

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Making of National Identity and Symbolism in Modern Ethiopia: A Need for Deconstruction?

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Abstract:

A given entity – group, nation, state, or otherwise – can develop identity and be attributed some common and defining elements of identity. While it is reasonable to argue that identity may develop for different reasons in different conditions, once created it significantly affects social, political, cultural, and to some extent economic relations among or between peoples. Even a given pieces of social practice performed by a group of peoples in a regular way becomes a tradition of the latter which in turn defines the mode of living of the group. Religious, cultural, and political practices performed by a given community, consequently become defining elements of the group's identity. Important elements of national identity are myths, values, culture, religion, history, and to some extent ideology and such are reflected as national symbols which can be put as foundations of nationalism. The aim of this article is to examine the status functions of national symbols in the country since the formation of the modern Ethiopia by putting a due focus to the Oromo and Amhara peoples. The Oromo and Amhara national groups are focused: - due to the fact that they are the first and second largest nations, respectively, in terms of number on one hand; and the Amhara has been dominant in terms of cultures, values, history, and discursive narratives while the Oromo people has been marginalized on the other hand. Furthermore, almost all of the Abyssinian values and discourses are either claimed by or attributed to the Amhara people of Ethiopia. Consequently, there remains the political dynamics of symbolism that need to be addressed in order to re-imagine the federation founded upon a genuine national identity and nationalism. In writing this article, the researcher uses both secondary sources of data and observation of the existing discourse with regard to Ethiopia's national identity.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Oromo, national identity, national value, national symbol

1. Understanding National Symbols

The conventional definition of symbol is something that represents something else and essentially serves the purpose of communication. In political terms, symbols contribute to the formation of an identity of a particular group – ranging from a small community to large nations or groups or entities. In this article, the focus shall be on political symbols at a national level, i.e. national symbols and their relations with national identity.

National symbols contribute to establish collective values upon which national identity is founded. National identity may be constituted by historical, ethnic, cultural, religious, and other values that can be interpreted into and expressed by socio-political terms (Olsen, 2015). National symbols include flag, national anthem, coat of arms, historical monuments and statues, national holidays, iconic personalities, languages, thoughts or world view, dressing and feeding codes, as well as other invisible traditional values (Kolsto, 2006). Whether interpreted in political, religious, social and historical terms or not national symbols define identity of nation. Thus, national symbols are not mere objects or concepts of objects; they convey collective myths, memories, and values of a particular nation (Smith, 2009).

National symbols are very important to national identity (Koster, 2010). The importance of national symbols can vary, depending on the strength, history, and political environment of a nation. Furthermore, national symbols are easily recognized entities that are used as means to communicate the history and culture of a particular nation. These symbols, in turn, can be used to instill pride and unity in a nation's population (Smith, 2009). Though not in consensual manner scholars admit the importance of symbolism for political and socio-economic factors as far as nations and nationalism is concerned (Kolsto, 2006).

Notwithstanding their significance to national identity, national symbols are understood, interpreted, and treated differently by different groups or individuals in a nation. Therefore, even though people may, very often, tend to reify a given nation with particular symbols; it would be a mistake to conceive them as “unitary empirical datum (Smith, 2009). A nation may be represented by symbols which can have not only contradicting interpretations, but also a source of socio-political tensions and conflicts. While some of the national symbols of a given nation appear to be widely consensual, others remain to be controversial.

In this account, several conflicts happened and various battles fought over Jerusalem, for instance, throughout history. Symbolic contests and battles over changes of names of places like cities, shrines, and countries have been witnessed across corner of the world as a consequence of the change of political and religious regimes (Unal, 2013). For instance, Constantinople was renamed Istanbul in 1453 following the Ottoman conquest. Russia's city of St. Petersburg was renamed Leningrad in 1924 after the victory of the Bolsheviks communist vanguard party over the Mensheviks in an effort of symbolizing the role of V. I. Lenin as the leader of the revolution. The same city, however, regained its former name – St. Petersburg – in 1991 with the weakening influence of the Communist ideology in Russia. Similar example in Russia is the city of Tsaritsyn founded in 1589 and renamed twice – to Stalingrad in 1925 and Volgograd in 1961 – because of the symbolic debate arising there from.

After independence from French Colonial rule, the new elites attempted to withdraw colonial names of several places in Vietnam – including the capital Saigon to Ho Chi Mini City – so as to rebuild national identity and symbols (Koster, 2010.). Similar phenomena happened in Africa after the end of colonial rule. In Europe, national symbolism had revived following the collapse of Communist systems. Such have usually happened to either new states emerged out of the former empire or states that had witnessed civil wars and, as a result, brought about new state structure as well as political systems. In the north-east Africa, good examples are Eritrea, Ethiopia, and South Sudan where new flags have been adopted in order to symbolize the new breakthrough from the past.

