Modernity and the Quest for Democracy in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia

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Abstract: This paper deals with the philosophical aspects of modernity and democratic change in Africa with a focus on Ethiopia. The traditional or religious nature of Ethiopia's political and economic system has posed a serious challenge to modernization. In addition, the contemporary experiment with ethnic politics and tribalism has exacerbated the problem. The country's continued existence has been endangered because of its repeated failures at modernization. I therefore argue that one of the major challenges to democracy and modernization in Ethiopia is the inability to transcend ascriptive, primordialist, and tribalist criteria of political membership.

Keywords: ethnophilosophy, Ethiopian nationalism, ethnic nationalism, modernity, professional philosophy, pragmatic politics

Introduction

Contemporary political philosophy has been concerned with liberty, equality, and fraternity as the three basic ideals of the modern democratic age. Regardless of differences in their methodology, the great political ideologies of the past three centuries, such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism, offered their respective visions of the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity (Kymlicka 208). Values such as liberty, equality and fraternity are modern values with a universal appeal. Andreas Eshete (1) states that "historical self-consciousness", or the capacity to think retroactively about the past to compare it with our own time, is the conspicuous mark of modernity. Eshete seems to indicate the considerable agreement among Western scholars that the West is the birthplace of modernity regardless of its exact date of birth (Eshete 1). However, the idea that the West is the birthplace of modernity is disputed by contemporary scholars (see Taiwo; Dussel). Eshete (1–2) argues that even though there are several historical phenomena associated with the advent of modernity, the attempt to single out a specific phenomenon is disputable. He claims that the attempt to trace the origins of modernity risks a category mistake because periods are not facts but conceptual tools, which we use to understand the past retroactively to frame our imagination. However, periodization may lead to errors in historical thought because it may lead to factual errors about the exact time when important things happened (Eshete 1–2). Eshete (2) argues that there is no binding "explanation of human progress."

Western thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, and Weber proposed sophisticated explanations of human progress. Marx argued that "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty, and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones" (quoted in Eshete 2). Thus, the imperative to improve the technical forces of production changes social organization. There is a special image of modernity as the end not of linear temporal history but in the Hegelian sense of history as the realization of human freedom (Eshete 5).

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 47, No. 1, Spring 2024 [41-51]

Modernity marks the end of traditional or religious authority, ushering in for humanity a new sense of freedom through secularization. This implies that the realization of individual freedom poses the challenge of justifying the moral foundations of the exercise of coercion by the state, namely the question of legitimacy. Furthermore, with the increasing secularization of society, the imperative for religious and political pluralism in the form of tolerance has become the order of the day. Rawls (xxi) argues that the plurality of philosophical, political, religious, and moral doctrines is the unavoidable feature of a democracy.

The modern world has parted company with the old quest for a universal vision of the good life in the sense that the private and public spheres cannot be reconciled without risking a compromise in the form of tolerance and pluralism. Thus, pluralism of views implies that ethical problems can be resolved only by rational and critical argumentation. This makes justice the first virtue of social institutions.The apparent prophecy of the end of history in the sense of the triumph of Western liberalism has been a subject of controversy. Weber was disquieted by the triumph of instrumental reason despite his appreciation of scientific disenchantment. Marx supported the capacity for self-government embedded in modern democratic constitutions but was also wary of the dangers of capitalism and bourgeois democracy.This article aims to demonstrate that the failure of modernization and democracy in Ethiopia is due to the inability to envision a pragmatic political philosophy that represents major interests within our nation.

Method

This article adopts the hermeneutic method of interpreting and discussing primary and secondary literature on African philosophy, politics, political economy, and history with an emphasis on Ethiopia. Primary documents refer to the works of prominent African and Western scholars, while secondary documents are commentaries or critical reviews of these scholars. This research is purely qualitative as it does not attempt to introduce quantitative variables in the study.

