

This article is distributed in open access under the Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0 Licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>)
(c) Author(s)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23810/1345.ETIOPIABEKELEDEBELE>
When citing this article please include its DOI with a resolving link

Ethiopia in Transition: Thinking with Feminist Notions of *Waloo*, *Tumsa* and *Wallala*

Serawit Bekele Debele

Abstract

This article reflects on the much anticipated political shift in Ethiopia. It does so through a Siinqee Feminist lens as proposed by Martha Kuwe Kumsa. Beyond regime change in 2018 after long years of protest especially by the Oromo youth, some significant reforms such as opening up the political space were witnessed. However, regressive politics has set in soon after – extreme social polarisation and the ongoing civil war being major manifestations. This highly moving (and hence unpredictable) socio-political context begs for new questions on what actually constitutes political change and how differently it might be imagined. How do we make sense of a political shift that is filled with hope and dismay? I ponder over what can be gained from paying attention to grounded practices to cultivate democracy, solidarity and politics that drive from and attend to everyday struggles by people on the margins. I suggest that we draw inspirations from the lived experiences of Oromo women and how they mobilise Siinqee feminist practices to foster solidarity.

Keywords: Halagaa, Siinqee, Ethiopia, Oromo women, transition

Introduction

Just a year before the start of the Oromo Protest in 2014, I had a series of conversations about the sacred lake of Arsadi. The one that focused on what constitutes a legitimate development within the federal arrangement resonates with the questions I ask in this article. Conventionally known as an annual thanksgiving ritual performed by the Oromo, the nationwide *Irreecha* takes place at this sacred lake that is located in Bishoftu of

the Oromia Regional State. My research at the time focused on the ritual, particularly on what its increasing popularity does to our understanding of political processes in Ethiopia. Seated in a small cafe in the city centre, I was chatting with one of my interlocutors. I asked him about the investment opportunity the beautiful lake is said to have attracted in recent times. I wanted to know his take on the rumours about the permission granted to a nearby resort to expand to Lake Arsadi. He sipped on his coffee to take his time before he spoke. His "let them dare us" sort of answer revealed his rage at the very thought of giving out the sacred lake to yet "another one of those tycoons".¹ What I gathered from his reflections was a reliance not on his might to stop the state, or his anticipation of a coordinated force that will subdue the move to commercialise the sacred site. He counted on the constitution that grants the cultural and religious rights of citizens. He pointed out that to give the lake to developers violates the rights of those who revere the lake as sacred. For him, it is preposterous to take away places of worship in the name of investment. I asked what he thinks about the justification – that investment creates job opportunities. He said: "not at the expense of our rights to worship", implying that the state has to find another way of developing the area without compromising constitutionally granted rights. This and similar other conversations offer entry points to explore the tensions abounding state-society relations and how that is shaped by the way in which the role of the state is understood. On one hand, the state promises to boost the economy and make Ethiopia a middle-income country. On another, it focuses on the celebration of ethno-religious and cultural identities as one of its main priorities to redress past injustices. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but one may get the impression that there is a tension in managing these overlapping commitments by the state. As I show in this article, this tension can, among other things, be linked to the way in which the nation-state is organised and how ethnic federalism approached the question of socio-economic and political inclusion of historically marginalised groups. To come back to *Irreecha*, Lake Arsadi was not handed over to investors. Rather, the sacred lake and the annual ritual continued to be central in shaping (as they are shaped by) the country's politics. Equally, the act of taking away land from farmers for large scale investment and urbanisation remained as salient as ever. In 2014 the infamous Addis Ababa Master Plan was publicised by the city administration. The grand plan threatened to expropriate land from farmers surrounding Addis Ababa in order to expand the city. This sparked the Oromo Protest for which Lake Arsadi became one of the most important venues. What started out in 2014 as a demand by the youth to revoke the master plan grew into a nationwide protest with more expansive demands such as the removal of the regime itself. *Irreecha* was one of the rare points that brought Oromo youth across Oromia region to express grievances and aspirations. The October 2016 celebration is remembered for "Down down TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front]" "Down down Woyane", a pronouncement by fearless Oromo women and men who protested the regime. The protest continued