Though not successful, the government of Israel attempted to redesign the national flag in 2005 aiming, among others, that the Palestinian national symbol would be incorporated into the Israeli, supposedly, new flag (Unal, 2013). It is also observed that some of the new regimes tend to erase the previous celebrations and symbols to establish new ones as an essential part of the process of renewing national identity. For instance, national symbolic change and development happened in Republic of South Africa after the Apartheid System was over (Smith, 2009). The process of national reconciliation was arranged in the country and Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to further the process. Moreover, the re-designing of the national flag was understood as a crucial element of national reconciliation in the country that had been torn by racial divide for so long.

2. The Making of Modern Ethiopian State

With regard to the statehood/nationhood of Ethiopia, there are three diverging views. The first view and, of course, the dominant one is that Ethiopia has existed for around 3000 thousand years (Bahiru, 1991; Teshale, 1995). A group of scholars and politicians of this category trace Ethiopia to ancient civilization of Aksum and others located in the northern parts of modern Ethiopia (or proper Abyssinia) and Eritrea. The second group of scholars and politicians explain Ethiopia's statehood/nationhood as the phenomenon of the last decade of 19th century (Asefa, 1998). According to this group, Ethiopia is of around 100 years of existence and emerged during the emperorship of Minilik II. The third group of scholars and politicians argue that Ethiopia has only the age of three decades which traces back to the year 1991 after which there have happened political, social, cultural, and economic reforms in the country (Fasil, 1997). This shows us that there is no consensus about the statehood/nationhood of Ethiopia¹.

Notwithstanding the above debates among scholars, Ethiopia emerged during the last decade of 19th century as a modern state primarily through the brutal war of conquest led by 'kings of kings', later on, Emperor Minilik (Leenco, 1999; Teshale, 1995; Bahiru, 1991). Several independent kingdoms and municipalities tried to resist conquest at the beginning, but finally were defeated and incorporated into the Abyssinian socio-political system. Prior to the conquest and annexation by the Abyssinians, those groups had their respective distinct social, political, economic, and cultural systems (Asefa, 1998; Merera, 2003). Upon the conquest led by emperor Minilik, those systems were severely challenged via imposition of monarchical political system and feudal economic system along with Abyssinian cultural and religious values. While elites identified with the *neftegna*² group dominated the political, economic, and socio-cultural affairs of the country, the subject peoples were forced to learn the Amharic language, convert to Orthodox Christianity, and adopt other aspects of Amhara³ culture as the only 'civilized culture' (Hassan, 1996; Markakis, 1994). This historical event is very critical not only in creating modern Ethiopia, but also in affecting inter-communal or inter-ethnic political, economic, and cultural relationships.

The imperial system established in such a manner had sustained until the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. Even though the 1974 revolution was hoped by many to redress the past injustices, due to the dictatorial nature of the new regime which took power after the revolution the previous problems had continued, albeit, in different modes (Markakis, 1994; Markakis & Nega, 1985). Eventually, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took state power in 1991 after a bitter struggle against the Dergue⁴ regime (Merera, 2003). Although many commentators underline the idea that the current regime

¹ The aim of my argument, here, is not to present the particulars debates between the aforementioned paradigms, but to situate the absence of consensus in this issue which has continued to affect the country's politics to date.

² Literally, *neftegna* means gun-holder, it primarily denotes a group comprised of military elites (soldiers) who were allotted a large share of political and economic resources.

³ Amharas are the inhabitants of the proper Abyssinia; the core ethnic group who contributed to the Abyssinian political and socio-cultural systems that, later on, became Ethiopia's political and socio-cultural systems (See Donald Levine, 1974).

⁴ Dergue is an Amharic term for committee, denoting the military regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.

is far better than the previous ones (Fasil, 1997), there remain several questions regarding the political dynamics of the country for a democratic, representative, and equitable system to take root (Merera, 2003; Turton, 2006).

Consequently, Ethiopia has not been a genuine single nation since the emergence of modern state in the last decade of 19th century. It composed of different nationalities some of which are recognized by or mentioned in the new Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution of 1995 as nations. The constitution adopts the federal state structure, seemingly, in an effort of ensuring the rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples to self-determination (FDRE Constitution, 1995). Furthermore, it grants equal status to all languages, cultures, and values of nations, nationalities, and peoples in the federation. Of course, in the 1995 constitution the phrase “nations, nationalities, and peoples” is mentioned several times. However, neither the current constitution nor any other legal document has clearly defined and differentiated between nations, nationalities, and peoples. In spite of this, the dominant political discourse since 1991 depicts Ethiopia as a “nation of nations” (Fasil, 1997).

Even though such constitutional measures taken after 1991 are appreciated, it has not achieved substantial result in terms of forming a federation genuinely represented by cultures, values, history, myths, and other symbols of nations, nationalities, and peoples. Hence, even today, Ethiopia does not seem those nations/nationalities than the Amhara and, to some extent, Tigray in terms of culture and symbolism. This is one of the challenges of building a genuine foundation of the federation which, in turn, leads to the question of symbolic representation at the national⁵ level in the process of nation building.