Discussion and Results

Debates on modernity and tradition in African philosophy

The origin of the African philosophical debate can be associated with the Western representation of Africa and the African reaction to it. In general, the debate on African philosophy is characterized as the rationality debate because the central point of contention is the category of reason, "a value which is believed to stand as the great divide between the civilized and the uncivilized, the logical and the mystical" (Masolo 1). This debate seems to have taken two forms: the first is the affirmation of pre-colonial African cultural values by calling upon a return to them, while the second is the affirmation of the universality of human experience and thought regardless of its racial, cultural, ethnic, and geographical origin.

One of the most important categories in African philosophy is the notion of return. This notion was introduced by Aimé Césaire's 1939 book, *Return to My Native Land.* In this work, Césaire introduced new vocabulary to explain the Black predicament, the most important being the notion of negritude. The concept of negritude entails a commitment to restore the dignity and humanity of black people through the metaphorical return to the African past. Negritude was originally supposed to be a historical consciousness or awareness of blackness, given the matrix of power relations and manipulations in the global context (Masolo1–2). According to Masolo, Césaire attributes two meanings to the word return. The first is a real spatial repatriation to the original land, namely Africa. The second meaning involves a metaphorical appeal to an awareness or consciousness of one's blackness (2). The idea of return has divided African philosophers into two major schools of thought: the traditionalist school and the modernist school.

The proponents of the traditionalist school are known as ethnophilosophers. The literal meaning of ethnophilosophy is a philosophy that studies culture/people/race. From a broader sense, ethnophilosophy has to do with the "recording of the beliefs, values, categories and assumptions that are implicit in the language, practices and beliefs of African cultures" (Etieyibo 94). Ethnophilosophers believe that philosophy is a communal property as opposed to an individual activity (95). On the contrary, Modernist or universalist philosophers believe that (African) philosophy is a universal, rational, and critical activity of individual thinkers. Most of the proponents of this view are trained within the Western philosophical traditions. They "are mostly united by their attempts to undermine ethnophilosophy as authentic philosophy; namely, they embraced a universal view of the methods and concerns of philosophy" (96).

The paradigm of modernization that ethnophilosophy suggests is a critique of Eurocentrism and the revival of African cultures. Tempels believe that African development and modernization require a firm grasp of the nature of the African soul. The earliest articulation of this line of thought can be traced back to Placide Tempels, who was a Belgian missionary. Tempels's mission of Christianization coincides with the issue of African modernity. He laments that missionary work only managed to create stunted elites called *évolués* (Tempels 19). Tempels points out that the *évolués* are stunted intellectuals without foundation either within their native tradition or the Western Christian tradition (19). He argues that the reason for this facile evangelization is the inability to reconcile traditional philosophy with Western Christianity. As a result, deep in the soul of the *évolués,* traditional philosophy remains intact. This is owing to the failure to synthesize Christianity with the soul of the native, which by implication means poor evangelization. Temples deduces that this is the result of the colonial narrative that depicts African traditions as "childish and savage". This characterization, he argues, stunted the soul of the Bantu. As a result, missionary work lost the spiritual prowess that animates its message (20).

Western missionaries failed to promote authentic African Christianity owing to their contempt for the indigenous philosophy of the natives (20). Thus, for Christianity to flourish in the soul of Africans, it must be rooted in the native philosophy. To that end, Tempels studied the Bantu ontology that forms the basis of Bantu philosophy.

Apparently, Tempels' reflections are pertinent to the attempt to frame the problem of development and modernization of Africa. It forms a firm basis for the critique of Eurocentrism and the consequent marginalization of African traditions and values, arguing that the effort to modernize and civilize Africans cannot materialize unless it has a substantive basis in African indigenous philosophy. This strand of thought in African philosophy locates the roots of underdevelopment in dehumanization and consequent loss of identity. This is owing to facile Westernization and the resultant split between the native and Western personalities hindering a genuine transformation.

