

THE TWO-FACED AMHARA IDENTITY

In the *St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies*, the late Sevir B. Chernetsov published in 1993 a remarkable article which, even more remarkably, was not noticed by the majority of scholars on Ethiopia. To my knowledge, not a single serious academic comment underscored its main thesis or its important historical and political significance. And no later publication on relevant issues I know of has quoted the article or indeed given S. Chernetsov credit for his contribution through referencing it. Even Tronvoll and Vaughan, who in their *Culture of Power*¹ describe in some detail the difference between urban Amhara identity and rural ethnic Amhara culture, do not mention Chernetsov in their reference list.

The article by S. Chernetsov, entitled «On the Origins of the Amhara»,² described Amhara culture as a culture of assimilation. The language and the culture of the Imperial Court was Amharic since the reign of Yekunno Amlak and, through him, the «Solomonic line» of kings emanating from the historical Amhara province.

S. Chernetsov observes that today the Amhara are counted as the second largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, much more populous than what the tiny province of Amhara could be expected to procreate. This is because whoever wanted to advance in the court, the administration or in the military of the Emperors had to speak Amharic reasonably well and usually also had to adopt the Orthodox Christian religion. The court retained an Amhara culture, but attracted ambitious and bright individuals from other ethnic groups, provided they volunteered to adopt the language, the religion and the customs at the court. The culture of the court thus became an ethnic melting pot, a culture of assimilation. But it was also a culture conscious of its of superiority.

Ethiopian history created two different groups of Amhara

In some way this may appear almost self-evident. Yet, this historical explanation was sensational because it enables us to better understand some of the hotly debated issues and differences among ethnic groups and «nationalities» in Ethiopia today. It appears strange that nobody among the Ethiopianist

¹ VAUGHAN, SARAH — TRONVOLL, KJETIL, *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*, Stockholm: SIDA, 2003.

² See CHERNETSOV, SEVIR, «On the Origin of the Amhara», *St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies* 1 (1993), 97–103.

scholars reacted to the article, though it explicitly refers to an ongoing debate on the nature of the Amharic ethnicity at that time (1992–1993). Some participants maintained that the Amhara did not exist as an ethnic group, while others insisted that the Amhara, as any other ethnic group, had to identify themselves as a nationality. But Chernetsov's challenge was not followed up, and even when he in 1995 published an enlarged version of the same article, with the title «On the problem of ethnogenesis of the Amhara»,³ the issue was not reflected in academic debate. It is difficult to tell if this silence is due to the fact that the *St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies*, which appeared from 1993 to 1996, unfortunately never achieved a wide distribution and may have escaped the attention of many scholars. The enlarged article was hidden in a volume entitled *Der Sudan in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*⁴ — not exactly a place where one would search for a crucial contribution to Ethiopian ethnic debates. Another possible explanation might be that there are large groups and interests within Ethiopia who do not want to recognise any distinction in the ethnogenesis between the Amhara and other Ethiopian ethnic groups, nor between two different groups of Amhara.

Whatever the reason, the article deserves much more attention than it has so far received, and here may be the place to draw attention to its academic importance. For it directs our attention to a difficult issue in Ethiopian social and political life today. Chernetsov should maybe have given his article the title «Who are the Amhara?» For at the bottom of his analysis is the observation that two types of Amhara cultural self-consciousness developed in parallel though certainly not without mutual influence on each other. There are today two different and quite distinct groups and identities attached to this name. Amhara peasants understood — and still understand — Amhara as their (local) culture, their way of life and their identity, just like Oromo or Gurage or Sidama peasants are conscious of theirs. Quite distinct from this is the identity of the urban, generally well educated, ethnically mixed, assimilated cultural Amhara, who understand themselves as Ethiopians with an Amhara language.

It must be noted here that the «rural Amhara» — or indeed the peasant groups today identifying as Amhara — were also strongly influenced by Amhara court culture. Indeed, areas like Manz, and (rural) Shoa Amhara in general, as well as large parts of Gojam, for example, only became Amhara through a military expansion, in particular, through the cultural influence of the military and of the Amhara administration on their rural surroundings. As

³ In 1997 it was also published in a Catalan translation: «Entorn al problema de l'ethnogenesi dels Amhara», *Studia Africana* (Barcelona) 8, 1997.

