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The ‘Wolqayt question’ from c. 2015 to the Tigray war: agrarian claims in Amhara nationalism.

MEHDI LABZAÉ

Abstract: The emergence of Amhara nationalism as a central political trend in Ethiopia can be dated to 2016. It soon gained considerable audience within the Amhara region and beyond. This article analyses a spearheading claim of Amhara nationalists: the annexation of ‘Wolqayt’ - constitutionally known as Western Tigray - to the Amhara region. The article shows that beyond identity discourses, material claims related to agrarian questions were central in how a committee made of agricultural investors, rich peasants, and civil servants first articulated their grievances. After many activists spent months in jail, the Amhara cause was militarized in the lead-up to the Tigray war, within and without state structures. Drawing on a firsthand ethnographic account of the increasingly polarized political crisis and the Tigray war, the article shows how wartime government practices and violence paved the way for the politicization of other identity categories in Western Tigray and Wolqayt, once again anchored in claims over resources – notably land - and state services. A qualitative methodology unveils strong material dimensions of current contentious politics in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Ethiopia, land, violence, war, state administration.

On the night between November 3rd and 4th, 2020, heavy fighting broke out around barracks of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in Tigray, Ethiopia’s northernmost region. Militiamen from the neighboring Amhara region, led by Amhara Special Forces (ASF), entered Western Tigray to assist ENDF units battling it out with the Tigray Special Forces.¹ The Tigray war had started. Supported by the Eritrean army the ASF, ENDF, and Amhara militiamen called *fanno* soon took control of Western Tigray, up to the Tekeze river that they claimed was the ‘*natural boundary*’ between Amhara and Tigray. In subsequent months, Western Tigray was *de facto* incorporated into the Amhara Region, as a new zone called Wolqayt Tegeḍé Setit Humera.

For Amhara nationalists, the war was the occasion to realize irredentist views they had carved out during a political crisis that had started with the Oromo Protests in 2014.² Since the summer of 2016, nationalist and territorial claims erupted from activists claiming to represent Amharas’ interests.³ Although recent

scholarly work locates the crafting of the Amhara as an ethno-national label in the Orientalist views of Ethiopianist scholars linked with Italian colonial pretensions,⁴ it is the 1960-1970s Ethiopian student movement who politicized the notion, by framing the ‘question of nationalities’ in the Ethiopian context.⁵ Readers of Frantz Fanon, student activists claimed that only socialism could end the unmasked Amhara supremacy hiding behind Ethiopian nationalism.⁶ Indeed, Amhara cultural practices provided most of what was subsumed as the Ethiopian culture, Amharic was the language of the state, and an Amhara political identity was melted in a wider notion of Ethiopianness, characterized by a high degree of plasticity.⁷ The theorization of domination through the lens of nationalism and ethnicity became central in the ideological makeup of armed groups during the 17-years-long civil war against the military *Derg* regime, before being institutionalized by the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In the early 1990s, the latter proceeded to a re-drawing of state institutions on ethno-federal lines.⁸

Ethnicity was now the basis for political representation. Over the 28 years of EPRDF rule (1991-2019), despite an Amhara branch of the EPRDF ruling over the Amhara region, Amhara élites provided the bulk of ‘pan-Ethiopianist’ opposition members, many of them in the diaspora.⁹ Groups opposing the diagnose of imperialism and oppression of ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ by an Amhara-Christian center were deemed reactionaries willing to reintroduce the feudal rule the 1975 land reform had abolished. Although most of the Amhara population remained extremely poor,¹⁰ the blindness of their political élites to ethnonational inequalities within Ethiopia showed that their vision of the latter was rooted in a particular socio-cultural context, that of a community who had not resented their place in the hierarchy of cultural identities.¹¹ By enouncing the formal idea of equality between all Ethiopians whatever their ethnic background, pan-Ethiopian élites ignored that such ‘universalism’ had not guaranteed equal rights and dignity for all.

The pace at which a new trend of Amhara nationalism became ubiquitous in the Amhara region between 2016 and 2020 took many by surprise. Amhara activists retrenched on a claim of representing the Amhara’s interests as such, not confounded in a wider Ethiopianness. They did not abandon their claim of embodying Ethiopia as a polity and historical entity but rephrased Ethiopian nationalist discourse in

a narrower Amhara nationalism, revengeful and irredentist. Amhara nationalism constitutes a case of backlash nationalism, as activists vehemently reacted to claims for autonomy from other ethno-national groups by reasserting Amhara high culture as a reference point.¹² They strongly oppose the ethnofederal Constitution, accused of having institutionalized the Amhara's marginalization.¹³ It is an ambiguous nationalism whose main proponents were, for long, advocating a wider form of political identification, *i.e.*, an empire. Contemporary Amhara nationalism is the product of the intricate transformation from an empire to a nation-state.¹⁴