According to Bashir Diagne (10), Tempels's Bantu philosophy seeks to counter the colonial narrative by uncovering the philosophical roots of traditional thinking. Thus, the existence of African philosophy should be affirmed beyond reasonable doubt because ethnophilosophers believe that the denial of philosophy to Africans is tantamount to the denial of the humanity of Africans. Ethnophilosophers are convinced that attempts to resuscitate tradition would help restore African dignity, effecting mental decolonization and inventiveness. This is believed to pave the way for the African path to development, as it recommends a clean break from Eurocentrism and a forceful assertion of African identity. One may perceive a call for intellectual repatriation, which is the central theme of negritude and African socialism. The attempt to articulate the African cultural and spiritual heritage by way of a holistic Black identity is distinctively ethnophilosophical because ethnophilosophy identifies philosophy with communal thought. Socialist principles are assumed to resonate with the cultural patterns and practices of Black identity. Thus, for the proponents of the traditionalist school of ethnophilosophy, African modernization is concomitant with the restoration of precolonial norms of Africa.

Modernist professional philosophers are against the affirmation of African holism or holist African identity. They argue that African holism risks affirming African backwardness and underdevelopment. Given the emancipative potential of reason and science, any successful move towards modernity and development must be premised on individual freedom, equality, and rationality. The more we insist on African holism, the higher the affirmation of African otherness and anachronism. The affirmation of holist values justifies the call for a civilizing mission instead of contradicting it. Messay Kebede points out that the critique of ethnophilosophy revolves around three points: first, it is the affirmation of the anthropological discourse on Africa. Secondly, it is based on a wrong conception of philosophy. Thirdly, it has untoward implications for Africa's development and modernization (Kebede, 'Development and the African philosophical debate' 48). The first point is that the affirmation of holism is a disservice to African rationality and agency because it affirms the colonial discourse according to which Africans are not capable of integrating into the modern way of life without the guidance and supervision of the West. Thus, the affirmation of hierarchical and holist values reinforces the colonial discourse endorsing Levy Bruhl's attribution of primitive mentality. Ethnophilosophy is a self-imposed confession of African subordination as opposed to the restoration of African dignity and culture. Professional philosophers (Bodunrin; Hountondji; Wiredu) demand parting company with the holist and hierarchical African past. They argue that the colonial and neo-colonial discourse is premised on the denial of African membership in the normal human category.

African philosophy must critique the invention of difference since it is the first step towards marginalization and subordination. Thus, African philosophy must be a critique of holism and traditional hierarchy. Modernist professional philosophers contend that the best way to disparage the colonial discourse is to expose the untenable epistemological and scientific foundations of Western anthropology. The point is to highlight the procedural and constructivist nature of the colonial claim to objective knowledge about traditional societies. Moreover, the nature of ethnophilosophy is problematic from a philosophical point of view since it endorses a worldview that is implicit in the collective unconscious of African societies as philosophy proper. Thus, this line of thought undermines philosophy as an individual thought by succumbing to a collective consciousness.

Professional philosophers argue that the affirmation of collective thought is against the specific quality of philosophy (Kebede, 'Development and the African philosophical debate' 49). Considering the need for individual thought, collective philosophy is an oxymoron. But the very existence of this debate in the form of literature is a case in point for the existence of African philosophy. We may need to rethink the communal and collective foundation of ethnophilosophy to open the space for individual freedom, equality, and rationality. This does not mean that African philosophy is concerned just with the conflict between tradition and modernity today. Rather, given the subject of this paper, namely the relationship between modernity and tradition, I find it imperative to dwell on this distinction to elucidate my point.

The meaning and nature of democracy

Democracy is founded on the consent of the governed, who act as self-legislators. Freedom of choice is critical to democratic practice because people are free to pursue what they deem appropriate for honourable existence. As a result, individual autonomy is considered the guiding principle of human rights and thus cannot be violated unless a greater moral good is at stake (Gaus 1–2; Shapiro 191; Ikuenobe 571). Nobody has the right to impose their will on other individuals without their consent. Paradoxically, however, the state has the exclusive right to make and enforce laws, and citizens who are not directly involved in the legislative process are nonetheless expected to adhere to these laws. Forcing citizens to obey laws enacted by others appears to be a violation of human rights.

