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Continuity and Rupture in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

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Universities as Contested Terrain. Interpreting Violent Conflict in Ethiopia in Times of Political Transition

Yonas Ashine

Abstract

This paper explores the root causes and trajectories of ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities between 2017 and 2019. Adopting a critical approach that focuses on structural, historical, and discursive factors I argue that university conflicts constitute a microcosm of wider social and political fractures that have characterised the Ethiopian nation-building project under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Ethnic conflict in universities must be understood against the unresolved contradictions of the "nationalities question" as it was initially framed by the student movement of the 1960s during the late Imperial period. The resulting tensions over the country's nation-building project constitute the structural background against which present-day political crises that preclude the benefit of multi-nationalism and diversity in the country unfold. Elite discourse has produced opposing narratives of oppressed and oppressors, making ethnicity a defining trait of national and local politics at the expense of diversity. These trends have divided university students, and Ethiopian society more broadly, by producing a simplistic binary of victims and perpetrators among different ethnonationalist groups. The recent political liberalisation and the widening of the political space since 2018 have amplified these dynamics further. As result, universities have become a contested terrain, a microcosm of ethnic confrontation that hinders a political debate conducive to national dialogue. The paper concludes by calling for universities to initiate a critical pedagogy that involves debate, dialogue and deliberation to challenge the dominant public discourse relying on divisive ethnonationalist politics. This may help universities to become critical sites for new historical possibilities and the formation of subjectivities that transcend the enduring legacy of the 1960s university student radicalism.

Keywords: Ethiopian universities; ethnic conflict; Ethiopian student movement; deliberation

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Introduction. The classroom meets the multinational state: an ethnographic account

In 2018, I taught the course Politics and Government in Contemporary Ethiopia to first-degree students of Political Science and International Relations at Addis Ababa University.[1] The class gathered students from different Ethiopian regions, and could be regarded as a microcosm of the country's multinational society. One Tanzanian and one Norwegian student were also part of the class, speaking to the diversity of interactions and cosmopolitan ambitions that the department prided itself in establishing the course. The course was particularly attractive to students as it dealt with the country's contemporary politics. The course exposed students to critical literature on Ethiopian politics, including the country's history of state formation, as well as popular protests and the then recent 2018 political transition. I paid particular attention to address debates around nationalism, elite formation, and the absence of a national consensus over nation-building as a major challenge to current political dialogue. Students were encouraged to engage critically with scholarship addressing the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s, a critical conjuncture in the radicalisation of the political debate. Taking this historical angle, the class discussed the need and possibility for transcending the limits of weak national consensus in Ethiopia. Students were encouraged to reflect critically on how to understand present-day politics in Ethiopia, including unpacking dominant political narratives and their own positionality in it.

At the end of the semester, I was asked to mediate a disagreement between different groups within the class. Students failed to agree on the design of a graduation t-shirt which was meant to represent Ethiopia. Different national and ethno-national symbols were proposed: for instance, these included the map of Ethiopia and of Africa, the *habesha* face, the *jebena* (Ethiopian coffee kittle), some Ethiopic scripts, the *ensete* (false banana) and the Oda (the charismatic tree used as a symbol by many national groups among the Oromo). The root of the disagreement was that all these objects were contested symbols of representation: they assumed controversial meanings when filtered through ethnonationalist politics. Based on their ethnolinguistic differences, students ascribed different values to the t-shirt, mirroring the divisions and contestations currently affecting Ethiopia as a multi-national state.

In the attempt to find a solution, students gathered along two main camps. Those who saw the risk of transforming the graduation ceremony into a divisive discussion about politics and had strong ethnonationalist feelings opted to suggest a logo sketching the map of Africa without any other symbol. Their rationale was to escape divisions by drawing on pan-Africanism as a form of post-nationalist political ideology. They were open to solve ethnonationalist divisions by moving beyond the nation-state project. A second group suggested to use the map of Ethiopia and additional symbols representing the country. Students belonging to this second group had usually nationalist or moderate ethnonationalist inclinations and opted for a solution in which Ethiopia could be re-

imagined as a multi-ethnic nation. Despite my intervention – I remarked the historical contradictions of nationalism in Ethiopia and its role in producing the contested nature of these symbols – and call to find alternatives – for instance using representations of the university itself – students failed to reach a consensus. The two groups finally opted to produce two different graduation t-shirts: the first depicting an Ethiopian map and some ethno-national symbols, the second relying on a general map of Africa with no symbol in it.

The failure of students to produce a single t-shirt is a clear metaphorical expression of the divisions and fragmentations of classroom and university groups in Ethiopia. With the deficit of deliberative democracy and critical dialogue, in recent years Ethiopian universities have become a site in which the failure to transcend ethnonationalist divisions beg the questions about how to represent Ethiopian history, and what symbols can be regarded as authentically Ethiopian. Thus, in absence of deliberative democracy, far from being agents of unity, transformation, and stability, universities become victims and agents of broader societal divisions, fragmentations, and antagonisms.