This article aims at analyzing how Amhara nationalism emerged during the political crisis and was implemented during the Tigray war. It takes issue with two tendencies of recent scholarly work on Amhara nationalism. The first one is the acceptance of narratives of victimhood without considering both the historicity of nationalism and the ways nationalist mobilization was built by activists, within and without state structures.¹⁵ The second one is taking essentialist narratives on territory and identity for granted, without paying attention to the agrarian claims they are based on.¹⁶ Consequently, the paper proposes an understanding of nationalism through its materiality, demonstrating how agrarian grievances frame mobilization and shape the politicization of ethnicity.¹⁷ It focuses on the 'Wolqayt question', one of the main bones of contention between Amhara nationalists and their adversaries, mainly the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), since 2016. Territorial disputes over Wolqayt and other localities such as Metekel or Raya provided the rallying claim for youth who found in nationalism a means to articulate a wider critique, first based on demands for social justice and access to resources.

The article is neither based on archival work nor intended to give yet another arbitration on territorial disputes. In a first part, I review discursive and organizational elements central to the birth of Amhara nationalism, showing how urban youth organized in movements and a political party, while a segment of Western Tigray élites raised agrarian claims that provided a leading slogan: the 'Wolqayt question'. The second part described how Amhara nationalism was militarized, when urban activists merged with former armed groups, and through the recruitment of ASF. The third part analyzes the implementation of an Amhara nationalist project in annexed territories of Western Tigray, showing how nationalists tried to create, by ethnic cleansing, an ethnically homogeneous population. Remaining residents offered

a stinging rebuttal to their essentialist views of ethnicity, by articulating a counter-politicization of the Wolqayt ethnicity.

The article draws on ethnographic observation, interviews, and informal discussions with Amhara activists, *fanno* fighters, administrators, agricultural investors, and peasants during stays in North Gondar (Dabat, Debarq), Armach’ho, Metemma, TegeḎé, TsegeḎé, Qafta-Humera, and Wolqayt. The study was presented as sociological research on agricultural practices, land administration and conflict. It was supported by research authorizations from relevant authorities. Interviews with activists have been conducted since January 2019 in Ethiopia and in Europe. Fieldwork in North Gondar was carried out for two weeks in October 2016 and in January 2020, and for a month and a half in October-November 2020. Four stays in territories conquered by Amhara forces during the civil war were carried out in November-December 2020, March, June, and July 2021, for a total of five weeks. Additional interviews were conducted in Gondar, Bahir Dar, Addis Ababa throughout the period, and in camps hosting refugees from Western Tigray in Sudan in December 2022, and Tigray in November 2023.

ORGANIZING THE PARADOX: THE (RE)BIRTH OF AMHARA NATIONALISM

Party politics

Amhara activists generally date the first attempt to build an Amhara political movement in 1993, when Asrat Woldeyes, a surgeon and Haile Sellassie’s former medical doctor, created the All-Amhara People’s Organization (*Meahd*). The party’s ethno-nationalist stance didn’t survive the imprisonment of its leader and was later rechristened into an All-Ethiopian Unity Organization (*Meiad*),¹⁸ showing that Amhara political élites were not ready to accept their regionalization, reasserting the conflation of ‘Amhara’ and ‘Ethiopian’ political identities. In 2018, as activists repeatedly claimed the surgeon’s legacy, an activist media channel reporting extensively on displacements and violence Amhara populations were facing in Ethiopia’s peripheries was named Amhara Satellite Radio and Television (ASRAT).

If *Meahd* failed, the conversion of other Amhara politicians to the language of ethnicity was encouraged by the EPRDF. In 1980, the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM), another emanation from the Ethiopian student movement, engaged in close military cooperation with the TPLF.¹⁹ The two

groups created a military united front in 1988, before forming the EPRDF in 1990.²⁰ At the end of armed struggle, the EPDM was renamed Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) - the EPRDF branch ruling the Amhara region. As the only channel to access state power, the ANDM recruited largely among Amhara élites throughout the region. It was a prominent member of the EPRDF coalition, who played a leading role in some of the party's political crises and who kept some autonomy in policy implementation. If, as Tezera argued, the Amhara élites showed '*utmost resistance*'²¹ to the federal dispensation, they did it mainly from the diaspora, while the ANDM provided high-ranking officials to the federal government. However, as Tezera noted, ANDM officials tended to refrain from adopting ethnicity as the main grid for understanding domination. They avoided referring to Amharaness in mundane political speeches and activities until the mid-2010s, as the increasingly violent political crisis threatened ethno-federalism.

If the transplant from Ethiopian nationalism to a narrower Amhara nationalism failed in 1993, it proved successful in 2018, when the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) was created and soon gained considerable audience. The party was formed around a group of male University lecturers, journalists, and researchers from most of Amhara region's zones. Some Amhara activists from Benishangul-Gumuz involved in ASRAT Media also played a prominent role in the creation of the movement.²² Early factional struggles within NaMA revolved first and foremost around trying to balance regional divisions. In Gondar, activists considered NaMA as a "Gojjamé" party, arguing that its first chairman was from Bahir Dar, and Gondar underrepresented.²³ It is in Gojjam that the party secured four seats in the 2021 general elections. Religious divides were carefully avoided. While successive chairmen have both been Christians, their deputy, a Muslim from Wollo, was regularly put forward in the media. Such distinctions remained implicit, but young supporters knew they were potential lines of divide.

