body at Haile Selassie University was composed of various ethnic groups, the use of Fano by the ESM did not carry an ethnic connotation. It was only after the protests in the Amhara region in 2016 that Fano began to be associated with a specific ethnic identity.

The youths who participated in the opposition against the EPRDF since 2014 adopted distinct names for members of their movements. For instance, Oromo youths referred to themselves as Qeerroo, Sidama youths as Ejeto and Gurage youths as Zerma. Similarly, Amhara youths described members of their movement as Fano. The appropriation of Fano by Amhara nationalists aligns with what Pierre Nora (1989) describes as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), where the past is selectively recalled and reinterpreted to serve present ideological needs. In this process, nationalists emphasize certain historical elements while omitting others, shaping collective memory to legitimize their political narratives. Theorists of nationalism, such as Brubaker (1996), argue that such appropriations of historical terms, symbols and narratives are central to constructing continuity, legitimacy and collective identity.

To justify their claim that Fano is an exclusive domain of the Amhara, Amhara nationalists attribute it to the military tradition of the Amhara.¹⁴⁰ They assert that the Amhara possess a deep-rooted warrior culture (Tilahun, 2024). A leader from the Amhara Fano in Gojjam argues that the Amhara people embody a combination of warrior culture and patriotic spirit, which played a crucial role in saving Ethiopia from colonization.¹⁴¹ As he further explains, the adoption of Fano stems from this

140. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

141. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

military tradition embedded within Amhara culture.¹⁴² Indeed, many Western scholars have described the Amhara as the warrior people of Ethiopia (Levine, 1965; Jonas, 2011). Levine (1965), in particular, notes that the military organization of the Amhara was highly individualistic, where each man was expected to learn how to fight on his own, provide his own military equipment and practice *kererto*. This warrior spirit, according to Gooch (2007), was one of the reasons why the Fascist Italians specifically targeted the Amhara.

Contemporary Amhara nationalists, such as the Amhara Fano, have adopted such narratives to provide historical grounding for their political aspirations. At this stage, the term Fano has been redefined to refer to any Amhara youth committed to ensuring the survival and protection of the Amhara people. Adopting this name, Amhara youths have engaged in both large-scale non-violent protests and limited violent insurgency against the EPRDF since 2016 (Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 2024). Even after the leadership change in 2018, Fano continued to engage in small-scale skirmishes whenever it perceived a threat to Amhara interests. For instance, Fano was involved in sporadic clashes with the Sudanese Armed Forces over the disputed Al-Fashaga region from 2020 to 2023 (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024). Domestically, it clashed with the Gumuz militia, which was accused of committing atrocities against Amhara civilians in the Benishangul-Gumuz region (Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 2024). Fano also aligned itself with the federal government during the conflict with the TPLF.

Such military involvement has enhanced Fano's reputation in the eyes of the Amhara people, who view it as a freedom fighter capable of alleviating decades of suffering. A young Amhara I met in a coffee shop in Bahir Dar shared this sentiment. Initially suspicious of me due to the current political climate, he eventually confided that he believed 'the Fano spirit is the only way to end the systematic marginalization of the Amhara'.¹⁴³ He further emphasized, 'the people should support them, either by joining as fighters or by providing logistical support'.¹⁴⁴ This support, according to a leader from the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, is rooted in the belief that 'our question is

142. Ibid.

143. Informal conversation with an Amhara youth at Bahir Dar, January 2025.

144. Ibid.

about justice, equality and living in peace in the country'.¹⁴⁵ He adds that these concerns are effectively communicated to the Amhara youth through social media platforms like Facebook.¹⁴⁶

Beyond social media platforms, leaders of the Amhara Fano attempt to indoctrinate the public on the ground, venturing deep into rural locales.¹⁴⁷ The early good relationship between the Amhara nationalists and Abiy's administration, Fano's involvement in the central government-TPLF conflict and the appointment of populist leaders to the highest office in the Amhara region allowed them to recruit, train and arm numerous Fano fighters (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024). This contributed to the early success of the Amhara Fano in controlling major towns in the Amhara region when they launched a massive attack against government forces in August 2023 (International Crisis Group, 2023). Although they retreated into rural areas after a counter-offensive by government forces, the Amhara Fano still maintain a strong force capable of launching successive attacks using a combination of guerrilla warfare and face-to-face tactics. However, the Fano lack a centralized command structure, consisting instead of numerous Fano units operating in different provinces of the Amhara region.¹⁴⁸

Two central problems arise from the lack of a centralized command structure within the Fano movement. First, this fragmentation undermines the movement's overall effectiveness. Each Fano unit operates independently, pursuing its own strategies, which creates coordination gaps that the government can readily exploit.¹⁴⁹ The second issue concerns the difficulties of engaging in negotiations with the government. Prime Minister Abiy has publicly expressed frustration in Parliament, noting that the absence of a unified Fano leadership complicates efforts to determine which group to negotiate with.¹⁵⁰ Attempts by individual Fano units to initiate dialogue are often met with deep suspicion by others, who perceive such actions as efforts to hijack the movement for personal gain. A notable example occurred in January 2025, when the Amhara Fano Popular Front (AFPF) was accused of entering negotiations with the government. Following these reports, other Fano units condemned the AFPF's actions as an act of betrayal. In response, Eskinder Nega

145. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

146. Ibid.

147. Ibid.

148. At the time of writing, some factions of the Fano have formed a loosely organized Amhara Fano National Force, yet without establishing a centralized leadership. The unit is chaired by a committee of 13 members.

149. Ibid.

150. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyWmGhjS9Mg>

(2025), head of the AFPF, dismissed the accusation as fabricated. Echoing this, Geta Asrade (2025), head of political affairs for the AFPF, clarified that while no negotiations had taken place with the government, the AFPF had established contact with international organizations such as the African Union and Inter Governmental Authority for Development.

The lack of an overarching organization does not, however, mean there is a divergence of goals. Each Fano unit shares two key objectives: ending structural violence against the Amhara and gaining control of central power to bring about transformative democratic governance (Messay, 2024; Yonas, 2024). This suggests that the goal of the Fano movement is not confined to the Amhara region, contrary to what Atrsaw and Yared (2024) mistakenly claim. These authors argue that the Amhara Fano's objective is merely to protect the interests of the Amhara regional population. This argument has two major flaws. First, it misinterprets the discourse of Amhara nationalism, which seeks to secure the survival of the Amhara people, wherever they live. Second, it misrepresents the objectives of the Amhara Fano without citing any opinions from its leadership. Geta Asrade (2025) stated that their concern is to stop the killing and eviction of the Amhara people and ensure that their territorial integrity is respected. This view is shared by Asress Mare (2025), the head of Political Affairs of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, who asserted, 'even though we launched the movement in the Amhara region, our goal is to eradicate the maltreatment of the Amhara nation at the hands of the fascistic Abiy administration'.

While the goal of the Fano movement is to ensure that the Amhara live in peace, the humanitarian crisis they have suffered amidst the conflict is immense. Numerous reports indicate that government security forces have played a significant role in perpetrating attacks on civilians. The United Nations Human Rights Council (2023) writes that in government-controlled areas, horrifying atrocities are being committed, including the rape of women, execution of families in their homes, and the creation of an atmosphere of fear and desperation among the people. The government has indiscriminately used drones against civilians. To cite a few incidents: in August 2023, drones killed 26 and injured 55 civilians in Finote Selam; in October 2024, 30 civilians were killed in Ayimba; in October 2024, 37 civilians were killed in Tala; and in October 2024, 12 civilians were killed in Jihur (European Center for Law and Justice, 2024; AAA, 2024). Health professionals have also been targeted, tortured and killed after being labeled as collaborators for treating injured Fano members (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In stark contrast, areas under Fano control have exhibited relative stability, with no reports of vandalism, crime, or bank robberies (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023). However, the Fano have taken action against individuals suspected of collaborating with the government. Reports indicate that the Fano have targeted and killed civil servants they accuse of serving what they describe as an ‘enemy government’.¹⁵¹ For instance, Addis Standard (2024) reported that Fano members killed two teachers in Sinan in September 2024. The Fano’s justification for targeting educators stems from their opposition to the reopening of schools, an act they interpret as a symbolic return to normalcy under government authority.¹⁵² According to the Amhara Regional Education Bureau, over 3,600 schools are currently closed and more than 4.5 million students are out of school due to security concerns (Addis Standard, 2025). In addition to obstructing the education sector, the Fano have sought to shut down all government services except for health centers and banks.¹⁵³ This strategy appears to serve a dual purpose: first, to demonstrate the Fano’s ability to paralyze the state’s routine functions; and second, to pressure able-bodied Amhara civil servants to abandon their posts and join the armed struggle, thereby accelerating what the Fano regard as the path to victory.¹⁵⁴

6.3. Drivers of Radicalization in the Amhara Nationalist Movement

The transformation of Amhara nationalism from peaceful to violent forms in post-2018 Ethiopia has been driven by a combination of factors. Central among these is the growing mismatch between public expectations and reality, coupled with an enabling environment that facilitated the recruitment, training and mobilization of Amhara youth. The following section provides a detailed discussion of these contributing factors and their role in the radicalization of Amhara nationalism.

6.3.1. The Fractured Promise

The honeymoon period for the new leadership ended swiftly, as promises made by Abiy Ahmed in his inaugural speech and subsequent addresses were soon broken.¹⁵⁵ Critics argue that these promises were, in fact, utopian and wildly unrealistic claims (Alemseged, 2022). Gardner (2024) also criticized Abiy for focusing more on the rhetoric of his speeches than offering concrete policy

151. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

152. Ibid.

153. Ibid.

154. Ibid.

155. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

solutions. Aalen (2019) pointed out that the release of political prisoners, the promise to open political space and the repeal of draconian laws were not innovations introduced by Abiy, but decisions already initiated by the EPRDF as part of what has been termed the deep reform process. Yet, the new leadership presented these reform measures as the fruits of political change.

For the new leadership, only the complex socio-economic and political challenges afflicting post-2018 Ethiopia is viewed as remnants of the past, while the positive legacies are largely overlooked (Daniel, 2024). Indeed, contradictory interpretations of history, divergent visions of the state and irreconcilable political claims have significantly hindered the progress of the reform agenda (Gedu, 2024). Gedu argues, however, that by externalizing the root causes and failing to propose practical solutions to the longstanding issues of ethnic tension, economic inequality and political instability, the PP cannot be considered immune to these challenges. Rather than addressing the problems that have long afflicted the Ethiopian state, the PP has continued the TPLF-led EPRDF's strategy of dividing Ethiopians along ethnic lines, a tactic they believe will help consolidate power (Tesfaye, 2022). This approach is evident in the rhetoric employed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in various public speeches. For instance, during a 2023 parliamentary session, when a member of parliament raised concerns about schools in Addis Ababa being required to fly the Oromia regional flag and have students sing the Oromia anthem, Abiy responded vehemently:

In Addis Ababa, there is a force who have high hate against the Oromo; who wants to live in Ethiopia, who think about Ethiopia after hating the Oromo. In this city, there is French school, Greek school, German school, Italian school and other international community schools. These schools sing in their own language. Why do they become ill when singing in Afan Oromo, while not when singing in French?¹⁵⁶

Addis Ababa operates under its own self-administration, with Amharic as its working language. However, this key constitutional and administrative reality was disregarded by the OPP when it mandated that schools in the city fly the Oromia regional flag and have students sing the regional anthem.¹⁵⁷ The decision was met with strong opposition from Amhara nationalists, who perceived it as an attempt to symbolically and politically reframe the city as exclusively Oromo territory.¹⁵⁸

156. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnyYhGD4fqg>

157. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

158. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

While members of parliament from the NaMA raised these concerns in the legislature, Abiy Ahmed quickly interpreted their objections as an expression of hostility toward the Oromo people.

Abiy's speech embodies both a logical fallacy and a calculated political objective. The fallacy lies in his comparison between international and local schools in Addis Ababa. International schools do not compel students to sing anthems in the languages of their respective countries; rather, such practices are voluntary and guided by the schools' own educational philosophies.¹⁵⁹ In contrast, Abiy's administration imposed the Oromia regional flag and anthem in public schools through a top-down directive, without securing public consensus.¹⁶⁰ Politically, Abiy's response serves a dual purpose: first, to deflect criticism by presenting himself as a staunch defender of Oromo interests; and second, to preserve a fragile political equilibrium by strategically leveraging ethnic identity for political support.¹⁶¹ By framing opposition to the policy as an expression of hostility toward the Oromo, he deflects attention from substantive debates on cultural representation and reframes the issue within an emotionally charged narrative.¹⁶² This rhetorical maneuver obscures the deeper political dynamics at play and marginalizes the legitimate concerns of other ethnic groups.

For the Amhara, the issue of Addis Ababa goes beyond questions of cultural representation; it also touches on deeper concerns of ownership and historical entitlement.¹⁶³ Amhara nationalists assert longstanding ties to the city, citing both historical precedence and demographic dominance as the basis for their claim. As discussed in Chapter Five, they argue that Addis Ababa served as the seat of royal authority under successive Amhara-led regimes, long before the expansion of the Oromo into the area. Demographically, they point to figures indicating that the Amhara constitute the largest ethnic group in the city, comprising 47 percent of the population compared to 19 percent Oromo (Population Stat, 2025). Similarly, the World Population Review (2025) estimates that 71 percent of the city's population speaks Amharic, while only 10 percent speaks Afan Oromo. Against this backdrop, the imposition of the Oromia regional flag and anthem in public schools is viewed by Amhara nationalists as not only ironic but also deeply unacceptable.¹⁶⁴ They interpret

159. Interview with the Director of one of the Greek schools in Addis Ababa, December 2024.

160. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid.

