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## 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*<sup>1</sup> 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»,<sup>2</sup> 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

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

<sup>2</sup> 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»,<sup>3</sup> 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*<sup>4</sup> — 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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.