⁴ See CHERNETSOV, SEVIR, «On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara», in: GUNDLACH, ROLF — MANFRED KROPP — ANNALIS LEIBUNDGUT (eds.), *Der Sudan in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart (Sudan Past and Present)*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1996 (Nordostafrikanisch/Westasiatische Studien, 1), 17–35.

Tadesse Tamrat shows,⁵ the population of Gojam is in fact by itself a mixture of many waves of ethnic immigration, unified in an Amharic culture and identity. Equally, the Shoa Amhara are a mixture of different ethnicities, united in the culture of a ruler who, by himself of ethnically mixed stock, identified with the Amharic Solomonic Dynasty.⁶ It appears that the borders between the rural Amhara and the court Amhara were never clear, nor strict, nor impermeable. Individuals who returned into the rural community after some years experience in the military or the court, would carry parts of the court culture and personality into their rural surroundings. In terms of «Amhara» interests and identities today, however, there appear to be good reasons to separate the two groups.

In the debate of 1992–1993, which S. Chernetsov reviews in his articles, the contestants give two different descriptions of «the Amhara», which essentially fit one or the other of the two mentioned groups. But none of them identifies «his» interpretation of the term as referring to a distinct group within the «Amhara». One side (Meles Zenawi, Endreas Eshete) claims that the Amhara are a nation with their territory and their culture as any other ethnicity in Ethiopia, and should take their proper place — which is true for the «ethnic» (rural) Amhara in some regions in Ethiopia. The other side (Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Getachew Haile) describes the characteristics of the urban assimilated cultural Amhara, and claims that they are the beginning of a truly Ethiopian nation and must have the right to live anywhere in Ethiopia. Refusing to recognise that both descriptions are correct, but refer to different sections of people with different characteristics, confuses the understanding and blurs political conceptions and activities. The debate of 1993 could easily have been resolved, had one just agreed to distinguish the two groups.

In the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Michigan 1994, Takkele Tadesse presented a paper entitled «Do the Amhara exist as a distinct ethnic group?»⁷ He came very close to distinguishing the two groups, giving a description of the history of the Amhara language and consciousness. But his conclusion describes the Amhara as «being a fused stock, a supra ethnically

⁵ See TADDESSE TAMRAT, «Ethiopia in Miniature. The Peopling of Gojam», in: MARCUS, HAROLD GOLDEN (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies. Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 5–10 September 1994*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1994, vol. 1, 951–962.

⁶ See CLAPHAM, CHRISTOPHER, *Haile-Selassie's Government*, with a foreword by Dame Margery Perhame, London: Longmans, 1969; ID., «From Haile Selassie to Meles: Government, People and the Nationalities Question in Ethiopia», paper presented at a conference on «Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa», in September 2004 in Bergen, Norway (to be published).

⁷ See TAKKELE TADDESE, «Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?», in: MARCUS, *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies. Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 2, 168–187.

conscious ethnic Ethiopian serving as the pot in which all the other ethnic groups are supposed to melt. The language, Amharic, serves as the center for this melting process in spite of the fact that it is difficult to conceive of the existence of a language without the existence of a corresponding distinct ethnic group speaking it as a mother tongue». The Amhara, he argues, think and feel as Ethiopians. They do not distinguish between different ethnicities but try to integrate all into Ethiopia. Thus, he concludes, insisting on the Amhara being a distinct ethnic group amounts to breaking apart the Ethiopian nation.

In that sense, the «urban Amhara» group assumed without much reflection the role of speaking for all Amhara. They identified their cultural and political views as the Amhara position, thus effectively absorbing and dominating the rural Amhara. Pressurised to identify as ethnicity, they adopted in early 1992 the name «All Amhara People's Organisation» (AAPO) for the newly founded political organisation under Prof. Asrat Woldeyes. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) repeated the same assumption. Organised by the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in the years before the overthrow of the military government, from among Amhara prisoners of war, ANDM became the official party representing the Amhara as one group. In effect, the Amhara peasants were — and are — the last ethnic group without any political organisation and representation, as both AAPO and ANDM represent urban Amhara views, but claim to speak for all Amhara. AAPO, moreover, sometimes assumed to speak for all nationalistic Ethiopians. Consequently it has recently re-organised itself into the «All Ethiopian Unity Party» — without abandoning its claim to represent the Amhara — both urban and rural.

