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# Ethnolinguistic federalism and interborder conflict in Ethiopia

by

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## Abstract

This study examines the interplay between federalism and interborder conflict between the Tigray and Amhara regions of Ethiopia. To this effect, secondary data, both qualitative and quantitative, were collected from the National Census Report, YouTube and official government letters. The qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis, while the quantitative data were expressed in terms of percentages. Results indicate that ethnolinguistic federalism was not implemented based on concrete parameters, but mainly on language that the government used as a tool for interborder demarcation and historical ownership of territories that can serve as a sound parameter. This practice has led to interborder conflict, which has both historical and linguistic bases, between the Tigray and Amhara regions. Thus, it is concluded that ethnolinguistic federalism could not be a panacea for ethnic conflict in Ethiopia, especially in the north. Both regions are working to expand their territories beyond their current statuses, and thus laying claims for pieces of lands from each other.

## Key-words

Ethiopia; Ethnolinguistic federalism; interborder conflict; Raya; Wolkait



## 1. Introduction

Following the collapse of the military regime in 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced ethnolinguistic federalism. It divided the country's political map predominantly along ethnolinguistic lines to establish regional autonomy and decentralise government power. Hence, politically, Ethiopia is a federal state, comprising nine administrative regions, namely Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harari, and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR), as well as two chartered cities, namely Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. Each of the first four regional states is dominated by one linguistic group, and thus they are somehow homogenous, while the SNNPR is the most heterogeneous region consisting of 56 different linguistic groups. Gambela and Harari are also heterogeneous regions where more than two numerically competing linguistic groups dwell. Unlike the other regions, Benishangul-Gumuz, as the name denotes, is a home for two linguistic groups, namely Benishangul and Gumuz.

The current administrative structure – federalism – is a new phenomenon for Ethiopia but not for other federalist countries. The idea of federalism dates back to the ancient Greek civilisation where the legal relationships between the leagues and the city-states were attempted to be elucidated; nonetheless, the modern concept of federalism was brought in by the American Constitution of 1787 (Graves 1964). The very discourse of federalism deals with devolution of state power among the central and regional governments. It is 'a system of government in which central and regional authorities are linked in a mutually interdependent political relationship' (Vile 1961:196). Nonetheless, the practices of federalism differ owing to the linguistic, ethnic and economic contexts of a given country that formulates and implements it. For instance, Ethiopia's federalism is implemented mainly on an ethnolinguistic basis. The legal foundation for the federal model is clearly stated in the preamble of the 1995 federal Constitution of Ethiopia; 'We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia: *Strongly committed*, in full and free exercise of our right to self-determination, to building a political community founded on the rule of law and capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing our economic and social development'. To put the federal model into practice, as stated in the



Constitution (Article 47(1)), nine regional states were established. The boundaries of the regions were demarcated predominantly based on language and ethnicity in order to protect the unity of the country, promote peace and ensure the rights of nations and nationalities. The Constitution (Article 46) indicates that ‘States shall be delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned’. The use of language and ethnicity in the establishment of the regions was meant to pacify national and border conflicts. Meles Zenawi, the architect of the federal arrangement, who served as the head of the federal government since its inception until 2012, said:

From a purely legal point of view, what we were trying to do was to stop the war and start the process of peaceful competition. ... The key cause of the war all over the country was the issue of nationalities. Any solution that did not address them did not address the issue of peace and war. ... People were fighting for the right to use their language, to use their culture, to administer themselves. So, without guaranteeing these rights it was not possible to stop the war or prevent another one. (Quoted in Vaughan 2006:33-37)

This implies that ethnolinguistic federalism was introduced to exterminate conflicts between ethnic groups and promote peaceful competition. This model has been in practice for the last three decades and has protected the country from disintegration. Ethnolinguistic federalism has preserved the unity of Ethiopia, while providing full recognition to the principle of linguistic, cultural and ethnic equality as well as political, cultural and linguistic autonomy at regional level (Alem 2003). It has helped to minimise internal conflicts in the last three decades. Since most violent conflicts of a country are fought between different groups within the country, the potential of ethnic federalism to maintain political stability, prevent territorial disintegration and facilitate the accommodation of differences has rendered it one of the international society’s preferred conflict resolution strategies (Monteux 2006).

However, ethnolinguistic federalism is not without problems. The major argument against ethnic federalism is that it “will only lead to further ethnic fragmentation, tensions and conflicts and will thus ultimately result in the demise of the state” (Beken 2009:1). This view appears to be true when we see it in terms of interborder conflicts in Ethiopia that have taken place following the focus only on language and ethnicity to establish the regional states and mark out their borders. Therefore, it is argued that though language and





ethnicity appears to be unavoidable in the establishment of regional states, they are not the only parameters, and thus there is a need for consideration of other factors such as historical ownership of territories.