A democratic state must be grounded on the recognition of individual autonomy as the guiding principle of human rights (Gaus 1–2; Shapiro 191; Ikuenobe 571). This, in turn, calls into question the legitimacy of a state's authority in relation to individual rights because it results in the conviction that one has an obligation to obey laws that are not the result of one's free will (Raz 76–77; Rubenfeld 195). Thus, what is the moral justification for this seemingly difficult conundrum in which the state's exclusive right to make and enforce laws and the right of individuals to their freely chosen values are at odds? Democracy is the most viable moral justification for the legitimacy of the state, given the imperative to respect individual autonomy (Shapiro 190; Forst and Flynn 2; Ikuenobe 571).

Democracy is the only means to institute a government freely elected by the people to serve their needs. This requires the participation of citizens in the decision-making process either directly by themselves or through freely elected representatives who rule on their behalf. The elected representatives rule to serve the people's needs and interests. The people's representatives are simply delegated to act on their behalf; in a sense, they are trustees delegated to pursue the people's goals. As a result, we can conclude that the foundation of democratic rule is an accountable representation that serves the needs and interests of the people (Ikuenobe 572). Democracies are morally justifiable because they allow citizens to rule directly or through elected officials. This implies that the legitimacy of a democratic government is considered to emanate from the will of the citizens. Thus, obedience to the law implies submitting to rules that we have freely enacted.

The tension between individual autonomy and obedience to the state's laws can be resolved in democratic governance. This does not mean that the state always relies on the judgement of its individual members to make public policy and laws. Without a proper legal procedure that ensures the appropriate management and control of conflicts of interest, risks, and perceived threats, it is impossible to sustain lasting peace and order. Thus, it is imperative to have a legitimate government that takes charge of the state's affairs based on the people's will. The norms that underlay the nature of good governance are universal suffrage, popular participation, consent, the promotion and protection of human rights, justice, equality, and respect, among others (Ikuenobe 572). A democratic form of government should meet these requirements of good governance. Apart from moral reasons, there are pragmatic, functional, anthropological, and other reasons for respecting individual autonomy. However, this discussion focuses on the moral justifications for individual autonomy. Individual autonomy as a guiding principle of democratic governance has two major moral justifications: consequentialist and deontological (572).

Consequentialists value individual autonomy for its perceived benefits for good governance, whereas deontologists advocate individual autonomy for its intrinsic value to good governance. A consequentialist argument for individual autonomy is more compelling than a deontological one since individual autonomy is valued for its outcomes in enhancing accountability, good governance, human rights, and democratic institutions. Nothing would be sacred about respecting individual autonomy if it were not valuable for society. Thus, it is not plausible to argue that we should respect individual rights because they are good in themselves. The deontological argument implicitly draws on some perceived benefits, although it does not endorse valuing an ideal for its consequences (Gaus 359). One may argue that the justification for accepting a particular belief is not a function of its consequences. But this does not mean the belief in question can be justified without appealing to some empirical standards of adequacy. Hence, the justification of a moral belief always draws on its possible outcomes on human well-being. The justification of a moral belief cannot be a matter of pure procedure (Ikuenobe 573).

The principles of democratic governance may prescribe some procedures to bring about a certain outcome. For example, the right is neither prior nor consequential to the good; rather, the right and the good are interdependent. In other words, the procedures of democratic governance

cannot be dissociated from the results they are supposed or expected to produce. Ultimately, a particular procedure becomes the norm of democratic governance if it is the outcome of a contract among the majority of the citizenry while at the same time providing for the rights of the minority (Rubenfeld 196). Contract or agreement among the governed is a procedure endorsed for its perceived benefits for democratic governance. A democratic constitution is a procedural contract signed by the governed to run the affairs of a state. But constitutionalism is not a recipe for tyranny; instead, it protects citizens from tyranny of any kind (Raz; Rubenfeld; Ikuenobe).

The context of modernization and democracy in Ethiopia

My discussion in this part of the paper heavily relies on Messay Kebede's work titled *Survival and modernization: Ethiopia's enigmatic present*: *a philosophical discourse.* Kebede argues that modernization is inextricably bound with survival and that Western modernity is the outgrowth of the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman heritage (Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 243). Modernity marked the revival of the classical world through reinvigorating the Greco-Roman legacy (243). Studies indicate that one of the factors that contributed to the economic growth of East Asian countries is the legacy of Buddhism and Confucianism (Bell). Some scholars contend that colonialism and modernization led to the loss of identity, resulting in poverty and underdevelopment (Marzagora 1; Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 243–244).