And the peasants fell into the trap without realising that they were being duped. They were swayed by nationalist appeals to come to the rescue of Amhara who were attacked by other ethnic groups — by an Oromo mob in Arsi and by other groups in the South. Little did they realise that these «Amhara» were in fact the descendants of Menilek's soldiers conquering these areas in the late 19th cent., who were given administrative offices, land titles and privileges in the conquered areas of other ethnic groups. Often these «Amhara» were ethnic Oromo or Gurage themselves, assimilated into Menilek's army and administration. But as landlords and administrators, as *Näṣṫäñña* («gunmen» or «gens d'armes»), and as Orthodox Christians, they were identified as «Amhara» by the local peasants.

Ethnicity is identity, not race

Ethnicity has in fact always been, and still is defined not by blood or race, but by cultural identity — a subjective rather than a biological category. Religion was often a stronger factor in determining identity than blood relations

or language, and not only in Ethiopia. The history of the Jews may be the best known example to demonstrate this trend. The Jews survived as an «ethnicity», as a «nation», in the Diaspora for several hundred years, not because of their ethnic, cultural or biological heritage, but rather in spite of it, facing the hatred of the host societies because of these characteristics. Many groups even lost their language, Hebrew only remaining as religious language. The Jews in Poland spoke «Jiddish», which was a dialect derived from German. Their religious identity alone made them preserve a distinct culture. They never even tried to maintain their «blood». Cross-cultural marriages were never a problem for them. As long as the partner from outside their group was willing to adopt the Jewish religion, anyone was accepted and assimilated into the Jewish cultural community. Those who abandoned their faith, lost their Jewish identity. Before racial laws were invented, they were — at least after one or two generations — no Jews any more.

The Amhara assimilation culture, too, had a religious identity as one of its components determining identity. The term «Amhara» changed its meaning depending on local conditions. In many contexts, it just signified a Christian. The practice of conversion to Christianity involved taking a new, Christian (baptismal) name, usually a biblical Ge'ez or Amhara name. Thus, assimilated people could no longer be identified as Gurage or Sidama or Wolaita by their names. It is one of the ironies of the dynamics of cultural development, that many students during the revolution of 1974–1975 changed back to their original (ethnic) names, only to turn a few years later back again to their Christian (Amharic) names.

In the border areas between Wollo and North Shoa, along the escarpment where Amhara people had been exposed to Moslem influence for a prolonged period, the term «Amhara» signifies today a Christian, while a Moslem of the same ethnic, cultural and language background would not be considered an Amhara. In Sidamo as well, during Haile Selassie's time, the term «Amhara» could variably signify a Christian or a *Näftäñña*.

The same change of meaning also occurs in other ethnic words: in Borana, for example, I was told, in Haile Selassie's time, an Oromo would insist on being called a Galla, not an Oromo. Generally, Oromo people strongly resent the term «Galla», as a pejorative Amharic term which implies contempt for the Oromo, almost equal to a slave. But these Borana Oromo saw the term «Oromo» to mean a pagan, while «Galla» implied that they had adopted Christianity (here usually in the protestant version), or indeed Islam. Again, one should add that historically, most peasants in Amhara areas held more strongly to their local identities: peasants in Gondar felt as Gondare, in Gojjam as Gojjame, if they did not identify themselves even more locally as the people of Achefer or Dangilla or Dega Damot. In the same way, most Oromo would identify as Arsi or Borana — a common Oromo identity is, in fact, an invention of the 1960s.