To deal with ethnicised conflict and to reduce 'ethnic clashes' in Ethiopia, there probably has to be some constitutional revision and a reordering of the current regional state boundaries in the country to produce workable, balanced units where territory ... and regional identity are the building blocks, and not [only] ethnicity or language. ... The issue of *land* and access to land is currently playing a major role in this Ethiopian conflict dynamic. Land is the most important resource, and historically it had major existential and identity aspects for people. (Abbink 2006:392)

In a nutshell, it appears that the introduction of ethnolinguistic federalism could not yield the intended result because ethnic conflicts, such as interborder conflict, is still a main state-building challenge in Ethiopia, probably because of the avoidance of other factors, especially historical land ownership that has become a challenge of effective implementation of the federal model. Therefore, this study aims to examine the interplay between federalism and interborder conflict in Ethiopia by taking the border issue of Tigray and Amhara regions as a case in point. To this end, a qualitative research approach was effectuated for this study. Qualitative data were drawn purposefully from official government letters about the Raya territory and were written a few years after the territory was taken away from the Tigray province because analysing historical documents is crucial to justify the claims made over the Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede territories. Moreover, it is important to analyse the views of the Tigray and Amhara elites who lay claims over the territories and thereby triangulate their views with the historical evidences. Hence, qualitative data were collected from YouTube videos of interviews that journalists conducted in 2018 and 2019, with politicians and other professionals who have deep knowledge about the Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede territories. The two years are selected purposefully because the debates on the Tigray-Amhara interregional borders of the Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede territories have become hot after friction among the coalition forces of EPRDF started in 2018. In addition, quantitative data were drawn from the 1994 National Census of Ethiopia.

The YouTube qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and translated from Tigrinya and Amharic into English. Also, the qualitative data drawn from government official letters were translated from Amharic into English. The translated data were prepared for analysis



by reducing the data into themes via a process of coding and summarising the codes. The condensed themes were organised and categorised and analysed through thematic analysis, while the quantitative data were expressed in term of percentage. Finally, the qualitative and quantitative findings were discussed and interlinked with related literature.

## 2. Federalism and interborder conflict between Tigrai and Amhara

Federalism refers to the sharing of power among autonomous units through ‘shared rule and self-rule’ (Watts 2008:1). In other words, a federal system of government is a division of power between a general authority and several regional authorities (Watts 2008). Such a system provides inspiration for the development of a practical way out for the growing demands of diverse ethnic groups for participatory and inclusive democracy that helps to maintain the unity of multi ethnic countries (Palermo 2015). The threat of disintegration and the need to maintain unity are the major reasons why unitary states opt for federalism (Lovise 2002). Federalism is certainly a good bargain for the political elites of conflict-spiked unitary states, which are on the verge of complete disintegration as it provides a platform for conflict management and accommodation of differences (Lovise 2002). It ‘has become a very popular “solution” for problems of ethnic conflict in public discourse’ (Elazar 1994:167). The more federalism encourages self-governance, the smaller the demands for secession become (Hechter 2000). Federalism is a stabilising measure, as it accommodates the quest for autonomy more through concession than repression (Hechter 2000). Similarly, in Ethiopia, ethnolinguistic federalism is set out to confirm the central government power devolution and maintain the country’s unity through concession. The federal arrangement was introduced as a means of power decentralization in response to the hitherto high concentration of power at the centre, and to empower ethno-linguistic groups (Assefa 2006) and thereby mitigate ethnic and border conflicts. However, ethnolinguistic federalism could not be a blameless bargain for interborder conflict. The ‘redefinition of Ethiopia along ethnic lines has created conflicts of its own, especially over the demarcation of the territories of the different federal units’ (Clapham 2004:53).

The post-1991 regime in Ethiopia, despite its promise and claims to bring solutions, has been less successful than expected in managing ethnic tensions in the country, and has basically only



‘decentralised’ the problems by defining the sources of conflict to be on the local and not national level. ... ‘ethnic’ struggles between communities are quite frequent and have led to a localisation of conflicts away from challenging the central state, and to an ‘essentialisation’ of ethno-cultural or linguistic differences, which then came to (re)define local group relations. (Abbink 2006:390-391)

This implies that ethnolinguistic federalism has brought about local conflicts, like the border conflicts between various regions. The border conflict between the Tigray and Amhara regions is presented here as a case in point to explicate that the parameters used in implementing federalism in Ethiopia has not exterminated interborder tensions. The federal borders between the Tigray and Amhara regions have not been accepted by a considerable number of individuals of the two regions, especially by the elites. Tigray elites lay a claim to territories that are presently under the Amhara region because the territories were under Tigray before 1956. In contrast, Amhara elites lay a claim to territories that are currently under the Tigray region because the territories were under the Gonder and Wollo provinces in the last two decades of the Haile Selassie era and most of the Derg regime.

Border conflict is not a recent phenomenon for Tigray and Amhara and other regions of Ethiopia. ‘Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede’<sup>i</sup>, which have been sources of conflicts since the late 1950s, are typical examples. For instance, before 1956 the border between the Tigray and Wollo provinces was ‘Alla’ River. Alla, which is a Tigrinya term, refers to a borderline. It indicates that the border between the Tigray and Wollo provinces was Alla River (Allawha Milash). However, in 1956, Haile Selassie took away a large territory from Tigray, and thus the ‘Allawha Milash’<sup>ii</sup> borderline was demolished. Some years after the end of the Weyane Uprising, the territory of Tigray was diminished because Raya was given away to the province of Wollo (Gebru 1991). In this respect, Ras Mengesha Seyoum<sup>iii</sup> (2018) says:

In 1948 and 49 E. C. ... the land from Allawah Milash up to Kobo was given away to Wollo, and Wolkait-Tsegede up to Tekeze was given away to Begemidir. ... Before that, I know that the territories were administered under Tigray throughout their histories. ... Everyone knows it; it is a recorded history.