163. Ibid.

164. Ibid.

the move as an effort by Abiy's administration to erode the cultural and linguistic dominance of Amharic in the capital, thereby undermining their historical and demographic claim to the city.¹⁶⁵

Those who publicly raised concerns about these issues were subjected to intimidation, abduction and arrest, effectively betraying the political promises made in April 2018 (Yonas, 2024). Prominent figures such as Yohannis Buayalew from the Amhara Regional State Council, Christian Tadele from the federal parliament and Kassa Teshager from the Addis Ababa Council, along with several journalists and human rights activists, have been imprisoned. The government has justified these arrests by alleging that the individuals conspired with extremist groups to seize power through violent means (Daniel, 2024). Claims frequently cited to support this narrative include organizing clandestine military training for Amhara youth, mobilizing financial support from the diaspora to fund extremist activities and infiltrating Amhara insurgents into Addis Ababa with the intent to destabilize the capital.¹⁶⁶ These allegations have been used strategically to influence judicial decisions and discredit opposition voices.¹⁶⁷

Amhara nationalists contend that the arrests were politically motivated, aimed at silencing Amhara voices and suppressing dissent from the official narrative.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, many of those detained are known for their outspoken criticism of the government. Christian Tadele, a member of the national parliament from the NaMA, gained prominence for consistently posing critical questions during parliamentary sessions. In one such session, he challenged the Prime Minister on his failure to fulfill the promise of amending the constitution.¹⁶⁹ Abiy Ahmed responded dismissively, stating, 'we do not want to amend the constitution for one region', a remark that signaled his intention to preserve the institutional legacy of the EPRDF.¹⁷⁰ In another session, Christian calmly urged the Prime Minister to voluntarily step down, citing the country's deteriorating condition under his leadership.¹⁷¹ Anticipating potential backlash, he clarified that his critique was not an attack on Abiy's Oromo identity but a challenge to his performance as head of government.¹⁷² Just months

165. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

166. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

167. Ibid.

168. Ibid.

169. A copy of the full parliamentary speech was obtained in September 2024 from an Amhara journalist, formerly arrested and now residing abroad. The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDnxi7b5XEo>

170. Ibid.

171. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDyLLpvho0c>

172. Ibid.

after making this statement, Christian was arrested and subjected to harsh detention conditions. One Amhara activist remarked that Christian had become ‘the personal prisoner of the Prime Minister for asking him to step down’.¹⁷³

Amhara nationalists also point to the ongoing structural violence against the Amhara as further evidence that the Prime Minister has failed to honor his pledge to end such atrocities.¹⁷⁴ One persistent issue is the kidnapping of Amhara travelers on the route from the Amhara region to Addis Ababa through Oromia.¹⁷⁵ Families of the victims are often extorted for millions of Ethiopian birrs under threats that their loved ones will be killed if the ransom is not paid.¹⁷⁶ Female Amhara students have also been frequent targets, particularly those attending universities in Oromia. A particularly alarming case occurred in December 2020, when sixteen students from Dembi Dolo University were abducted (BBC, 2020). Their whereabouts remain unknown to this day. The government’s failure to provide even the most basic information, such as the identity of the perpetrators or the status of the investigation, has made the case a continued source of controversy. This lack of official transparency has fueled suspicions among Amhara nationalists that the Oromia regional government may have been complicit in the abduction.¹⁷⁷

The structural violence experienced by the Amhara under Abiy’s administration is further evidenced by the recurrent killings and evictions in areas such as Wollega, Ataye, Kemise and Arsi (Tesfaye, 2022). AAA (2022) reported that at least 3,308 Amharas were killed in targeted massacres by the OLA and Oromia regional forces in 2021 in these areas. Similarly, an insurgent group known as the Gumuz militia has carried out attacks against the Amhara in the Metekel zone of the Benishangul-Gumuz region. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2019), the group committed atrocities ranging from the murder of pregnant women and infants to the mass killings of elderly men and women. In one incident, the agency reported that more than 1,800 homes, mostly belonging to Amhara residents, were destroyed.

According to Tesfaye (2022), Abiy’s administration responded to these attacks with deliberate silence. When concerns were raised in parliamentary sessions, the Prime Minister either ignored

173. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

174. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

175. Ibid.

176. Ibid.

177. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

them or resorted to personal attacks against those who voiced dissent (Tilahun, 2024). The APP also collaborated with the federal government in suppressing local discontent.¹⁷⁸ During the 2023 planting season, for example, Amhara farmers experienced a critical shortage of chemical fertilizer. An Amhara activist alleged that the shortage was politically orchestrated by the Oromo-dominated federal government to undermine agricultural production in the Amhara region.¹⁷⁹ In contrast, a peasant I interviewed expressed a different concern. He recounted, ‘we observed that a sufficient amount of chemical fertilizer was stored in the peasant association’s shop in April of that year. But when we went to collect it, government officials told us the shop was empty’.¹⁸⁰ He added, ‘we suspect that government cadres hid the fertilizer to sell it to us at a higher price’.¹⁸¹ While the activist framed the issue as structural marginalization, the peasant’s account points to local-level corruption and exploitation. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the APP is not merely a collaborator but an active participant in both the political and economic forms of violence afflicting the Amhara.

This does not, however, imply that all senior officials, lower-level cadres and party members were collaborators or indifferent to Amhara concerns. Asaminew Tsige, who served as head of the Amhara Region’s Administration and Security Bureau until his death in June 2019, was notably responsive to the killings and evictions targeting the Amhara.¹⁸² He sought to work with Amhara nationalists, strengthen the ARSF and conduct operations against the OLA and the Gumuz militia.¹⁸³ On several occasions, he urged the Amhara people to organize and defend themselves from anti-Amhara political actors.¹⁸⁴ His actions, however, drew discontent from both regional and federal government officials. In a speech delivered in Dessie, Abiy Ahmed expressed concern about allocating regional budgets to strengthen special forces, an address that Amhara nationalists interpreted as signaling the Premier’s unease with the growing influence of Asaminew.¹⁸⁵ This

178. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

179. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

180. Interview with an Amhara Peasant at Debre Markos, July 2024.

181. Ibid.

182. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

183. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

184. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESw9swpmIYU>

185. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1V_tUwWDZM

suspicion was deepened when Asaminew was killed by government forces shortly after being accused of attempting a coup d'état against the Amhara regional government.¹⁸⁶

On June 22, 2019, the president of the Amhara region, two of his colleagues and the Chief of Staff of the national army were assassinated (Yayehsew, 2024). While the government immediately labeled the incident a coup attempt, Amhara nationalists argued that it was orchestrated by Abiy Ahmed as a pretext to directly intervene in the affairs of the Amhara region (Gardner, 2024). In the aftermath, federal troops were deployed to restore control, and numerous individuals, including journalists, politicians and activists, were arrested (Daniel, 2024). State media outlets such as the Amhara Media Corporation and Ethiopian Television actively promoted the coup narrative to shape public opinion (Yayehsew, 2024). However, among Amhara nationalists, the event is remembered not as a failed coup, but as a calculated plot by Abiy to disenfranchise the region by eliminating its influential figures.¹⁸⁷ Within this narrative, Asaminew Tsige is revered as a martyr and enduring symbol of resistance, not only for his defiance against perceived injustices, but also as the embodiment of the broader Amhara struggle for survival.¹⁸⁸ In his honor, Fano brigades have been named after him, preserving his legacy at the heart of their nationalist movement.¹⁸⁹

Beyond discursive and rhetorical struggles, Amhara nationalists have also staged successive protests in response to violent attacks and perceived government inaction. For instance, following the massacres in Kemise and Ataye in April 2021, reportedly carried out by the OLA, Amhara youth mobilized in large-scale street demonstrations (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024). During these attacks, OLA fighters allegedly entered the towns, set homes ablaze and conducted house-to-house assaults targeting Amhara civilians (Addis Standard, 2021). Amhara nationalists suspect that these atrocities occurred with the tacit support of the Oromia regional administration.¹⁹⁰ In response, they launched the #Beka demonstration, *beka* being an Amharic word meaning 'enough'. The adoption of this slogan conveyed two core messages: first, a demand to end the structural violence being perpetrated against the Amhara; and second, a warning that continued neglect of peaceful appeals could lead to armed resistance.¹⁹¹ The government's failure to acknowledge or address

186. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

187. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

188. Ibid.

189. For instance, the Amhara Fano in Gojjam has named one of its brigades the Asaminew Brigade.

190. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

191. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

these grievances ultimately contributed to the radicalization of the Amhara nationalist movement, culminating in the militarization of the Fano.

6.3.2. The TPLF-Central Government Conflict

Another factor that contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism and the militarization of the Fano was the conflict between the federal government and the TPLF. Lasting from November 2020 to November 2022, this conflict was largely the result of elite power struggles. When Abiy Ahmed assumed office, TPLF officials withdrew to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, and began opposing several decisions made by the new leadership (Gardner, 2024). For example, they opposed the release of political figures who had been incarcerated on charges of terrorism (Aidi, 2021). The transformation of the EPRDF into the PP was interpreted by the TPLF as an ‘illegal and reactionary aspiration towards the centralization of power into the hands of a few individuals’ (Gedu, 2024, p. 198). In addition, legal actions taken by the new administration against alleged corruption by TPLF officials were viewed by the TPLF as a political witch-hunt targeting Tigreans (Tofa, Alagaw & Hubert, 2022). These developments led the TPLF to conclude that the political transition of 2018 was, in essence, a project to marginalize Tigreans from the new political order.

Political tensions escalated into military confrontation when the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a dispute over the national election schedule. While the federal government postponed the election originally scheduled for May 2020, the TPLF went ahead with conducting a regional election in September of the same year (Tronvoll, 2024). In response, the central government declared the election unconstitutional and refused to recognize the newly elected cabinet (Lefort, 2020). It also warned that legal action would be taken if the TPLF failed to disavow the entire election (Gardner, 2024). Escalating the standoff, the TPLF declared in October 2020 that the federal government had lost its constitutional legitimacy, as its mandate had expired (Aidi, 2021). TPLF officials further asserted that they would no longer comply with any decisions or regulations issued by the federal government (Tofa, Alagaw & Hubert, 2022). In retaliation, the federal government formally severed ties with the Tigray regional leadership, suspended the regional budget and threatened to undertake a law enforcement operation (Tronvoll, 2024).

Amidst the political deadlock, the TPLF launched an attack on the Northern Command of the army on November 3, 2020 (Yayehsew, 2024). The following day, the Prime Minister declared what he called a law enforcement operation after framing the assault as an act of high treason (ENA, 2020).

The federal government mobilized a coalition of forces, including the national army, regional security units and the Eritrean military (Tronvoll, 2024). Among the regional actors were Amhara forces such as the ARSF, local militias and the Fano, all of whom played an active role in the conflict (Sakr, 2024). The involvement of these forces was driven by two primary motivations.¹⁹² First, to seek retribution against the TPLF, which they accuse of perpetrating structural violence against the Amhara.¹⁹³ Second, to reclaim territories, specifically Wolkayt, Tegede, Telemt and Raya, which Amhara nationalists argue were forcefully annexed by the TPLF.¹⁹⁴

Amhara forces were successful in capitalizing on the conflict to achieve these objectives. For instance, territories that had long been claimed as ‘lost’ were retaken in the early days of the war.¹⁹⁵ In these areas, the APP established a de facto administration by appointing local personnel to leadership positions (Yayehsew, 2024). For example, Colonel Demeke Zewudu, known for his role in the Wolkayt Identity Restoration Committee, was appointed head of the Administrative and Security Office in the Wolkayt area. While revenge is a subjective concept that cannot be empirically measured, Amhara nationalists argue that ‘Amhara forces succeeded in avenging the TPLF by blocking its return to power’.¹⁹⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Brigadier General Mulualem Admasu (2020), a survivor from the Northern Command, who testified that without the intervention of the ARSF, the TPLF might have succeeded in wiping out the entire unit.

It may have been this resistance that provoked Getachew Reda, a senior TPLF figure, to publicly threaten that the TPLF would retaliate against Amhara elites (Yayehsew, 2025). His speech was widely circulated among Amhara nationalists, who interpreted it as a threat directed at the entire Amhara population.¹⁹⁷ This interpretation was subsequently employed as a mobilizing tool to rally mass support for the nationalist cause.¹⁹⁸ The Maicadra and Chenna massacres, along with the looting of property in the Amhara region during the war, further reinforced the rhetoric of Amhara nationalism. After occupying a local village known as Chenna in September 2021, TPLF forces were reported to have massacred approximately 200 civilians (Adane et al., 2022). They were also

192. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

193. Ibid.

194. Ibid.

195. Interview with an Amhara activist at Bahir Dar, February 2025.

196. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

197. Ibid.

198. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

accused of looting hospitals, schools and industrial equipment (UOG, 2022). However, TPLF officials denied these allegations, insisting that they neither deliberately targeted civilians nor looted any property (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Instead, they alleged that Amhara forces committed acts of violence against Tigrean civilians.

One of the Amhara forces accused by the TPLF of committing targeted killings against Tigreans was the Fano (Daniel, 2021). This claim, however, was refuted by a participant in the war, who recalled that Fano had never engaged in the killing of civilians.¹⁹⁹ Instead, he insisted, ‘we were cruel only in retaliating against TPLF forces who killed our mothers, sisters and children’.²⁰⁰ Verifying the claims of either side remains a difficult task, as wartime narratives are often shaped, and at times fabricated, by the opposing parties. In this context, Kalyvas (2006) notes that war is not only a physical confrontation but also a discursive battle, in which combatants construct selective memories and justify their actions in order to gain legitimacy and mobilize support.