Assimilation had different connotations

Certainly the Amhara were not the only ethnic group inviting assimilation. All ethnic groups have more or less been open to the integration of outsiders. Cross-ethnic marriages have occurred wherever ethnicities overlapped or bordered one another. They did not cause any problem as long as the wife moved to the husband's community and integrated into his culture. However, at the same time, professional minorities are in the peasant societies in Ethiopia often despised and identified as different ethnicities. For an Oromo and Amhara alike, marriage with a «fuga» is considered improper. Often there is no other distinction except that these groups are segregated by their profession, suggesting that their ethnic identity was a result of professional segregation rather than being its cause. We have one interesting experience in recent times: in the elections of 2000, a professional minority in Sidama, the Hadicho, formed their own separate political party and ran as an opposition, identifying themselves ethnically as Sidama-Hadicho,⁸ in order to gain the status of a Special Woreda for the one area where they had a majority to rely on. Once they succeeded in winning the (repeated) election, they joined EPRDF as a separate ethnicity. In a similar process, the Silte eventually succeeded in separating themselves from the Gurage and becoming recognised as a distinct ethnicity. The Oromo, too, are renowned for freely assimilating outsiders from different ethnic backgrounds. They are said to have freely integrated those who lived among them and joined into their culture, identity and common interests. Also slaves could be adopted or allowed to establish themselves as peasants and assimilate.

Assimilation is and always was a fact of life. A general trend of smaller groups being absorbed into larger ones probably took place all over Africa. Assimilation is a motor of change, development, adaptation, progress.

There was one difference in the pattern of assimilation: becoming an Amhara was tantamount to becoming eligible for an office in the government, and belonging to the dominating and superior people.⁹ As such, becoming Amhara meant shifting from an inferior culture over into the superior Ethiopian culture. Becoming an Oromo, on the other hand, was a purely local affair, adjusting to local conditions but giving away any chance of joining the elite of the Ethiopian state.

The Amhara court culture, in contrast, developed differently from Amhara peasant culture in several ways. Amhara court culture became a culture of domination, superiority — a culture of rulers. The legend of the Solomonic descent of the Ethiopian kings was expanded to give the Amharic court cul-

⁸ See SOLBERG, KJELL, «Political Apathy and Class/Caste Conflict», in: AALEN — PAUSEWANG — TRONVOLL, *Ethiopia since the Derg*, 141–155, here 144, 150.

⁹ See CHERNETSOV, «On the Origin of the Amhara», 25, 27.

ture the myth of legitimacy as rulers, the chosen people, the «true Israel», as expressed in the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* in the 14th cent. This myth gave not only the kings, but the general Amharic court culture, a flair of legitimacy as rulers and leaders. To some degree, this aspect of culture has been diffused into Amhara peasant culture, for example as described by Alan Hoben in Gojjam. S. Chernetsov quotes this example in his article,¹⁰ and I do not need to repeat the quotes. It may seem, though, that Gojjam peasant culture itself was amharised by the rulers and their settlement of soldiers in the vicinity, partly replacing, partly assimilating the local dialects and cultures. In the same way, Shoa Amhara culture is, no doubt, a result of the expansionist policies of the Shoa aristocracy, rather than a genuine development of an ethnic culture. The land holding patterns in Ankober and Manz, for example, mirror a history of conquests and retreats, hardly allowing an uninterrupted ethnic development. And the victories and the settlement policies of the kings, more than peasant interactions and dispositions, made Northern Shoa develop an Amharic peasant culture.

The borders between Amhara peasants and Amhara court culture are thus never clear. Peasants could be absorbed into the court, and soldiers could become peasants or *Näftäñña*, spreading their culture in the rural peoples. Nevertheless, the result is the development of two distinct versions of Amhara culture. In the 20th cent. the court culture developed into a culture of education.¹¹ In order to staff the modernising administration, education was essential, and the Amhara elite had preferred access to education. Again, ambitious and gifted individuals were admitted from other ethnic groups, but for their majority there was little room in the education system. When the Oromo General Tadesse Birru in 1961 wanted to create better chances for Oromo youths to advance through education, he was discretely but firmly advised to scrap his ideas.¹² One did not want to create the opportunity for too many Oromo to enter the elites: the Oromo majority was destined to remain in the lower social classes. In frustration, Tadesse Birru founded the «Mecha-Tulama Association», and with it started the growth of an Oromo nationalism among those members of the amharised elites who remembered their Oromoness and became proud of being Oromo. From these circles grew, in the early 1970es, the founders of OLF (Oromo Liberation Front).