The party gained considerable audience among Amhara youth, first on social media, and then in the region's towns. Its victories at the June 2021 elections paved the way for NaMA's entrance in the federal government, with one ministerial seat in October 2021. Several elements explain NaMA's rapidly expanding social base. In 2018, many youths had only known the ethno-federal state, *i.e.*, a system institutionalizing ethnicity as the basis for political representation. As pupils and youth, they had been

taught in Amharic, organized, and defined as Amharas, as a regional political arena took consistence along these lines. What's more, Amhara activists purposely avoided to separate being Amhara from being Ethiopian: for them, displaying their 'Amharaness' was being a 'good Ethiopian'. For NaMA's chairman, '*Amhara nationalism is not in opposition to Ethiopian nationalism. We shall create an Ethiopia where all are treated the same way.*'²⁴ As a prominent journalist, activist and NaMA founding member puts it: '*If we became Amharas, it's because we couldn't live as Ethiopians. So, we organized as Amharas. But we didn't leave our Ethiopianness out of joy. This doesn't make me happy to spread ethnic politics.*'²⁵ Retraction on a narrower nationalism is presented as something imposed on the Amhara as a result of the increasing violence targeting Amhara population outside the region.

Violence and the G-word

As a political party, NaMA took part in the elaboration of the main element of the Amhara nationalist discourse: the idea that Amharas were victims of an ongoing genocide or, in their parlance '*a campaign of race extermination*' (*yezer matfat zemecha*). From 2016 onwards, many articles, videos and books documenting violence committed against Amhara populations have been published. Most authors linked the denunciation of violence to territorial claims and mainly Wolqayt²⁶, while some works engaged in documentation of the massacres.²⁷

Labelling violence that targets one's people as genocide has a history in the Horn of Africa, and Amhara activists, like members of other communities, didn't lack episodes of atrocious violence to substantiate their claims.²⁸ They made extensive political use of the massacres that targeted Amhara populations in other regions in the 2010s. In 2013, local authorities had displaced thousands of ethnic Amharas and Oromos from Benishangul-Gumuz. From 2016 onwards, security forces had repeatedly shot on Amhara demonstrators, leaving hundreds of dead, as the then Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn eventually acknowledged.²⁹ In 2020, as polarization deepened, a series of massacres received large media coverage: Repeated killings in the Metekel zone of Benishangul-Gumuz in September, a massacre in Gura Ferda (Southern region) on October 12th, another in West Wellega on November 2nd that prompted emotional debates in Parliament, and an attack on a bus on November 14th in Metekel. In the previous week, hundreds of people were killed in the town of May Kadra, most of them said to be Amhara.³⁰

Authors denouncing the ‘Amhara genocide’ converged on a solution: ‘*First, Amharas will solve the continuous danger they are facing only by organizing as Amharas.*’³¹ NaMA’s chairman shared a similar view, arguing that instead of putting forward an elaborate political and economic program, his party should focus on the Amhara’s ‘*existential fight*’.³² Until the start of the Tigray war, NaMA cadres tried to take distance from vigilant groups fueling political violence. However, urban activists linked to the party were organizing militias from late 2018 onwards. Their stance differed from NaMA’s discourse more in intensity than in nature: ‘*To protect our race, we were compelled to organize. Until now, we were thinking of ourselves as Ethiopians, not Amharas [...] Both TPLF and OLF are enemies of the Amhara and of Ethiopia. [...] the Amhara extermination campaign continues. The TPLF is getting ready for a war. The Oromos too. Their communities are ready. They know it will happen.*’³³ The return of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to Ethiopia in September 2018 was interpreted as yet another sign of the efficiency of ethno-national political organization, and the opacity of its deal with the federal government fueled rumors of a secret alliance to annihilate the Amhara people.

The idea that Amharas would be facing an ‘*existential threat*’ then fostered violence committed by *fanno* and ASF on Tigrayan civilians during the Tigray war.³⁴ It was legitimized after the ‘*existential threat*’ idea was picked up by the Amhara branch of Abiy Ahmed’s Prosperity Party early in the Tigray war, and even more so after clashes between Oromo militias and ASF erupted in North Shewa and South Wollo in March 2021. While the federal government first framed the war as a ‘*law enforcement operation*’ (*hign yemaskeber zemecha*), the official Amhara TV channel called it an ‘*existential campaign*’ (*yehilwuna zemecha*). In the summer of 2021, as the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) were making military gains, the term was picked up again by governmental communication agencies, displaying the war as a struggle for Ethiopia’s very survival.