Beyond engaging in both the physical and discursive battles, Fano capitalized on the conflict to establish camps, recruit and train fighters, build social networks and amass weapons seized from defeated TPLF forces (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024). It also leveraged the government’s logistical, security and administrative infrastructure to strengthen its military capacity.²⁰¹ In particular, the Amhara regional government played a key role by arming youth and organizing military training programs aimed at mobilizing them into the ARSF and the national army (Yayehsew, 2024). However, during this period, a noticeable tendency emerged among youth to prefer joining the Fano over enlisting in formal government forces.²⁰² In response to this growing sentiment, the regional government intensified its recruitment efforts through a coordinated campaign carried out in partnership with universities across the Amhara region.²⁰³ This collaboration was formalized during a meeting held in September 2021, in which I participated as a representative of Debre Markos University.

Following the meeting, university teachers, including myself, were dispatched to various localities to persuade youth to join the national army. Together with my colleagues, I visited rural areas in

199. Interview with Deneke Biabale at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

200. Ibid.

201. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

202. Interview with a senior official from APP at Bahr Dar, February 2025.

203. Ibid.

the East Gojjam Zone, where we led four meetings with the youth.²⁰⁴ However, we found it extremely difficult to convince them. Many voiced deep distrusts toward the defense forces.²⁰⁵ A recurring concern was that the national army was dominated by Oromo generals.²⁰⁶ Abiy Ahmed was criticized for allegedly replacing Tigrean generals with Oromo ones in an effort to control key sectors of the military (Yayehsew, 2024). Consequently, Amhara youths expressed concern that the dominance of a single ethnic group in the army's leadership fostered a perception of ethnic favoritism.²⁰⁷

This perception led youths to reject our attempts to persuade them to join the national army. In one memorable encounter in Yeduha, a young man told me, 'if the purpose is to defeat the TPLF, why are you forcing us to join the government forces? I personally want to join the Fano'.²⁰⁸ The widespread skepticism toward the national army was further fueled by the perception that it served as a tool of the ruling party.²⁰⁹ During past protests, government security forces had been accused of using lethal force against demonstrators (Solomon, 2022). One youth at the meeting shared, 'to tell the truth, I still remember that soldiers killed my friend just because he was at a protest'.²¹⁰ These traumatic experiences have significantly shaped the attitudes of many young Amhara, pushing them to align with the Fano.²¹¹

The wartime politico-military opportunity and social networks enabled the Fano to formalize as an organization, establishing provincial commanders and organizational structures.²¹² For instance, the Amhara Popular Force, the precursor to the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, was founded on August 13, 2021 (Daniel, 2024). The origins of the Amhara Fano in Wollo are also linked to the involvement of key leaders, such as Merie Wodajo, in the conflict and their subsequent public recognition (Atrsaw & Yared, 2024). According to Deneke, members of the ADFM had gained practical experience in direct battlefield combat, beyond their expertise in guerilla fighting.²¹³ He

204. Supra note, September 2021.

205. Ibid.

206. Ibid.

207. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

208. Supra note, September 2021.

209. Ibid.

210. Ibid.

211. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

212. Ibid.

213. Interview with Deneke Biabale at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

believed this experience enabled ADFM members currently involved in the armed struggle to lead successful operations.²¹⁴

Fano members gained practical battlefield experience through their deep involvement in the war in collaboration with the ARSF. This was underscored by Brigadier General Tefera Mamo (2022), who served as the commander of the ARSF at the time and is now affiliated with the Fano. Tefera asserted that ‘it was the combined force of Fano and the ARSF that curtailed the TPLF’s march toward Addis Ababa’ (ibid). He recalled that when TPLF forces advanced into North Shewa, the Prime Minister personally called and ordered him to lead his forces to that front, even though he had already been stationed on another battlefield. It was after ‘our forces pushed the TPLF forces back to Wollo’, Tefera (2022) stated, that ‘the Prime Minister announced his decision to lead the army’ on November 23, 2021.

The military alliance between the Amhara Fano and the government, however, ended with the conclusion of the conflict and the signing of the Pretoria Agreement (Associated Press, 2025). One of the factors that strained the relationship was the claim that the Amhara were not represented in the Agreement.²¹⁵ Amhara nationalists argue that Amhara representation was essential, not only due to the involvement of Amhara forces but also because of territorial disputes and other political divergences with the TPLF (Messay, 2024). Without fair representation, the agreement was signed with controversial provisions.²¹⁶ The most contentious of these was Article 10(4), which stipulates that both parties agreed to resolve ‘issues of contested areas in accordance with the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’.

The contested areas in this context refer to Wolkayt, Telemt, Tegede and Raya. Amhara nationalists argue that attempting to resolve the issue in accordance with the constitution is unrealistic, as the TPLF had already annexed these territories before the constitution’s promulgation (Adane, 2023). They contend that the provision signals the Abiy administration’s willingness to relinquish these lands, thereby undermining Amhara voices.²¹⁷ A specific clause in the Pretoria Agreement, which states that displaced Tigreans from these contested areas would be returned, is frequently cited by

214. Ibid.

215. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

216. Ibid.

217. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

Amhara nationalists to support this claim.²¹⁸ To further exacerbate the situation, Amhara nationalists suspect that the federal government intends to assume administrative control over these areas and organize a referendum.²¹⁹ This proposed referendum has itself become a significant source of contention. While the TPLF maintains that it should take place only after the return of displaced Tigreans, Amhara nationalists argue that these individuals were settlers rather than original inhabitants (Yayehsew, 2025). As a result, Amhara nationalists categorically oppose the referendum and instead demand unconditional ownership of the territories in question.²²⁰

In conclusion, the TPLF-central government conflict radicalized Amhara nationalists and militarized the Fano in two major respects. The first was the direct participation of Amhara forces on the battlefield. This enabled Fano, in particular, to recruit fighters, create social networks and collect military ammunition. The second was the unmet promises the federal government failed to uphold after the conclusion of the conflict. During the war, the Prime Minister was known for vowing that Wolkayt, Raya, Telemt and Tegede were part of the Amhara region's Gondar and Wollo areas and would remain part of the region (Yonas, 2024). Yet, the Pretoria Agreement downplayed the status of these areas to 'contested', and subsequently, senior federal officials began to treat them as territories aggressed by the Amhara (Messay, 2024). To make matters worse, the central government remained silent when Raya was recontrolled by TPLF forces in April 2024 (AAA, 2024). Only the Amhara regional government released a statement condemning the TPLF for not learning from past mistakes (Ethiopian Observer, 2024). The statement also expressed concern that the government's war with the Amhara Fano had undermined its capacity to respond to what it described as renewed aggression.

6.3.3. The Attempted Disarmament of Amhara Fano and Demobilization of ARSF

Tensions intensified following the government's initiation of disarmament operations against the Amhara Fano.²²¹ This move was preceded by an effort to delegitimize the Fano, with its members increasingly depicted as extremists, looters, bandits and unruly actors (Messay, 2024). Notably, Prime Minister Abiy played a leading role in promoting this narrative.²²² This marked a stark

218. Interview with Deneke Biabile at Bahir Dar, March 2025.; Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.; Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

219. Interview with Deneke Biabile at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

220. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

221. Ibid.

222. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

departure from his earlier stance during the height of the TPLF-central government conflict, when he had hailed the Fano as the pride of Ethiopia (Yonas, 2024; Yayehsew, 2024). However, in a parliamentary speech delivered in June 2023, Abiy adopted a markedly different tone, accusing certain groups operating under the Fano name of engaging in serious misconduct.²²³ He alleged that individuals associated with the group had committed a range of grave offenses, including looting weapons from the army, perpetrating acts of sexual violence and unlawfully extorting funds along major transportation routes.²²⁴

For many within the Fano, the government's abrupt shift in tone was perceived as a prelude to a broader campaign of repression.²²⁵ Indeed, the federal government soon launched a widespread crackdown: prominent figures such as Zemene Kassie were arrested, while security operations were conducted to apprehend others, including Merie Wodajo and Mesafint Tesfu.²²⁶ Activists suspected of ties to the Fano were also targeted.²²⁷ One notable example is Asress Mare, now serving as Head of Political Affairs for the Amhara Fano in Gojjam. In an interview with the Associated Press (2025), Asress recounted being arrested twice on allegations of conspiring with extremist groups to forcibly overthrow the government. He stated that his decision to join the Fano stemmed from the government's closure of any avenue for peaceful struggle.

In a seemingly contradictory move, on May 11, 2022, the federal government held an award ceremony to recognize certain Fano leaders for their contributions during the TPLF-central government conflict (Ethio Times, 2022). This move was widely interpreted by some factions within the Fano as a calculated attempt to divide the movement and weaken its collective resistance. In a statement, the Amhara Fano Unity in Gondar expressed strong disapproval:

Giving recognition to those heroes who fought the enemy-TPLF is commendable. However, the process of selecting awardees is riddled with problems. We observed that individuals who made no significant contributions on the war front were awarded in the name of Fano. Meanwhile, those who sacrificed the most for the sovereignty of the Ethiopian state have been arrested or killed. In our view, the award program is an attempt to sow discord among Fano members...Dear Fano members from Gondar, Gojjam, Shewa and Wollo, our enemy knows how fiercely you have fought. Our people will remember

223. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM6ZOXrfsno>.

224. Ibid.

225. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

226. Ibid.

227. Ibid.

the sacrifices you made for their survival. So, please preserve your unity and remain focused on the enemy that has targeted our ancestral lands (Ethio Times, 2022).

Meanwhile, a political scientist from Addis Ababa University remarked that although the award ceremony included an element of recognition, it also conveyed an implicit message.²²⁸ The message, he argued, was the government's intention to halt the recruitment and training of new Fano members and to initiate the disarmament of those already in possession of weapons.²²⁹ This interpretation was reinforced by a speech delivered during the ceremony by then Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen, who stated: 'from now on, our focus is on development. Youths must invest their energy in developmental activities rather than maintaining a warfare mentality' (Ethio Times, 2022). Amhara nationalists interpreted Demeke's statement as an indirect order for armed youth to lay down their weapons.²³⁰ One interviewee asserted that this perceived call for disarmament contradicted an earlier statement by Kelemework Mihrete, then governor of the South Gondar Zone, who had declared that Fano members were entitled to inherit and retain weapons captured from TPLF militants.²³¹

The fears of Amhara nationalists were realized when the government took concrete measures against the Fano, including intensified disarmament efforts and the suspension of military training.²³² For instance, in early April 2022, clashes erupted between government forces and Fano militias when the former attempted to halt a training exercise organized by the latter (Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 2022). Shortly thereafter, Brigadier General Tefera Mamo, who had been dismissed without explanation from his leadership role in the ARSF in February, was arrested (Reuters, 2022). On May 16, 2022, the Amhara regional government issued a directive requiring residents to register their firearms (AMC, 2022). Just two days later, it announced the launch of a law enforcement operation purportedly to restore peace and security in the region (Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 2022). According to AMC (2022), over 4,500 individuals were arrested as part of this extensive operation.

228. Interview with a political scientist from Addis Ababa University, November 2024.

229. Ibid.

230. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

231. Ibid.

232. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

Although regional authorities insisted that the campaign targeted criminals rather than the Fano,²³³ Amhara nationalists perceived it differently.²³⁴ Amhara nationalist argued that the government's true intention was to eliminate prominent Fano leaders and disarm the group, thereby leaving the Amhara defenseless.²³⁵ As evidence, they pointed to a violent incident in the town of Motta on May 19, 2022, where security forces clashed with Fano fighters during an attempt to disarm them (Ethiopian Peace Observatory, 2022). In the days that followed, protests erupted in Motta, Merawi and Woldia, as young demonstrators took to the streets demanding the release of detainees and denouncing the disarmament campaign (ibid). Government forces reportedly responded with live ammunition, resulting in the deaths of an unspecified number of youths (DW Amharic, 2022). Since these politico-military incidents, Amhara nationalists have come to view every move by the government with deep suspicion.²³⁶

Adding fuel to the fire was the federal government's decision to demobilize regional special forces. Article 52(7) of the 1994 Constitution states that regional states are only empowered to 'establish and administer a state police force'. In a statement issued on April 18, 2023, the Prime Minister cited this provision to argue that the establishment of special forces was unconstitutional (Daniel, 2024). He contended that these forces not only violated the Constitution but also contributed to national instability (ibid). As Daniel recounts, the Prime Minister cited two key incidents to support his claim: the TPLF's attack on the national army and the alleged involvement of the Somali regional special forces in the 2017 expulsion of numerous Oromos. Consequently, the Prime Minister announced that regional special forces would be demobilized and integrated into the national army and regional police, in order to uphold state integrity and reassert the central government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

Though the initiative was intended to apply to all regions, the demobilization of the ARSF became particularly controversial. When the letter announcing the decision to demobilize the ARSF was circulated on April 5, 2023, Amhara nationalists immediately objected, citing three main concerns.²³⁷ First, they argued that the Pretoria Agreement, which called for the TPLF to disarm, had not been fully implemented, as senior TPLF officials admitted they had not fully disarmed and

233. Interview with a senior official from APP at Bahr Dar, February 2025.

234. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

235. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

236. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

237. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

had no intention of doing so.²³⁸ Second, they pointed out that the TPLF still controlled contested territories like Telemt, meaning the disarmament of the ARSF effectively allowed the TPLF to retain these areas and potentially reinvade the Amhara region.²³⁹ Third, they claimed that the decision targeted only the ARSF, aiming to weaken the Amhara region, while the government had taken no comparable action to demobilize the Oromia Special Force.²⁴⁰ Overall, as Yonas (2024) succinctly put it, Amhara nationalists believed that the disarmament operation should be delayed until they had developed sufficient confidence in the government's commitment to protecting Amhara interests.