The administrative and military Amhara elite grew into an urban and educated elite, a group of potential administrators, civil servants, military officers and top leaders. They were raised to become leaders, and they came

¹⁰ See CHERNETSOV, «On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara», 25.

¹¹ See CHERNETSOV, «On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara», 31.

¹² See LEENCO LATA, *The Horn of Africa as Common Homeland. State and self-determination in the era of heightened globalisation*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004.

to feel as such. Urban «New Amhara» culture became elitist, to some degree condescending, and arrogant.¹³ However much individuals developed a taste for socialist ideas of equality or for democratic values, their culture retained the characteristics of a ruling class.

«All-Amhara» becomes Ethiopian nationalism

The urban, educated, ethnically mixed Amhara understand themselves to be the progressive elites, the people destined to be the leaders in Ethiopia. After 1975, and especially after 1991, they developed a strong tendency towards identifying themselves as Ethiopians, in opposition to centrifugal tendencies in the political sphere and to an increasing ethnic consciousness. In 1975, this was probably in reaction to the early Derg period, when the military regime opened up free expression to all ethnic cultures and promised the equality of ethnic groups. When the Derg changed its policy to a pan-Ethiopian sentiment of «*Andännät*», unity, it was too late to quell the revived ethnic movements, which reorganised as ethnically based resistance movements. Irony of incidences, the «Red Terror» in 1976–1977 fed into their recruitment, when it tried to suppress the resistance of the educated youth (see below). The strengthened ethnic resistance movements were one of the reasons why EPRDF decided in 1991 to reorganise the country along ethnic lines. They had hardly any choice: In 1991, no-one could expect to win legitimacy without offering the re-vitalised ethnic groups an acceptable solution, that is, at least a reasonable degree of self-determination.

But the urban elites also changed their political world view after 1975. Many young idealists joined the regime in the hope of gradually reforming it into a strong national movement, and helping to form a national Ethiopian state as a strong power in the region. Their aspirations were also soon frustrated, but their nationalism brought them over into the ranks of the after-1992 «All-Amhara» thought and movement.

Provoked by pressure to identify as an Amhara «nationality», the urban Amhara escaped again into Pan-Ethiopian nationalism. The term «All Amhara People's Organisation», was adopted as a compromise formula to identify this group within an ethnically structured federation. It is in fact not the identity of all Amhara — but of all «assimilated urban elites» speaking *Amarəñña*, regardless of their ethnic origin. They cherish an all-Ethiopian nationalism which at times comes dangerously close to chauvinism. They try to replace ethnic identities with a pan-Ethiopian national identity, and attempt to suppress or reform any sub-national ethnicity, integrating all Ethiopians into one nationality, irrespective of their origin. For them, reorganising Ethiopia as a

¹³ See CHERNETSOV, «On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara», 32.

federation of ethnically self-determined regions or states was a travesty of Ethiopian unity. Hence they accused the new government after 1991 of a policy of «divide and rule». They strongly opposed Eritrean independence, as they opposed the Tigrean claim to leadership. Symptomatic of this trend may be the argument forwarded in 1994 by Getachew Haile (in a debate at the Ethiopian Studies Conference in Michigan) that Eritrean independence was illegitimate, as was the Referendum of 1993, because it did not give the entire Ethiopian population a vote: *You can not amputate my arm and call it voluntarily*, he said, *if you ask only the arm...*

In the period after 1991, such nationalistic views were most aggressively expressed by Ethiopian nationalists in the diaspora, those who had become refugees after the overthrow of the military government or before. But they were also very strong among urban elites in Addis Ababa. Even if these were more reluctant to speak out in public, in personal meetings one encountered such attitudes as an expression of frustration with the course of events. Of course there are also other views represented among the urban Amhara; and the attitudes towards Eritrean independence have changed markedly since 1995. Yet, as a group, the pan-Ethiopian nationalist position of the urban Amhara has been remarkably consistent.¹⁴ The political position of this particular group is so dominant in the urban public debate that large parts of the foreign community take it uncritically as «the public opinion» in Ethiopia.