The Committee for the Restoration of the Amhara Identity of Wolqayt-Tegeḍé

In addition to their denunciation of massacres, Amhara nationalists rallied around the ‘Wolqayt Question’, that gained audience among urban youth from the summer of 2016 onwards. In the activists’ parlance, Wolqayt refers to the mountains and vast plains west of the Tekeze river that constituted Western Tigray before November 2020. In local perceptions of space and territories, Wolqayt *per se* is

much narrower, comprising the highlands around Addi Ramets also locally called Awra. Wolqayt is separated from the lowlands around the Setit river and Humera town by the midlands called Qafta, that go North up to the Eritrean border. Nationalists usually raise claims on Wolqayt, Tegedé, Setit-Humera, Tellemt and Raya, but only Wolqayt and Raya reached wider audience in the media.³⁵ Wolqayt comprises large fields where cash crops such as cotton and chiefly sesame have been grown for decades. After the shift in the TPLF's agricultural policy from supporting smallholder peasants to the promotion of agricultural investment,³⁶ Western Tigray saw many large-scale mechanized agricultural investments, including the Banat farms owned by the party's consortium, EFFORT, and a myriad of TPLF-affiliated investors who have been granted land in the area.³⁷ These took part in an integrated agricultural-led industrialization scheme that brought seasonal workers from all over the country to the agricultural hubs of Humera, Dansha and May Kadra.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Wolqayt has also seen the resettlement of dozens of thousands of peasants from other parts of Tigray. To find a long-term solution to repetitive dearth episodes in rural areas of Central and Eastern Tigray, peasants had been relocated in the lowlands of Western Tigray. Returnees who had spent years in Sudan were also resettled at Humera, Rawyan, and May Kadra.³⁸ In 1995-1996, demobilized fighters from the TPLF were resettled with their families in a place known as Woynat and renamed Division, where 9,000 families were said to be living before November 2020.³⁹ This example was often used by Amhara militiamen fighting in the early days of the war to exemplify how, for them, Tigrayan inhabitants of Wolqayt were necessarily TPLF supporters. Resettlements led to local land redistributions, which were widely perceived as dispossession by the locals. Redistributions have disturbed past land tenure systems and agricultural practices, and in particular the shifting cultivation practice known as '*mofér zemet*', according to which a peasant living in the highlands moves down to the lowlands only for the agricultural season, farming a different parcel each year.

After land registration was carried out in the area, a group of civil servants and wealthy peasants from around Dansha and Addi Ramets built on this resentment to create the 'Committee for the Restauration of the Amhara Identity of Wolqayt-Tegedé' (CRAIWT - *YeWolqayt Tegedé yeAmara Mannenet Asmelash Comité* in Amharic), that went public in September 2015. Land administration agents and

officials from Western Tigray remember that the main figures of the CRAIWT had had recent arguments with the TPLF administration as many, including the one who would become their leader, Colonel Demeqe Zewdu, were entangled in disputes over land plots, in which the local government decided against them.⁴⁰ Land registration carried out repeatedly in the 2000s but which last round took place in 2014 meant the implementation of the Tigray regional land law and directives that allowed peasants to keep only 2 hectares of land in the highlands, and 5 in the lowlands. Farming a wider parcel would need the issuance of an investment permit – something that needed TPLF connections – and *mofer zemet* was *de facto* prohibited.⁴¹

According to former administrators of Western Tigray, many investors who became leading figures of the CRAIWT were once TPLF members – something CRAIWT members recognize only reluctantly.⁴² Most had always used Tigrigna as their main language and had not problematized ethnicity along these lines. But activists framed their cause in the idiom that would make them heard in the context of ethnic federalism: ethnicity. They report that after an initial public meeting in Gondar, they brought a petition of 25,000 signatures to Tigray's regional government in Meqelle, asking for the instauration of an autonomous 'Amhara zone' in Western Tigray.⁴³ If they later adopted a strongly anti-TPLF wording, CRAIWT activists first hoped to get support from the government, as they were demanding the implementation of a procedure the Constitution allowed, in a very legitimistic manner. Their main claim was that before 1991, '*Wolqayt has never been in Tigray, the Tekeze river had always been a boundary.*'⁴⁴

But the CRAIWT faced repression. On July 12th, 2016, some of its prominent members including Colonel Demeqe Zewdu violently resisted their arrest in Gondar, triggering several days of riots in the city. In Western Tigray, members of the committee were jailed. The summer of 2016 saw large-scale protests in both Oromia and Amhara regions, leading to internal party reforms and the eventual nomination of Abiy Ahmed to Premiership in early April 2018.⁴⁵ A few months later, CRAIWT members and Amhara nationalists were little by little freed from prison and resumed their activism, including by taking up arms.