Daniel (2024), Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, remarks that opposition to the demobilization initiative came not only from Amhara nationalists but also from members of the ARSF themselves. According to him, their objection stemmed from the lack of consultation prior to the release of the official letter announcing their demobilization. Due to this communication gap, ARSF members perceived the initiative as a disarmament effort rather than a plan to integrate them into the national army or regional police force (International Crisis Group, 2023). In contrast to official narratives, one ARSF member recalled that they were commanded to drop their weapons while stationed at a camp in North Wollo.²⁴¹ This, combined with mistrust and confusion, prompted many to leave the camp with their arms and join the Fano.²⁴² Binalf Andualem, then Minister of Peace, acknowledged in August 2023 that most ARSF members had indeed joined the Fano with their weapons (Yonas, 2024). This significantly bolstered the Fano's military strength.²⁴³

6.3.4. Delegitimization of Amhara Nationalist Aspirations

Amhara nationalists argue that their efforts to urge both state and non-state actors to acknowledge and address Amhara grievances through peaceful means have often been met with disdain.²⁴⁴ As one Amhara activist stated, 'while we have a concern for justice, our nationalism is viewed by anti-Amhara political groups as a project of domination'.²⁴⁵ Political groups such as the OLF and TPLF are criticized for rejecting the legitimate concerns of the Amhara in order to perpetuate their

238. Ibid.

239. Ibid.

240. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

241. Interview with a demobilized member of ARSF at Bahir Dar, March 2025.

242. Ibid.

243. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

244. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

245. Ibid.

mistreatment without accountability (Mesganaw, 2021). The presence of such counterclaims surrounding Amhara nationalism is, in fact, unsurprising within a political landscape marked by contradictory interpretations of history and competing visions for the future of the state.

Theorists of nationalism argue that nationalist movements often portray their own cause as virtuous while framing rival nationalisms in a negative light (Smith, 1991; Eley & Suny, 1996; Spencer & Wollman, 2002; Özkırımlı, 2017). Nationalists tend to seek moral superiority by presenting their struggle as one for equality, justice and democracy (Brubaker, 1996), while depicting competing movements as illiberal, oppressive, or driven by hegemonic ambitions (Smith, 2010). This is frequently achieved through counter-narratives, discursive strategies designed to discredit and delegitimize the aspirations and grievances of other nationalist projects (Ting, 2008). Such practices not only entrench political polarization but also generate resentment among those whose claims are dismissed or distorted (Finlayson, 1998). In the case of Amhara nationalism, this form of delegitimization is perceived not merely as political opposition, but as an existential threat.²⁴⁶

The delegitimization of Amhara nationalism has been carried out by various social groups, each motivated by different concerns. One such group comprises proponents of the nation-building thesis, who argue that fostering Amhara nationalism undermines efforts to construct a unified Ethiopian polity (Getachew, 1992; Takkele, 1994; Tegegne, 1998; Admasu, 2010). Tegegne (1998, p. 123) succinctly articulated this fear, stating that ‘if Amhara nationalism is allowed to mature, particularly among the elite, it is possible that the country will revert to the days we long not to see’. For Tegegne, the reassuring sign at the time was the apparent disinterest of Amhara elites in ethnic-based mobilization, which he viewed as ‘a positive trend in the construction of the new Ethiopia’ (ibid). However, this hope has not materialized. On the contrary, Amhara nationalism has grown significantly, reaching a point where many consider it irreversible (Messay, 2024). Given this, one might reasonably ask: why is the emergence of Amhara nationalism uniquely seen as a threat to national unity, while the flourishing of Oromo or Tigrayan nationalisms has not elicited comparable concern? This selective anxiety raises important questions about the assumptions underpinning the discourse of unity and the unequal treatment of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia.

246. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

Another social group that delegitimizes the concerns of Amhara nationalism consists of Oromo and Tigrean nationalists. Alemseged (2022), a Tigrayan scholar, characterizes Amhara nationalism as unitarist and driven by a desire to reclaim state power and exact revenge on Tigreans. He portrays Abiy Ahmed's administration as an extension of the old Amhara ruling system, arguing that it seeks to dismantle the ethnic federal arrangement in order to reestablish a unitary Ethiopian state. This concern is echoed by Asafa (2023), an Oromo scholar, who describes Abiy's government as a neo-*neftegna* regime. According to Asafa, the current administration represents a continuation of what he terms the Amhara settler state formed under Emperor Menelik. He contends that it enables the remnants of the *neftegna* to organize both domestically and internationally in an effort to restore the Menelikean order.

The emphasis on Ethiopian unity, the glorification of history and the call for the restoration of a greater Ethiopia in the Prime Minister's inaugural speech are often cited by Oromo nationalists as evidence that his administration signals the resurgence of Amhara nationalism (Asebe, 2023). However, this assertion is flawed for at least two reasons. First, Abiy Ahmed did not ascend to power as an Amhara but as an Oromo; thus, associating his rhetoric with Amhara nationalist aspirations misrepresents the actual dynamics of nationalist discourse.²⁴⁷ His worldview diverges significantly from the concerns of Amhara nationalism. Abiy has frequently distanced himself from Amhara nationalists, often referring to them as 'the other' in public speeches. In one such address, he remarked that 'so-called Amhara nationalists used to instill fear among the Amhara' by saying 'you are betrayed, eliminated and marginalized'.²⁴⁸ He then urged them to tone down such rhetoric in the interest of Ethiopian unity.²⁴⁹

Second, such claims mischaracterize the actual goals of Amhara nationalists, who primarily seek to end the structural violence inflicted upon their community (Tezera, 2021; Yared, 2022; Desalegn, 2025). Many Amhara nationalists regard the Prime Minister not as an ally, but as an Oromo nationalist whose rise to power has coincided with, and in their view contributed to, the persistent killings and eviction of the Amhara.²⁵⁰ As one interviewee expressed:

247. Email Interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

248. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1V_tUwWDZM

249. Ibid.

250. Email interview with an Amhara journalist who was formerly arrested, January 2024.

The rhetoric of Ethiopianness is used by Abiy Ahmed as a camouflage to conceal his true intentions. It is invoked only insofar as it helps consolidate power or serves the interests of the Oromo. If Abiy were a genuine Ethiopianist, he would put an end to what is happening to the Amhara in the Oromia region. I suspect that Abiy and his Oromo cliques are clearing the region to pave the way for the formation of an independent Oromia.²⁵¹

It is, therefore, more accurate to conclude that the rise of Abiy Ahmed to power does not represent a resurgence of Amhara nationalism. Rather, the politico-military developments that unfolded during his tenure have contributed to the radicalization of the Amhara nationalist movement. In essence, this radicalization has taken shape as a form of counter-state-framed nationalism, reactive to Abiy and his PP circle, and views their actions as exacerbating the suffering of the Amhara and endangering the very survival of the Ethiopian state.²⁵²

Even so, Amhara nationalists have objected to Abiy Ahmed's interpretation of Ethiopia's past. They argue that although Abiy may invoke the country's long and illustrious history, he does so selectively and primarily when seeking support from the Amhara constituency.²⁵³ In contrast, his addresses to the Oromo public, delivered in Afan Oromo, are framed around themes such as: 'you were oppressed by the ancient system', 'you have defeated the *neftegna*', 'this is your government born out of struggle', and 'you must protect it from being hijacked by *neftegna* forces'.²⁵⁴ Such rhetoric, according to Amhara nationalists, reveals a calculated use of historical narratives for political expediency.²⁵⁵ They maintain that their engagement with history is not politically instrumental, but rather rooted in a desire to construct an authentic Amhara self, grounded in historical experience.²⁵⁶ However, as one activist noted, Amhara nationalists 'do not advocate for a return to the past or the restoration of former hegemonies at the expense of other Ethiopians'.²⁵⁷ In this regard, a leader of the NaMA added:

We have no interest in restoring the unitary Ethiopian state. We do not seek to impose our culture, language, or way of life on others. What we want is an Ethiopian state that treats the Amhara fairly. The

251. Ibid.

252. Email Interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

253. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

254. Ibid.

255. Ibid.

256. Email Interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

257. Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

Amhara have the right to live and work in every part of the country. Demanding this is not about unitarism or restoring Amhara domination.²⁵⁸

Justice, equality, democracy, fair representation and the preservation of Ethiopian unity are central to the political program of NaMA (NaMA, 2019). A close reading of this document reveals that there is not a single sentence advocating for the restoration of unitarism or the revival of the so-called past Amhara system. The same holds true for the political program of BETAM, which asserts that the Amhara have been subjected to structural violence and deprived of their historical territories (Mesganaw, 2021). Far from promoting a return to dominance, BETAM's program explicitly calls for the establishment of an independent state. At the same time, as discussed above, the Fano movement pursues a dual objective: to end the structural violence inflicted on the Amhara and to establish a political system that ensures equal treatment for all Ethiopians.

Other competing nationalisms, however, have labeled Amhara nationalism as illiberal, anti-democratic, aggressive and expansionist, while portraying their own as progressive and morally superior (Alemseged, 2022; Asafa, 2023; Gemechu, 2023). For instance, Lencho Leta (2019), one of the founders of the OLF, draws a sharp contrast between Oromo and Amhara nationalism. He presents Oromo nationalism as rooted in justice and equality, while depicting Amhara nationalism as inherently chauvinistic. He stated that:

Our nationalism demands the recognition of the Oromo as human beings, the protection of their culture, language and history, and the equality of all nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia...Amhara nationalism, [on the other hand], has a different nature. It is grounded in the belief in Amhara superiority. Its concern is not that the Amhara people are mistreated, but rather in crafting the Ethiopian state in the image of Amhara culture and language (Lencho, 2019).

Territorial claims by Amhara nationalists are often interpreted as indicative of an expansionist mindset. Alemseged (2022), for instance, characterizes the Fano movement as expansionist, arguing that it seeks to annex territories such as Wolkayt and Raya, which he considers integral parts of Tigray. Similarly, Gemechu (2023) contends that the Fano have launched attacks against the Oromo in Wollega with the intent of altering the province's demographic composition. He argues that, through the annexation of Oromo territories, Amhara nationalists aim to establish what he refers to as a Greater Amhara. The commemoration of Emperor Menelik II is also criticized by

258. Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

detractors of Amhara nationalism, who argue that it glorifies a historical figure accused of subjugating and committing violence against various communities.²⁵⁹ Assefa (2019), an anthropologist from Wolayta, stated in a televised interview that ‘celebrating Menelik must be legally sanctioned, for he was an oppressor, genocide perpetrator and colonizer’.

The radicalization of Amhara nationalism can, therefore, be understood through the lens of counter narratives, wherein demands for recognition are met with delegitimizing discourses that portray the movement as inherently supremacist and expansionist. Rather than addressing the concerns raised by Amhara nationalists, those in positions of state power have largely ignored these grievances and criminalized those who voiced them.²⁶⁰ For instance, Asress Mare told the Associated Press (2025) that he had been arrested twice for organizing peaceful protests and engaging in social media activism. Likewise, a leader from the Amhara Fano in Gojjam remarked, ‘we tried our best to urge anti-Amhara political groups to at least acknowledge the suffering of the Amhara through peaceful means. Their response was to mock us as mere shouters’.²⁶¹ This perceived denial, delegitimization, and vilification by both state and non-state actors has contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism and the subsequent militarization of the Fano.²⁶²

Summary

By distancing the concept from its associations with extremism, terrorism and fundamentalism, this chapter seeks to situate the shift in Amhara nationalism from peaceful to violent forms within a broader framework of radicalization. It argues that while a deficit in state legitimacy can contribute to this transformation, it is not a sufficient condition on its own. Rather, a combination of factors, including the state’s weakened capacity to maintain order (particularly during political transitions), ongoing civil wars, the consistent repudiation of nationalist concerns by both state and non-state actors and emerging opportunities to mobilize the masses toward armed struggle, play a critical role in the radicalization of nationalist movements and the militarization of the groups leading them.

259. Interview with an Oromo activist at Addis Ababa, November 2024.

260. Email Interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

261. Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

262. Ibid.

The case of Amhara nationalism illustrates this dynamic. The transformation of the Amhara nationalist movement from peaceful activism to armed struggle can be attributed, in part, to a crisis of state legitimacy rooted in the government's failure to address the structural violence faced by the Amhara. It is important to note, however, that such structural violence is not a post-2018 phenomenon. Despite this long-standing marginalization, Amhara nationalists initially pursued peaceful avenues of resistance – aside from small-scale insurgencies – including participation in party politics, organized protests, sit-ins, social media campaigns and boycotts of businesses affiliated with ruling parties.

The leadership change in April 2018, however, brought both opportunities and challenges that accelerated the radicalization of Amhara nationalism. On the one hand, the initial period of cordial relations between the new administration and Amhara nationalists created space for the Fano to expand. This opening enabled Fano leaders to recruit new members, conduct military training in rural areas and accumulate arms (particularly through their involvement in the war between the TPLF and the federal government). On the other hand, the government's tendency to restrict peaceful avenues of struggle (through the arrest of activists, journalists and politicians), the marginalization of Amhara voices in the Pretoria Agreement, and the attempts to disarm the Amhara Fano and demobilize the ARSF, all contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism. Ultimately, some Amhara nationalists came to believe that only military means could end the structural violence against the Amhara and bring about a political system that treats all Ethiopians equally.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Synthesis, Recommendation and Future Research

7. Introduction

This chapter synthesizes the overall findings of the dissertation and presents the key conclusions and policy recommendations drawn from the study. The dissertation examined the radicalization of Amhara nationalism in post-2018 Ethiopia, tracing its origins and analyzing the resistance strategies employed by nationalist actors. To guide its epistemological, ontological and methodological foundations, the study adopted a critical research paradigm. Accordingly, it followed a qualitative approach based on data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, media content analysis and document review. Data analysis and interpretation were conducted through a combination of TA and CDA methods.