The newest political demand originating from this developing pan-Ethiopian nationalist ideology is the claim that Ethiopia needs a harbour. This demand surfaced in 1999, in the course of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. The newspapers in Addis Ababa eagerly took up this issue, and there raged a protracted debate in 1999–2000. It fell very much in line with the government adopting a nationalist «pan-Ethiopianism», while accusing Eritreans living in Ethiopia of treason. The harbour issue brought the urban Amhara opposition for some time considerably closer to the government. It is a popular claim, which stimulated populist attempts to incite a nationalistic wave of patriotism. It was useful for the government to draw the Amhara peasants, as well as peasants from other ethnic groups, as cannon fodder into a war, riding on a wave of idealistic national euphoria. It proved also attractive to elites of other ethnic groups. Even Beyene Petros, the leader of the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Coalition and the Coalition of Alternative Forces for Peace and Development in Ethiopia, fell into this trap and joined the demand for access to a harbour.

The only harbour Ethiopia could possibly claim is Assab. But Assab belongs to Eritrea, a sovereign state which gained its independence in 1991,

¹⁴ MERERA GUDINA, *Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy, 1960–2000*, Addis Ababa: Shaker Publishing, 2003.

after a UN-observed referendum and with Ethiopian acclaim. Assab is not to be had without a new war. The demand is political nonsense. Especially in the times of internet and international air traffic, no nation needs a harbour. Switzerland, Austria, Czechia have been leading economic and political powers in Europe without harbours. Ethiopia needs good relations with its neighbours, not a harbour. A red, yellow and green flag over Assab would not bring the harbour a single kilometre closer to Addis Ababa. The harbour issue serves only to rally uncritical support for the nationalist rhetoric of the political parties of the urban Amhara.

Should Ethiopia really not have stopped the offensive in 2000 before taking at least Assab, or even Asmara, to have a token for negotiations? The border issue and the war, seemingly about Badme, strengthened the nationalistic trend of the urban elites and offered them a chance to draw large groups from other ethnicities into a euphoria of all-Ethiopian nationalism.

The war, indeed, pulled a number of members of the former regional elites and of the opposition into the Pan-Ethiopian nationalistic fold, and hence into the orbit of All-Amhara identity. This is a process which can be observed in different areas and ethnic groups, and with different motivations. It even includes Tigreans who are posted in Addis Ababa and who have gradually lost interest in the ethnic federation, or who realise that it does not fulfil their expectations. It also includes regional elites from most ethnic groups who are disappointed with the development of the federation for it has not solved many of the old problems and has created a number of new ones. They begin again to see a better future in a national state of Ethiopia.

Modern nationalism originating in the French Revolution

In Africa, nationalism in its modern form is a European implant. When the colonial powers understood that they could no more hold on to their colonies, they handed over power to those elites with whom they had cooperated earlier and whom they had educated to run an administration. As they had never cared for ethnic differences in drawing their boundaries, all colonies contained fractions of many ethnicities. Nation building became the magic word of the first generation of independent African leaders. Instead of giving ethnic groups their self-determination, the Organisation of African Unity adopted the doctrine of not tampering with the colonial borders. Once ethnicity is recognised as the basis of border revisions and the creation of new states, it will not end until all African states fall apart — that was the argument.