It appears that taking the Allawha Milash and ‘Lemalimo Milash’<sup>iv</sup> territories away from Tigray was a phenomenon of the near past. This practice brought about resistance by the people of Tigray against the monarch that lasted for decades. Few years after the Haile Selassie government took away the Raya territory, elders, leaders and lawyers of Kobo and





the nearby areas such as Alemrew Gugsu, Abera Belay, Haile Ejigu, Abaye Abasero, Berinto Abaye, Birhanu Kassa, and Teshome Arersa mobilised the Raya people to demand the Haile Selassie government for the reincorporation of their territory into Tigray province (see Appendix B2). Such resistances continued until the downfall of the Derg in various forms. Despite the resistances, the territories remained under the Wollo and Gonder provinces until 1991 and a part of them until now. As the EPRDF took power, a part of Allawha Milash and Lemalimo Milash were given back to Tigray following the introduction of ethnolinguistic federalism; however, the Tigraian elites are not yet satisfied with the response of the government since large parts of Allawha Milash and Lemalimo Milash are still under Wollo and Gonder, respectively. On the other hand, Amhara elites are demanding for the reincorporation of Alamata, Ofla, Chercher, and Enda Mexoni because they were under the Wollo province, as well as for Wolkait, Tsegede, and Humera because these places were under the Gonder province in the Haile Selassie and Derg regimes.

### 3. Interborder conflict in Raya

After the end of the Weyane Uprising, Haile Selassie took away the Allawha Milash territory and introduced an assimilationist policy through the newly assigned Amhara governors and banned any services, including religious service and verbal communication, delivered through Tigrinya. This policy continued until the downfall of the Derg. Though it was hoped that the 1974 revolution, which removed the last monarch from power, would alleviate national oppression and forge the unity of the country on a completely new and democratic grounds, the unity through oppression and inequality was not dismantled (Berhane 1990). As a result, many people, especially those who are still under the Amhara region, are assimilated. Currently, these areas are prone to interborder conflict because the Tigraia and Amhara elites are contesting over the territory.

Kidane Amene<sup>v</sup> (2019) states that ‘in the southern part of Tigray, the border of Tigray is Allawha Milash; we have documents that confirm this; we have history; we have documents that show that the area was under the administration [of Tigray].’ This implies that historically, Allawha Milash was under Tigray, and thus Kidane Amene and his party have made a strenuous effort to reincorporate the Allawha Milash territory into Tigray. In doing so, the party has used historical documents as evidence. Official letters of the last





monarch show that Allawha was the border between the Tigray and Wollo provinces. One of the official letters of Haile Selassie indicates that Alamata and Kobo were under Tigray, which helped the province to levy enough tax up to 1956 to cover regional expenses, but the province was unable to pay teachers' salaries because its revenue was highly diminished after the territories were taken away (see Appendix A2). Presently, political parties and the elites of the Tigray region have used this phenomenon and other related ones to claim the whole Raya territory.

On the contrary, politicians and elites who are inclined to the Amhara linguistic group lay a claim for the demarcation of the Raya territory under the Amhara region, which is currently under Tigray. Belete Mola<sup>VI</sup> (2019) states:

What is Raya? There are people of Raya. ... In Raya, if we go to Ofla, we find Agew. If we go to Ofla-Korem, we find many Amharas and many Agews. If we go to Mexoni and Chercher, there are people who identify themselves as Tigrayians. In a few *Kebeles*, there are few people who speak Oromo. ... People who live in places around Alamata, Waja, Balla, Merewa dominantly identify themselves as Amhara.

Similarly, Dejene Asefa<sup>VII</sup> (2018) says that 'we [the people of Raya] want to ... live with the Wollo community, with Wollo Amhara.' These views imply that most of the Raya people are Amhara, and should be incorporated to Amhara region. Hence, it can be argued based on the above view that Amhara politicians and some individuals who live in Raya have a common goal, namely the demarcation of the whole Raya territory under the Amhara region. Of course, they did not conduct any needs assessments that enable them to argue that the Raya community accepts the demarcation of Raya under the Amhara region. It seems that they are propagating their own political interest because of two important reasons where most of the Raya people do not have any question on the issue. As stated in the 1994 national census, most of the Raya people, 84.06 per cent of them, identified themselves as Tigrayians (see Appendix C) and in a zonal and district level assessment, people selected from each locality of the Raya zone as representatives of the Raya community, confirmed that they are Tigrayians (Muleta Yirga<sup>VIII</sup> 2019) and do not have any other aspiration and question of administration under the Amhara region.



Therefore, it is argued that the question of the Raya people is a question of good governance, and infrastructure and economic development. In this regard, Muleta Yirga (2019) states:

The area, especially the villages, has unique natural resources, but it has not been developed because it was not given enough attention. The representatives mentioned the Raya Valley Development Project as an example. ... Several water wells were dug, but they have been there for many years without being utilized. ... In the zone and district level discussions, infrastructural related things such as road, quality of education, shortage of classrooms, all season roads, water, shortage of pure drinking water in many localities were raised as issues that grumbled the community. ... These problems have made people feel that they are neglected, forgotten.