But modernization and underdevelopment are not coterminous. There must indeed be signposts that set an example in our Ethiopian or African tradition in the struggle to modernize. But the mere enthusiasm to revive tradition for its own sake is not helpful aside from endorsing our idiosyncrasies in the name of authenticity. It is true that thinking for ourselves implies saying no to any influence that may impoverish us mentally, economically, and politically. So, this mental attitude may engender Ethiopian nationalism or African nationalism. Quoting Rostow, Kebede argues that nations seek to uproot their traditions not to make more money but to ensure their security (Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 244). He also argues that the case of Ethiopia is paradoxical because Ethiopia is a country with a very long history but, at the same time, one of the poorest in the world. The stability of the country is in jeopardy because of its inability to modernize (Marzagora 4; Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 244).

There are several conjectures to explain why Ethiopia failed to modernize. Christopher Clapham argues that Ethiopia's lag can be attributed to geographical reasons as "standing obstacles to its development in the present" (Clapham quoted in Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 245). Kebede points out that other Western observers confirm Clapham's observation, attributing the country's failure to modernize to natural obstacles and remoteness (Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 245). But Kebede highlights that Addis Hiwot, an Ethiopian intellectual, rejects the '"isolation argument" 'because the isolation argument is Eurocentric because it presumes civilization comes from without. Thus, Hiwot then attributes Ethiopia's failure to modernize to the absence of peace caused by protracted wars, the nature of social organization and the slave trade (245). The first two factors are closer to the truth, given the history of the country. Kebede quotes Gebru Tareke to substantiate the claim that Ethiopian leaders were ineffective in terms of nation-building despite their relative success in state creation and consolidation (245). He argues that ethnic and cultural diversity has posed a series of challenges to modernization (245). He also states that "the Ethiopian state has for long represented the interests of one particular ethnic group, the Amhara, with the consequence that the country was torn by constant ethnic tensions and conflicts" (245). This problem is further aggravated by the conquest of peoples from different cultural and ecological backgrounds by Emperor Menelik II (Young 192; Fiseha 439; Clapham 3). This, in turn, brought about ethnic and religious disparity and led to the final overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie's regime, which was attributed to Amhara domination or Amharization, especially by the detractors of the regime (Marzagora 5; Kebede *Survival and*

modernization 245-246; Young 192; Abbay 270). The consequent ethnic and religious divisions in the country made nation-building and modernization impossible. Ethnic liberation movements started to flourish in the country, destroying in the process "the institution of democratic norms, so essential to modernization" (Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 246).

Modernity is driven by individual liberty, instrumental or technological mastery, division of labour, bureaucratic rationalization, and private property ownership, in contrast to status-driven or ascriptive ownership of property (Clapham 3; Giddens 12; Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 246). Modern political culture challenges traditional authority and ascriptive legitimacy to uphold individual liberty and equality.

One of Ethiopia's major obstacles to modernization and development is the absence of democratic consciousness (Clapham 3). The notion of democratic consciousness implies belief in individual liberty, equality, justice, and human dignity. These values are fundamental to a modern, well-ordered society. On the contrary, in Ethiopia, ethnic politics, ethnic loyalty, ascriptive political economy of nepotism, corruption and parochialism have become the order of the day (Záhořík 257; Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 246). As Kebede writes, "People were less and less able to refer to objective, impersonal criteria, preferring instead partial and narrow norms. Rather than catching up with modernity, Ethiopia was turning its back on it" (Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 246).

The absence of peace is one of the root causes of poverty and backwardness in Ethiopia. The political system is devoid of a democratic institutional backup, and thus, it created mutually suspicious ethnic factions. In addition, the traditional economic arrangement is hostile to modern forms of production (Young 196). For instance, the Gebar system was a traditional economic system based on exploiting the farmer without legally protecting private property. This system favoured just the owner of the land and his political affiliates (Kebede, *Survival and modernization* 247). The Gebar system prevented the emergence of wealthy middle-class farmers, which would have brockered the balance between the peasantry and landowners (247).