FROM ACTIVISTS TO SOLDIERS: THE MILITARIZATION OF AMHARA MOBILIZATIONS

Fanno: From urban activists to armed militia

Amhara militiamen calling themselves ‘*fanno*’ attracted international media coverage for their role in atrocities committed in Tigray. In Ethiopia, however, the word *fanno* regained fame in the years following the 2016 uprising, after Amhara youth groups called themselves as such. Doing so, they were making *fanno* the equivalent of the Oromo *qeerroo*: youth groups with the agenda of protecting their ethno-national interests. By using the term *fanno*, anti-EPRDF activists knew that the nationalist and positive connotations of this old Amharic word would not be missed by the peasants of Northern Amhara. Historically, a *fanno* is a sort of voluntary mercenary, a free Christian peasant who fights alongside imperial armies against foreign invaders.⁴⁶ The meaning of *fanno* sometimes overlaps with the Patriots (*arbegnoch*), the fighters who defended Ethiopia against the fascist Italian invasion.⁴⁷ It is not the first time the term gets a slightly bended meaning, as some leftist students from the 1960s had already made it their own.

Many urban activists were jailed in 2016, being released almost two years later as part of the amnesty granted by Abiy Ahmed. They resumed their political activities. In Gondar and Addis Zemen, they created youth associations right on their return from the infamous Ma’ekelawi prison.⁴⁸ Membership was first drawn essentially from urban males between 25 and 35 years old. Until the start of the Tigray war, rural members were almost non-existent. These associations had a wide range of activities to mobilize the youth: they collected money to support Amharas displaced by violence, they lobbied municipalities for the opening of factories they thought would provide jobs to local youths, and organized rallies. The Gondar *fanno* organized five such events in 2019: one for the death of the engineer Semegnew Bekele, project manager of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, one against the ‘Amhara genocide’, one in support of Abiy Ahmed, one at the occasion of Issayas Afwerqi’s visit to Gondar, and the last one for a visit of Russian Orthodox priests.⁴⁹ They benefitted from support by Amhara authorities who were engaged in fierce political fighting against the TPLF. For example, Amhara authorities offered a sanctuary for activists wanted in Western Tigray, such as Kibreab Simachew, CRAIWT’s spokesperson, who could settle in Gonder and travel to Addis Abeba, despite multiplying calls for violence.⁵⁰

In the summer of 2016, armed groups had already militarily engaged the ENDF in North Gondar, claiming some victories,⁵¹ although peasants met a few weeks later tended to see the clashes as mere skirmishes.⁵² In the post-April 2018 period however, *fanno* youth established links with former social bandits (*shifita*) who had started a rapprochement with the government. Fighters who had spent years in the bush fighting intermittently against the EPRDF came back to civilian life. Among them were Sefer Mellesse, known for having downed a military helicopter around Waldeba monastery in 1998; Mesafint Tesfu, known for having militarily stood up to the ENDF in the summer of 2016 in North Gondar; and Aregga Alebachew, who spent seven years in the bush and whose ambushes on the ENDF had made him famous in South Gondar. Aregga gave military training to some *fanno* from Addis Zemen in 2019-2020.⁵³ Other men had been active in *Keffagn*, loosely organized armed groups mostly from Gondar's lowlands that mobilized against land reallocations in the 1990s and 2000s, found shelter in Eritrea, and later merged into Arbegoch-Ginbot 7, an armed opposition group to the EPRDF. Land issues were already instrumental in their mobilization, as many had lost land that was, according to them, 'offered to Sudan by the TPLF' throughout the 2000s.⁵⁴ The eventual slipping of *fanno* activities towards military action was prepared by activists, as a *fanno* chief from Gondar made clear:

*'Armed struggle... not yet. We still didn't start military training. But we have some capacity for it. Each of us has some capacity. There are many costs needed, so we're not yet there. But within fanno, we have people who have military training, people who used to be in the ENDF, and peasants. [...] At our level, our main force are the peasants. They don't even need military training. This is something we see, concretely, they are better than the soldiers! [...] We won't escape a war!'*⁵⁵

In the summer of 2016, another local issue helped fueling the narrative of an existential threat on the Amhara: the 'Qimant question'.

The Qimant as significant Other

The Qimant are a group related to the Agew people, inhabiting Gondar area. Since the mid-2010s, a committee was campaigning for the establishment of an autonomous Qimant zone in the Amhara region, with territorial claims including the city of Gondar itself. Clashes between Qimant *qebelé* militias and Amhara fighters had occurred since 2015, but intensified in 2018 and 2019, as the ASF joined the fighting.⁵⁶ Urban *fanno* organized self-help campaigns in solidarity with Amharas displaced by the

fighting. As the Qimant provided the 'significant Other' for Amhara nationalists, the skirmishes were the opportunity for young urban men to gain their first experience in warfare.