for more than a year, joined by protesters from other parts of the country such as the Amhara region. In February 2018, Hailemariam Desalegn resigned from his short-lived premiership and April marked the coming to the political scene of the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Beyond the replacement of one administrative body with another, some reforms have been introduced but regressive politics seems to dominate the atmosphere. This highly moving socio-political context begs for fresh perspectives on what actually constitutes political change and how differently it might be imagined. The question then is, how do we make sense of these political changes that are at the same time filled with hope and dismay? Drawing on my own research, I explore what can be gained from paying attention to grounded practices to cultivate democracy, solidarity and political shift that drives from and attends to everyday struggles by people on the margins. I am guided by Martha Kuwee Kumsa's (2020) Transnational Siinqee Feminism (TSF henceforth). Named after the stick Oromo women carry, Siinqee feminism emanates from Oromo women's socio-political and cultural practices and revolves around three main pillars: *waloo* (relationality), *tumsa* (solidarity) and *wallaala* (barriers). These notions emerge from a specific conception of womanhood as strangeness characterised by mobility, as I will explain later. I would argue that the insights that emerge from women's lived experiences can be extrapolated to imagine an emancipatory politics understood as Jacques Rancière's (1992) "impossible identification" with the pain and suffering of the other. I complement TSF with Andreas Eshete's (1981) ideas of fraternity as a bond created among those who share, beyond an identity, a common cause (for example the cause of social justice). Though my intention is to shed light on embedded and embodied everyday practices as sites of thinking emancipatory politics, I am also aware that these everyday practices do not exist outside of histories and structures that shape the socio-political and material conditions of citizens. Considering this, I also propose rethinking the nation-state in a way that is divorced from essentialising majority/minority divides as solid and settled entities. Drawing on Elleni Centime Zeleke (2019) and Mahmood Mamdani (2020), I would posit that the making of centre-periphery as well as majority-minority is an outcome of historico-political processes. Accordingly, the essay is divided into three main parts. Section one begins with discussing my position as a researcher/citizen to show that my research does not promise any objectivity due, among others, to my own socio-political and cultural formation and commitment. Since it is important to situate my interventions in context, in the second part of the essay I evaluate political transformation and what it means in shaping Ethiopia's recent history. I mainly focus on how changes were handled by regimes that came in 1974, 1991 and 2018. Central here is a synthesis of how the state/the political is organised in a way powerful actors imagined to address issues such as the national question. The third part deals with the three notions - *tumsa*, *waloo*, *wallaala* - within TSF in tandem with my proposal for restructuring the political. This will lastly be followed by a few concluding remarks.

Methodological reflections

In terms of my modes of engagement, this is a contemplative reflection on a subject that matters to me on many levels. I do not claim to understand nor exhaust everything that is going on in the country since the new change, as it is much complex than can be captured in a piece as short as this one. It is rather a call for us to pay attention to other venues outside of conventions we are used to. Most of what I write is based on deep conversations and debates as well as introspection in addition to written materials. My observation of Ethiopian politics, my research on *Irreecha* and Oromo protest and the recent debates among stakeholders spur my reflections. This piece is also highly informed by thinking-together with my friends Semeneh Ayalew, Surafel Wondimu and Shimeles Bensa on our weekly program on Asham TV. In a sense, I am not saying a lot of new things rather than reiterating some thoughts in order not to remain silent at a time our voices are much needed. Indeed, there is no such thing as a private intellectual as we learn from Edward Said's writings and the life he lived. Following Said (1994: 12), I write "as someone who is trying to advance the cause of freedom and justice [... I reflect] my own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from my experiences, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how these enter into the social world where-people debate and make decisions about war and freedom and justice". I struggle with the question of what it means to be me and write such a contemplative piece at this time. My reflections stem as much from my situatedness in as my displacement from a country I call home. I write about an issue that deeply concerns me as an Ethiopian, an Oromo with an Amhara mother - at times accused of being *baletera* (the newly groomed to privilege). I write as a woman whose feminist sensibilities come from women who raised me up collectively. I also write as someone who is in a lot of pain due to the continuous violence faced by everyday people. I find resonance in what the Rwandese intellectual Jean-Pierre Karegeye said to the Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop responding to the question "what is going on" in Rwanda. Karegeye responded: "my perception of Rwanda cannot be that of a researcher who stands far away from the object that he is observing. That is impossible for me. I inhabit Rwanda as much as Rwanda inhabits me with its past and present, where the horrors of the genocide and the hopes of an entire people intertwine. I would even add that the destiny of my homeland haunts me"² So there is no semblance of objectivity in this piece. Rather, I want my writing to be read as coming from a plethora of emotions: anger, frustration, disappointment, desperation and sadness but also a great deal of hope for national healing.

Political transformations in Ethiopia 1974–2018

Ethiopia has undergone major political transformations that reorganised the state as well as state-society relations in significant ways. However, one might argue that Ethiopia's experiment with political reform has not always been the most rewarding. It

is one dominated by continuity rather than a radical departure from what new regimes criticise as the fault of their predecessors. Let us see just one example: the nationalities question. Transforming imperial Ethiopia in a way that changes the nature of the state to be more accommodative of the nationalities question was conceived in the prehistory of the revolution that culminated in the emergence of Derg in 1974. The demand for inclusion by diverse social groups into the nation-state is one of the ways through which economic questions were articulated during the student movement of 1960s and 1970s. How these struggles for inclusion should be concretised is at the centre of intellectual debates and socio-political processes that led up to the 1974 revolution and its afterlife. The Derg adopted socialism as an umbrella to address the question of inclusion by foregrounding the workers in urban and the peasants in rural areas. While the Derg might be credited for introducing major structural transformations including the issue of land distribution, end of monarchy and birth of a socialist state, it relegated the question of nationalities as something that might open "the gate for narrow nationalism" to use Bahru Zewde's formulation.³ This does not mean that the nationalities question was simply ignored. It was acknowledged and the cultural rights of nations and nationalities were respected. As Elleni (2019: 141) notes, "the PNDR [Program of the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia] recognised the right to self-determination of all nationalities, it also insisted that unity between the different nationalities in Ethiopia existed through the common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, and bureaucratic capitalism" (Elleni 2019: 141). However, this recognition had bounds. Organising and politicising the workers and peasants as major allies was the priority compared to granting the right to self-determination up to secession, which was seen as a distraction from the main agenda of maintaining the country's much needed unity on its road to progress. As such, the Derg resorted to repressing quests and forcefully uniting under what Samson Tadelle Demo (2021) calls "scientific materialism". This is despite the fact that the popular protests prior the revolution demanded change not only to transform relations of production, but also for the respect of religious, cultural and linguistic rights.