Kebede also points out that the Ethiopian mindset resists mobility through hard work, innovation, and investment (247). Ethiopian social mobility "values power over people as opposed to power over things" (247). The landholding system hijacked Ethiopian feudalism making the transition to capitalism impossible. Kebede states that European nations took advantage of feudalism in transitioning to modern liberal capitalist democracies (248). In Ethiopia, the traditional economic system was completely unable to transform into a viable and working economy. Landlords only cared about one thing: amassing wealth at the expense of peasants, not creating wealth through investment. Since the landlords' tenure was backed by the state, they felt insecure, while the peasants felt helpless because the landlords would seize their harvest (248).

The concept of property rights was not part of the legal system, which entrenched dependency and centralized power. The economic system was not conducive to autonomous property ownership. Furthermore, the political system was opposed to democracy and democratic values. For example, power is valued not for what it does for the people but for the benefits it confers. Instead of the modern ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood, political dispensation relies on concrete ties like kinship, regionalism, and tribalism. Modern impersonal bureaucracy that is based on rationalization is almost non-existent. Authority is regarded as a personal gift rather than an impersonal position that must be filled by everyone (249).

I claim that one of the challenges to Ethiopian modernization and development is the absence of a proper Ethiopian bourgeoisie. This can be explained by the reasons that Messay Kebede outlines, as shown in my partial review of his foundational work on Ethiopian modernity. These reasons are a long history of war and conflict, ascriptive political culture, traditional and archaic relations of production exemplified by the Gebar system, the absence of legal protection for private property, and poor work ethic. The above-mentioned social, political, economic,

and historical reasons made the rise of a robust Ethiopian bourgeoisie impossible. But this does not imply that modernity is equated with the rise of a strong bourgeoisie. In other words, there are social, cultural, and political reasons for the rise of modernity; the existence of a strong bourgeoisie is just one aspect of it.

Marxist roots of contemporary Ethiopian politics

The struggle for greater equality and freedom in Ethiopia began with the infatuation of Addis Ababa University students with Marxism. Andreas Eshete (14) describes the Ethiopian Student Movement as "a midwife of Ethiopian modernity". The Ethiopian Student Movement exemplifies the modern quest for justice and democratic governance in Ethiopia. Marxism has exercised significant influence on Ethiopian intelligentsia since the 1960s. This ideology has shaped the political psychology of radical intellectuals like never before. The onset of Marxism on the Ethiopian political scene was marked by the growing dissatisfaction of university students with the imperial regime and their unrelenting demand for revolutionary regime change in the country. The national question was the bone of contention among the university students during the Ethiopian Students Movement (ESM).

The trailblazer of the question of nationalities in Ethiopia was a radical university student named Walelign Mekonnen, who was at the forefront of the Ethiopian students' movement. Although his concern is legitimate, I argue that his legacy prevails in the increasingly ethnically and geographically polarized political landscape that has come to define the current political status quo of the country. Five years after the 1960 abortive coup, Haile Selassie I University students demonstrated against the Haile Selassie government with a provocative demand, "land to the tiller" (Tibebu 346). The students snatched the slogan "land to the tiller" as a Marxist catchphrase to ground their Marxist criticism of the Ethiopian state. However, the problem with using Marxist theory to explain the Ethiopian political reality is its hostility to the psychological makeup of the Ethiopian people and the historical reality of the time. Ethiopia's centuries-old monarchy was abolished with the reign of a military government led by Mengistu Hailemariam, who was ousted in 1991 (Khisa 1).

In May 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) took over power after defeating the Ethiopian government. Tibebu (346) particularly notes that "EPRDF came out of the Marxist movement and its Marxist core, the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray, praised the Albanian brand of Marxism, it ceased to officially identify itself as Marxist by the time it seized state power on 28 May 1991" (346). Yet, the EPRDF has made the national question the crux of its constitutional philosophy and the source of its legitimacy (Opalo and Smith 4; Fiseha 440).