From this view, it appears that the question of the Raya community is a question of economic development, infrastructure and good governance. They demanded that the government build classrooms and roads and utilise water wells of the Raya Valley. They do not have any resistance on their administration and inclusion under the Tigrai regional state. However, as indicated earlier, some members of the Raya community and Amhara politicians have used the economic and infrastructural development questions of the people as fertile grounds to put their political interest into effect. Thus, it appears that the conflict over Raya is a conflict over territory. It is a conflict of the 'Tigrai and the Amhara regions' elites over land resources. Conflict on land 'becomes a collective community issue, and pits communities against each other' (Abbink 2006:396).

Thus, the historical phenomenon of the Raya territory is the main factor for interborder conflict between the Tigrai and Amhara regions. This factor has become the causes of interborder conflict between the two regions that are trying to expand their territories beyond their present statuses. Tigraian elites have laid claims to the Raya territory, which is under the Amhara region presently, given that the territory was under Tigrai before 1956. On the contrary, Amhara elites and some members of the Raya community, who are inclined to the Amhara linguistic group, are working to give away the Raya territory of Tigrai to the Amhara region. They indicated that the Raya community speaks Amharic, and thus the Raya territory, which is presently under Tigrai region, must be included in the Amhara region.



#### 4. Interborder conflict in Wolkait-Tsegede

In the west, historically, the border of Tigray was beyond Lemalimo in that it extended to the Semen Mountains. Bishop Samuel Gobat<sup>IX</sup> indicated the extension of the Tigray province to the Semen Mountains. Tigray and Amhara are separated ‘partly by the lofty mountains of Samen, which stretch themselves in a gigantic range, to the majestic Laota’ (1850:37). Likewise, Bishop Michael Russell<sup>X</sup> states that Lasta, Abergele, Semen, Wolkait, and Waldubba were Tigray proper (1833:104). It can be thus traced that the territory beneath Lemalimo was under Tigray and the people have been Tigrinya speakers for centuries. One of the maps published by the Derg in 1978 shows that the people of the territory beneath Lemalimo were Tigrinya speakers (see Appendix E).

Therefore, it can be argued that unlike in the Raya area, the impact of the Shewan assimilationist policies is minimal in Wolkait-Tsegede. The people of Wolkait-Tsegede and other neighbouring territories maintained their Tigrinya language despite the pressure of the assimilationist policies of the imperial and military regimes. Tigrinya is predominantly spoken in Adi Arqai, Abderafie, Mai Tsebri, and other nearby places beneath Lemalimo that are presently under the Amhara region. Therefore, Kidane Amene (2019) states that ‘We do not accept the present map of Tigray; the present map does not include all Tigrinya speaker people of Tigray; ... in the direction of Gonder, [the territory of Tigray] extends up to Lemalimo.’ This implies that even though the people, who dwell in the mentioned and other nearby localities, are Tigrinya speakers and the territories were under Tigray for centuries, the EPRDF did not use historic land ownership and language to demark the border between Tigray and Amhara regions in the west. In this regard, Ghelawdewos Araia (2016) writes:

Just beneath the Lemalimo, there is a place called Mai Liham, and east of Mai Liham on the main road there is Adi Arqai and below Adi Arqai on the same road there is Mai Tsebri, all Tigrinya names; the capital of Wolkait, deep in the interior of the district, itself is Adi Remets, another Tigrinya name and I argued that these names could not be mere coincidences unless they were part of Tigray, and even if we ignore the names of these places, how could it be possible to dismiss an entire Tigrinya-speaking people as non-Tigraians?





It seems that most of the people who live in the places mentioned in the above extract are Tigrinya speakers and the place names are Tigrinya. However, a large part of the territory beneath Lemalimo such as Mai Liham and Adi Arqai are under the Amhara region. It can be, therefore, argued that the border demarcation in the west did not follow the general rule of federal border demarcation that used language to set the interborders of the country. This practice is advantageous for the Amhara region because besides comprising assimilated linguistic groups, people who still speak Tigrinya are included in the region. However, Amhara elites are not satisfied with this action. They claim for more territories that are presently under the Tigray region because the territories were under the Gonder province in the Derg regime. For instance, Atalay Zafe<sup>XI</sup> (2019) says that ‘we have a denied Amhara identity; we were under North Gonder, Wogera Awraja, Dabat Capital City, Wolkait district, Tsegede district, and Humera district, but presently we are included under Tigray region.’ This implies that, in the Derg regime, Wolkait, Tsegede, and Humera were under the Gonder province that belongs to Amhara. However, the Gonder province was not an Amhara province since it was a home to both Amharas and Tigrayans. In this respect, Daniel Berhane (2011) argues:

The fallacy is that Gondar province was not an ‘Amhara Province’ – be it by law or in terms of composition. Gondar was inhabited by Amharans and Tigrayans, just like Tigray Province was populated by Tigrayans and the Afar. ... In fact, there is no relation between the current States and the former Provinces, though, accidentally, there has been a Province by the name Tigray before 1991.