Building on this methodological and analytical foundation, the dissertation contributes to the existing literature on nationalism studies in two key ways. First, grounded in the social constructionist view that nationalist movements must be understood in their specific contexts, it traces the origins and evolving dynamics of Amhara nationalism. By highlighting the politico-historical conditions that gave rise to this movement and the factors that led to its radicalization, the study provides empirical insight into how particular contexts shape nationalist expressions. Second, it expands the literature on African nationalisms by demonstrating how colonial legacies have influenced the development of competing nationalisms in a society untouched by the actual process of colonization. This concluding chapter brings together these key contributions by highlighting the major findings of the dissertation.

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section establishes the broader connection between the empirical findings presented in the previous three chapters and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two. The second section concludes the core arguments of the dissertation in a concise form. The third section offers key policy recommendations based on the findings of the study. The final section outlines potential areas for future research identified during the dissertation process.

7.1. Synthesis

7.1.1. Amhara Nationalism as Counter-State-Framed Nationalism

Rather than framing the Amhara nationalist movement as a form of ethnic nationalism, this dissertation analyzes it as a counter-state-framed nationalism that emerged in opposition to the nation-building project pursued by the EPRDF in post-1991 Ethiopia. This is not to deny the ethnic dimension of Amhara nationalism, but rather to utilize the analytical power of the state as a framework for interrogating the movement. This approach draws on Brubaker's (1998) classification of nationalism into state-framed and counter-state-framed forms. Brubaker contends that using the state as the unit of analysis helps circumvent the citizenship-versus-culture deadlock, which renders the civic-ethnic dichotomy analytically reductionist. It also enables a more comprehensive examination of the divergent and sometimes competing ideological orientations that can coexist within a single nationalist movement.

Although united by the common goal of ending structural violence against the Amhara, Amhara nationalists differ in their ideological orientations. Political parties such as the AAPPO, NaMA and ADFM have aspired to address this structural violence within the framework of the Ethiopian state. What they contest is not the legitimacy of the state itself, but the official narratives that portray the Amhara as colonizers and oppressors. For these groups, removing such narratives from Ethiopian political discourse is key to overcoming structural injustices. The AAPPO, in particular, went so far as to oppose the ethnic-based federal arrangement, arguing that it could lead to the disintegration of the state. This stance indicates that the primary divergence between the official nationalism of the EPRDF and that of the AAPPO lies not in their views on citizenship or culture, but in their contrasting conceptualizations of the Ethiopian state. While the EPRDF viewed the state as a mere collection of discrete ethnic groups, the AAPPO claimed that Ethiopians have developed an overarching national identity that transcends calcified ethnic boundaries.

In contrast to these state-oriented approaches, other political actors within the Amhara nationalist movement have adopted more radical positions that challenge the legitimacy of the Ethiopian state. BETAM, for example, advocated for the establishment of an independent Amhara state, arguing that structural violence against the Amhara could not be addressed within the existing territorial framework of Ethiopia. In this regard, Mesganaw (2017) contends that the actions committed against the Amhara by political actors such as the TPLF and OLF severed the social and political

ties between the Amhara and other ethnic groups, rendering secession the only viable option. However, the rise of new leadership at the national level in April 2018 led many proponents of secession to revise their ideological position in favor of preserving Ethiopian unity. At the time of writing, there are no organized political groups within the Amhara nationalist movement that openly promote secession.

The shifting dynamics and variations in the ideological orientations of Amhara nationalism align with the broader social constructionist thesis that nationalist ideologies are not fixed but malleable, even within a single nationalist movement (Finlayson, 1998). Nationalists frame their ideologies in response to prevailing circumstances and evolving political contexts (Ming, 2022). Within Amhara nationalist discourse, secessionist sentiments have emerged in response to the perceived failure of the Ethiopian state to protect the Amhara from structural violence. However, when a political change occurred in 2018, accompanied by promises of a more equitable distribution of national resources, the prevention of ethnically motivated attacks and fairer representation of the Amhara in national politics, many Amhara nationalists initially supported the new leadership and distanced themselves from secessionist agendas. Yet, the administration has since faced growing criticism for failing to fulfill its commitments, as reports of massacres and evictions targeting the Amhara have persisted.

While this failure has already driven the Amhara Fano to militarize and contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism, it may also rekindle support for secession as an ideological option. Such a development risks accelerating the disintegration of the Ethiopian state and exacerbating interethnic conflict. In making this assertion, the researcher does not seek to sound alarmist or pessimistic, but rather to underscore the urgency of addressing the legitimate concerns voiced by Amhara nationalists. Ethiopians from diverse ethnic backgrounds should collectively urge the government to adopt a more democratic and inclusive approach in responding to counter-state-framed nationalisms, such as that of the Amhara.

7.1.2. Amhara Nationalism as a Discourse

Following the Foucauldian notion of discourse, many theorists of nationalism, such as Calhoun (1997) and Özkirimli (2017), treat nationalism as a discursive formation – a specific way of seeing and interpreting the world. Adopting this perspective, this dissertation conceptualizes Amhara nationalism as a discursive formation, a specific mode of understanding that both shapes and is

shaped by the broader politico-historical conditions of Ethiopia. In this framework, Amhara nationalism emerges as a counter-discourse that challenges dominant narratives portraying the Amhara as oppressors, expansionists, or colonialists. By rejecting these depictions, Amhara nationalists seek to offer alternative interpretations of both historical and contemporary developments. Their discursive efforts aim to reframe Amhara identity in more affirmative and dignified terms.

An understanding of Amhara nationalism as a specific way of interpreting the world, shaped by Amhara-centered narratives in both negative and positive senses, is adopted in this study to locate the period in which Amhara nationalism emerged. Based on this framing, the study rejects the claim that Emperors Tewodros and Menelik were Amhara nationalists. The worldview surrounding these prominent emperors was primarily religious (protecting Orthodox Christianity from perceived threats by the religiously impure) and focused on maintaining the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state, rather than conducting an Amhara-centered mobilization. This mobilization is a post-1991 phenomenon, where the three nationalist claims (identity, temporal and spatial) that distinguish nationalism from other ideologies that can be understood as a discourse are more clearly evident in this era than the second half of the nineteenth century.

With respect to identity, Amhara nationalists assert that the Amhara constitute a distinct nation with unique cultural traits that set them apart from other groups in Ethiopia. Affirming this claim is particularly important for countering narratives that deny the existence of a unique Amhara identity. Temporally, Amhara nationalism is grounded in a historical narrative that emphasizes the Amhara people's long-standing contributions to the formation of the Ethiopian state and to the production of civilizational values. However, Amhara nationalists argue that these contributions have been reinterpreted by anti-Amhara actors as a history of domination and colonialism. Their movement seeks to challenge this interpretation and reclaim a more positive historical memory as a foundation for the future of the Amhara. Spatially, Amhara nationalists maintain that the Amhara possess a legitimate homeland, parts of which, such as Wolkayt, Telemt, Raya, Metekel and Dera, have been forcibly annexed and incorporated into the Tigray, Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. The movement is thus committed to defending what it views as the territorial integrity of historic Amhara lands and restoring those that have been lost.

7.1.3. The Colonial Origins of Amhara Nationalism

The first objective of this dissertation was to examine the politico-historical conditions that gave rise to Amhara nationalism. The study found that anti-Amhara narratives, and the structural violence stemming from their sedimentation in Ethiopian political discourse, are key factors in the emergence of Amhara nationalism. These narratives, which depict the Amhara as colonizers, oppressors, *neftegna* and *timkhtegna*, are attributed in this study to a colonial origin. Specifically, the dissertation argues that such portrayals were initially adopted by Fascist Italians.

This argument stands in contrast to prevailing views within Ethiopian Studies, where many scholars assert that, since Ethiopia was never formally colonized, linking the rise of nationalist movements to colonial legacies is misplaced. However, this dissertation challenges that assumption by adopting a broader conception of colonialism, not merely as territorial occupation, but as epistemological domination and control over knowledge and historical narratives (Yates, 2021). It is true that Ethiopia defeated Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Yet, as Marcus (2005) observes, this victory compelled Western scholars to racialize Ethiopian history in order to preserve the dominant narrative that whites were never defeated by blacks. To reconcile this, they attempted to ‘whiten’ Emperor Menelik, who led the Ethiopian army, thereby reinterpreting Adwa as a battle between whites rather than between races. Teshale (1995) encapsulates this interpretive tradition as the Oriental Semitic Paradigm, a framework that constructs a civilizational dichotomy between ‘civilized’ Semitic peoples and ‘barbaric’ non-Semitic groups. Within this paradigm, Semitic groups such as the Amhara and Tigreans are portrayed as South Arabian migrants who subjugated indigenous communities, like the Agaw, Beja and Oromo, as early as the first millennium BCE.

Fascist Italians gave blood and flesh to this narrative during their attempt to colonize Ethiopia in the 1930s. Aware that their defeat at Adwa was largely due to Ethiopian unity, they sought to sow ethnic discord by interpreting the late nineteenth-century territorial expansion of the Ethiopian state through the lens of European racial ideology (Yates, 2021). In this interpretation, Emperor Menelik was portrayed as a colonizer and oppressor of the peoples in the newly incorporated regions. Given Menelik’s Amhara identity, this accusation was extended to the entire Amhara population. Fascist propaganda weaponized this narrative to mobilize non-Amhara groups by

claiming that Italy's mission in Ethiopia was not colonial conquest, but the liberation of these groups from Amhara domination.

The reaction of Ethiopians to Fascist calls for collaboration was mixed. While some local chiefs chose to align with the occupiers, others resisted. In an effort to exact revenge for the perceived Amhara domination, certain collaborators – such as Aba Jobir – even went so far as to issue declarations that allowed the killing and massacre of the Amhara people. However, the majority of Ethiopians rejected the call for collaboration and actively resisted the Fascist occupation. As Bahru (2002) notes, this widespread resistance rendered the Italian administration unstable. Ultimately, the efforts of Ethiopian patriots combined with support from Great Britain, led to the expulsion of Italian forces and the restoration of Ethiopian sovereignty in 1941.

In the aftermath of the occupation, the British assumed control over several areas in the Horn of Africa that had been liberated from Italian colonial rule and administered them as protectorates. After establishing the BMA, British authorities sought to facilitate the formation of Greater Tigray and Greater Somalia by attempting to detach certain regions from Ethiopia. As part of this geopolitical strategy, they permitted political actors such as the SYL to carry out abuses against the Amhara. This tacit support was evident in the restrictions placed on the Ethiopian government, which was barred from taking punitive measures against SYL members, even within its own sovereign territory, including the Ogaden and other Somali-inhabited regions. These measures were driven by a broader objective: to construct a homogenous Somali community by removing the Amharas, thereby facilitating the integration of the Ogaden into a proposed Greater Somalia under British influence.

Beyond being constructed and reinforced by colonial powers, anti-Amhara narratives were later embraced by domestic actors, ultimately shaping the political economy of post-1991 Ethiopia. This system has been widely criticized for enabling structural violence against the Amhara, which, in turn, contributed to the emergence of Amhara nationalism. These developments suggest that the rise of Amhara nationalism can be understood within the broader context of how colonial legacies have contributed to the formation of competing nationalisms in Africa. As discussed in Chapter Two, many scholars argue that colonial powers crafted racialized historical narratives as part of a broader strategy of 'define and rule' (Mamdani, 2012). These narratives were subsequently adopted by postcolonial elites to privilege certain ethnic groups over others for purposes of

political patronage. This dynamic has fostered ethnic polarization, leading to xenophobic conflict, irredentist claims, and, in extreme cases, genocide.

In the Ethiopian context, the racialized interpretation of history by Orientalists and the anti-Amhara narratives propagated by Fascist Italy were later adopted by activists within the ESM of the 1960s. As their publications – such as the *Struggle* – suggest, many of these activists, who would go on to form ethnic liberation fronts in the 1970s, were deeply influenced by historical books rooted in the Orientalist tradition. These readings were refracted through a Marxist-Leninist framework, which required categorizing society in binary terms of oppressors and oppressed. In pursuit of ideological authenticity, ESM activists uncritically identified the Amhara as historical oppressors, while positioning other ethnic groups as victims.

This oversimplified dichotomy directly contributed to the emergence of ethnic liberation fronts in the 1970s. Upon seizing power in 1991, these fronts institutionalized the anti-Amhara narrative through the administrative and institutional apparatuses of the state. The introduction of ethnic federalism reclassified Amharas living outside the Amhara region as non-indigenous, effectively denying them equal recognition and rights. State-owned media further reinforced this marginalization by reviving pejorative labels such as *neftegna* and *timkhitegna*. These narratives were not merely symbolic – they translated into persistent structural violence against the Amhara. This violence has manifested in various forms, including killings, evictions, economic marginalization, cultural stigmatization and political underrepresentation. It is in response to this structural injustice that Amhara nationalism emerged. Over time, the movement evolved from a defensive posture to a broader campaign aimed at eliminating anti-Amhara narratives from Ethiopian political discourse. Amhara nationalists contend that such narratives have long served as the ideological foundation for recurring acts of violence and exclusion.