3. National Identity and Symbolism in Modern Ethiopia

The modern Ethiopian national identity has developed by the process of holding those elements of Abyssinian religion, politics, and culture in its systems (Teshale, 1995; Levine, 1974). Especially, political and religious elites started to define Abyssinia – later on Ethiopia – with those core values and strived to protect themselves as a distinct political and religious community (Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990). Of course, the name Ethiopia evolved through the intervention of different foreign groups. Initially, these peoples inhabiting in the proper were called ‘Habeshi’ by the Arabs connoting that the former is “a group of peoples who does not know its genealogy or, perhaps, origin which was a serious insult among the mid-eastern peoples, especially Arabs (Ayalew, 2005: 26). Later on, when the Portuguese came to Abyssinia, they called the ‘Habeshi’ ‘Abexin’; without knowing its exact connotation failing to pronounce as it was. This term, then developed to ‘Abessin’ and eventually became Abyssinia (ibid.). Surprisingly enough, most members of this group – either do not know or preferred the very connotation of the term – are proud to be Habesha (in Tigrigna) or Abesha (in Amharic).

Some equates the term ‘Abyssinia’ with Ethiopia (Mesfin, 2012; Levine, 1973) which seems logically difficult to compromise. Because the name Ethiopia was given to the peoples next to the ancient Egypt in the south by the Greeks prior to the Habashas migration, even, to the coastal areas of the Red Sea (Asefa, 1998). The term Ethiopia implied the Cushitic peoples living most parts of the north-eastern Africa, and did not include the Habashas (Ayalew, 2005). The Abyssinians, however, preferred to be called Ethiopian after some foreigners confusingly associated them with Ethiopians and their country as Ethiopia, especially after the beginning of 20th century when Europeans came to the scene for their own colonial ends. Abyssinian kings of the day interacted with the outside world – especially with Europeans – notifying their country as Ethiopia which was sovereign like the western ones. These phenomena highlight how Ethiopia obtained its ‘modern’ name and paved the way for the later emergence of Ethiopian empire state (Leenco, 1999). The Abyssinians accept whatever name foreigners attached to them, and Ethiopianity, then became their business of political and religious engineering. As a result, peoples originally called Ethiopians – in fact which the term connotes – are alienated and re-defined as aliens not knowing and participating in the central values of the Abyssinian kingdom which were, eventually, attributed to imperial Ethiopia (Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990).

What to be seen critically, here, is that while the Abyssinian political, social, cultural, and religious values are attributed to Ethiopian identity in general, other ones were discouraged, ignored, and even seen as aliens (Teshale, 1995; Walelign, 1969). Therefore, the very mission of the empire of Ethiopia, among others, was to protect and maintain Abyssinian hegemony based on Judeo-Christian tradition and feudalism than building a nation of equals out of the multi-cultural, multi-confessional, and multi-national society through developing common values representing all groups in question (Merera, 2003). While these were genuinely kept as the Abyssinian national values, cultural as well as historical myths employed were used as symbol representing all groups in Ethiopia (Teshale, 1995). While the Abyssinian cultural and historical myths and values were blessed, promoted, and kept as the national values and symbols, nothing incorporated as the same from the non-Abyssinian groups. These symbols were spread throughout Ethiopian society by virtue of an extraordinary system of national communication that was provided by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) (Levine, 1974). Hence, EOC and monasteries throughout Abyssinia – later across Ethiopia – played a tremendous role in providing a nationwide system of political communication.

In this process, serving the nation means serving those values which, in turn, means serving the Abyssinians. In other words, one may be assimilated and socialized effectively to the Abyssinian cultural and political values and obtain some position – albeit not very critical – but is kept from doing other businesses than serving the Abyssinian mission (Hassan,

⁵ National, here, refers to the identity character at the federal level.

1996). For example, Muslims and indigenous believers were Christianized, forced to change their name, as well as required to be proficient in Amharic language to fit any position available in the imperial politics (Teshale, 1995; Hassan, 1994). Among the Abyssinian values sealed to the modern Ethiopian state are the national flag with its color composition and arrangement, the Orthodox Christian Calendar serving as the national calendar, symbolization of the above values and others as national artifacts like monument and statues.

3.1. National Flag

The history of usage of flag is neither as long as the history of Ethiopia nor the elites' mystifications attached to it. According to some sources, the first flag was flown in Ethiopia was that of the Aussa⁶ Sultanate, in the place south-eastern of Abyssinia, in the 16th century (Dirribi, 2012). The Oromo Gadaa's flag – a horizontal tricolor black, red, and white arranged from top to bottom – was said to be hoisted during power succession held at eight years interval (ibid.). However, scholars have not reached a consensus as to when the Gadaa system begin to operate though some argue that Oromos had already had it by 16th century. In the Abyssinian part, from the 17th Century red, yellow and green pennants were flown in the area though there is no evidence that the pennants were flown by the state or on behalf of it. The First official flag of Ethiopia which featured the green-yellow-red horizontal tricolor was adopted in 1897 after the battle of Adwa with the crowned Lion of Judah at the center (Goshu, n.d.). This is what many call Minilikan flag and served as the official flag of the empire until the 1974 Ethiopian revolution.