In addition, Atalay Zafe (2019), who was born and grew up in Wolkait says, ‘the people [of Wolkait] speak, express their feelings, and reflect their identity through Amharic; ... in January, ‘all’ wedding rituals are [conducted through] Amharic.’ This implies that the people of Wolkait-Tsegede speak Amharic and use to conduct wedding services; thus, the territory belongs to the Amhara region. However, these linguistic practices are not peculiar to Wolkait-Tsegede only. As the language has been used as a government language for more than 150 years, it is disseminated throughout the country, and so it is common to hear Tigrayans speaking Amharic and conducting their wedding services in Amharic and Tigrinya, including in the hinterland of the Tigray regional state. Similarly, the people of Wolkait-Tsegede use both languages as mediums of communication and weddings or other





social affairs. As such, it is common to see differences in peoples' feelings while using languages. For instance, it is when Tigrinya music is served that people in all walks of life dance and express their feelings wholeheartedly. In this regard, Mekonnen Zelelew<sup>XII</sup> (2018) says:

My parents were the basis of the people [of Wolkait] for a long period of time. ... I have heard two things being voiced: 'Wolkait is Amhara; Wolkait has never spoken Tigrinya.'... Wolkait is a Tigrinya speaker from the beginning. Amharic came into Wolkait; it is not Tigrinya that came into Wolkait. Amharic came into Wolkait with the coming of policemen, teachers, especially with the coming of *Azmari* [traditional vocalists] of Gonder. ... The people of Wolkait have different culture [from Amhara]. An elder does not dance *Eskista* [Amhara dance] even in his son's wedding ceremony; he enjoys it seating. But we see an 80 or 90-year-old elder dancing when it is in Tigrinya culture [music].

It appears that it is wrong to think that Tigrinya is not indigenous to Wolkait. It is rather Amharic that is not an indigenous language to Wolkait because teachers, policemen and *Azmari* were the first to introduce Amharic, in the last hundred or so years, into Wolkait-Tsegede, while Tigrinya has been spoken in the territory since time immemorial. Besides, Mekonnen Zelelew (2018) says:

If you see the place names, they all are Tigrinya; Adi Goshu, Kulita, Bilamba Kirshi, Adi Afterari, Adi Bezza, Kaka, Adi Remets, Adi Hirdi, Kefta, Tolla, Tsili'elo, Dejena, A'werki, what can I say all are Tigrinya names. The identity of Wolkait is Tigrai; they are Tigrai and. This cannot be denied.

The fact that most of the place names of Wolkait-Tsegede are in Tigrinya, proves the indigeneity of the Tigrinya and Tigrai identity in the territory. Geographical features have indigenous-language names that reflect the profound connection of the group to the territory: 'Places where important events took place have names that reflect those events, and places with mythological or supernatural associations also have names rich in meaning for the group' (Dorian 1999:32). Hence, the identity of the Wolkait-Tsegede people is undeniably Tigrai because, despite the pressure of the Shoan assimilationist policy, the people have maintained their Tigrinya culture and language; and based on the 1994 National Census, most of the people of Wolkait-Tsegede and other debatable nearby territories (88.29 per cent) identified themselves as Tigrains (see Appendix D).



## 5. Conclusion

In Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede, historic land ownership has become a playground for different political and social groups. This factor has become the cause for interborder conflict between the Tigrai and Amhara regions that are trying to expand their territories beyond their present statuses. This situation has made the Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede territories prone to interborder conflict and hindrance to the effective implementation of ethnolinguistic federalism. As a result, it is concluded that ethnolinguistic federalism could not be a remedy for interborder conflict in Ethiopia, mainly because it has not taken historical ownership of territories into account. For instance, many territories that were under Tigrai, Oromo and Benishangul-Gumuz before the expansion of the Shewan monarch are given to the Amhara region because of the assimilation of various ethnolinguistic groups into Amharic, which was deliberately spread by central governments for the last 150 or so years. Currently, interborder tensions are in flux. The interborder conflict between Tigrai and Amhara regions has become intense in that the Tigraian elite has aggressively involved in the movement of returning their territories that were taken away by Amhara governors. This tension is likely to lead to fierce conflicts if proper measure is not taken timely. Thus, it is recommended that historic land ownership context should be taken into account in interborder demarcations, especially in Amharic frontiers. People who dwell in the Amharic frontiers have remained bilingual as Amharic was imposed and spread aggressively to assimilate people and destroy their languages. Hence, in such contexts, other languages, other than Amharic, along with historical ownership of the territories, should be used as mechanisms to demark interregional borders to minimise interborder conflict and effectively implement ethnolinguistic federalism in Ethiopia.

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<sup>1</sup> Raya and Wolkait-Tsegede are controversial territories that have become sources of conflicts between the Tigrai and Amhara regions. There are two self-nominated groups that work on the incorporation of the Raya and Wolkait territories, which are currently under the Tigrai region, to the Amhara region. One group that works to return the Raya territory is called the 'Raya Identity Committee', and the other group that lays a claim for the Wolkait territory is called the 'Wolkait Identity Committee'. Each group has active members who reflect their views through various media. The views of two members of the committees, one from each group are analysed in this study. Besides, the view of the president of one of the political parties of the





Amhara region is included in this study. In contrast, there is a self-nominated committee that lays a claim for territories that are presently under the Amhara region, namely the Allawha Milash and Lemalmo Milash Asmelash Committee. One can notice individuals that call upon the committee to make active engagement on the issue through social media such as Facebook. However, there are no recorded views of the members of the committee on YouTube. Thus, views of politicians and other professionals, who press for the incorporation of the Allawha Milash and Lemalmo Milash territories, are taken from YouTube.