The doctrine was realistic in that point. But it did not recognise that African identities are much more closely tied to language and to cultural peers than to loyalty to a state. And least of all the colonial state, which Africans experienced as a means of suppression and exploitation, was attractive as a

new focus of identification. Nation building was bound to fail, at least in the short and middle term.¹⁵

But nationalism was indeed invented in a situation not too different from that of Ethiopia today. It was Napoleon, who after the French Revolution seized power in France and had the difficult task of defending the revolutionary state against an alliance of revengeful European monarchs. Before Napoleon, rulers like Louis XIV and even Louis XVI could not care less whether the people in Alsace spoke German, whether people in the Camargue felt like Occitans rather than French, so long as they were the obedient subjects of their sovereign. Just as Frederik the Great, king of Prussia, did not mind whether his subjects spoke Polish, Czech, Danish or German, were Catholics or Protestants, so long as they remained subjects to his absolutist reign. But Napoleon demanded more of his subjects. Only by creating a nationalistic wave of euphoria for «La Grande Nation», the Great Nation of France, could he recruit massive armies of drafted soldiers, many of them in fact volunteers. A nationalistic wave embracing all corners of France was the secret weapon that allowed him to crown himself Emperor and to engulf the whole of Europe into a series of nationalistic wars. Other nations followed suit. The new French ideas spread into Germany, where the former Empire was divided into thirty-six mini-states of dukes and princes who claimed sovereignty and watched each other jealously to protect their prerogatives. German nationalism thus developed as a movement of the urban elites uniting all Germans from East to West and North to South against the princes and for one German republic. The German tragedy was that their enthusiasm was perverted by the leading regional princes. The Prussian king eventually prevailed in assuming the crown of the new Empire, converting nationalism from a revolutionary to a conservative device for coercing the people into unity. And when the German Emperors (of the Prussian dynasty) lost the First World War, Hitler succeeded in rallying this perverted patriotic nationalism into a fascist ideology of a «Herrenvolk» destined to cleanse itself and lead Europe.

This historical parallel should not be misused to suggest that Ethiopia, or indeed Amharic Pan-Ethiopianism, is on the way to fascism. History does not repeat itself so crudely. But it is reasonable to conclude that there are inherent dangers in populist mass mobilisation being misused for antidemocratic and anti-humanist political risings. And nationalism taken to the extreme has also proven its destructive force in Ethiopian history, and shows its ugly face today in Eritrea, where the rulers attempt to force an entire population into a permanent state of nationalist euphoria, in the name of national sovereignty and autonomy.

¹⁵ DAVIDSON, BASIL, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*, London: James Currey, 1992; CHABAL, PATRICK — JEAN-PASCAL DALOZ, *Africa Works: Disorder as a Political Instrument*, Oxford: James Currey, 1999.

All Amhara nationalism has political consequences

Understanding the difference between ethnic identity and the urban Amhara identity is essential to understanding some aspects of the particular character of Amhara all-Ethiopian nationalism. In the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995, there are two articles that were contested at the period of its drafting and continue to be so. They concern the rights of ethnicities and the regulation on land tenure.

Article 39 gives every «nation, nationality and people» the right to self-determination «including secession». This constitutional guarantee is often criticised as a device of disunity, an expression of «divide and rule». However, this argument totally overlooks the situation of 1991, when the victorious liberation movements, all ethnically defined, had to invite all other movements and nationalities and political forces into a coalition. After the «Red Terror», there was no other alternative open. In the «Red Terror» campaign, the Derg had targeted anyone who was young and educated as a potential enemy. Those who could escape ended as refugees in the diaspora or hid away in their rural home areas. There, if they wanted to continue any political activity at all, they had only one choice — to join the ethnically defined resistance movements. Thus the «Red Terror» inadvertently fed into the recruitment of the ethnic liberation fronts. In 1975, no government could hope to win legitimacy without solving the land question. In 1991, no one could win legitimacy without accommodating the demand of the different ethnic groups for freedom from domination. Yet, the urban elites were favouring a united Ethiopian state and resented ethnic nationalism. Their political agenda became the common denominator of a political «public opinion», only because the rural majority lacks the information, is less vocal and has no access to media.

Even more controversial is the issue of land tenure. Article 40 of the Constitution declares all land the property of «the State and the peoples of Ethiopia». This is squarely rejected by the urban opposition, who claim that state land prevents economic liberalisation. To be developed, land needs investment, they maintain, and people will only invest if they own it. The EPRDF, in response, argues that as long as a large majority of people feed themselves in the rural areas, they can take care of themselves. If they are forced to sell their land and move to towns, they would demand jobs and investments on a scale no government could provide. Second, the EPRDF can claim that «common property» defends the traditional land holding rights of rural people, and guards their culture and their economic adaptations.