This ethnographic vignette illustrates much of the tensions and contradictions of the state and nation building project in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In the 1980s, the EPRDF was conceived as a national communist party bringing together different ethnic organisations sharing a Marxist and Leninist ideology, and combining both ethnic and class-based mobilisation (Andargachew 2015: 123-117). The EPRDF had the ambition to be both a national and an ethnic organisation, a feature which is at the heart of the contradiction of the "nationalities question", *i.e.* how to accommodate Ethiopia's different groups based on the principle of self-determination and a democratic political system, as articulated by Ethiopian students in the 1960s. The EPRDF brought together the experience of ethnic-based liberation movements from the Derg, led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). After the war, the EPRDF ruled Ethiopia for almost three decades operating as a *de facto* one party rule until 2019, and embarking on contradictory political projects such as ethnic federalism, decentralisation, and an economic model relying on the notion of developmental state.

In the course of the 2010s the ERPDF regime faced unprecedented challenges from popular protests, most notably in the country's two largest regions, Oromia and Amhara. In the three years spanning between mid-2015 and the beginning of 2018, the country was gripped by waves of protests. These were staged by disaffected youth and occurred alongside institutional decay and a power struggle within the EPRDF coalition. The EPRDF itself became a victim of the unresolved contradictions in dealing with the nationalities question. The popular protests can be viewed as a popular reaction to the EPRDF's domineering mode of rule and economic strategy relying on a developmental state model. The claimed 100 percent electoral win of the EPRDF and its allies in the May 2015 elections symbolises the challenges of multiparty democracy and pluralistic

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politics. This occurred in a hostile political environment where alternative sites for civic engagement such as civil society organisations were nonexistent. The EPRDF-led government reacted violently to suppress popular dissent and by declaring two states of emergency in October 2016 and in February 2018.

The magnitude of protests, as well as a growing fracture inside the political elite itself over how to deal with the crisis, forced the regime to embark on political liberalisation and democratic reforms. The party fell into a self-ascribed political crisis warranting a deep renewal. In 2017 the EPRDF released a statement promising "deep reforms" within the party, pledging to release political prisoners and widening the political space. Prime minister Haile Mariam Dessalegn resigned in February 2018, paving the way for Abiy Ahmed to take power in April 2018. The transition came with expectations for a "new transition" to democracy. At the time of this transition the horizontal conflict among nationalities was limited and protests targeted the political elite controlling the state. The new leadership took comprehensive steps towards democratic reform. However, reforms soon faced various challenges. Ethnic conflict erupted throughout the country, causing mass displacement, and a significant human toll, including in universities. The opening-up of the political space since 2018 went side by side with unprecedented ethnic conflict and polarised ethnonationalism. The EPRDF was replaced in 2019 by the Prosperity Party (PP), and this generated a split with the TPLF. The civil war the country descended into since late 2020, pitting the TPLF against the federal government, indicates the failure of the ruling elite to transcend the inherited structural contradictions embedded in party and federal design (Yonas, Kassahu 2021).

Since the political transition violent ethnic conflict has disrupted public universities as well. Studies about violent conflict in Ethiopian universities are limited and mostly consist of case studies focusing on a single university and therefore lack comprehensive analysis (Adamu 2013). This study tries to fill this gap.[2] Violent conflicts that occurred in 2018 and 2019 are given special attention because they took place alongside comprehensive political liberalisation. How do we explain conflicts taking place in universities throughout 2018 and 2019? What are their causes? A considerable number of students have died or have remained wounded as a result of conflict, and since then many parents refused to send their siblings to public universities.

This study pursues three arguments concerning the causes of violent ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities. The first one concerns the lack of national consensus and cohesion in Ethiopia as a structural or root cause of a historical political crisis that constrains the benefits of multi-nationalism and diversity in the country. As a multinational state Ethiopia failed to use, accommodate, and recognise diversity. Moreover, there is a serious deficit of democratic norms and experience, allowing elites and communities to negotiate and overcome differences. The way differences are mobilised politically generated a crisis of national cohesion. Universities, far from being sites of stability and national cohesion, have become ethnicised spaces. Students have become ethnic

subjects mobilised for contestations. Universities have become a site of fragmentation and ethnic competition, failing to generate a much needed discussion about the nature of Ethiopian history, cosmopolitanism and post-nationalism.

Moreover, I also contend that how the Ethiopian political elite weaponised diversity and lack of national consensus as a political tool reflects a naturalised classification of friend-enemy produced through victimhood psychology. This has divided university communities and the larger Ethiopian society classifying ethnic groups as victims and perpetrators. Elite discourse produced a narrative of oppressed (victim) and oppressor (perpetrator) as political strategy. Therefore, university students who were mobilised and influenced by this discourse come to see each other as oppressors and oppressed, rather than Ethiopian citizens who came from different cultures to experience life in higher education. Despite similar agrarian or working-class backgrounds, nationalist discourses have helped students see each other in this binary frame of oppressor and oppressed.