Since the nation-state became synonymous with those who agreed with Derg's ideology and the state served in reinforcing it, there was much less room to address these multiple agendas as a result of which some groups took arms. For example, TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) resorted to armed struggle to fight for liberation as their names indicate. In 1991 Ethiopia's civil war came to an end with Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) taking power. Guided by democratic centralism, EPRDF incorporated the question of self-determination in the charter of the transitional government and later on became the most controversial article 39 of the 1995 constitution.⁴ EPRDF introduced ethnic federalism and instrumentalised it to organise the state by devolving power to sovereign regional states that were divided in accordance with majority ethnic groups. The articulation of socio-cultural relations

within the framework of ethnic federalism took centre-stage to determine inclusion within the state for the past thirty years. To be sure, contemporary debates that are simplistically framed and ridiculed as "identity politics" – as if identity takes shape in a vacuum and devoid of political economy – remained to be lingering demands for inclusion in the nation state.

Since his appointment in 2018, Abiy Ahmed's administration seems to be regressing to politics that suppresses differences and looks back to the "old Ethiopia" with nostalgia. His inaugural speech in April of the same year suggests his commitment to an Ethiopia whose lost glory he promised to work towards restoring. He said: "we live as Ethiopians and we become Ethiopia when we die"⁵ presenting Ethiopia as if it is uncontested. For him, Ethiopia is a country made by the sacrifice its different nations paid to protect its territorial integrity, longstanding and proud history and great people. The mixed reception by the public of his speech – a speech that oscillated between seeking liberal consent and nostalgia for an old empire – is telling. A sharp criticism was forwarded by the so-called ethno-nationalists for his implicit marginalisation of the constitutionally recognised categories of nations, nationalities and people. His speech was received by some in the so called Ethiopianist camp as the arrival of the moment Ethiopia was waiting for to undo what has been inflicted by ethnic federalism. The main umbrella of his speech, *medemer* (synergy), was seen by others as a hybrid framework that might potentially work for both groups which take extreme positions.⁶

What we gather from the regime changes of 1974, 1991 and recently in 2018 and the ensuing political actions is a high degree of continuity in the way the nation-state has been organised despite the major changes introduced. The centre-periphery as well as majority/minority divide continued to organise politics in the country. Political processes in Ethiopia are characterised by perpetual postponement and this is so because of the way in which politicians set priorities. Politicians stick to what Walter Benjamin (1968) calls a "stubborn faith in progress" around which they organise citizens. Faith in progress suggests that we are waiting for the next stage in anticipation of it being better. Central to this is linearity and that people are made to accept their present-day suffering in anticipation of a better future for their children if not for themselves. When it comes to taking popular demand and politicking from below seriously, the regimes suffer from overlooking what actually mattered to ordinary citizens. This kind of thinking does not lend itself to a change that is made possible through a different relation with the past and the present. A break from this tradition requires interrupting the anticipated progress for the future while the oppressed continue to suffer in the present. The question then is, instead of dwelling on their vulnerability, what ways are there for the oppressed to work against postponement orchestrated by political leaders and the violence it entails? One way could be to explore the potentials of politics from below in order to transcend the notion that political leaders alone determine the fate of the ruled. What might TSF lend us to think this politics from below? I agree with Martha

(2020: 133) that TSF "has the immense potential to facilitate the work of peacemaking, reconciling, and unifying among the diverse peoples of Ethiopia. [...] Siinqee feminism offers a framework of context, solidarity, and vision for broader emancipatory projects and environmental sustainability".

Thinking with feminist notions of *waloo*, *tumsa* and *wallala*

Theodros Alemu Teklu (2021) characterises today's Ethiopia as a moment of crisis of political culture that is marred with "hatred of the ethnic other" who is already defined as the enemy. This rhetoric and practice of "politics as hatred" cuts across the elite and ordinary citizens, he opines. Disconcerted by this political crisis, Theodros asks where Ethiopia is headed to in socio-political terms. He quickly answers saying we are "in a milieu of ethnic enmity" on the verge of full-blown ethnic-conflict (Theodros 2021: 14). There seems to be just enough evidence to support Theodros' fear. The ongoing displacement and killings in places such as Oromia, Gedeo, Benishangul-Gumuz, Konso, Metekel, Wolayta, Somali and Tigray have made Ethiopia home for the highest number of internally displaced people.⁷ Major cities, including the capital Addis Ababa and others like Hawasa, Dire Dawa, Moyale, Ambo, Jijiga and Nekemt have not been spared of atrocities as they have had their share of killings and internal displacement. Survivors, such as those in Shashemene of Oromia region, are yet to recover from the trauma, the loss of social fabric, and economic hardship caused by violence.⁸ The war in Tigray that is labelled by the federal government as "enforcing law and order" is yet another manifestation of problems underlying not just the 2018 insertion of the new administration. It exposes much more historically grounded problems, with the question of what kind of state Ethiopia needs being a major one.