According to Donald Levine (1974), the [Minilikan] flag was among the symbols that were spread throughout Ethiopian society by virtue of an extraordinary system of national communication that was provided by the Ethiopian national Church. Churches and monasteries throughout the country embodied a nationwide system of communication. Liturgically, it was unified by the classical Ethiopic language, Ge'ez, much as medieval Europeans speaking different languages were unified by Latin (ibid).

After the emperor was deposed from power in 1974, the tricolor flag was maintained with a slight alteration replacing the spear with the cross and removal of the crown. The lion as an emblem was entirely removed from the flag by the Dergue in 1975 but continued to represent Ethiopia in its tricolor shape until the establishment of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1987. In 1987, the Dergue – through WPE – established socialist People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The tricolor's proportions were elongated and a socialist emblem featured in the center. In 1991 the People's Revolutionary Democratic Front defeated the Dergue and the socialist emblem was removed. The new emblem⁷ was added to the center of the flag in 1996. Each color on the flag has a specific meaning; the green is for land, yellow for peace, red for strength and the blue is for unity. The current Emblem of Ethiopia was adopted in 1996 and features a blue circle with a gold pentagram and five rays golden light (www.flagmakers.co.uk).

Some writers and political groups seriously oppose the recent political and cultural reforms undergone as the conspiracy against the hitherto established Ethiopian identity including its sacred flag. Upon the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012, Nigussay Ayele has put his political concern or, perhaps, sentiment in the following manner:

The critical question is whether we are today in 2012 witnessing the culmination stage of the longstanding campaign for the summary politicide by Meles-TPLF of Ethiopian identity, unity, sovereignty, dignity, history, liberty, integrity as well as its sacred name – Ethiopia (Itiopia), national lingua franca – Geez-Amharic, its cultural heritage, Ethiopian people--especially Amharas and Oromos and other smaller units who identify themselves as Ethiopians – Ethiopian heroes and heroines and the eternal Ethiopian national flag (2012: 2).

According to this writer, it seemed that, the previously constructed Ethiopian identity including its flag ought to continue as they were in the past. Whatever Ethiopian identity was and is, it is remembered that, the issue became one of the political and cultural agenda in 1960s when the students and educated elites of various nationalities openly criticized the very identity of Ethiopia as well as how it has evolved (Waleign, 1969). For example, 'Nationality Question' was one of the slogans of the student movement of the 1960s as a result of unrepresentative elements of Ethiopian political and cultural identity.

It is found in the above quotation that the Amharas and Oromos identify themselves as Ethiopians. Of course, it is not surprising if Oromos do that. However, this argument seems implausible as it has been evident that many Oromo writers and political groups are critical of the very foundation and implication of Ethiopian identity (Merera, 2003; Asefa, 1998). It can be put that, the Oromos – except very few assimilated or Amharized – did not benefit politically and economically from the empire of Ethiopia rather they were culturally and socially marginalized and symbolically unrepresented. The fact that Oromos reside in Ethiopia does not mean they were represented in and confident of Ethiopian identity. Symbolic marginalization and underrepresentation of the Oromo people have been some of the factors which affected the politics of Ethiopia in general and Oromo-Amhara relations in particular. Even, some of the Oromo political groups like Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) have been struggling to secede from Ethiopia and establish an independent republic of Oromia⁸ (Melba, 1999; OLF, 1976).

⁶The ancient Sultanate located in the north-eastern part of modern Ethiopia.

⁷The emblem was originally a light blue field and was changed after eight months to dark blue.

⁸ Oromia is the largest and most populous regional state in the current federal structure of Ethiopia.

According to article 5 of the Flag Proclamation No. 654/2009, the Flag of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia “symbolizes the sovereignty of the Republic and the unity of its peoples founded upon their common will.” However, the phrase ‘common will’ remains controversial as the basic colors and its symbolization have rarely changed. As it is pointed out the emergence of the flag, interpretations connoted with regard to its color, and its very importance are absolutely tied to Orthodox Christian myths and practices. It is not a mere political flag, rather is a symbol of Orthodox Christian faith like a ‘holy cross’ (Qidus Mesqel in Amharic) (Teshale, 1995; Levine, 1974). Orthodox Christianity and the flag are strongly related, and as a result the green-yellow-red color arrangement is everywhere the Orthodox Christians inhabit. It seems a must to decorate a part, at a least, of a church with the colors of the flag (Plowden, 1968; Perham, 1948). Let alone a church, this flag is visible in most EOC believers’ home furniture like curtain, traditional clothes, and picture of saints in their belief are decorated and designated with the colors of the flag. Believers praise and elevate the flag to the status of faith holding that “it is a meqenet⁹ of Saint Mary”. Therefore, it is easy to understand who is attached to the flag more and who is not when this issue is brought to a national/federal level.