The political liberalisation and widening of political space since 2018 have entrenched ethnic-based conflict further. Universities as public spaces hosted these political processes and became conflicting sites. Dissemination of rumours, fake information, conspiracy politics and the dominant public discourse of oppressor and oppressed have helped mobilise students towards violence. Universities have become contested spaces that mobilise polarised ethnonationalisms, in which students are produced as a political subject through these discourses fuelling ethnic animosity.

Using Paulo Freire's philosophical intervention, I conclude that pedagogical action is necessary to deconstruct the oppressive discourse shaping students, to democratise, de-ethnicize as well as to transform universities into civic public spaces where Ethiopian national cohesion and consensus, diversity and self-affirmation can be nurtured. Universities could be used as sites of a constructive dialogue where the new subjects of history and new social possibilities in history can be pursued (West 1993). In absence of critical pedagogy and dialogue between university students, they will remain both victims and agents of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia: a contested terrain of multinationalism

Ethiopia is a multiethnic society that historically has struggled with issues of identity politics. Despite the country's short-lived colonial experience, Ethiopia has a significant record of ethnic conflict (Mamdani 2017). The disagreement over the graduation t-shirt illustrates the scope of identity politics and the lack of national consensus and cohesion which became a significant concern during the most recent political transition in 2018. However, identity politics is not new in Ethiopia as it has been central to dynamics of elite formation for over a century (Merera 2011).

Identity politics is entrenched in the violent process of formation of Ethiopia as a modern nation-state. The impact of historical state building is a contested terrain in

itself, which can be best expressed through the so-called question of nationalities: how to accommodate diverse groups, nationalities, and people within one single and fairly centralised polity. As noted by Bahru Zewde (2014), these issues were first discussed within the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s in the late Imperial period, and remained unresolved despite the federal restructuring of the state in the 1990s. Despite some success in self-governance and self-administration of regional units, and some signs of economic recovery, ethnic federalism was largely unsuccessful in delivering the twin objectives of creating a cohesive nation and preserving multiculturalism (Kidane Mengisteab 2019). Rather, ethnic federalism has encouraged ethnic mobilisation not only in cultural terms, but as a political identity produced through a discourse, and a psychology, of victimhood. Recent trends show that the disagreement on national history and symbols has been used by political elites to mobilise ethnonationalist contestations and animosity: the re-working of symbols and traditions is inextricable from historical dynamics of power which had at their centre representations of Ethiopian history (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983). Ethnic mobilisation usually relies on victim psychology about remembering past injustices as they unfold along the formation and consolidation of the modern state. While historically constructed as a national discourse, Amhara ethnonationalism is the most recent addition to ethnonationalist forms of identity emerging alongside the EPRDF rule (Bantayhu, Ishiyama 2021; Tezera 2021).

Ethiopia can be regarded as a textbook case of what Mahmood Mamdani describes as a society whose political world is divided into victims and perpetrators in postcolonial Africa (Mamdani 2003). The historical violent process of formation of modern Ethiopia is today mobilised by ethnonationalist forces that divide the Ethiopian society horizontally, and that lock the political debate into an unending proverbial binary of "the rat and the cat" (Mamdani 2003). The praxis of the federal experiment encourages the mobilisation of cultural differences for political purposes and, at the same time, it fixes cultural differences as political identities of victims and perpetrators, rulers and ruled, and natives and non-natives. A starting point here is the argument by which the formation of modern Ethiopia could be labelled as an Amhara project. This argument has colonial origin similar to other contexts in Africa. During the colonial period, both Great Britain and Italy politicised ethnicity and mobilised anti-Shewan Amhara sentiments in the 1930s and 1940s (Andargachew 2015; Yonas 2018) by identifying the Amhara as an oppressor ethnic group and the rest of the Ethiopian society as oppressed. This gave the Amhara a new political identity as oppressor and perpetrator of violence against many other nationalities, including Tigray. This binary resonated in the TPLF's liberation struggles in the 1980s and later as a discourse of the EPRDF-led government.

The Amharic word *neftegna* epitomises the construction of this binary well. It identifies those who "have a gun" and historically refers to the landed gentry who settled in the conquered territories as a class of warrior and administrators under Menelik II. The

neftegna is constructed both as an ethnic group (Shewan Amhara) and an upper class (tribute collectors of the state) (Andargachew 2015: 161-167). Beyond retrospective memory, today a poor Amharic speaker peasant or worker, or a day labourer outside of the Amhara region, could be seen as a *neftegna* or a perpetrator and a non-native, if not a settler, because of his/her Amhara identity. Similarly, the new mobilisation of Amhara as an ethnic identity also relies on victim psychology: it labels the Tigrayans as the perpetrators of state violence. These binary political identities are key to explain the challenges and contradictions of ethnic federalism under EPRDF, as well as the wave of conflict in universities between 2017 and 2019 that this article tries to unpack.

Universities as a microcosm of African societies

Debates addressing African universities have taken three theoretical directions. The first two are about university relations with the state and the larger society. The third is about the historical formation of the university in Africa as a foreign institution and its evolution over time. The politics of higher education and its relation to violent student conflicts in Ethiopia must be located within these three strands of literature.