152

Yet, while I share Theodros' fear and concern, I shy away from definitive characterisations such as "hatred of the ethnic other" or "milieu of ethnic enmity" to rather think of this moment of heightened change as one full of contradictions replete with multiple other possibilities. I reckon this moment is irreducible to parts of its aftermath, namely to the atrocities we are witnessing. It is a moment pregnant with the potential of cultivating solidarity within and across national boundaries. It has to also be seen as an opportune moment to restructure the political, such as the way the nation-state is organised. In light of this, I focus on what ordinary citizens live and do as a site of innovative political practices with an eye for contradictions not definitive characterisations of political developments in the country. I use Martha's TSF to imagine emancipatory politics from everyday practices and lived experiences in times of violence. The idea is that if we are to engage humanities from the place of the subordinated, we have to see like a feminist a la Nevidetta Menon (2012). TSF is central "because we feel deep kinship and empathy with our kith and kin from across the boundaries of multiple nations" (Martha 2020: 126). Asserting the transportability of Oromo women's feminist sensibility, Martha calls it transnational.

Oromo women's political practices have three main guidelines, namely *tumsa* (solidarity), *wallaala* (barriers blocking the pursuit for justice) and *waloo* (relationality). She uses three proverbs rooted in the history of the people to illuminate the notions. Solidarity/*tumsa* is described using the expression "*abbaan iyyatu, ollaan birmata* [neighbors respond only if one screams]", where *iyayatu* "means a cry for help, a demand of justice, and *birmata* means a response of empathy and solidarity" (Martha 2020: 126). She describes *wallaala* using the proverb, "*dhakaan of hindarbuu; abbaan of hinarguu* [A pebble cannot throw itself; self cannot see itself]". In essence, this means that "no solo introspection produces self-knowledge. As our eyes are cut to look outward, we need Others' eyes to see ourselves" (Martha 2020: 127). *Waloo* relationality is captured in the saying "*migirri lagaa gubannaan gingilchaan golaa boosse* [when the reeds are burned in the valley, the sieving basket weeps in the kitchen]" (Martha 2020: 126). This signifies the capacity to feel other's pain even when we are in the comfort and warmth of our homes as represented by the basket that cries when the reeds are destroyed. Martha's articulations of the three notions within Oromo feminist thinking come from her keen observations and situated knowledge of Oromo women's socio-political cultural as well as spiritual practices and experiences which are marginalised in Oromo nationalist discourses (Martha 2020).

According to Martha, women are *halagaa* (strangers) due to their mobility within their communities. A daughter is a stranger in her parents' house because she will soon be given out for marriage. When she becomes a wife, she is a stranger because she comes from "elsewhere" and her belonging is affirmed later through childbirth. This perpetual strangeness while still belonging is where the potential for *tumsa* lies. As a matter of necessity, women stick together in solidarity. In situation of injustice suffered by one woman, all of those in the village raise their *sinqee* (the stick) and call out the one who committed the wrong, and they continue doing so until the wrong is amended by whoever committed it. As *halagaas*, women have no one but one another (Martha 2020). This resonates with my upbringing as it does with many who did not grow up in today's urban contexts that are hyper individualised. No woman raises a child alone. Irrespective of conflicts, tensions and differences, women come together in support of a struggling mother. They practice *tumsa* by sharing their deep knowledge and wisdom as well as material resources. Similarly, *tumsa* is lived at Lake Arsadi, where I conducted research, among the women who gather every Sunday and other Orthodox Christian holidays for coffee rituals. Most of these women do not know each other and yet bond in the process of sharing the space and the moment. Different issues - such as health, politics, economic struggles, marriage, motherhood - are reminisced about during the coffee sessions. Prayers (for the self, the other, the country, its leaders, peace, etc.) are said together. Items for coffee making, food and drinks are shared as much as experiences and hopes. It should be noted that the women at the weekly sessions are diverse - for ethnic origin, education, class, religious background, age wise - but there

are always shared experiences that cut across these differences and offer the ground for *tumsa* deliberations. These moments by the lakeside are instructive of the potentials of *tumsa* and its capacity for extrapolation.