The Amhara Special Forces (ASF)

In all of Ethiopia's regions, Special Forces (SF, *liyu hayloch*) were instrumental in the escalation of the political crisis. Modelled after the Somali *liyu police*, a militia at the command of former Somali regional president Abdi Illey, SF were constituted as a police force under the command of each regional government. From 2016 on, regions recruited thousands of SF fighters, in a worrying race of militia raising. In Oromia, successive ceremonies of graduation of the new recruits were the occasion of bombastic nationalistic speeches by regional authorities, for whom integrating the region's youth to the SF was an easy way to recycle increasingly uncontrollable *qeerroo*.⁵⁷ Training camps also opened in Tigray in late 2018, and recruiters went to Sudan to convince youth who had fled there that a return home with a fixed salary was possible.⁵⁸

The Amhara region was, at first, behind its counterparts in militia raising. Asaminew Tsige, a former ENDF general who was serving a life sentence after a failed coup attempt against the EPRDF, was freed in 2018 and reinstated as head of the Security of the region.⁵⁹ Trying to catch up with Oromia in terms of SF recruits, he turned to *fanno* groups and youth activists, enrolling thousands of them in the ASF, to the point that the ASF themselves were sometimes called *fanno*. The abovementioned Gondar *fanno* chief recalls: *'He had the plan of placing the fanno under government control. Because special forces weren't popular at that time. The people have full trust in the fanno, we need a force able to defend the people. [...] We're waiting for the moment when the government will turn its face towards the fanno.'*⁶⁰

Asaminew was killed by the ENDF in June 2019, following what was called a 'failed regional coup attempt'. He was said to be behind the murders of the Amhara region president, Ambachew Mekonnen, and ENDF chief of staff Seare Mekonnen. The feud between Asaminew and Ambachew was real, but it is very likely that the federal government also tried to slow the pace of militia raising in the region. Indeed, Asaminew was known as a strong Ethiopian nationalist who converted to the Amhara cause, and had little sympathy for the Oromo protests that indirectly brought Abiy Ahmed to power. Had he lived, the general would have witnessed the temporary conversion of the federal government to his

views, as Abiy Ahmed took a more conciliatory stance through 2020, acknowledging he would need the political support of the Amhara branch of the Prosperity Party (PP), however close the latter got to the strongest nationalist positions. When the war started, the government changed its political allies into military ones.

Under Asaminew, the ASF integrated former guerrilla fighters. Interviewed on the eve of the war, an ASF fighter was thankful: *'We are Asaminew... It's thanks to him that we're back.'*⁶¹ This soldier's trajectory tells a lot about the type of people the general enrolled in the ASF: Native from North Gondar, he was a young ENDF recruit when he fought in Somalia in 2006, soon leaving the army before the end of his contract. A deserter, he took refuge in Sudan where he stayed seven years, working in mines and as a mercenary. He went as far as Libya but didn't cross the Mediterranean. In 2018, back in Sudan, he heard about the amnesty granted by Abiy Ahmed and came back to his birthplace to get new Ethiopian identity documents. This is where the *wereda* administration, knowing his military past, invited him to join the ASF. His batch of recruits also included former Arbegnoch-Ginbot 7 fighters who had spent years in camps in Eritrea and were left jobless after they had returned home in the summer of 2018.

Asaminew also called back to service soldiers who had broken ranks and spent time in the bush, like Dejené Maru, a former soldier and agricultural investor known for having advised Colonel Demeqe to resist his arrest in 2016. Stationed at Soroqa, Dejené's men were among the units who fought the Tigray war from the very first shot. They were aware that the war would start. In the evening of November 3rd, 2020, a man who was taking part in the coordination of security activities between the *fanno* and the ASF called to tell me that *'something would happen'* on this very night.⁶² All in all, Asaminew's ASF were both the spearhead of Amhara nationalists and an employment opportunity for former servicemen.

IRREDENTISM AT WORK: AMHARA FIGHTERS AND BUREAUCRATS IN THE CIVIL WAR

Ethnic cleansing and bureaucracy

Before fighting even cooled down and while intense looting was taking place, the ENDF and Amhara forces started to administer Western Tigray. From late November 2020, new leaders were instated, with the ENDF's approval and assistance. CRAIWT members took over *wereda* and *zone* positions. While the zone's chairmanship was left to a PP member, Colonel Demeqe Zewdu had considerable authority

in the zone, as vice-administrator in charge of security. Kibreab Simachew became the main administrator of Wolqayt *wereda*. In Humera, Eritrean military officers took part in political meetings with the new ruling team. Women were absent from local executive positions.

Even when they stayed, civil servant did not go to work in the first months. Intermediate administrative levels were *de facto* suppressed, political appointees often being in direct contact with service seekers. The latter consisted mainly in investors and merchants who had bought or looted cereals from the zone's many warehouses. To cross the many checkpoints established on roads, they needed laissez-passers, an activity that kept the new rulers busy in the first months. The issuance of laissez-passers often needed personal ties with the local rulers. Other, routine state services were totally suspended.

The new administration also issued laissez passers to some of the remaining Tigrayan civilians, mostly women and children, for them to cross the Tekeze river to central Tigray. Fearing to be considered as combatants, most of the men had fled in the very first days of the war. Remaining inhabitants identified as Tigrayans were told to leave during official meetings, as it happened in Adebay, Baeker, Bereket, Dansha, Delesa Qoqah, Humera, Idris, May Gaba, May Humer, Mogo', Qorarit, and Rawyan at least. People resettled in the lowlands in the 1990s and 2000s were particularly identified as Tigrayans and targeted. Even in the absence of meetings, repeated threats that the administration '*will not take the responsibility if something happened to them*'⁶³ had the same effect.