African universities have historically played an important role in mediating state-society relations. The idea of the university itself is defined by its relations with society and the state. A starting point to frame university-society relations is the model proposed by Barnett, which distinguishes between university *in* society, university *of* society and university *for* society (Amare 2011). A university of society is rooted in a "Napoleonic university model, which rested on a clear subordination of the university to the state" (Amare 2011: 39). According to Amare, in such a model the role of the university is "to ensure political stability and unity of the nation in the physical sense" (*Ibid*). The opposite view frames university as a site of critical knowledge production to serve society, as opposed to the state, also referred to as university for society. Following this model, universities are expected to play key role in socio-economic upliftment as well as the cultural transformation of society (Daniel 2004). Universities are dialectically produced as a site of struggle between the state and society.

Except for few years during its establishment, Addis Ababa University has always been a university *of* society, and by extension *of* the state. Since the late Imperial period, Ethiopian universities could be regarded as an extension of state-controlled autocratic bureaucracies (Amare 2011). An alternative perspective brings to the fore the functional or utilitarian relations between university and society. University can be regarded as an "ivory tower" and as a site of excellence aloof from society: its mission is exclusively confined to knowledge production, of which society is expected to benefit indirectly (Mamdani 2016). The opposite interpretation is that university is a microcosm of society, and that knowledge production cannot be disentangled from broader societal forces (Barrett 1998).

While normatively imagined to stand as an ivory tower producing knowledge of

universal and national relevance, a nuanced understanding of university-society relations in Ethiopia requires studying how universities have been historically produced as a political and social space. Despite universities are normatively expected to ensure political stability and unity of the nation, they are practically produced as a site of contestation. Ethiopian universities reflect a key tension of the multinational state model in that they are imagined to serve a national project while, at the same time, they reflect deep societal fractures (Anderson 1983). As noted by Jacques Derrida the university represents society as much as society represents itself through the university (Derrida *et al.* 2005). In Ethiopia, universities remain divided along ethnic lines and constitute an important space where ethnonationalist politics is performed. The contestation over the t-shirt represents this fragmentation both in the classroom and the society. This forms a dual identity of the university in Ethiopia: the first is an imagined ivory tower where societal wounds get healed, and the second is a historically produced microcosm of society with all its shackles.

The third theoretical perspective puts into sharp focus the historical formation of universities in Africa as a derivative of the western intellectual tradition. From this perspective, like other universities established as part of the colonial modernist project in Africa (Mamdani 2019), universities in Ethiopia can be regarded as foreign institutions (Balsvik 1985; Yirga 2017). University institutions embody the civilizational mission of the colonial project, with the partial difference that Ethiopian universities are a product of a native modernist project (Yirga 2017). However, the western intellectual tradition has clearly influenced the institutional and epistemological setting of universities in Ethiopia. For instance, similar to many other universities in the continent English is the language of science and intellect in Ethiopian universities (Mamdani 2019).

Addis Ababa University became a site of student activism in the 1960s, giving rise to a radical movement with revolutionary intention (Hussien 2006). While the Ethiopian student movement played a significant role in bringing to the end the Imperial regime in 1974, it left two permanent legacies in post-revolutionary Ethiopia in the course of the 1990s. The first is "the question of nationalities" and the tension between an ethnic versus a multi-ethnic form of state organisation. This question brought to the elaboration of the EPRDF as a coalition party and ethnic federalism as a radical form of state organisation. The second legacy is about an elitist political culture by which "dogmatic belief, rather than reasoned debate and a spirit of compromise, become the norm" (Bahru Zewde 2014: 280). These legacies were produced when university students struggled to construct a socialist utopia in the 1960s. The contemporary Ethiopian society is burdened with the task to transcend both these legacies so that credible and durable political possibilities can open. Messay Kebede, however, argues that student radicalism in the 1960s was nurtured by a university institutional setting which failed to produce an environment conducive for students to become intellectual subjects (Messay 2008).

Under the EPRDF, Ethiopian universities became a microcosm of these deeper societal fractures. On the one hand, the contradiction of the multi-ethnic state organisation reproduced universities as a contested terrain. On the other hand, the democratic deficit of elitist political culture, including the lack of compromise and dialogue, reproduced universities as the most securitised, silenced, and surveillance spaces in Ethiopia. Ironically, the fragmentation of students along ethnic lines remains an enduring legacy of the student movement of the 1960s. Thus, ethnic politics reduced the space for a productive debate about the role of university in society. For instance, discussions around the meaning of decolonisation, democratisation, and de-securitisation of universities have been almost entirely absent in Ethiopia.