Though a flag is conventionally speaking a symbol of a nation, in the case of Ethiopia it is a symbol representing Orthodox Christians more than any group else (Levine, 1974; Perham, 1948). This may have disappointing political and national implications for non-Orthodox believers that a flag is a symbol to die for, but who should take a risk first? Or why do others take the risk for the symbol representing few groups comprising the state? Of course, flag is not a mere color arrangement especially in contemporary times. It is a symbol/tool of organizing and mobilizing groups as well as individuals within a given state for a common cause, thereby developing a strong national feeling or patriotism (Unal, 2013). In doing so a flag needs to be designed and declared carefully so that it genuinely represents all groups in a state or, at least it should be neutral to all concerned groups. Flag is a symbol of a sovereign entity; but, whose is the symbol makes problems. It is also a national symbol; but, whose symbol is it leads to political controversies (Eriksen, 2007). National groups in Ethiopia have their respective colors and symbols as well as interpretations. But no one national group was consulted when EOC’s flag was declared a national flag. Even if few peoples look at this issue critically, it needs to be seriously considered by politicians as well as elites so that the state is claimed equally by all groups. Imperialism ceased to operate, the ruling party and some elites argue, but some of its dangerous elements still exist.

3.2. National Working Language, Arts and Literary Works

Language is not a mere tool of communication. It is said that language is an instrument of communication. However, the usage of the same is not merely concluded to communication as it serves a given society in verity of ways. At first comes the substance that is disseminated through a given language; a society’s social, cultural, political, and scientific values (Küspert-Rakotondrainy, 2013). The way of expressing oneself and her/his philosophical outlook are well served using own language. Even knowledge of a political individual is well explained and analyzed using own language. Coming to our case, due to century’s old domination of Amharic language, there have been a large number of people who forgot speaking their original language along with its respective original cultural, social, philosophical, and political values and practices were forgotten.

Many individuals originally belonged to the Oromo ethnic group have been one of the victims of switching identity in the country (Bassi, 1996). Especially children born in urban centers to families of Oromo background, beginning from their childhood, used Amharic language, knowingly or unknowingly. Knowingly because speaking Afaan Oromoo¹⁰ would discredit their opportunities and career; so, they had to speak Amharic to survive in the system dominated by Amhara ethnic group (Mekuria, 1997). Today, there are hundred thousand of ethnic Oromo’s who cannot speak Afaan Oromoo. In connection to the continuation of Amharic language as official language of the federal government, the Amhara’s cultural and social influence has continued. As it has been discussed earlier, language is not the mere tool of communication but also importantly the instrument through which a group disseminates, expands, and socializes political, social, and cultural values and practices pertinent to the group upon others. Even though a new language policy has been adopted since 1995 which conforms the equality in status of every language in the country, Amharic previous privilege and influence has continued.

Under the current federal state structure, some of the regional states are using their respective ethnic languages for official purposes. However, every federal issue is to be written and explained in Amharic. Using these opportunities, many entertainment and private radio and Television stations in the capital Finfinnee¹¹ transmit their programs in Amharic (Mekuria, 1997). Most dramas and movies are prepared in Amharic and also most cinemas and theater houses are committed to host dramas and films prepared in Amharic or foreign language, especially English (ibid.). Films and dramas are the artistic lenses through which society’s political, cultural, economic, and any other realities are reflected and explored. Therefore, through Amharic movies and dramas it is normal and inevitable to observe the Amhara or, probably, the Abyssinian social realities and values.

Therefore, movies in Ethiopia are dominantly of Amharic type and are targeted to either reveal the Amhara social reality or help the government socialize the peoples of political and legal systems (Levine, 1974; Keller, 1995). Some tend to blame the Oromo intellectuals or artists for not doing the same task that the Amharas have been doing. However, it is plausible

⁹*Meqenet*, literally, means a piece of cloth woman use around her waist to be firm enough.

¹⁰ Afaan Oromoo, literally means Oromo Language in English, is the language spoken by Oromo people.

¹¹ Finfinnee is an Afaan Oromoo term to call Addis Ababa, the capital city of the FDRE. The Oromo people prefer to use Finfinnee to Addis Ababa for symbolic and cultural significances.

that the political environment in which those intellectuals or artists are supposed to deal with the issue has not been encouraging. While arts are the reflections of the real social, political, and cultural, phenomena; but, to reveal such realities prevailing in Oromia would seem dangerous to the ruling political elites. Therefore, literary writings relevant to Oromo contexts have highly been censored and banned by the government officials systematically (Mekuria, 1997). The case of newspapers and magazines is also similar to that of films and dramas. While there are many writings of books in Afaan Oromoo, none has been inaugurated at ceremony regularly conducted at the National Theatre. The National Theater often arranges ceremonies for newly published Amharic books, especially artistic, and also Guragigna and Tigirigna books occasionally. The Oromo arts and literary works have got no or minimal attention from being publicly inaugurated while; even, Guragigna and Tigirigna enjoy pretty attention as compared to Afaan Oromoo.