<sup>II</sup> Allawha Milash was the border between the Tigray and Wollo provinces before the 1950s. Allawha Milash denotes to the whole Raya territory that extends from Alla River to 'Gereb Ago'. Gereb Ago is a river in Tigray that is situated about 70 kilometres south of Mekelle City. The term 'Milash' is common in Tigray in that it is used following many place names such as Alaje Milash and Mereb Milash that show boundaries of zonal territories. The Raya territory consists of five *weredas* ('districts') of which four (Alamata, Oflla, Chercher, and Enda Mexoni) are presently under the Tigray regional state, while the remaining one (Kobo) is under the Amhara regional state.

<sup>III</sup> Ras Mengesha Seyoum is a member of the imperial family of the Ethiopian monarch. He was one of the government officials of the aristocratic Ethiopian Emperor and a husband of Emperor Haile Selassie's granddaughter. He was the governor of the Tigray province from 1960 to 1974, that is, since few years after the Raya and Wolkait territories of the Tigray province were taken away.

<sup>IV</sup> Lemalimo Milash is in the north west of the Amhara region. Tigrayan elites argue that Lemalimo Milash is the border between the Tigray and Amhara regions.

<sup>V</sup> Kidane Amene is the president of the National Congress of Great Tigray opposition political party. He argues for the annexation of the Allawha Milash and Lemalimo Milash territories to the Tigray region that are presently under the Amhara region.

<sup>VI</sup> Belete Mola is the president of Amhara National Movement opposition party. He was a vice-president of his party during the time of the interview. He was born and grown up in the Raya territory that is currently under the Amhara region. He argues for the incorporation of the Raya territory that is presently under the Tigray regional state.

<sup>VII</sup> Dejene Asefa was born and grown up in the Raya territory that is currently under the Tigray region. At present, he is the vice-president of the Raya Identity Committee and works for the incorporation of the Raya territory of the Tigray region to the Amhara region.

<sup>VIII</sup> Muleta Yirga (PhD) is an assistant professor at Mekelle University who conducted an assessment on the question of the Raya people. He was born and grown up in the Raya territory that is currently under the Tigray regional state.

<sup>IX</sup> Bishop Samuel Gobat was a Swiss Calvinist who became an Anglican missionary in Africa and Bishop of Jerusalem in 1846. He visited Ethiopia for the first time in 1830 and stayed for three years. He visited Ethiopia in 1834 for the second time and stayed for about two years. In 1850, he published a book titled *Journal of three years' residence in Abyssinia*. In his book, Samuel Gobat stated the moral state, religion, and so forth, of Ethiopia and places that were under Tigray and Amhara in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and before.

<sup>X</sup> Bishop Michael Russell became the first Bishop of Glasgow and Galloway in 1837. He visited Ethiopia as a missionary before he became a Bishop and lived in Ethiopia for years in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1833, he published a book titled *Nubia and Abyssinia*. His book describes the Ethiopian culture, civil history, language, literature, religion, and so on, in detail. The book indicates the territories that were under the Tigray, Amhara, and other people of Ethiopia, is used as evidence for claims made for territories based on historical accounts.

<sup>XI</sup> Atalay Zafe is a public relation of the Wolkait Identity Committee. He was born and grown up in the Wolkait territory that is currently under Tigray. He argues for the incorporation of the Wolkait territory, which is currently under the Tigray region, into the Amhara region.

<sup>XII</sup> Mekonnen Zelelew is an executive of the Tigray Democratic Alliance opposition party. He was born and grown up in the Wolkait territory that is currently under the Tigray region. During the imperial regime, his grandfather was an administrator of the Wolkait territory. He argues that the whole Wolkait up to Angereb was Tigray since time immemorial, and thus it should be under the Tigray region.