Since the 1990s the EPRDF government established new university campuses throughout the country. Today Ethiopia counts over fifty universities located across all regional states. The Ethiopian government pursued its multicultural agenda by demanding students to enrol in universities outside of the region of origin. Rather than fostering dialogue and diversity, this increased the scope of ethnic factionalism and conflict among different student groups, which escalated significantly after 2018. Language policy has also been contradictory. Rather than streamlining teaching in local languages the government has opted for establishing departments dedicated to the study of specific languages, for instance *Amharic, Afan Oromo*, and *Tigrigna.* In the social sciences and the humanities teaching takes place in English exclusively. These policies were meant to depoliticise the language question in universities, and thus have reduced significantly the scope for a productive discussion around ethnonationalism, including the meanings of decolonisation and democratisation. Curricula increasingly privilege depoliticised topics that refrain from engaging with questions about what it means to study the national Ethiopian history and identity. As result, universities have remained highly securitised and silenced spaces inhabited by fragmented and divided student subjects. Against the stark silence of curricula over important questions about the nature of the country's history, identity politics persisted, marking a new high in the conflict between different student's ethnic factions.

Ethiopian universities have been operating under the sky of an authoritarian political culture shaped by radical Marxism that survived in the neo-liberal age. Critical discussion and dialogue, in other words deliberative democracy (O'Flynn 2006), has been largely absent. Political activism and horizontal competition by divided student communities became the target of political repression by the state (Amare 2011: 183). This increased the scope of conflict between different groups and between students and the university establishment.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the Ethiopian case is not isolated in Africa. Literature discussing countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, and South Sudan highlight how universities can turn into violent spaces. For instance, Fomunyam notes that "African universities from Cape Town to Cairo are gradually becoming battle grounds

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where students wage war against one challenge or another in the fight for liberation" (Fomunyam 2017: 57). Goolman Mohamedbhai (2010) contends that conflicts between students and/or student protests against the government or university management are increasingly common in many African countries. The author notes that there is a substantial difference between the nature of protests in the 1960s and 1970s and the more recent one. First, the number of students enrolled in African universities increased dramatically in the past two decades, and this increment resulted in increased protests. Second, while the number of students grew sharply, the availability of key infrastructure such as libraries, lecture halls, student residences, have lagged behind. This increased the scope of discontent. Third, a more diverse student profile, which now includes students from different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, has exacerbated class differences and generated tensions between students. Finally, mobile technology has increased the capacity of students to mobilise and organise protests.

While violence is a feature that many African universities share (Fomunyam 2017), the reasons behind protests depend on specific issues such as institutional culture and the level of social cohesion. Conflict may occur between students, between students and staff, or be directed against broader state and government institutions (Etadon 2013). For instance, recent conflicts between students at Zalingei University in central Darfur State have been characterised by a deteriorating residential and academic environment and have been affected by civil war and conflict. The nature of the curricula and university fees are important reasons behind some recent conflicts (Hassen, Ageed 2015). For instance, rising fees is reported as a cause of conflict in both Nigerian private schools and South African universities. In South Africa, since 2015, student protests against rising university fees ("Fees Must Fall") have raised broader issues about social justice, the legacy of apartheid to higher education, institutional racism, and the meaning of decolonising knowledge (Rene 2019).

Ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities: findings of the survey

Conflicts have become a norm in Ethiopian universities: this is the main finding of a survey I conducted between 2017 and 2019 based on questionnaires administered to student representatives across the country. In a recent article Miressa Yadessa contends that "these days it has become common news to hear that a student of one ethnic group being attacked by the other and it is hard to find a university which finishes its academic year without such horrendous incidences and interruption" (Miressa 2018: 4). Since 2017, many casualties occurred as a result of violent conflicts in Ethiopia universities. The sample of student representatives interviewed was asked whether there had been recurrent conflicts at their universities in the past three years. Among 122 respondents, 20 strongly agreed, 31 agreed, 10 opted to be neutral, 34 disagreed and 27 strongly disagreed.

This polarised response seems to indicate that the nature of conflict in Ethiopian

universities is somehow different from the 1960s student protests. Present day conflicts do not occur via a fairly coherent student movement. However, fieldwork evidence indicates that until 2018 protests were mainly driven by an anti-government sentiment, which unified students to some extent. There is no inherited culture of violence or ideological orientation from the past generation. While the 1960s conflict occurred along vertical lines – had the Imperial regime as the ultimate target – the current student conflict is horizontal in nature. Contemporary violence is between students, this reflecting the absence of a fairly unified student movement. Thus, if one compares the causes of conflict in 2017 against 2018 and 2019, the former appears of a more vertical nature. Conflicts that occurred in 2017 in Haremiya, Adigrat, Woldia, and Gondar university took the form of protests against the ruling government. This is confirmed by 74 of the 122 respondents. In 2017 protests targeted the authoritarian character of the EPRDF regime. From this perspective, 2017 protests took a similar value to those that occurred in the 1960s, although without a coherent student movement as the driving force.

Conflicts that have occurred since 2018, after the political liberalisation under Abiy Ahmed, became more horizontal, they occurred between different groups of students. At the same time, the number of casualties increased sharply. However, the immediate causes vary from university to university. In 2017 conflicts were generated by protests in which the majority of students were standing together against the government, though conflicts between students occurred as well. The government itself was involved in university conflicts during the protest period causing "tension and conflict among students to divert the attention of the society when there is political or social pressure on the government and when it wants to accuse some groups or political parties" (Adamu 2013: 15).