The most important problem in this controversy is the practice of local authorities today. State agents misuse state ownership of land to hold peasants ransom: — *if you don't support us, you may ask land from your party, not from us...* They assume that as local agents of the state, they can dispose

of the state land freely. In addition, a growth close to 3 percent makes the population double within one generation. Land scarcity is growing worse over time. Yet, to reduce the number of peasants is no solution, as long as there is no alternative livelihood available for those forced to leave.

But the voices of peasant farmers are not heard in the public debate. Public opinion in Addis Ababa does not show any consideration for their interests. Even scholars carrying out research in rural areas often claim to understand the interests of peasant farmers without really enquiring. Public debate and public opinion just exclude the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian people who live in rural areas, most of them illiterate and uninformed about what is debated in the capital. The interests of the urban elites are simply assumed to be the common interest.¹⁶

Maybe the reason why the article by S. Chernetsov was not taken note of, is precisely this. Understanding his argument, might have forced scholars and politicians to see the arrogance of an elite deciding for the majority without any mandate to do so. Without realising its imposition, this urban elite forcefully adopts the position of speaking for «the» Amhara, and in some contexts even for the population at large, assuming to know best what people need. By the strength of their educational achievement, their vocal advantage, their superior access to communication, and their political influence, they present their nationalistic views and their interests as those of all Amhara. They seduce the Amhara peasants into adopting their rhetoric, into following their political views, into demanding access to a harbour — hardly knowing what this means. The name «Amhara» with its language and cultural associations allows them to uncritically mix the group identities of the Amhara peasants with their own urban group identity. Despite their name, they represent not all Amhara, but the «assimilated» urban elites feeling Amhara regardless of their ethnic origin.

If the Amhara peasants had their own political organisation, they would probably have expressed much more concern for peace, for more conducive conditions for agriculture and more control for the peasant himself over his conditions of cultivation and marketing, than for a war or a border town or «national sovereignty». As this representation does not exist, hardly anybody knows what, really, Amhara peasants think and demand.

The rural-urban split of interests is of course more universal. In Ethiopia it is particularly associated with a lack of access to representation for the rural views. The Oromo or Wolaita or Sidamo peasants also have very little voice and influence in Ethiopia these days. But the claim of the Amhara to be a supra-ethnic group with a national outlook and no territorial affiliation is only true for a small but vocal fraction of the Amhara speakers — but it

¹⁶ PAUSEWANG, SIEGFRIED, *Local Democracy and Human Security in Ethiopia: Structural Reasons for the Failure of Democratisation*, Johannesburg 2004: SAIIA (South African Institute of International Affairs), 28, 32.

imposes their views as those of «the» Amhara. And they are up to now allowed to do so without any protest or reaction.

Anti-Amhara feelings also often confuse these two identities. Eating in an Ethiopian restaurant with a group of Oromo people in Europe, we heard that some guests had asked the owner not to talk in *Amarəñña* to them. If he could not speak their language, they would prefer English to the language of «their colonisers». Just think if Nelson Mandela had refused to talk English or Ben Bella French — history might have taken a different course.

One can well be proud of being both Amhara and Ethiopian, as others can be Oromo, Wolaita or Sidamo and Ethiopians. Ethnicity is identity, not race or belief or culture. A nation consists of those who feel to be, who identify themselves as one. Nationalism becomes dangerous when it is used to engage others for a suggested common ground, hiding differences of interest for the sake of creating unity for an undefined and obscure agenda.

SUMMARY

The term Amhara relates in contemporary Ethiopia to two different and distinct social groups. The ethnic group of the Amhara, mostly a peasant population, is different from a mixed group of urban people coming from different ethnic background, who have adopted Amharic as a common language and identify themselves as Ethiopians. Sevir B. Chernetsov explained in 1993 their difference as a result of a historical process of assimilation. Though the difference has significant consequences in contemporary political life, it appears little reflected, maybe even consciously veiled, in the interest of a pan-Ethiopian nationalist elite claiming to represent all Amhara.