While this dissertation contends that the anti-Amhara narratives emerging from the state formation process have colonial roots, it does not overlook the shortcomings inherent in that process. The formation of the Ethiopian state was marked by a failure to pursue democratic nation-building and was shaped by the aristocratic character of its state-builders. However, the dissertation challenges the claim that this process was ethnically driven. It argues that ethnic-based mobilization was largely absent during the monarchical era and that interpreting state-society relations through an ethnic, rather than a class-based, lens is itself a colonial construct. Recognizing this is crucial for

reexamining the dominant narratives in contemporary Ethiopian politics, where ethnic categorization permeates social and economic life. A reappraisal of Ethiopian history grounded in class-based analysis can contribute to mitigating the current ethnic polarization and the rise of competing nationalisms.

7.1.4. Resistance Formation

The second objective of this dissertation was to examine the resistance strategies adopted by Amhara nationalists in pursuit of their aspirations. The findings reveal that Amhara nationalists have employed a range of mechanisms, including discursive, everyday and armed resistance. Discursive resistance involves constructing a distinct Amhara identity, one that has been contested even among Amhara elites, and reclaiming historical narratives that were repudiated by anti-Amhara political forces. Everyday resistance includes social media campaigns and organized protests aimed at mobilizing support and raising awareness. Armed resistance, on the other hand, refers to the use of armed struggle by certain segments of Amhara nationalists as a means of confronting structural violence. This section synthesizes how various actors within the Amhara nationalist movement, ranging from political parties and paramilitary groups to civil society associations, have adopted these resistance strategies to advance their nationalist aspirations.

7.1.4.1. Discursive Resistance

Discursive resistance among Amhara nationalists has manifested in two main ways. The first involves the construction of a collective Amhara identity aimed at mobilizing the population around shared goals. This effort is particularly significant given the contested nature of Amhara identity, even among Amhara elites. Influenced by the nation-building thesis in the interpretation of Ethiopian history, many scholars argue that the Amharic language and other cultural traits associated with the Amhara were employed by state-builders to forge a unified Ethiopian identity. In this process, these cultural elements were adopted by many non-Amhara populations, leading to the perception that they lost their distinctiveness. Consequently, some scholars view the Amhara not as a distinct ethnic group, but as a supra-ethnic category into which all Ethiopians were supposed to melt. From this perspective, mobilizing the Amhara along ethnic lines is often framed as a threat to Ethiopian unity.

This perspective is challenged by Amhara nationalists, who argue that it has hindered the Amhara from organizing and mobilizing politically in an era dominated by ethnic politics. In response, they have sought to construct and assert a distinct Amhara identity, an identity that, as Messay (2024) notes, has already been realized and denying its existence is to reject a present reality. Amhara nationalists employ three main discursive practices to construct a collective identity: the essentialization of Amhara identity, the invocation of a golden age narrative and the articulation of a victimhood thesis. The essentialization of identity involves the claim that being Amhara is natural, primordial and immutable. According to this view, individuals born to Amhara families are inherently Amhara. Nationalists further support this claim by highlighting shared cultural markers such as Amharic language, cuisine and clothing styles, which, despite being adopted by some non-Amhara groups, are presented as evidence of Amhara distinctiveness.

The tracing of a golden age involves the use of history to justify and affirm the existence of a distinct Amhara identity. Drawing on Ethiopia's rich historical legacy, within which the Amhara are believed to have played a central role, Amhara nationalists have no shortage of symbolic reference points. The Aksumite civilization, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela and the castles of Gondar are frequently cited as living testimonies to Amhara contributions to the state. Prominent figures such as Emperors Tewodros II and Menelik II are also celebrated by Amhara nationalists as iconic heroes who significantly shaped the formation of Ethiopia. These historical narratives are strategically invoked to strengthen a sense of collective identity and mobilize the Amhara for shared goals. Yet, while the Amhara are portrayed as having a proud and formative past, nationalists argue that they now suffer from systemic marginalization and structural violence at the hands of anti-Amhara political forces such as the TPLF, OLF and PP. This claim lies at the heart of the victim thesis, which posits that the Amhara are targeted precisely because of their unique identity. The adoption of these discursive practices suggests that Amhara nationalists attempt to construct Amhara identity both by looking back to their historical roots and imagining a glorious past, as well as by adopting a defensive stance in response to contemporary threats.

The second form of discursive resistance involves the positive reinterpretation of the Amhara past, in contrast to the narratives advanced by proponents of the colonial and national oppression theses. These critics argue that the Amhara colonized and oppressed non-Amhara groups under the guise of building the Ethiopian state. As part of this narrative, anti-Amhara political actors have deployed

defamatory labels such as *neftegna* and *timkhitegna* to stigmatize the Amhara. Amhara nationalists, however, reject this characterization. They contend that the Amhara were not an oppressor nation, but rather defenders of Ethiopia who helped protect various ethnic groups from Western colonial domination. They cite the victory at Adwa as a critical moment when Amhara leaders safeguarded the sovereignty and cultural heritage of all Ethiopians. In response to the derogatory labels, Amhara nationalists have sought to reappropriate and redefine them. In line with the Foucauldian notion of reverse discourse, they strip these terms of their negative connotations and imbue them with positive meanings: *neftegna* is reframed as a symbol of the Amhara tradition of gun-holding to defend Ethiopia from external threats, while *timkhitegna* is reinterpreted as an expression of the Amhara's loyalty to the state. In doing so, Amhara nationalists aim to present a more affirmative historical narrative – one that portrays Amhara not as subjugators of others, but as architects of a state that preserved indigenous cultures in the face of foreign imperialism.

7.1.4.2. Everyday Resistance

Discursive resistance was accompanied by everyday forms of resistance that Amhara nationalists adopted to engage with the broader Amhara population. This form of resistance predominantly involved social media campaigns and street protests. Initiated by diaspora Amharas in North America around 2015, the social media campaign proved effective in raising awareness about Amhara identity and the challenges facing the Amhara people. The campaign aimed to engage youth, the most active demographic for nationalist mobilization, around shared goals. Through these campaigns, cultural elements such as *shema*, music, *fukera* and *kererto* were showcased, and historical figures were celebrated. A notable example was the designation of May 2015 as a special Amhara month to promote cultural pride and identity. This online initiative allowed Amhara nationalists to disseminate their narratives among youth both at home and in the diaspora so that they could mobilize to advance their aspirations.

The social media campaign coincided with a wave of protests that erupted in various towns across the Amhara region starting in July 2016. The immediate trigger was an attempted abduction of Colonel Demeke Zewudu, chairman of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee, by government intelligence personnel from his home in Gondar. In response to the sound of gunfire, residents took to the streets to protect him. Leveraging social media platforms, Amhara activists publicized the incident widely and called on youth across the region to mobilize. Protesters rallied

around a range of issues, including identity, political representation, territory, corruption, marginalization and other forms of maladministration, which were prominently featured in slogans and chants.

Although the government responded with heavy-handed tactics, the protests succeeded in raising awareness and catalyzing the formation of Amhara-based political parties, civil society organizations and business groups. In addition, the movement inspired Amhara intellectuals to write books on Amhara identity, history, culture and the structural injustices the people have faced. In coordination with other opposition movements across the country, these protests also played a pivotal role in facilitating the leadership change within the EPRDF in 2018. However, the politics of protest has persisted, culminating in the outbreak of conflict between the Amhara Fano and government security forces in 2023, as the new leadership failed to adequately address the concerns of Amhara nationalism.

7.1.4.3. Armed Resistance

This dissertation finds that armed resistance is also part of the broader strategies employed by Amhara nationalists to advance their concerns. The first armed group formed explicitly in the name of the Amhara was the ADFM. Established in 2010 with a military base in Eritrea, the group aimed to end the structural violence committed against the Amhara and to safeguard the unity of the Ethiopian state. Since its formation, the ADFM carried out several guerrilla attacks against the Ethiopian army. One of its most notable nationalist actions was its support for the Amhara protests, primarily by providing shelter to demonstrators during government crackdowns. This small-scale insurgency was carried out in collaboration with the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Restoration Committee. However, following negotiations with the government, ADFM fighters returned to Ethiopia in September 2018. The government's failure to fulfill its promises, particularly its commitment to ending structural violence against the Amhara, prompted some former ADFM members to return to the bush and join forces with the current Fano movement.

7.1.5. The Road to Radicalization

The third objective this study addresses is the identification of factors that contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism in post-2018 Ethiopia. By distancing the concept of radicalization from notions of extremism and fundamentalism, the dissertation employs it as an

analytical category to explain the shift in the way Amhara nationalism operated, from peaceful activism to violent resistance. The concept is particularly useful in two respects: first, it allows for an examination of how new political and social circumstances contributed to the shift in resistance strategy; and second, it underscores the evolving character of this transformation, emphasizing that it is not a one-time event or the result of a single incident, but rather an ongoing process shaped by broader developments.

Based on this perspective, the dissertation argues that the launching of armed resistance by the Amhara Fano in 2023 is the result of broader political developments arising from the evolving dynamics of post-2018 Ethiopia. The newcomer to power in April 2018 promised to end ethnic-based violence that had undermined the stability of the country. This promise raised the hopes of Amhara nationalists and led them to support the new leadership, believing it could put an end to the structural violence against the Amhara. However, the killings and evictions of the Amhara people continued unchecked under the new administration. This broken promise deepened the grievances of Amhara nationalists, prompting them to persist in their peaceful resistance by organizing protests and social media campaigns.

Amidst these political developments, a conflict broke out between the federal government and the TPLF in November 2020. In this conflict, Amhara forces, such as the ARSF, local militia and the Fano group, sided with the federal government to advance two key aspirations. First, to contribute to the weakening of the TPLF's military capacity, as the group is perceived as a threat to the Amhara; and second, to reclaim Amhara lands allegedly annexed by the TPLF. However, the conclusion of the war under the Pretoria Agreement created tension between Amhara nationalists and the government. Amhara nationalists argue that they were not represented in the negotiations and that certain provisions of the agreement contradict Amhara interests. Article 10 of the agreement, which states that contested areas should be resolved in accordance with the constitution, is frequently cited by Amhara nationalists as evidence of betrayal by the government. They contend that since the TPLF annexed these territories before the constitution was promulgated in 1994, using the constitution as a framework to resolve the issue is unacceptable. While this perception contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism, the conflict more broadly militarized the Amhara Fano both in mentality and in access to weaponry.

The militarization of the Fano group was not welcomed by the power elites. In response, they launched a military campaign to disarm the group under the guise of a law enforcement operation beginning in May 2022. This confrontation was further intensified by the decision to demobilize regional security forces in April 2023. The implementation of this decision was particularly contested when it came to the ARSF. Amhara nationalists securitized and politicized the move, framing it through social media as a targeted effort to weaken the Amhara and expose the people to further attacks. As this unfolded, members of the ARSF left their camps with their weapons and joined the Fano group. This significantly boosted the human and material capacity of the Amhara Fano, enabling them to launch effective operations against both the national army and regional security forces. By August 2023, the conflict had escalated, engulfing the Amhara region and resulting in humanitarian crises and the destruction of immense property.

While the conflict has resulted in severe casualties, no practical efforts have been made by the combatants to come to the table for a peaceful resolution of the problem, aside from lip service on the part of the government. Power elites claim that the lack of a hierarchical structure within the Fano movement poses a challenge to peace efforts. In contrast, the Fano group argues that the government is not genuinely committed to negotiation and instead exploits internal divisions to weaken the movement. The dissertation finds, however, that when one faction of the Fano attempts to engage in dialogue with the government, it is perceived by other factions as an act of betrayal. These accusations and counter-accusations have been accompanied by intensified propaganda from both the insurgent forces and those in power, each asserting their capacity to win the war.

One tactic both combatants have adopted in their effort to win the war has been the kidnapping and killing of individuals suspected of supporting what each side labels as the ‘enemy’. Government security forces have targeted young men on the grounds that they support the Fano. When they faced heavy attacks from Fano fighters, they responded with indiscriminate street massacres and house-to-house killings. At the same time, the Fano has targeted civil servants, including teachers, accusing them of serving the government and legitimizing its authority.

This severe humanitarian crisis demands urgent action from both sides. In the short term, both must refrain from targeting civilians based solely on suspicion. In the long run, they must recognize that war is not an end in itself but a means to achieve political goals, a perspective that may encourage consideration of peaceful alternatives. In this regard, the government should genuinely

create space for negotiation by halting its attempts to exploit divisions within the Fano. On the Fano side, establishing a hierarchical organizational structure is essential to create a centralized mechanism for negotiation. This would help prevent the crisis of internal accusations when one faction attempts to engage in talks with the government.

7.1.5.1. Counter-Narratives

One of the key contributions of social constructionism in explaining the origins and evolving dynamics of nationalism is its recognition of the inevitability of counter-nationalist narratives. Özkirimli (2017) underscores this by noting that nationalist movements are often shaped by the notion that ‘my nationalism is good, while the other is bad’. In contexts where history is contested and visions of the state diverge, such as in Ethiopia, this dynamic becomes particularly pronounced. Contradictory interpretations of the Ethiopian past and conflicting vision of the state among elites have subjected competing nationalisms to persistent counter-narratives that seek to delegitimize their claims. This dissertation finds, for example, that Amhara nationalism has been portrayed by organizers of other nationalist movements as expansionist, unitarist and illiberal.