Interviews suggest that since 2018 trivial disputes between students escalated to full-blown ethnic conflicts. The vertical conflict between students and the regime has now transformed into horizontal violence between students. This has transformed campuses in highly volatile spaces and questions around security have become a public concern. As result, since 2018 student enrolment has sharply declined, while the admission rate in private universities and evening courses, for example in Addis Ababa University, has increased.

A main feature of conflict since 2018 is volatility. Interviews show that external actors actively played a role in destabilising universities after the 2018 political transition. External political forces increasingly targeted universities. One initial example is a conflict that took place at Debre Markos University, Amhara region, in May 2019. Three unidentified individuals wearing masks attacked the campus leaving one student from Tigray dead and injuring three others.[3] While the actual reasons behind the attack remain unknown this episode escalated ethnic tensions between different groups of students both at Debre Markos and in other universities. Conflicts driven by external

forces escalated significantly towards the end of 2019. Incidents similar to Debre Markos were reported in several universities, including Woldia, Jinka, Dembi Dollo, Ambo, Mettu, Addis Ababa, Madda Walabu, Gondar, Wollega, and Dire Dawa. It seems clear that these incidents were the outcome of political disputes between elite groups unscrupulously regarding universities as a fertile terrain to nurture ethnic animosity. Commenting these conflicts, Samuel Kifle, the Minister of science and higher education has repeatedly denounced the involvement of external actor in university conflict. In an interview he contended that external actors have been "working intentionally to escalate conflicts and tensions in universities. (...) Trouble makers look like students. They are within the students or illegally entering University grounds in different ways (...) they post unfounded information on social media to instigate conflicts or some of them are throw rocks and run away. Others come at night time to commit crimes. Still, others wear masks to attack the students".[4]

Universities have become an ideal target to mobilise ethnic violence precisely because they are spaces where students from different groups meet and interact on a daily basis. Even when ethnicity is not the initial source of conflict, manipulation by external actors is likely to generate ethnicized outcomes. After 2018 Ethiopian universities have become spaces for violent political conflict, becoming a microcosm of broader societal fractures in Ethiopia. Students were mobilised along ethnic lines producing an escalation of ethnic tension and conflict inside multicultural campuses. The role of external forces in triggering violence was a matter that was brought up by 54 out of 120 respondents (30 "strongly agreed" and 24 "agreed"). While 24 respondents remained neutral on the issue, 21 disagreed and 21 strongly disagreed on the role of external forces in triggering campus conflicts.

The weaponisation of diversity

The recent surge of university conflicts in Ethiopia is clearly connected to the broader politics of identity and ethnonationalism after 2018 and has its deeper roots in the inherent contradiction over the Ethiopian nationalities question. It appears that in time of political liberalisation, particularly in the course of 2019, elites competing for shares of power actively played a role in mobilising ethnic differences for political purposes. Cultural differences have been ethnicized and weaponized, turning universities into a battleground. This mirrors historical fractures discussed above along the production of political identities of victims and perpetrators, in which the political mobilisation of diversity plays a central role.

In post-2018 Ethiopia universities have become a space of animosity and inter-ethnic tension. Of the 121 respondents to the survey, 43 contended that student relations are defined by suspicion and mistrust. The mobilisation of ethnic differences as a political tool produced the university as a space in which "everything is seen through ethnic eyeglasses" (Adamu 2013: 13). The educational system does not only incubate

contesting narratives, but it also celebrates "historical unfair events" (Miressa 2018: 4) which exacerbate ethnic animosity among students. Interviews further reveal that 82 student representatives consider the narrative oppressor/oppressed as a main reason behind ethnic conflict in Ethiopian universities (51 respondents "strongly agreed", 31 "agreed"). Only 17 respondents have rejected the connection (9 "disagreed" and 8 "strongly disagreed"). Adamu (2013: 13) has discussed how the oppressors/oppressed binary leads to ethnicized outcomes as follows: "there have been several ethnic conflicts because of ordinary disputes between individuals. Managers and teachers noted that once the ordinary dispute between individuals is ethnicized, the other students who are involved in the conflict do not ask or critically examine the rationality of the cause for the dispute. They just align with their group and participate in the conflict". These dynamics are exacerbated when human resource managers and staff members take position to defend one specific group (Miressa 2018: 6).