For instance, looking at the annual thanksgiving *Irreecha* celebrations at Hora Arsadi in Bishoftu and its shifts over the years offers us an entry point to appreciate the potentials of the Oromo protest that began in 2014. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the "political side" of the ritual was dominated by the presence of (or longing for) the OLF in the youth's imagination and invocations as we gather from songs and prayers. This was the case even while the ritual was one of the most government regulated public events in the country. The government goes as far as characterising *Irreecha* as the field on which OLF plays. The longing for OLF was always presented in relation to the frustration and anger with and rejection of TPLF and disappointment with its puppet satellite Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO). This started shifting gradually to become more obvious during the protest when the youth showed that they are prepared to take matters into their own hands instead of waiting for OLF to come and rescue the Oromo from the tyrannies of TPLF/OPDO (Serawit 2017, 2019). This was more so the case in 2014 and in 2016. In the 2016 celebration, the youth called on all Oromo to join hands, in the spirit of *tumsa* to fight against injustice. They pleaded with fellow Oromo from north, south, east, west and those in the diaspora to commit themselves to the cause of lifting the Oromo out of years of disenfranchisement. Oromo across class, education, generation, gender, creed, occupation, residence (urban, rural, diaspora) joined together to wage a coordinated social struggle.⁹ Affirming this nationwide movement, Martha praises the support: "we come together in the spirit of *wal malee maal qabnaa* (who else do we have but each other). When Oromo protestors are brutally repressed by the totalitarian regime in Ethiopia, *waloo* relationality brings us out in full force from across the many nations we inhabit" (Martha 2020: 131). The performance of *tumsa* as *wal malee maal qabnaa* was glaring in the 2016 celebration of *Irreecha*. Right before the stampede that killed hundreds, the protesting youth held their hands and created a line. They then started reciting prayers and pleas. In their plea, they asked the armed Oromo security forces not to fire and not to kill anyone in the name of *wal malee maal qabnaa*. The unarmed youth appealed to *tumsa* and said: "you are our own brothers, you should come join us in the fight for justice". They asked their fellow citizens not to align themselves with power which will soon betray them. They demanded the security forces to stand on the right side of history in the making by disowning a state that deployed violence to tame the struggle. In their plea, the protesters questioned the state and its functionaries by mobilising the notion of *tumsa*, solidarity.¹⁰

While this can be seen as *tumsa* within the same ethnic group, the Oromo, it should also be noted that these protest moments are significant not only for mobilising the Oromo nation across the board. They are equally crucial for their capacity of crossing

national boundaries. Protests in other parts of the country sprung up taking up the question of social justice, employment, human dignity, relief from the repressive state and demand for democracy. The Amhara were one of the first to follow suit to both protest the government in their own right and in solidarity with the Oromo. In these series of demonstrations in the Amhara region, the youth not only demanded change but also expressed support for their counterparts in Oromia as they condemned the inhuman and brutal treatment of the unarmed Oromo women and men. This was a significant manifestation of *tumsa* where impossible identification was practiced in sharing the pain of the brutalised youth. Recently, we have witnessed a boundary-crossing *tumsa* in the way ordinary citizens responded to victims of displacement, inter-communal violence and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. As an example, we can look at the seemingly simple gestures such as feeding and offering shelter to the internally displaced. It was not international NGOs that helped during these times; it was the neighbours who shared what they had. While descriptors like hate might cloud such practices of *tumsa*, exploring potentials that lie outside of victim-perpetrator afford us a space to imagine a way forward. *Tumsa* as lived by communities who have been subject to various forms of violence can be launched for rejuvenating social fabric as genuinely transformative. The state of being *halagaa* and its attendant *tumsa* are expressions of *wal malee maal qabnaa*. This highly frequented phrase among the Oromo, be it in popular songs or everyday communications, captures our interdependence as humans. It does not negate differences, nor does it deny violence. It refuses injustice but builds on empathy for the other. It operates on the basis of acknowledging *wallaala* (trespasses) to indicate fraternity as a complex process that ties communities of survivors while also accommodating "perpetrators" of violence since their fates are tied together.¹¹ The duo Zarihun Wadajo and Elnash Qano Afan Oromo singers say: "a tree has leaves who do we have but each other - *wal malee maal qabnaaree?*" Martha recognises this cross-national solidarity saying "I see movements of reconciliation and peace building as the young Oromo leaders play *waloo*, the adhesive glue that holds together the disparate peoples of Ethiopia. I see movements of *tumsa* solidarity among peoples with historical animosity" (Martha 2020: 132).¹² Along with Martha, I stress the potentials these protest moments exposed to cultivate what Andreas Eshete calls fraternity as a connection built across ethnic differences (Andreas 1981).

For Andreas, the existence of a common bond is what defines fraternity, a bond that is not based on sharing material goods. The necessary condition for fraternity is a common cause such as the concern for equality and freedom. This kind of fraternity transcends ethnonational connections which assume a primordial kinship. Although nationalism is one of the examples Andreas uses to elaborate fraternity, he does not impose the idea that fraternal bond is natural. He says it is open. What he calls a "public ideal of fraternity" is a "relationship in which individuals are wholeheartedly committed to a cause—say, the cause of abolishing hunger from their community. If the cause is a central