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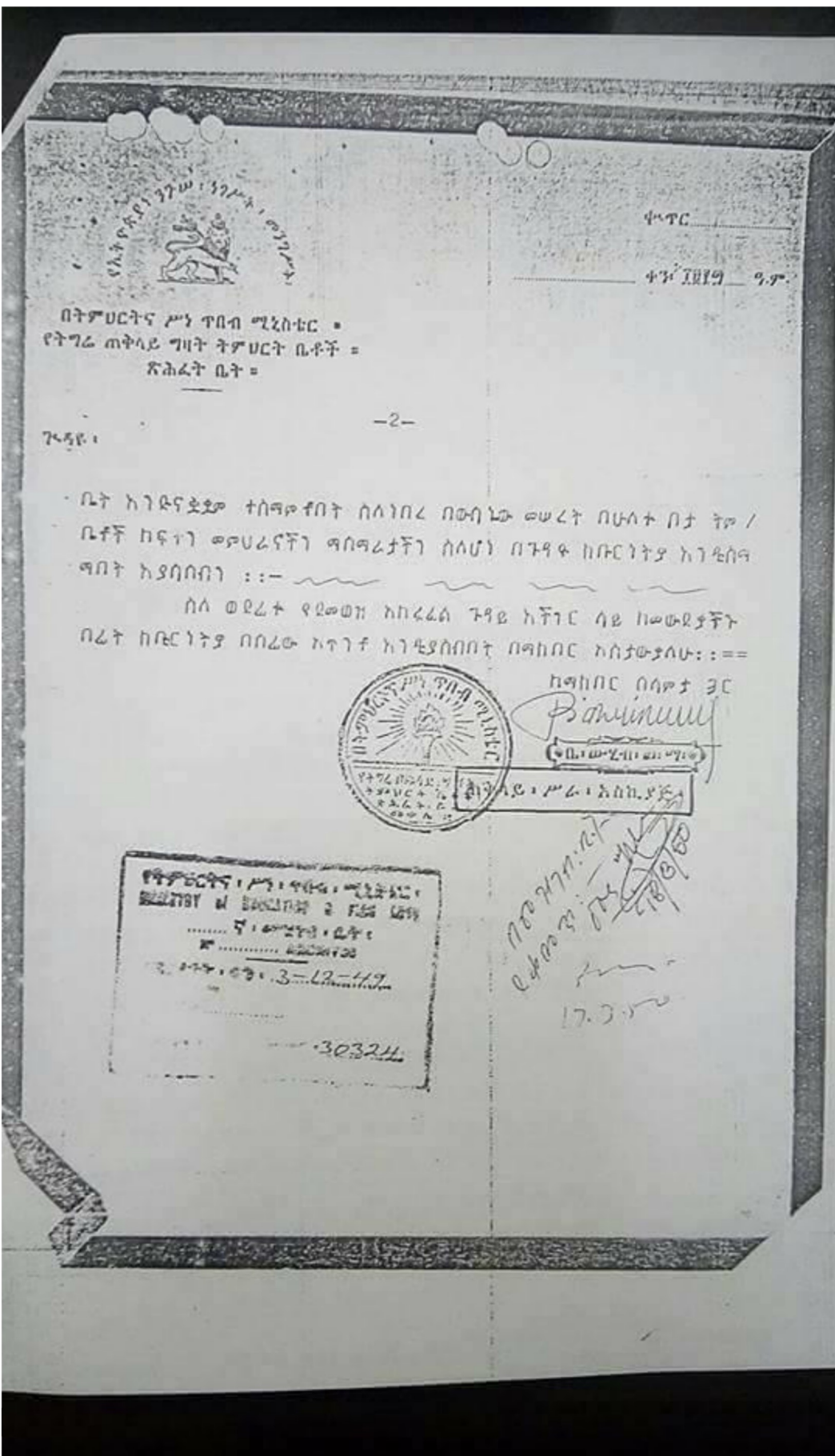




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## Appendices





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**Appendix A2:** Haile Selassie government's official letter I (translated into English)

No.: 3101/36  
Date: 2 August 1957

Ministry of Education and Arts

Tigray Province Schools' Office

Subject: About new teachers

To: His Majesty the Ministry of Education and Arts

Your Majesty,

It is clear that we could not cover our expenses in that the annual education tax income of the province. It has highly diminished from two hundred and fifty thousand Birr to one hundred and seventy thousand Birr because Debrichi, Kobo and Alamata of Raya are given away to the Wollo province. In this respect, we announce that when we examine our present income and expense, the money we have at hand can only cover the salaries of teachers and other workers of August 1957. Besides, as we informed your majesty through a letter dated 20 June 1957, No. 2679/32, we need new teachers for 1958. However, ten teachers were sent to us from teachers' training college whose salary payment has become a heavy burden for us.

As it was announced in the previous meeting, on top of their expansion, schools have enough teachers. The Education Board of the province assembled in December 1957 and agreed to establish two schools instead of making new employees idle. Thus, I would like to request your majesty to agree with the agenda because we are going to engage teachers, in two places, based on the decision.

With due greetings,

Full name of the general manager Wube Wihib and signature is affixed

The seal of Tigray Province Schools' Office of the Ministry of Education and Arts

The seal of Ministry of Education and Arts

At the top of this document, a statue, the symbol of Haile Selassie





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Translated by: Yonattan Araya Zemaryam, PhD

**Appendix B1:** Haile Selassie government's official letter II (Amharic version)





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**Appendix B2:** Haile Selassie government's official letter II (translated into English)

To: Dear Dejazmach Demisie Welde Amanuel, Governor of Wollo province

The relocation of the Raya Kobo administration to the Tigray province (as before) instead of with Wollo as it is administered presently is advocated by supporting with various preaching and enough money. Individuals who are working to dismantle the security of the Wollo province by creating a motive that the Tigray province is more crucial for them than the Wollo province and disseminate political thoughts and exchange letters secretly with the Tigray province include:

1. Mr Alemrew Gugsu, Lawyer of Alamata Woreda Court
2. Grazmach Abera Belay, Vice governor of Waja Woreda
3. Kegnazmach Haile Ejigu, Chief Secretary of Alamata Woreda
4. Fitewrari Abaye Abasero, Vice governor of Alamata Woreda
5. Fitewrari Berinto Abaye, Vice governor of Alamata Woreda
6. Mr Birhanu Kassa, Attorney

Besides, Mr Teshome Arersa is the distributor of accumulated money being sent from the Tigray province to run political activities. I am following up to get a concrete picture of the situation, but for the time being, the listed country elders are telling the people about politics and informing them that they will not be guilty if this district is returned to the respected Tigray province. In addition, the appointed leaders of this [Kobo] administration support the idea. They are involved in politics and have oral contacts with the mentioned persons. I also realised that they could not conduct government jobs effectively because politics is inculcated in their minds.

Therefore, despite my presentation of this idea as a clue, I will soon present the idea with evidence. However, until then, I would like to present my note with due respect to your majesty to help you understand and investigate the politics up to its source.