The Oromo people is one of the underrepresented nationalities in terms of arts and literary works. Of course, the 1995 FDRE constitution embraces progressive provisions regarding multi-cultural and diversity issues. But laying such frameworks and policies alone has failed to be satisfactory unless accompanied by genuine implementation. In this manner Amharic language as well as Abyssinian arts and literary works continue to play dominant role in maintaining Abyssinian version of Ethiopian identity and the actors of the above activities undergo their missions of socialization. This shows us that the Oromo people are not represented culturally, socially, and symbolically in the capital Finfinnee – though they are claiming the latter as their capital too – which has accounted for political crisis in recent decades. This, in turn, has created national mistrust between Oromos and Amharas and posed a great challenge to unity of the federation.

3.3. Naming of Places

Following the formation of modern Ethiopian state, political and religious elites of the imperial¹² Ethiopia managed to rename several places in Oromia so that each would have either Christian or Amharic name. As a result of the mounting Oromo nationalism and the coming to power of non-Amhara elites in the early 1990s, those places renamed by imperial elites have made to regain their original Afaan Oromoo (or indigenous) names. But the proponent of the imperial system as well as many of the Amhara people have failed to accept the change on the ground that it was intended to darken the history of the country or even by arguing that those places had no name prior to the Abyssinian adventure the areas and, therefore, acquired such names, not renamed (Mesfin, 2012). Because those places had definitely indigenous name prior the adventure of the Abyssinian to the places. Such places included the capital Finfinnee, Adama, Bishoftu, Chiro, Waliso, Ambo, Burayu, etc. These indigenous names were changed to Addis Ababa, Nazeraeth, Debrezeit, Asebe-Teferi, Gion, Hagerhiwot, and Ziway, respectively, by the Abyssinian rulers (Merera, 2003). Though those places have regained their indigenous names officially in recent times, it remains controversial whether the elements of the old elites and their belongings have accepted the indigenous names genuinely. Especially the Amhara elites and most of the Amhara consciously continued to call these cities in the renamed Abyssinian names.

It is argued that the imperial elites had committed a cultural genocide to the people/ communities inhabiting in and around those places, and even had to pay reparation so that the historical injustices are re-deemed and justice prevail in order to build a genuine solidarity (Asafa, 1998). They are not only willing to correct the past injustices but consciously resisting, even; the regained names and they regard one calling those cities with indigenous names as culturally inferior or Oromo-centrist. People of this type do not seem ready to compromise so that a genuine national reconciliation comes as a new foundation for the country's futurity.

Part and parcel of the aforesaid dynamics of places as symbolizing element of Ethiopian nationhood is the role of capital city. It seems easy to mention capital cities of states of the world, but it is difficult to put the dynamics – political, cultural, and economic, etc. – around their establishment and functions. Capital cities are not merely administrative centers; they are hubs of economic, social, and cultural affairs and activities which, in one way or another, affect public political perception and political decision making. Usually, capital cities are regarded as national symbols that embody the shared values of their state especially in matters pertinent to culture, history, and politics.

In Ethiopia, the choice of the capital city of the federation is politically and symbolically controversial. Addis Ababa, Finfinnee in Afaan Oromoo, has been serving as the capital city of Ethiopia since the formation of modern Ethiopian state during the last decade of 19th century. Less debatably, before this particular period Finfinnee was the possession of the Tulama clan of Oromo nation. By now, Finfinnee is an enclave of federal administration surrounded wholly by Oromia National Regional State. However, from that time to date, indigenous values, cultures, and demography of the place have changed. Such changes have happened, mainly, because of the assimilation policy of the imperial regimes which evicted and displaced the indigenous Oromo people from their land (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990). Though, gradually, various nations and nationalities migrated to the city, the dominant values, cultures, and identity have remained to be those of the Amhara people.

In the new FDRE constitution of 1995, Finfinnee is chosen and recognized as the capital city of the federation despite strong demand from the Oromo people that it is core part of their territory and should be put under the jurisdiction of Oromia National Regional State. Such political and symbolic concerns from the side of Oromo people have become one of the burning issues placed on the active tray of the government.

¹² Imperia Ethiopia refers to the Abyssinian rule imposed upon the peoples of Ethiopia of which the Amhara Ethnic group played a dominant role with regard to establishing cultural, social, and religious systems in Ethiopia.

3.4. Personification, National Holidays and Rituals

It is repeatedly held that the Amhara are saying no need of remembering the past events because they say, the past had already past and dead. On the other hand, they seem committed to maintain and glorify the very ancient history of Abyssinian founded and moved mainly through their myths (Markakis, 1994). They demonstrate that they love and enhance the ancient and contemporary glory of the country and show their strong readiness to maintain the past legacies, pointing to critical events associated with war adventure.