project in the lives of all, and if they are able to work harmoniously in pursuit of their cause, and if they mutually recognize their calling, they would develop strong bonds of loyalty and affection" (Andreas 1981: 28). The possibility of fraternity presupposes identifying with both the cause and those who share it. This makes a community built by devotees of a cause whose membership is based on choice, not "natural" bond such as kinship. In anticipation of objections to his assertion, Andreas laments that "the received view is that fraternity cannot be realized under modern social circumstances. So, though it may be conceded that the ideal of fraternity points to a distinctive, perhaps even attractive, vision of social life, it is denied that the form of social life envisioned is a live alternative for us. To think otherwise is deemed misguided, or, worse, pernicious" (Andreas 1981: 34). Arguing otherwise, he brings nationalism to see the possibility of fraternity as bond by a common cause. And yet, one of the things he does is show that nationalism can break away from nationhood and exist without being encumbered by "the natural fetters of ethnicity". One "can be possessed by a passionate devotion to a moral or non-moral ideal: liberty, justice, beauty, productive work, adventure, the state, the betterment of the human condition. [...] Depending on the nature of the shared ideal and the distribution of the individuals who aspire to it, these forms of civic fraternity can exist in institutions within a nation and in associations that cross national boundaries" (Andreas 1981: 37-38). But this takes the willingness from all sides to engage in conversations that go past dehumanising the other as violent, that shades the sham of representing the self as innocent.¹³ It takes a genuine commitment for an inclusive social change around which we can gather as a community of justice seekers. These fraternal bonds also presuppose the preparedness of the Ethiopian youth to transform themselves from inward looking persons to subjects who go against their self-interest and move their organising to a more inclusive politics. Martha sees this possibility in TSF which is also vital in moving away from the androcentrism fraternity implies by assuming the figure of the man as its centre.

And yet, I do not want to romanticise citizens as if they are not capable of committing atrocities. They are not passive recipients of orchestrated violence either. They are capable of performing "political evil" in pursuit of some goal or vision for a good life. We all possess the capacity for political evil, which according to Alan Wolfe (2011: 9-10) means the readiness to inflict "a wilful, malevolent, and gratuitous death, destruction, and suffering [...] upon innocent people by the leaders of movements and states in their strategic efforts to achieve realizable objectives". We have had similar instances in Ethiopia recently where people committed atrocities in pursuit of "a grotesque conception of the good life" (Wolfe 2011: 45). Those who need to be held accountable need to be engaged on those terms but not in a manner that reproduces the cycle of violence. We have to take this into account while engaging embedded practices like *tumsa* and *waloo* for grooming democracy, for state making and for genuine political transformation from below. Acknowledging the capacity for political

evil – not as transcendental but man-made – enables us, first, to deal with historically situated systemic and structural injustices that people suffer and, second, to create the conditions conducive for cultivating *tumsa* to better manage violence. Even if we might be limited by *wallaala*, we have *waloo* and *tumsa* – deliberate and conscious political practices that remedy our flaws and compel us to look out for one another against exploitive forces of capitalism that thrive on perpetual division and bickering. In the below section, I discuss how we might theorise the political/structural by moving away from the dichotomies minority/majority or centre/periphery.

What would restructuring the political look like?

The XIX century formation of the Ethiopian nation-state under Minilik cannot be viewed in isolation from colonial and global political processes that shaped the political history of the rest of Africa, indeed with no disregard to its own specificities. For Elleni, nation-state formation has to be seen as part of a larger process of Ethiopia's transition to capitalism and its self-assertion against the European scramble for Africa. Elleni (2019: 45) concedes that "[e]ven if the colonial state in modern Ethiopia had a sporadic existence, the social and political dynamics of the scramble for Africa set the stage for the entire series of actions pursued in the name of state formation from the time of Minilik onwards". The socio-economic marginalisation and the struggle between those perceived as the centre and hence favoured by the state and its peripheries have to be seen in this light not just as local skirmishes. Reducing the history of nation-state formation in Ethiopia to local developments and stating it as a struggle between the centre and its peripheries clouds colonial histories, capitalist formations and the scramble for Africa in shaping Ethiopia in the XIX century. According to Elleni, being stuck in the localised centre-periphery/inter-ethnic clash narrative of nation-state formation is at the heart of Ethiopia's political problems. This is so because, first, the relation between the centre and periphery is "read as the intensification of age-old tendencies within the Abyssinian state" and, second, "instead of showing the active participation of non-Amhara peoples and groups in the making of the modern Ethiopian nation state, [scholarship] ends up 'legitimising the dominant positions claimed by agents of the centre'. What is lost is the role of 'diverse social networks' in the process of nation-state formation" (Elleni 2019: 40–41). The consequences of this is that it solidifies the centre-periphery and imagines the struggles for social inclusion only within that frozen framing as if belonging was natural, ahistorical and apolitical. Part of this arguably comes from the position that conceives the Amhara as an essentialised ethnic group privileged to define the nation-state, who belongs and on what basis (Yates 2016).¹⁴ The question of national identity as shaped by Amhara sensibilities such as language, religion, cultural expressions underlies political processes in today's Ethiopia. Nevertheless, these debates are not necessarily new. Ethiopian students of the 1960s deliberated on "how to expand membership within the Ethiopian state; how

to reorganise the state to address regional inequalities; and how to build an economy where the newly forming petty bourgeoisie could have a role" (Elleni 2019: 45). Political organising and practices follow this discourse in formulating policy, partly because there is an overlap of actors operating between the two spaces since the student movement. As the concern of my interlocutor in the introduction indicates, if EPRDF had claimed to facilitate economic transformation in the life of the dispossessed through granting self-determination, it failed to achieve that because post-1991 Ethiopia for the most part ended up being a political game play for the urban-based petty bourgeoisie who appropriated and at the same time disregarded popular demand for inclusion. Two issues can be raised about the attempt to address the economic question through ethnic federalism and how the urban elite appropriated and reduced the question to one of representation. One is that ethnic identity was made the only reality that defines all political struggles and demands, gradually pushing socio-economic questions to the background. What it did instead is the creation of a certain class that benefited from the arrangement in the name of representing the interest of a particular national group like Oromo, Amhara, Wolayta, Tigre. The second problem is that it created a permanent condition of minority-majority by simply promoting the illusion that ethnic identities are primordial not contingent on socio-political, economic and historical formations. This might give the impression of benefiting the representatives of the majority while actively excluding minorities, particularly those that reside in the regional states other than their own, such as Amhara living in Oromia and Oromo living in Amhara regions. What is granted to these minorities is limited to basic rights while denying the chance for political inclusion in the regional state apparatus. Their existence is "tolerated" within one region for as long as they do not make demands that might just suffocate the political privileges of the ethnic group that defines the regional state.