Oromo and Tigrean nationalists, in particular, have been at the forefront of such accusations. Tigrean nationalists have accused Amhara nationalists of unjustly laying claim to territories they consider part of historic Tigray. Meanwhile, viewing the historical role of the Amhara ruling class in state formation as oppressive, Oromo nationalists portray Amhara nationalism as a movement to revive that perceived era of domination. They reject claims of structural violence against the Amhara in the Oromia region, dismissing them as fabrications meant to justify an expansionist agenda. This persistent refusal to acknowledge what Amhara nationalists regard as legitimate grievances has partly fueled the radicalization of their movement. Amhara nationalists contend that this is because peaceful means have not only failed to yield tangible outcomes but have also failed to secure even minimal acknowledgment of their concerns and aspirations.

Such a shift toward more costly and confrontational strategies of resistance carries alarming implications. It risks deepening divides between competing nationalisms to the point of irreconcilability and further destabilizing the Ethiopian state. Addressing this challenge requires organizers of nationalist movements to cultivate a willingness to acknowledge the concerns and grievances of one another. This mutual recognition is a critical step toward developing a more balanced understanding of polarized nationalist narratives and laying the groundwork for the

formation of a viable Ethiopian state. For the Amhara in particular, such recognition could supplement efforts to end the structural violence they face, live and work peacefully across the country and contribute meaningfully to the unity of the state.

7.2. Conclusion

The resurgence of competing nationalisms in Ethiopia stems from contradictory interpretations of the process that shaped the formation of the state. At the core of these divergent narratives is the role of the Amhara ruling class in the state-building project, particularly their promotion of Amhara culture as the dominant national framework during the pre-1974 era. This process has been widely interpreted by various social groups as an act of Amhara domination within the political economy of the country. Some political and academic voices have drawn parallels to colonialism, framing it as a form of internal colonization in which the Amhara are portrayed as having subjugated non-Amhara populations.

This narrative is rooted in the Orientalist-Semitic interpretation of history, which categorized the Ethiopian population within a dichotomy of ‘civilized’ Semites and ‘uncivilized’ others. This thesis gained prominence after the Battle of Adwa, as Western scholars advanced the view that the war was not between different races but rather within the same racial group. In this context, Menelik II, who led the Ethiopian forces to victory, was symbolically ‘whitened’ to support the claim that Italy had not been defeated by Black Africans. Since Menelik was widely identified as Amhara, the entire Amhara population came to be portrayed as Semitic, light-skinned and civilized (Yates, 2021). Fascist Italy later weaponized this discourse in the 1930s to divide Ethiopians along ethnic lines, aiming to weaken collective resistance.

In addition to fostering anti-Amhara narratives, Fascist Italy incited local chiefs to carry out physical attacks against Amhara communities in various parts of the country. It also sought to curtail the spread of Amharic by implementing language policies that favored Arabic, Afan Oromo and other local languages in education, while restricting non-Amhara populations from using Amharic. Although Italy withdrew from Ethiopia in 1941, anti-Amhara narratives have continued to shape the political discourse of the country. The BMA, which succeeded Fascist Italy in administering the Horn region as enemy-occupied territory, used such narratives to further its goal of creating Greater Somalia by annexing Ethiopian lands. To this end, Britain supported groups

like the SYL, permitting targeted killings and evictions of Amharas in Somali inhabited areas of Eastern Ethiopia.

Postcolonial writers such as Mahmood Mamdani argue that colonially constructed divisive narratives have contributed to the resurgence of competing nationalisms in Africa, particularly when adopted by a weak bourgeois class. In a similar vein, although Ethiopia was never formally colonized, colonial-era narratives have continued to shape the political economy of the country after being appropriated by domestic political groups. This dynamic is exemplified by the political discourse advanced by ESM activists in the 1960s, who sought to align their activism with the Leninist interpretation of the nationality question. They invoked a colonially inspired oppressor-oppressed dichotomy among the diverse populations of Ethiopia. This ideological framing laid the foundation for the emergence of ethnic liberation fronts such as the TPLF and OLF, which aimed to liberate their respective groups from the alleged domination of the Amhara. Following more than a decade of armed struggle, these fronts seized power in 1991 and institutionalized anti-Amhara narratives within the political and administrative structures of the state. This institutionalization was accompanied by persistent structural violence, including killings, eviction, political underrepresentation, economic marginalization and cultural stigmatization.

Within this context, Amhara nationalism emerged as a reactive force aimed at challenging the institutionalization of anti-Amhara narratives and the resulting structural violence. Despite a shared objective of defending the Amhara, nationalist actors differ in both ideology and *modus operandi*. While parties such as AAPO, BETAM and ADFM have prioritized addressing structural violence against Amharas within the territorial boundaries of Ethiopia, BETAM has uniquely advocated for the establishment of an independent Amhara state. Moreover, whereas most Amhara-based organizations have pursued peaceful resistance, ADFM and Amhara Fano have opted for armed struggle.

These shifting patterns in ideology and resistance reflect that Amhara nationalism is a dynamic phenomenon, continually shaped by evolving social and political conditions in Ethiopia. When Amhara nationalists perceive the regime as sympathetic to their aspirations, they lend it their support; conversely, they withdraw that support when the government fails to deliver. A case in point is the 2018 change in national leadership that brought Abiy Ahmed to power. Immediately upon assuming office, the Prime Minister vowed to end attacks on Amharas, expand political space

and strengthen national unity. These assurances prompted Amhara nationalists to back the new administration. This support was demonstrated through street demonstrations in favor of the change, the relinquishing of the secessionist agenda by BETAM founders, the return of ADFM from exile to pursue peaceful struggle and the cooperation of Fano forces with the federal government in its confrontation with the TPLF.

However, unfulfilled promises, such as continued structural violence, restricted political space, the assassination of prominent Amhara figures, failure to restore claimed lands, and the decision to disarm Fano and demobilize the ARSF, led to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism and the further militarization of Fano. These grievances precipitated the ongoing conflict between Amhara Fano and the federal government, which continues to claim civilian lives and cause widespread destruction across the Amhara region.

To conclude, by tracing the origins, patterns of resistance and processes of radicalization within the Amhara nationalist movement, this dissertation affirms the social constructionist assumption that nationalism is neither fixed nor monolithic. Rather, nationalist movements are shaped by competing historical narratives, shifting political opportunities and enduring structural inequalities. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader literature on nationalism in general, and African nationalisms in particular, by demonstrating how colonial legacies can contribute to the emergence of competing nationalisms, even in societies that were never formally colonized.

7.3. Policy Relevance

Eliminating anti-Amhara narratives from Ethiopian politics has become a central goal of Amhara nationalists. In response to this pressure, those in control of the state pledged to end divisive discourses that expose Ethiopians to ethnically motivated violence. However, such narratives continue to dominate contemporary Ethiopian politics, subjecting the Amhara to ongoing structural violence. This unfulfilled promise has contributed to the radicalization of Amhara nationalism, to the extent that peaceful avenues for political struggle are increasingly seen as ineffective in achieving nationalist aspirations. Therefore, an inclusive national dialogue is essential, not merely as a symbolic gesture but as a substantive process, to address historical grievances, challenge divisive narratives and foster mutual understanding and meaningful recognition.

Amharas residing outside the Amhara region have faced a lack of political representation, which has exposed them to eviction, violence and cultural erosion. The framing of regional constitutions has labeled them as non-indigenous within their own country. Therefore, both federal and regional governments should develop inclusive policy alternatives that ensure Amharas can live as equal citizens and work to sustain their livelihoods. Moreover, robust legal mechanisms must be established to hold accountable those responsible for killings, evictions and other forms of violence against the Amhara.

More broadly, the legitimate grievances underpinning Amhara nationalism call for a democratic and inclusive approach to resolution rather than confrontational strategies. Such an approach could meaningfully contribute to ending the ongoing conflict between the Amhara Fano and the government. To this end, the government must expand political space to allow Amhara nationalists to articulate and pursue their goals through peaceful political engagement. In turn, groups such as Fano must acknowledge the principle that the state alone holds the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This reciprocal commitment could help advance the broader goal of building an inclusive and cohesive Ethiopian state that reflects the aspirations of all its citizens.

7.4. Avenues for Further Research

By examining the roots and routes of the Amhara nationalist movement, this dissertation provides valuable empirical insights into the broader field of nationalism. However, the study could not address all aspects of Amhara nationalism, leaving important areas for future research. One such area is a detailed examination of the structural violence against the Amhara, particularly whether it can be situated within the context of genocide. This inquiry is critical, as interviews and party documents reveal that Amhara nationalists frequently use this legally loaded term to describe what has happened against the Amhara. Another important avenue for future research is a thorough investigation of the nature, actors, patterns and causalities of the conflict between the Amhara Fano and government security forces. Such research could offer empirically grounded recommendations that combatants might use to peacefully resolve their political differences.

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Interview with an Amhara activist via WhatsApp, September 2024.

Interview with one of the leaders of the Amhara Fano in Gojjam, August 2024.

Interview with a former member of EPDM, Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Interview with one of the leaders of NaMA, Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Interview with a senior official from APP, Bahir Dar, February 2025.

Interview with an elderly woman, Maicadra, October 2021.

Interview with a member of the Wolkayt Amhara Identity Committee, Humera, October 2021.

Email interview with an Amhara political scientist, September 2024.

Interview with an Amhara survivor, Debre Markos, December 2024.

Interview with a former member of ANDM, Bahir Dar, February 2025.

Interview with an Amhara sociologist, Debre Markos, November 2024.

Interview with former member of the AAPPO, Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Interview with Deneke Biabile, Bahir Dar, March 2025.

Interview with the Director of one of the Greek schools in Addis Ababa, December 2024.

Email interview with Mesganaw Andualem, September 2024.

Interview with an Amhara activist, Bahir Dar, February 2025.

Interview with an Amhara poet, Bahir Dar, February 2025.

Interview with the former member of the Kefagn movement, Humera, October 2021.

Interview with senior official from OPP, Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Interview with an Oromo activist, Addis Ababa, November 2024.

Interview with an activist who organized a rallying cry for new leaders, Bahir Dar, January 2025.

Email interview with an Amhara journalist, January 2024.

Interview with an Amhara peasant, Debre Markos, July 2024.

Interview with a political scientist, Addis Ababa University, November 2024.

Interview with demobilized members of ARSF, March 2025.

Activist focus group discussant via Google Meet, December 2024.

Youth focus group discussant, Bahir Dar, March 2025.

Informal conversation with a PhD candidate of history, Bahir Dar, January 2025.

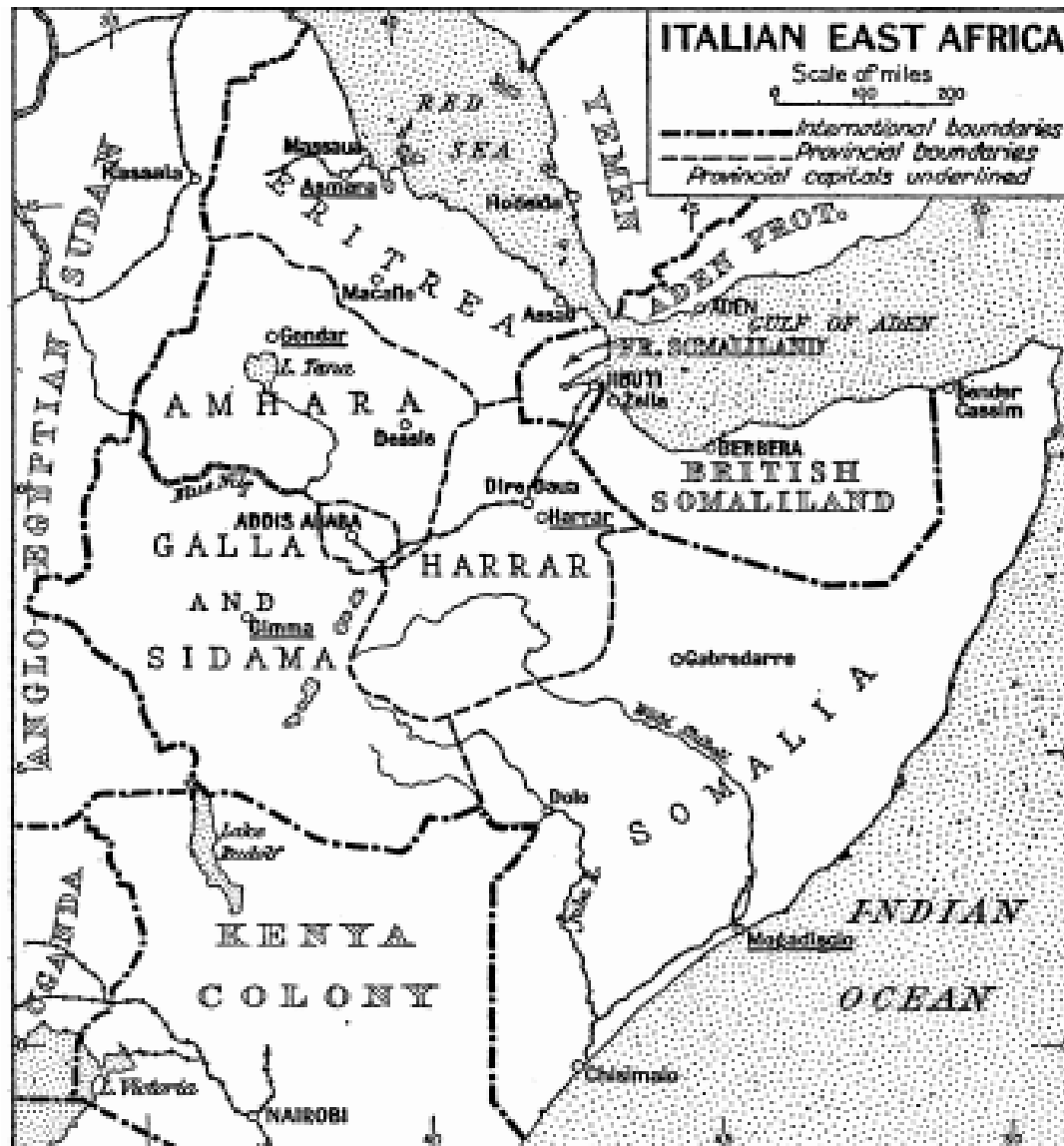
Informal conversation with an Amhara youth, Bahir Dar, January 2025.