In addition, ethnic conflicts have sometimes sparked from minor issues. In June 2019 a conflict escalated out of a dispute over a soccer game at Debre Birhan university. Similarly, in December 2017 one student was killed and twenty-nine remained injured following a confrontation between supporters of two soccer teams, the "Mekelle Kenema" and the "Woldia Kenema". Another ethnic incident involving soccer was reported at Dire Dawa university. As a result of these conflicts, recreational activities such as sport and cultural events are becoming increasingly rare. Ethnic conflicts have also sparked following public ceremonies. A conflict at Adigrat university in 2017 was the result of clashes between different student groups at the national ceremony on the Ethiopian day of nation and nationalities. Interviews conducted with student representatives show a clear relation between minor disputes and full ethnic conflict. Among 120 respondents, 70 contended that ethnic conflicts often originate from minor disputes (36 "strongly agreed", 34 "agreed", 15 had no opinion, 15 "disagreed" and 20 "strongly disagreed").

Interviews also suggest that other factors play an important role in the dynamic of ethnic conflict in universities. Factors mentioned include corruption, the lack of impartiality on the side of administrative staff, as well as the spread of rumours and fake news through social media. In November 2019, at Debre Tabor university, the spread of a rumour about alleged poisoned food distributed to students generated tensions with university management. Similarly, rapidly spreading rumours on social media claiming that students would be transferred to universities closer to their place of residence brought students to boycott classes, disrupting teaching in several universities. A correspondent for the news outlet *Reporter,* has contended that "the major cause for ethnic conflicts in universities is social media. It becomes the platform for extreme nationalism which is taking control of the minds of youngsters".[5] On several occasions the Ethiopian broadcast authority has blamed local television channels for disseminating hate propaganda and to instigate ethnic tensions within and outside

universities. The lack of human, infrastructural and institutional capacity play also a role in exacerbating disputes between different student groups. In addition, universities usually hire staff based on the ethnic profile of candidates.[6] Clearly, this rarely creates an environment conducive to establish healthy inter-ethnic dialogue.

Ethnic and ethnicized universities

Ethiopian universities are not only characterised by divided student communities. The broader institutional setting is constructed and deeply divided along ethnic lines. One could argue that each university is *de facto* a "property" of specific ethnic groups. For instance, at the federal level there has been a significant competition between ethnonational groups to host universities in their localities. This reflects how from an institutional perspective universities have been the battleground within which the meaning of the Ethiopian state and its history of formation has been negotiated. That the competition between ethnonational groups to establish universities is a source of conflict is a finding that emerges with particular clarity in interviews conducted with student representatives. Out of 119 respondents 106 contended that macro politics is a clear reason behind surging conflict (74 "strongly agreed" and 32 "agreed").

University campuses are also divided internally, with buildings that may be regarded as controlled by specific ethnic groups. The power dynamics between students from the ethnonational group hosting the university and "outsiders" are complicated. According to Tesfaye people from "nearby areas have in many occasions threatened to storm campuses in support of their ethnic groups" whenever conflict arises on the university campus (cited in Miressa 2018: 4). This implies that even student's relatives sometimes play a role in exacerbating rather than mediating tensions. An example are the events that unfolded at Dire Dawa university in the fall of 2018. Following a border dispute between the Somali and the Oromia regional states, which had at its heart issues about internal displacement, Somali and Oromo people flooded the campus in support of students belonging to their respective ethnic group.[7] The outcome was a significant escalation of conflict and animosity between the two groups of students.

While the EPRDF policy that encouraged campuses to accommodate students from different parts of the country was intended as a measure to nurture the positive value of diversity, university communities in Ethiopia have remained deeply divided: conflict-free interactions are increasingly limited. Then, what possibilities remain for students and staff to create a more civil and de-ethnicized university? In the last part of the article I will engage with this difficult question by drawing on the concept of deliberative democracy as elaborated by Paulo Freire (2005).

Universities without deliberative democracy

Universities are expected to change society for the better by democratising and fostering debates and deliberation on campuses and beyond. As noted by Nancy

Thomas, "dialogue, informed deliberation, analysis, and problem-solving – and their guiding principles – inclusion, reason, respect, neutrality, and collegiality – are critical to a strong democracy *and* the academy" (Thomas 2010: 88-89). It is only through this deliberative process that universities become publicly relevant, a gateway of critical and informed deliberation and democratic culture.

Ethiopian universities remain silent spaces lacking productive conversations about democratic culture and upliftment. Paulo Freire notes that "human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world" (Freire 2005: 88). What Freire suggest is that silent universities remain unable to nourish human existence. For instance, the silence of Addis Ababa University during the recent political crisis has been particularly prominent. Even now, in an era of political transition, Ethiopian universities allow little space for meaningful dialogue. In Addis Ababa critical dialogue and deliberations open to the public take place more often in hotels and other sites in the city. Following the contested 2005 national elections, mass arrests and draconian laws, universities have become highly securitised and politicised spaces. Moreover, there is a serious deficit of democratic norms and experience that would allow elites and communities to negotiate and overcome some of the negotiable social differences and fractures that haunt present-day Ethiopia. Dialogue is the only option towards enriching the existential potential of Ethiopians. Freire notes that "dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, to name the world" (Freire 2005: 88). Dialogue is therefore indispensable for Ethiopian university students to name each other and to rename their relation to their country and the world at large. Failing to promote dialogue nurtures oppressive discourse and extreme nationalism that produced fragile relations among Ethiopians. Dialogue is the only option that Ethiopia has to deconstruct a political identity relying on the victim and perpetrators binary.