Even though EPRDF defined its role as promoting "self-rule and fraternity amongst the peoples of Ethiopia" (Elleni 2019: 5), what the current developments in the country show is that the state as imagined by EPRDF did not live up to its promises. If, as Elleni (2019) suspects, the sense of fraternity that informs some of the provisions in the 1995 constitution is inspired by Andreas Eshete, the lived realities at this moment in time go against what Andreas wants us to understand as fraternal as discussed above. The developments in the last decades simply expose the limits of what many have thought would bring about a meaningful change in the life of citizens. As it stands now, the ethnic based federal experiment has reached an irreversible threshold as Theodoros Alemu Teklu (2021) observes. Ethiopia's federalism needs to come to terms to the fact that identities and associated privileges are a result of a political process rather than a birth right a few are given while others are denied.

The dictionary meaning of transformation suggests that there has to be a radical departure from what was. Bringing this to the political realm: when is a country said to have undergone transformation in the sense of a radical shift away from what has

been? Mahmood Mamdani (2020) lends us an appropriate vocabulary: decolonising the political. Transformation is when we decolonise the political, particularly the nation-state by first acknowledging it as a colonial invention. This is understood as restructuring politics as opposed to a simple facelift, which is when transformation as a radical departure can be thinkable. Mamdani calls for a novel way of organising political orders as the only way out of persistent violence. This means, moving away from the logics of colonial modernity that birthed the nation-state that is at the centre of extreme violence in our times (Mamdani 2020). Coming to Ethiopia, Elleni's proposal on theorising the nation state is well aligned to Mamdani's call for decolonising the political. Elleni (2019: 41-43) suggests theorising the nation-state as, first, "result of the activation of new social processes within the global context", second, as "the arena through which third world politics takes shape" within global political and economic dynamics such as (neo)colonialism and capitalism. This opens up the possibility to see the nation-state as a site of active social struggle in which inclusion or exclusion is political rather than a permanently given condition. It is a political process in which a variety of interests and subjectivities play out. Imagining the nation-state as always in flux and hence unpredictable makes it possible to articulate it as a site of perpetual struggle by different socio-political forces. While this is an approach that calls for transformation through a departure from the way the nation-state is organised, it is also important to think of political culture and subjectivities to start imagining new narratives of the self in relation to others with whom one shares the country. This continues to be crucial since the nation-state is penetrated by various interest groups. Ordinary citizens shape the nation-state as much as they are shaped by it.

Conclusion

Ethiopia has hosted political experiments that were orchestrated by thinkers and practitioners who are to a significant extent divorced from the life of citizens. Less attention has been paid to what those on the margin might actually want as well as what their practices might generate in terms of imagining a more profound political transformation that takes the lives of peasants, unemployed youth, children, women seriously. I believe perhaps the potential for a genuine transformation is one that seeks to build on ordinary citizens' experiences with violence. It is clear that our political theorising cannot afford to neglect entanglements of such experiences with structures of power that affect every facet of life. Imposition of political thoughts that are not attuned to the life and experiences of citizens has thus far proven fruitless if not futile. There is a need to seek new forms of political organising to cultivate thoughts and practices outside of the colonial logic. By bringing together Oromo women's experiences and practices of dealing with their strangeness, I have tried to indicate one potential site of such a political engagement that emanates from embedded and embodied practices. I have suggested that the TSF's three pillars - *tumsa* (solidarity), *wallaala*

(barriers blocking the pursuit for justice) and *wa/oo* (relationality) - can be launched as lenses for political theorising without losing sight of national-global networks and structures of exploitation and violence. I have also shown that these everyday practices are not enough if we are not equally interrogating the nation-state and rethinking its organisation. This said, I do not want to imply that Ethiopia's complex socio-economic and political problems can be exhausted in such a short piece. Mine is rather a call to pay attention to the grounded aspects too as part of the things we think about while reflecting on political transformation as it is happening in today's Ethiopia.

Serawit Bekele Debele (PhD) is a Junior Research Group Leader at the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, University of Bayreuth-Germany.

NOTES:

1 – Conversation with Caalaa Soresa, Adama, 25 February 25 2013.

2 – *The Oppressor Remains What He Is*, «Chimurenga», 21 January 2021: <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/the-oppressor-remains-what-he-is/>.

3 – *The Legacies of the Ethiopian Student Movement: an Interview with Bahru Zewde*, «Jacobin», 12 February 2019: <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/12/ethiopian-student-movement-bahru-zewde-abiy-ahmed-1974-revolution>.