Supra note, discussion from a meeting I chaired with Amhara youths, Yeduha, September 2021.

Annex I: List of Publications

1. Moreshe Wogene Amhara Organization. (2016). *The Amhara Genocide Ignored by the World: A study of the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Amhara ethnic group from 1991-2015*. Self-published.
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9. Achamyeleh, T. (2020). *The Wolkayt Affair: A Study of Wolkayt, Tegede, Telemt and Humera boundary and geographical history, 330- 1991*. Robot Publishing.
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11. Fitaye, A. (2021). *The Tears of Wolkayt, Gondar and the Amhara People: The Contribution and Plight of the Amhara People in Ethiopian History and Civilization*. Self-published.
12. Muluken, T. (2022). *The Amhara Holocaust: Accounts of the Hidden Genocide of the Amhara People in Ethiopia, 1991- 2015*. Self-published.
13. Getnet, Y. (2022). *Fanonet Bemistrawi Gabae*. Self-published.
14. Banteamlak, A. (2025). *Amhara: A Multidimensional Identity in Ethiopian History and Culture*. Self-published.
15. Banteamlak, A. (2025). *Silence is Not golden: Unveiling the Dynamics of the Amhara in Ethiopia*. Self-published.

Annex II: Map of Italian East Africa



Source: Zoli (1937, p. 82).

Annex III: Provincial health sector disparities during the Haile Selassie Regime

Province	Population	Hospital	Beds	Population Per Bed	Doctors	Population Per Doctor	Health Center	Health Officer
Arussi	1,110,800	1	50	22,216	7	158,685.9	3	4
Bale	159,800	1	50	3,196	2	79,900	1	1
Beghender	1,348,400	2	211	6,390	14	96,314.3	6	6
Eritrea	1,589,400	16	2,174	271.1	65	24,452.3	3	4
Gumuzofa	840,500	2	160	5,253.1	4	210,125	4	4
Gojjam	1,576,100	3	190	8,295.2	8	197,012.5	5	6
Harrarge	3,341,700	12	1,095	3,051.9	20	167,085	6	8
Illubabor	663,200	2	83	7,990.3	5	132,640	5	6
Keffa	688,400	3	229	3,006.5	9	76,688.9	5	7
Shoa	3,326,100	8	559	5,753.3	14	237,578.6	9	12
Addis Ababa	644,200	16	2,898	222.3	182	3,539.6	-	10
Sidamo	1,521,900	5	322	4,754.4	8	190,237.5	3	4
Tigre	2,307,300	5	301	7,665.4	7	329,614.3	5	7
Wollega	1,429,700	4	277	5,161.4	7	204,242.8	4	5
Wollo	3,119,400	4	400	7,798.5	10	311,940	5	7

Source: Struggle (1974, p. 14).

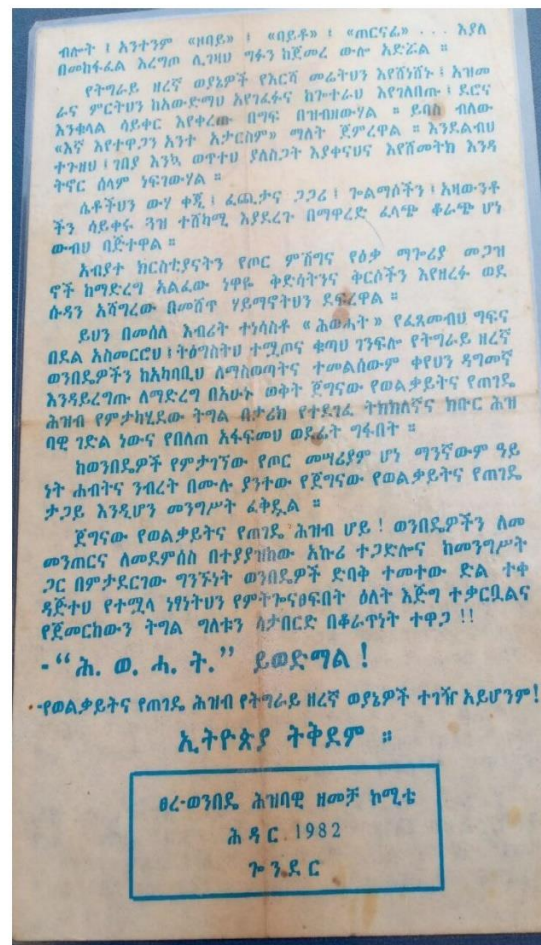
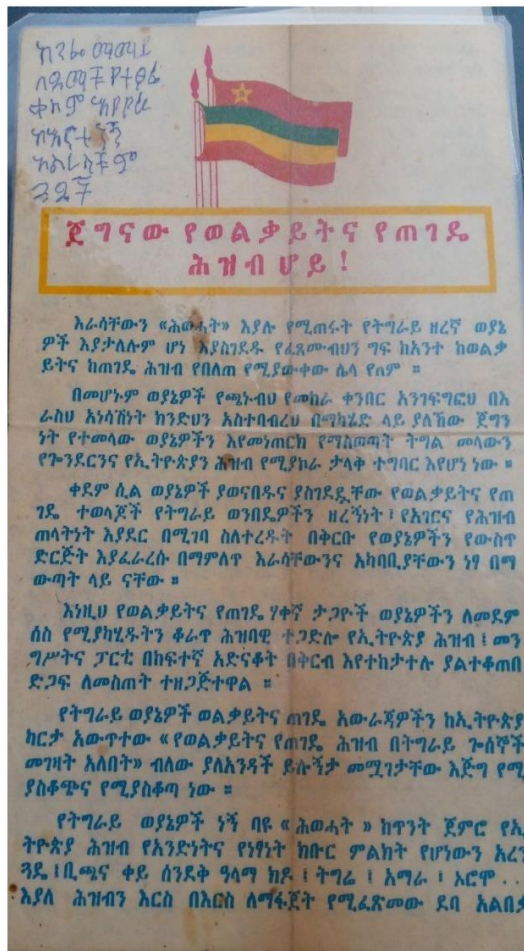
Annex IV: Provincial distribution of patriots during the Italian Occupation of Ethiopia

በኢጣልያኖች ግምት የአርበኞች ስርዓት
እስከ 1937-1938

አለ	ላሳ	በጊም	ገጃም	ሸዋ	አሮ-ሲዳ	ደምር
1937*	4500		14000	7000	400	25900
1937*	500	5000	14600	2400	400	22900
1937*	150	1800	14600	2500	3000	22050
1937*	-	2000	20000	3000	2500	27500
1938*	-	3000	20000	500	1500	25000
ደምር	5150	11800	83200	15400	7800	123350

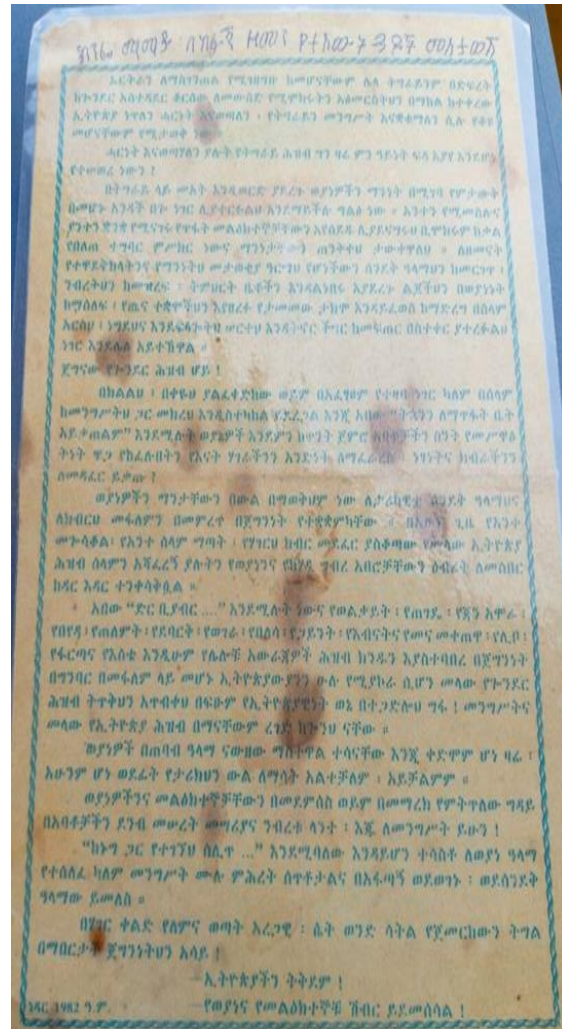
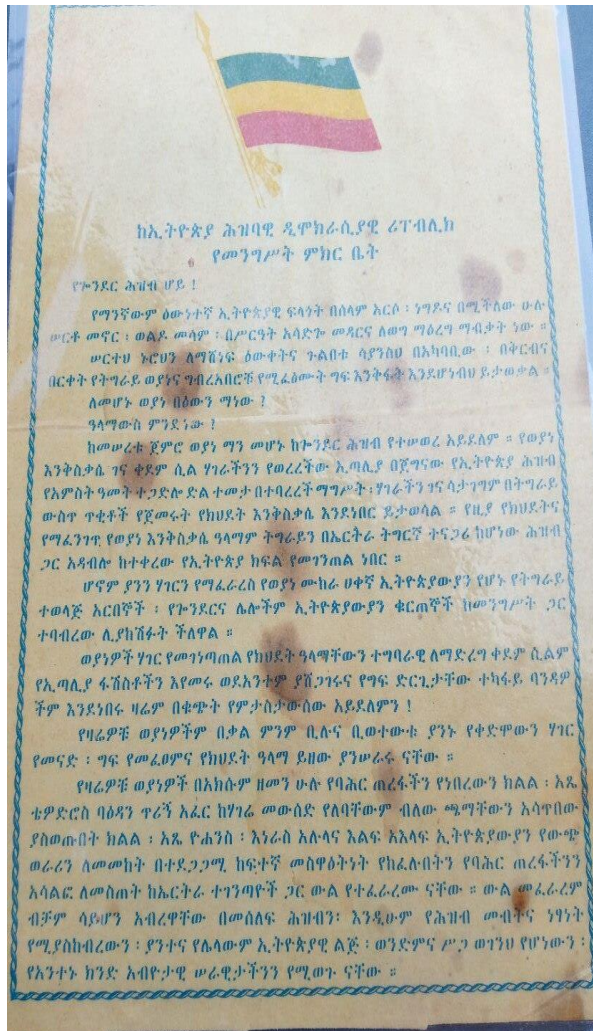
Source: Mesfin (2015, p. 129).

Annex V: Pamphlet distributed by Kefagn Movement organizers to the Wolkayt people



Source: Reproduced from the personal archives of a former Kefagn Movement member, October 2021.

Annex VI: Pamphlet distributed by the Derg Regime to the people of Gondar



Source: Reproduced from the personal archives of a former Kefagn Movement member, October 2021.

المدينه لله والوطنه للجميع

ادھر عقلات و ضمیر ہموار ہوا۔ دلیلیں تھیں یہ احادیث
معائنہ سنیہ و رموز و نیلے دھانیان الامداد تھیں وہاں لاچار
لاستمن الامام لا یستعاضد فی اذکارہا و اعطارہا و اقوالہا بل
یستعین بضمیر اللہ علی ہذا قریب قریب و استدلال و تحقیق
الضمین فی ہذا الامکان لکن البصرۃ المشرقتہ الضمیرۃ
فما من احد اقتدر ان یتکلم و یتحدث و یفصح یمک
اعمالہا و تقدمت فی علومہا و معارفہا و امسیت کربل و اندل
قلب وادع و امال وادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع
و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع و ادع
یائے انا

[illegible]

هذا اوان التآخي والتحابب هذه اوقات التحالف
والتوافق فقد ان لنا ان نعيش من هذا الزمان الذي يساورنا
ان لنا ان نجد مدنا وموجودا وان نعيش في العالم انا في الحياة
الحرة والحرية وان نعيش في ذلك الانتماء فالتأخي
الحضارة والحضارة هي العلم والملم هو الاستقلال
الاستقلال هو مصب الحياة.

انذروا خلافا لهم، وظهروا نفوسهم من داء الحقد ومودوا
بد الوفاء الى اثناسيوس في الوطن، واعلموا ان الله اذا اراد
قوم خيرا جمع كلمتهم ونظم اجزاءهم وتصرفهم على من خالفهم
وكان حقا علينا نصر المؤمنين »

واشد ما يتقاضى مضاجع الألمان ويقاق بالهم ماراوي في
الأخيرة من نشاط قوات الحلفاء البرية والبحرية والجوية
الغارات العديدة المتوالية التي يقوم بها البريطانيون بأن
قواتهم البرية على البر في فرنسا المحتلة كما حدث في سان
وبواوني وغيرها تقول ان في هذه الغارات البريطانية نفير
للألمان. فقد تحون مقدمة لهجوم كاسم تقوم به قوات