In this regard they continue to appreciate the imperial kings like Tewoderos II and Minilik II, who are considered as architects of modern Ethiopia by some groups. However, the same are perceived as enemies of non-Abyssinian peoples inhabiting in the modern Ethiopian state (Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990). As has been depicted by some Oromo nationalist scholars, Oromo people hate, even, to mention the names of those kings (ibid.). The Oromo nationalists argue, hence, that when the Amharas praise those Abyssinian Emperors, the latter are propagating hostility towards Oromos and other ethnic groups. If forgetting history is about abandoning deeds which are recognized as wrongs during present times – meaning learning from history – and not advocating the yesteryear's wrong deeds' actors, it needs to involve compromise and concession. However, the Amharas try to obstruct and offend the Oromo's, especially, when the latter tend to raise the cruelty of emperor Minilik II and the injustices of the then systems by saying "we are not where we were yesterday, please forget history and be concerned about the future." Some argue, therefore, that the Amharas are not ahistorical; they love and are committed to history very much, however, they paradoxically are ahistorical to confuse and mislead others which is a mischievous act (Teshale, 1994).

While Oromos have been contributing for the building of modern Ethiopian state, they did not obtain a reasonable recognition and reputation. For instance, statues of the Oromo heroes martyred during major Ethiopian battles like Adwa and Italian fascist invasion are not laid down. The war heroes like *Ras*¹³ Gobena Dachi, *Fitworari* Gebeyehu, *Dejasmach* Balcha Safo, *Fitworari* Habtegiorgis Dinagde, etc. who did a lot for Minilik II's imperial expansion as well as defending the empire from Italian invasion did not obtain a share of place in symbolizing the country's history. This means, Oromo prominent figures are not enjoying the same privilege being enjoyed by the Abyssinian ones. Furthermore, while Abyssinian symbols/statues are concentrated in the capital Addis Ababa, the Oromos' are located in some small towns or other else places.

Commemorations are, usually, social, cultural, and political in their nature. They are constituted by the coordinated individual and group memories. While few of such national commemorations may appear to be consensual, many are the by-products of the long periods of struggles and conflicts (Elgenius, 2005). For instance, in France and Norway national holidays began to represent the symbolic beginning or re-constitution of the nation and capture the essence of the nation building process (ibid.).

In association with the formation of modern Ethiopian state, the Amhara cultural ethos emerged to influence peoples living in the empire with diverse cultural practices and values. Oromos culture and civilizations were put under challenges exerted from Abyssinian political and cultural elites. In the name of nation building, the Abyssinians imposed their own cultural and religious practices upon Oromo ones. In due course of time, Abyssinian cultural practices became national cultures and values. Others remained either local or fiercely challenged by the rhetoric of 'national or mega cultures'. These national or mega cultures became identified as the ones representing Ethiopia while others were relegated and designated as inferior and/or uncivilized cultures.

Although Ethiopia hosts a variety of national groups having and entertaining their respective cultural practices, such promoted ethnic Amharas, in most cases, were declared as national ones. To mention a few, Amharic language became national; many traditional holidays became public holidays; Amharas cultural clothes became official and national identifying Ethiopians from foreigners; Abyssinian cultural dance *Iskista*¹⁴ became appreciated and promoted while Oromos' ignored and, even, ridiculed (Teshale, 1994). For instance, possessing the skill of dancing the Amhara's *Iskista* has been considered a quality of being Ethiopian and a simple formula to identify someone whether Ethiopian or not. A number of classical Oromo artists who tried to perform in Afaan Oromoo were discouraged and jailed on the ground that they would sabotage and weaken Ethiopian identity and unity. The pioneer Oromo artists like Ali Bira, Ali Shebbo, and Shantam Shubbisa, were few of those who suffered from Abyssinian harassment, hunt, and detention. These individuals, however, are beloved among the Oromo people for their pioneering contributions for the development and progress of Oromo arts in particular and the overall cultural consciousness amidst challenges mounting to their actions. On the contrary, some were socialized and assimilated to the Abyssinian tradition and escaped the imperial attack, even praised as Ethiopian music legends like, for example, Tilahun Gessese. Though Tilahun Gessese is an Oromo in blood, he served the Amharas interest in promoting and advancing Amharic music.

There are a number of holidays in Ethiopia which have been institutionalized within the context of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian doctrines and socialized to both Abyssinian and non-Abyssinian communities. While some religious holidays are public all over the country, many local ceremonies are celebrated after the name of saints on which the church is

¹³*Ras*, *Fitworari*, and *Dejasmach* are traditional Abyssinian military titles corresponding to General, Admiral, and Captain respectively in European military structure.

¹⁴ *Iskista* is the type of traditional dance performed by the Amharas.

founded. There are a number of churches established in the name of different saints which led to celebrating at least each found in different localities (Levine, 1974). These local holidays, though not public and official at this time, have brought a number of impacts to each originally non-Abyssinian community surrounded by different churches. Note that local clergy was connected with local rulers in the previous years so that they would be powerful and able to impose these values upon the conquered communities. The church and politicians used any means in socializing and educating the conquered peoples in order that the latter adopt and practice what the Abyssinian were practicing as a righteous and 'holy' deed. These cultures are everywhere in the Ethiopian territory while Oromos' have been discouraged and its practice and foundations diminished.