The de-politicisation and securitisation of universities significantly affected academic freedom and deliberative democracy. As Amare (2011) has argued, this has to do with the complex relationship between universities and the country's ruling elite. An absence of dialogue, conversation and critical debate limited the potential for transformation of university communities through positive interaction and engagement. The de-politicisation of university life constrains the ability of society at large to transcend difference and to accommodate, appreciate and recognise diversity.

Despite the most recent political transition in 2018 universities have remained a silent and de-politicised space. Student conflict has replaced the existing apparent peace that characterised Ethiopian universities under EPRDF. The recent establishment of "peace clubs" in all Ethiopian universities by the Ministry of peace is commendable. However, these clubs require institutional support if they aim to become microsites for critical pedagogy and dialogue. The unnecessary competition between these clubs and the student councils has to be addressed through critical dialogue so that both

associations become sites of dialogue for university students and the community at large. Thus, recent news indicate that the level of state policing of university campuses is likely to increase in the near future.[8] Such options can be a short-term solution to stop violence, but unless wider and long-lasting measures are taken into consideration, the role of universities will be limited to producing graduate students without any experience of deliberative democracy, critical thinking, and the capacity to engage in informed dialogue. Measures aimed at securitising university spaces will unlikely create an environment conducive to civic and de-ethnicized dialogue. Academic freedom and the democratisation of the university spaces are the only long-term options to nurture democratic dialogue in the wider Ethiopian society.

Prescriptive conclusion: towards a pedagogy of the oppressed

What does it take to liberate Ethiopian universities, and to nurture the potential of students as political subjects, from the domineering and dehumanising discourse of toxic ethnonationalism? Deconstruction must necessarily begin with self and inner group critique. This is a painful but necessary exercise. As Paulo Freire in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* explains, such an exercise is similar to the process of childbirth: "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor–oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labour which brings into the world this new being: neither longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom" (Freire 2005: 49). In this article I have contended that Ethiopian universities and students are victims of the inherent contradiction of the nationalities question, which has produced a discourse relying on the binaries of oppressor and oppressed, and victim and perpetrator. Under the EPRDF rule, universities have been ethnicized in the same way as other public spaces in the country. The ethnicization of universities was operated through the politicization of difference, and resulted in the emergence of different irresponsible narratives about Ethiopian history. These narratives have eroded any common psychology and national cohesion among Ethiopians. The inability of scholars to build consensus among people in Ethiopia has exacerbated these problems.

Ethnic conflicts in Ethiopian universities have increased markedly after the 2018 political transition. While in 2017 conflicts could be characterised as vertical – they had the EPRDF government as the ultimate target – this study has shown that political liberalisation was marked by increasing horizontal conflicts between student groups centred on competing ethnonational identities. Students became both the victims and the agents of such conflicts. Diversity was weaponised through competing ethnonationalist narratives. To address these issue universities must undertake what Paulo Freire has defined a pedagogy of the oppressed. This entails exposing the binary discourse which divides and mobilises society along identity politics. This is put by Freire

as follows: "the central problem is this: how can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be "hosts" of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy" (2005: 48).

Such pedagogical oriented action is the only way we have to open-up a "demystifying moment" (West 1993: xiii) in which the deconstruction of the oppressive discourse occurs, thus gradually liberating the potential of students and the university community as political subjects. This creates an opportunity for critical dialogue between students towards transforming Ethiopian universities as spaces of dialogue and deliberative democracy. In turn, deliberation and dialogue enrich national cohesion and the positive value of diversity.

Yonas Ashine is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of Addis Ababa University

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2 - Student perspectives were collected through structured questionnaires designed using a Likert scale (Members of University students' council and Peace Club). A total of 122 (62 female and 60 male) student representative members of student councils and peace clubs from 43 universities returned questionnaires. The questionnaires were written in Amharic with a range of 1–5, '5' to represent strong agreement, '4' agreement, '3' inability to decide, '2' disagreement and '1' strong disagreement. A total of 17 questions were given to participants. The questionnaire contains information on the nature, actors and the extent of conflicts in universities as well as broader relations in universities and surrounding communities. This article relies on an opinion survey along with a qualitative exploration of university conflicts in the country.

3 - *Seemingly clandestine attack in Debremarkos University left a student from Tigray dead,* «Borkena», 28 May 2019.

4 - *Minister Blames Third Party for Ethnic Clashes at Ethiopian Universities,* «Ezega News», 13 November 2019.

5 - *Universities should not be at the forefront of conflict!,* «Reporter (Amharic version)», 17 December 2017.

6 - *How to deal with stress created by universities?,* «Reporter (Amharic version)», 17 December 2017.

7 - *It is not possible to start education at three universities in Oromia,* «Reporter (Amharic version)», 10 December 2017.

8 - *Ethiopian Government to Deploy Federal Police on University Grounds,* «Ezega News», 9 December 2019.

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