It has been nearly three decades since Ethiopia adopted a multicultural, anti-foundationalist political philosophy driven by its political elite, who relegated the grand narratives and presuppositions that the country was founded on as the convictions of the ruling group in the country, namely the Amhara aristocracy. This phenomenon is marked by the Marxist criticism of Ethiopian university students concerning the foundations of the Ethiopian nation. Ethiopian nationalism and ethnic nationalism characterize the contemporary ideological divide in Ethiopia (Fiseha 440; Abbay 269). Ethiopian nationalists are accused of promoting a political doctrine which is inherently and inescapably rooted in the psychology, culture, and history of a distinct ethnic group (the Amhara). Hence, according to critics, Ethiopia is a colonial empire which historically marginalized and oppressed the Oromos and other ethnic groups in the country (Jalata 382). Gudina (158) also argues that at the heart of the current crisis of the Ethiopian state are contending nationalisms, which are the source of "multiple competing interests, contradictory visions, and clashes of dreams, especially among contending elites who are moving the spirit of ethnic nationalism". He explains that the hegemonic interests of Tigrayans, the secessionist

tendency among the Oromos and the nostalgia for the past among the Amharas are classic cases of contradictory visions and dreams among the elites (Gudina 158).

This is an interesting philosophical problem in modern Ethiopian politics: we envision our place in the world and our role within it by creating narratives or stories and claiming they are divine revelations that are universally true and which we believe with the strongest of convictions that they work for all people across the board regardless of their culture, history and tradition; yet our worldviews are inescapably constrained and limited by our particular historical predicaments.

Opponents of moral universalism argue that the project of modernity, which aims to create a universal political and moral community, has "suppressed cultural diversity and intensified oppression and exploitation in the name of common citizenship and cultural universalism" (Jalata 386). Ethnic nationalists who criticize Ethiopian nationalism can be put in this category because they contend that the Ethiopian state is imperialist (382). Ethnic nationalists claim that the historic Ethiopian state has denied the cultural, linguistic, and political rights of nationalities with different cultural, historical, and linguistic identities (Jalata 390).

The question of nationalities, which university students in the 1960s took up, was meant to assert the right to self-determination of different ethnic communities currently described as nations and nationalities. Advocates of the rights of nationalities argue that the values and norms imposed by the Ethiopian state on different ethnic communities are unjust infringements on local cultures and worldviews. State oppression and domination breed structural injustices in society. Ethnic nationalists contend that there was a structural injustice in the Ethiopian state because of the historic Ethiopian state's domination and oppression of marginalized ethnic groups (Jalata 382). This contention has exercised a considerable influence on Ethiopian politics since the 1960s. Still, I contend that instead of redressing the structural injustice that has prevailed in the country, it has created deep conflicts between peoples and ways of life, creating an unbridgeable ideological rift among the Ethiopian people, particularly the elite.

Conclusion

The failure to find pragmatic solutions to competing political ideologies in Ethiopia has led to repeated grand failures at modernization (Gudina). In the name of addressing the question of nationalities, the EPRDF has imposed an ideology that denies a political, economic, and social space for the ethnically mixed and supra-ethnic groups in the country. Consequently, a sizable segment of the people in the country has been excluded from the political system because of the incommensurability of their identity and ideology with the official state doctrine of the priority of nations and nationalities as the rallying agenda of Ethiopian politics. The question of nationalities has marginalized civic nationalism in the country as opposed to ending authoritarianism and ethnic tensions.

It is the responsibility of the state to create favourable conditions for the equal representation of the major interests, demands and ideologies of all groups in the country. For this to happen, all stakeholders should deliberate on the best course of action through a genuine commitment to democratic values and principles.

The nearly three decades reign of EPRDF has marginalized civic or Ethiopian nationalists by summarily dividing the country along primordial ethnic lines. This, in turn, denied the rights of those who do not want to join the ethnic bandwagon. It is argued that those groups in Ethiopia are liberal, supra-ethnic and ethnically mixed groups who value civic union as a principle of political organization and mobilization. Nevertheless, the rights of those who prefer to organize themselves along ethnic lines should be respected and upheld, but not at the expense of those who disagree with them.

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