There are five Christian holidays – New Year, Meskel, Ethiopian Epiphany, Christmas, and Easter – in Ethiopia which have been recognized as public holidays. However, none of these represents an indigenous and cultural days of the Oromos, for example. Even though there are a variety of cultural and indigenous days of the Oromo people, they are not recognized, till now, by the hitherto regimes. To mention a few, there are Irreecha, Ateetee, and Booranticha among the Oromos and also other days associated with the Gadaa institutions in general (Diribi, 2012). However, none of these has been incorporated into the national public day system. In the contrary, Buhe¹⁵ festivity of the Amhara or EOC culture is hotly celebrated across Ethiopia. Though it is of Abyssinians (especially of the Amharas), it takes very much attention and enjoys much media coverage of both government and private throughout the Filseta (Buhe) fasting days with the sustainable socializing mission. The Buhe like children's day which is known as Ukee¹⁶ is commonly celebrated across the central and western parts of Oromia, which even has broader social, political, and religious significances than Buhe. However, let alone socializing through media and education, nobody gives a shit of attention save the community to which Ukee belongs. This shows that while many people have been managed to be socialized to Buhe, of course being influenced by the Abyssinian socializing actors including church and media among others, Ukee does not obtain any privilege Buhe is enjoying which is one of the problems of cultural representation in Ethiopia.

4. Conclusion

As a usual of many colonies in the world, modern Ethiopia was created as a result of continuous wars of conquest by Emperor Minilik II against several peoples/groups – having distinct social, political, economic, and religious values – that now comprise the federation of Ethiopia. The Oromo elites were significant partners of the Amharas', in one way or another, in the making of modern Ethiopia. However, the latter became the maker and breaker of Ethiopia's political, economic, social, cultural, etc. affairs while the Oromos, including other nationalities in the country, were marginalized. The Amhara elites pursued assimilation policy of nation building and imposed the Abyssinian political, economic, and social systems along with their cultural and religious values on the rest of the majority of Ethiopian nationalities – the then subjects. Accordingly, Ethiopian national identity has been established as a reflection of those systems and values of the Abyssinians. Although, the Oromo people has contributed a lot for the making of the modern Ethiopia as well as for its sustenance as a sovereign entity, it has rarely been represented politically, socially, culturally, and symbolically at the national level.

Even if the empire of Ethiopia came to an end officially after the 1974 revolution and political and economic policies reformed; the dominance of the Abyssinian social and cultural values and ethos continued; the national character and of Ethiopia continued to be that of Abyssinians. This issue, among other factors, contributed to civil wars and instabilities in the country under the seventeen years of leadership of the Dergue regime. In 1991, the Dergue regime was collapsed and the EPRDF took state power. The EPRDF adopted federal state structure and designed a new constitution aimed to solve multi-dimensional problems of the country. Consequently, cultural, linguistic, religious, and national equalities as well as political self-determination are among the significant provisions of the new FDRE constitution. These measures taken by EPRDF leadership being appreciated, problems of national symbolism and national identity have continued to affect the country's politics.

Flag politics is one of the concerns pertinent to national identity and symbolism. Amid resistances from old 'Ethiopianist' elites, the EPRDF adopted the imperial tricolor flag with minor modification putting the blue color emblem at the center. Though, some groups opposed, even, the minor change made to the flag, the Oromo elites has demanding a new flag that could genuinely symbolize the federation on the ground that adoption of the previous one is just continuation of the Abyssinian values. Hence, the choice of national flag and its symbolic element remain to be politically contentious regarding national representation and identity of the Oromo people.

The second most critical agenda in contemporary Ethiopian politics is regarding national identity and symbolism is the choice of federal working language. The 1995 FDRE constitution recognizes Amharic language as the federal working language. Whilst, the Oromo elites and peoples insist that Afaan Oromoo should be the federal working language along with Amharic not only for its functional value but also for its symbolic value. Being the single largest national group in the federation, the Oromos need the official status of Afaan Oromoo to claim national identity at the national level. By now, this is one of the burning political agenda on the table since the last Oromo protests that claimed hundreds of lives. Furthermore, in Ethiopian context, the way arts are displayed and literary works are organized reveal the very foundation of the Abyssinian cultural and ethnic values. In contemporary Ethiopia, for instance, the context in which characters are given to films and

¹⁵ Children festivity commemorated during the two-weeks fasting in the Ethiopian month of *Nahsie* (August).

¹⁶ It is also called Taaboree in some parts of Oromia.

dramas are almost Amharic or Orthodox Christian type, unless there need to be ethnic messages in which case non-Amharic characters are given. This happens when the writers of films or dramas' scripts want to display the social and political status across ethno-national groups.

Personification as historic memories as well as holidays and ritual performance as national values are symbolic concerns affecting the politics, identity, and nationalism in Ethiopia. Oromo war legends who contributed a great deal for the sovereign existence of the country have not obtained a due reputation. With regard to religious symbols the EOC has been at the fore in symbolizing or otherwise performing any ritual or ceremony that encompasses every religious group. Even though religions and beliefs are constitutionally guaranteed equal status, practically inequality among them prevails given that EOC continues to symbolize religious causes.

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