4 – Walleligne Mekonnen, *On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia*, cit. Walleligne's piece in 1969 served as a blueprint not only for debates held by student activists in the 1970s and 1980s but also for organising state-society relations in post-revolutionary Ethiopia including the 1995 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

5 – I translated a segment of Abiy Ahmed's inaugural speech delivered in Amharic, available here: *Ethiopian Prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed inauguration speech*, "YouTube" 2 April 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4yn_bxVJlw.

6 – *Ethiopia Will Explode if It Doesn't Move Beyond Ethnic-Based Politics*, «Foreign Policy», 8 November 2019: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/08/ethiopia-will-explode-if-abiy-ahmed-doesnt-move-beyond-ethnic-based-politics/>.

7 – Norwegian Refugee Council, *Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID)*, Spotlight on Ethiopia, 2019: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2019-IDMC-GRID-spotlight-ethiopia.pdf>.

8 – Shashemene is one of the hardest hit by inter communal violence within a short time span, the latest being the one that happened following the tragic murder of Haccalu Hundessa in June 29, 2020.

9 – This section mainly draws on and echoes my ethnographic and archival research most of which are published in different platforms (Serawit 2018, 2019, 2020).

10 – A detailed account of this can be found in Serawit (2019).

11 – This is in sharp contrast to Mamdani's call to open the category "survivors" to accommodate all-beneficiaries, bystanders, victims, and perpetrators alike. Given that survivors get shaped differently by a specific experience of/with violence, positive political transformation comes from recognising and articulating differences of past experiences with violence assuming a future togetherness among beneficiaries, bystanders, victims and perpetrators.

12 – It should be noted that the performative political alliances between the Amhara and Oromo political elites (popularly known as Oromara) was a tactical alliance fostered against and due to the existence of a shared enemy that is TPLF. We should not lose sight by mixing that with grassroots forms of solidarity that do not necessarily reflect political alliances.

13 – Martha Kuwe Kumsa emphasises this in another article she wrote in "Ethiopia Insight" where she insists that we must be ready to interrogate our innocence as a way forward to cultivating transnational feminist solidarity. See Martha Kuwe Kumsa, *Our Diverse Feminists Must Team Up to Disavow Epistemological Violence*, "Ethiopia Insight", 16 December 2020: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/16/our-diverse-feminists-must-team-up-to-disavow-epistemological-violence/>.

14 – Brian J. Yates argues that ethnicity is a hindrance to our understanding of XIX century Ethiopian history. One of the claims he makes is that a more fluid socio-cultural identity is reduced to being a primordial ethnic identity (e.g. Amhara and Oromo) through which historical relationships are understood in today's Ethiopia. For instance, he highlights the absurdity of ascribing an essence to the category Amhara stating that it is more a class-based identity than ethnicity, a category all might belong to (Yates 2017).

References

- Andreas Eshete (1981), *Fraternity*, in «The Review of Metaphysics», vol. 35, n. 1
- Benjamin W. (1968), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflection* (translated by Harry Zohn), Schocken Books, New York
- Elleni Centime Zeleke (2019), *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016*, Brill, Boston
- Mamdani M. (2020), *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Martha Kuwe Kumsa (2020), *Waiting for Gadaa: A Critical Exploration through Transnational Siinqee Feminism*, in «Critical African Studies», vol. 12, n. 1

- Menon N. (2012), *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Penguin/Zubaan, New Delhi
- Rancière J. (1992), *Politics, Identification and Subjectivization*, in «October», vol. 61
- Said E. (1994), *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, Vintage Books, New York
- Samson Taddelle Demo (2021), "After Self Assertion: on a Paracletis of a Political Theology of Kenosis", in Theodoros Alemu Teklu (ed.), *Ethnic Diversity, National Unity: Moral Pedagogies of Togetherness for Ethiopians*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene
- Serawit Bekele Debele (2017), *Religion and Politics in post-1991 Ethiopia: Making Sense of Bryan S. Turner's 'Managing Religions'*, in «Religion, State and Society», vol. 46, n.1
- Serawit Bekele Debele (2018), *Reading Prayers as Political Texts: Reflections on Irreecha Ritual in Ethiopia*, in «Politics, Religion and Ideology», vol. 19, n. 3
- Serawit Bekele Debele (2019), *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, Brill, Boston
- Serawit Bekele Debele (2020), "Clemency oh Waaqa for the Blood of the Oromo: Praying to Sooth Social Suffering", in A. Adogame, O. Adeboye and C.L. Williams (eds.), *Fighting in God's Name: Religion and Conflict in Local-Global Perspectives*, Lexington Books, Laham
- Theodoros Alemu Teklu (2021), *Politics as the Hatred of the Ethnic Other*, in Theodoros Alemu Teklu (ed.), *Ethnic Diversity, National Unity: Moral Pedagogies of Togetherness for Ethiopians*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene
- Wolfe A. (2011), *Political Evil: What it is and How to Combat it*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York
- Yates B.J. (2017), *Ethnicity as a Hindrance for Understanding Ethiopian History: An Argument Against an Ethnic Late Nineteenth Century*, in «History in Africa», vol. 44