Full name of Dejazmach Desta Shiwa Rikab and signature is affixed

The seal of Wollo Province Office

The date of this document is unreadable, but the context gives a clue that it is around 1957.





Translated by: Yonattan Araya Zemaryam, PhD

**Appendix C:** Major Ethnic-Group Populations of Raya Zone of Tigrai

Wereda	Enda Mexoni	Raya Azebo	Alamata	Ofla	Total	%
All persons	81 657	87 638	93 659	124 484	387 438	100
Tigrai an	79 962	76 431	58 244	111 038	325 675	84.06
Amhara	901	8 466	31 761	4 304	45 432	11.73
Oromo	---	1 229	2 097	24	3 350	0.86
Others	794	1 512	1 557	9 118	12 981	3.35

Source: Central Statistical Authority (1995)

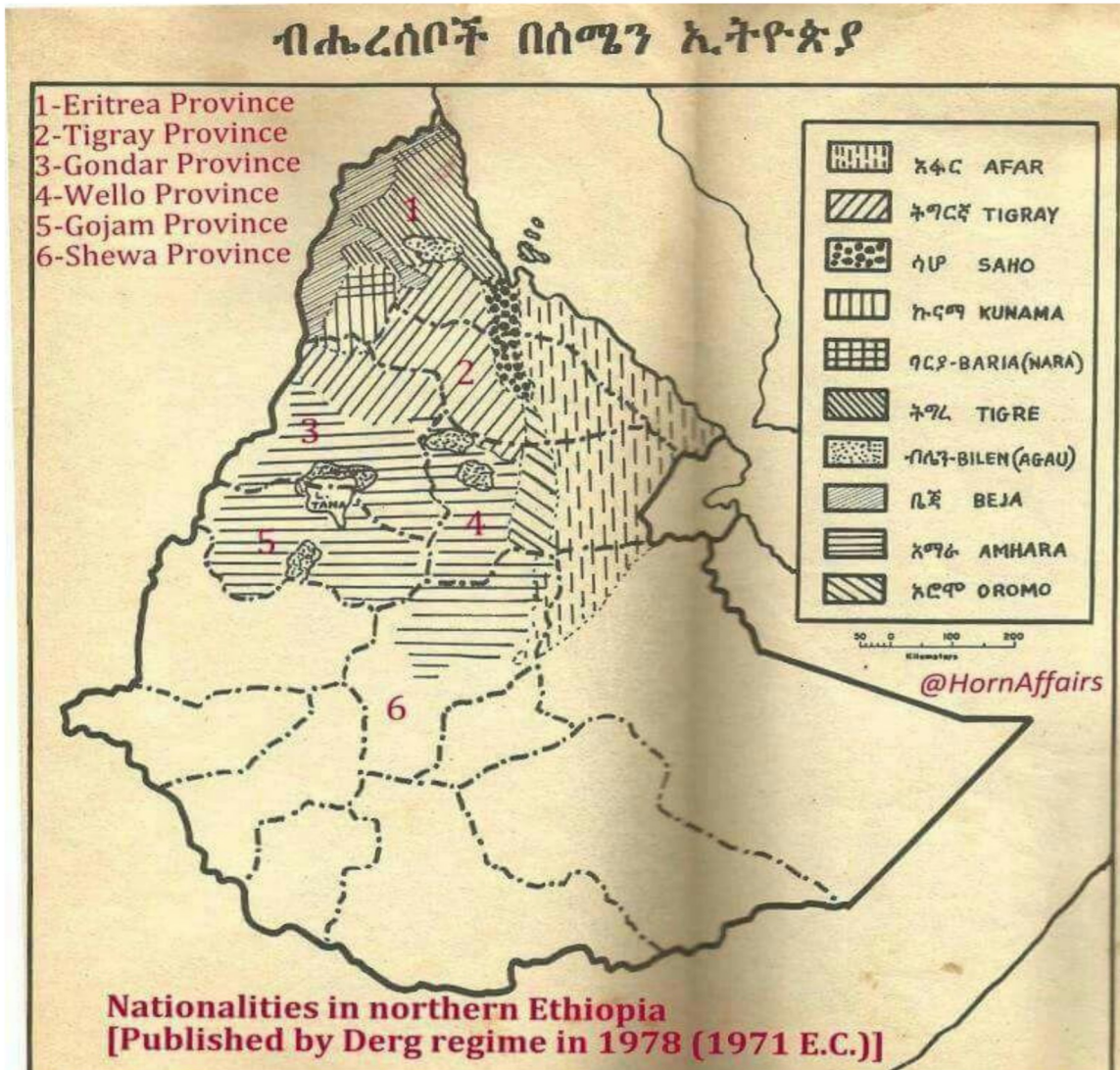
**Appendix D:** Major Ethnic-Group Populations of the Western Zone of Tigray

Wereda	Kefta Humera	Tselemti	Wolkait	Tsegede	Total	%
All persons	48 690	97 630	90 186	59 846	296 352	100
Tigran	41 999	87 012	87 099	45 532	261 642	88.29
Amhara	3 800	10 382	2 734	14 226	31 142	10.51
Others	2891	236	353	88	3568	1.20

Source: Central Statistical Authority (1995)



Appendix E: Nationalities in North Ethiopia, 1978



Source: Daniel Berhane (2011)