In some places, people about to leave could sell some of their belongings. In Division, a market of Tigrayans' goods was held, where looters also sold furniture to new settlers. Expulsed people would rent minibuses with Amhara region plates to travel to the Tekeze river, from where many had to walk to Sheraro. In December 2020, Amhara soldiers were already boasting that all Tigrayans had left.⁶⁴ Departures continued, to the point that it became common to hear Amhara armed men congratulating themselves about the absence of Tigrayans.⁶⁵ In March 2021, Yeabsera Esheté, the zone's chairman was, resorting to euphemism, downplaying the forced nature of displacements: '*Many of the Tigrayans, those who had no relation with the junta*⁶⁶, left saying they were just going to see their relatives in Tigray, across the river. They say, [...] '*We will come back around May, when the farming season starts.*'⁶⁷ Members of the new *qebelé* administrations were clearer '*In current circumstances, they're not going*

to come back.⁶⁸ Which proved right: in June 2021, houses had been destroyed and the parcels turned into farmland.⁶⁹

Over the summer of 2021 and more acutely even as the war reaching its climax in November and December, with the Tigray Defence Forces marching towards Addis Ababa, ethnic cleansing accelerated into waves of massacres. By rounding up Tigrayans before handcuffing and killing the men, authorities followed the same *modus operandi* in Idris on August 4th, Qorarit on August 5th, Delesa Qoqah on 29-30 October, May Cha'a on 31 October, May Gaba on October 24th, Addi Goshu, Sheykh Menshel and May Qeyh on November 6th. Survivors and witnesses insisted that the local CRAIWT leaders were the ones calling for the meetings.⁷⁰

In March 2021 as a lowland *qebelé* chairman was repeating that the return of displaced people was '*a federal affair...*', a young militiaman interrupted him: '*we don't want any of them, of those things we call Tigrayans! Let them stay there! We don't want them to come back!*'⁷¹ Although these men were Tigrigna-speaking as well, they self-identified as 'Wolqaytie'.

The Wolqaytie: Ethnogenesis under constraint?

On Wolqayt highlands, displacement in the first weeks of the war have not reached the scale of what happened in the lowlands. Many urban dwellers of Addi Ramets had fled, but most of the peasants leaving in surrounding rural *qebelé* remained on their lands. There, Tigrigna remained more widely spoken than Amharic until July 2021 at least.⁷² The new Amhara administration was issuing identity documents in Amharic, but Tigrigna dominated in day-to-day casual chats, inside as outside state offices.

However, most civilians would now declare themselves 'Wolqaytie' when their ethnicity or origins were asked at checkpoints. Of course, this local self-identification and a feeling of difference towards the rest of Tigray existed before the war, but it was now politicized to articulate criticism and claims towards the new rulers. While not openly contradicting the now official statement that '*Wolqayt is Amhara*', putting forward the 'Wolqaytie' and not 'Amhara' label tacitly underlined the difference between highland dwellers and other people who arrived in the zone thanks to resettlement programs, or with the aim of settling there and securing access to land. Obviously, declaring oneself 'Tigrayan' would have

exposed to violence, but most Wolqayt inhabitants acknowledged they were hitherto in possession of Tigray region identity documents, mentioning Tigrayan ethnicity. Although accepting this label seemed hardly evitable under the former TPLF rule, after November 2020 the new Amhara assignation looked as inevitable. This is what a *wereda* administrator discreetly confessed: *‘There are Tigrayans who stay here, this is not a problem, we too were speaking Tigrigna before, since this place was Tigray too.’*⁷³ The bureaucrat well summed up how identity labels are first and foremost the result of power relations. In May Gaba, half of the militiamen – all party members – under the TPLF administration sided with the CRAIWT, while many among the other half joined resisting Tigrayan forces in the bush.⁷⁴

The affirmation of a ‘Wolqaytie’ identity partly emanated from a latent hostility towards the authorities of the Amhara region. In early 2021, resentment of civilians seemed more marked towards the new leaders governing from Bahir Dar as towards the former ones located in Meqelle. Massive looting that had occurred in the zone was a reason behind this unenthusiastic welcoming of the new “liberators”. *Fanno* militiamen largely appropriated what they thought was ‘TPLF wealth’ or ‘Tigrayans’ wealth’ or, in their own wording, ‘*junta* wealth’. In March, looting concerned first and foremost pieces of furniture and construction material taken from emptied houses and administrative offices. This revenge by Amhara incomers left Wolqayt’s remaining inhabitants bitter, although some of them had also taken up arms against the TPLF. This was the case of the new administration of a lowland *qebelé*, where only a quarter of the once 4,000 population remained. In the presence of the other members of the cabinet and militiamen, the chairman was complaining: *‘They took everything! The mills engines, the generators, the public water pumps, everything! We don’t have running water anymore.’* When I asked him who he was referring to by ‘*they*’, one of the young militiamen answered ‘*the junta!*’, before all men corrected: *‘no, they were the fanno, but it’s the same!’* The chairman then continued:

*‘Everything is taken to be brought to the Amhara region. But what’s the problem with the Amhara region’s authorities, they still don’t believe it, that Wolqayt is part of Amhara now? Do they think that Woyane⁷⁵ [the TPLF] will be back? [...] When all these things are loaded on trucks, people from the administration see it, they don’t do anything! These things do not go by air, they go on the road, through each and every checkpoint! What does it mean, when the truck spends a night or two at the checkpoint before leaving once they’ve paid what they were asked for? [...] All these things, even if we’d develop this place anew for 50 years, we wouldn’t get them. [...] People who did that are not thieves, they are the Amhara region. What has the TPLF done worse?’*⁷⁶

In sum, one's own definition as Wolqaytie seems embedded in claims over access to resources and state services, and in the condemnation of the new authorities' kleptocratic practices. By doing so, remaining inhabitants were also almost explicitly praising the TPLF's achievements in terms of development and service delivery, linking their reconnaissance of authority to material claims. Although Amhara nationalists have erected 'Wolqayt' as the symbol of their struggle, they behaved as an invading force in what they claimed as their homeland, paving the way for the use by remaining inhabitants of this very symbol to articulate criticism.

In subsequent months, the CRAIWT administration became more and more fragmented, as some Wolqaytie who had first sided with the CRAIWT eventually joined the TDF or crossed to central Tigray. The level of violence and the multiplication of massacres partly explains this fragmentation, as tensions over land and resources to loot grew and the definition of who could be 'Wolqaytie' tightened up. Many who had until then be able to claim they were Wolqayté were eventually labelled Tigrayans by *fanno*, including members of local administrations who had been instituted in late 2020. In Adebay, Haleqa Hailmikaél, a Wolqaytie diacon who had been elected administrator in late 2020, was deemed Tigrayan and killed by *fanno* in late 2021.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Amhara administrators who had amassed considerable wealth in the looting went back to the Amhara region, like Alebachew Chanie, from Adebay, and Minyewab Woldu, involved in several massacres in May Gaba.⁷⁸

Governing the Promised Land

A central contradiction of the CRAIWT is that while they kept repeating that their struggle was not about 'land' or 'development' but about 'identity'⁷⁹, implying that it was much more than mere material claims, their mobilization and the popular support it received were largely based on agrarian issues and access to land. In addition to CRAIWT leaders' famous land squabbles, it became clear from the first days of the war that land control was a rationale behind the advance of the ASF and ENDF. The capture of the EFFORT-owned Banat farms on November 7th was celebrated by honking horns and shooting in Gondar.⁸⁰ Young men who had worked as daily workers earlier descended in the lowlands with the hope of registering for land distribution.⁸¹ Further fueling polarization, Amhara fighters and politicians repeated they were only reclaiming land that had been despoiled by the TPLF. As early as November, the PP organized registrations in Gondar, promising inhabitants to be allocated plots of land in the newly

conquered areas. While such programs seem to have fizzled out quickly, a Gondar resident who had registered declared:

*'I got registered too. In November or December, shortly after the war had begun and when they said they controlled these lands. They took a tour of the city, asking people if they wanted to get registered. [...] Then, they called me back only once, saying there would be a meeting for people who wanted to get land. I think they planned some kind of lottery. But then they talked about Prosperity and so on, so I said I was at work, and I couldn't join the meeting. I didn't want to get involved in political stuff'*⁸²

Apparently, Amhara authorities initially envisaged resettling many people in the lowlands. Officials declared that they would welcome any Amhara forcibly expelled from other regions, and organize the return of Amhara people who had fled abroad over the past 30 years – 500,000 according to CRAIWT estimates.⁸³ If logistic hurdles have probably dampened nationalist enthusiasm for such large-scale resettlement schemes, land administration was the most active sector of non-security-related local public action. Two main activities can be distinguished, both organized with the material, logistical and institutional support of the Amhara region. On the one hand, the administration carried out a local land reform with the aim of providing land to peasants. On the other hand, an auction of land for investors took place.

In April 2021, the new administration started to redistribute land hitherto occupied by peasants resettled in the 1990s and 2000s. A team from the regional land administration was sent from Bahir Dar for survey. Over the previous weeks, *qebelé* administrations had registered people who wanted to have access to land. 500m² parcels were allocated to each household for house construction, with an additional 5 hectares of agricultural land, without any distinction according to the size of the family. By providing Amhara households with land, the administration answered to a long-time grievance of the CRAIWT.

Thus, although the National Disaster Risk Management Commission had announced, on June 9th, the creation of a 40-members bipartite Tigray-Amhara committee tasked with organizing the return of displaced Tigrayans '*before the next rainy season*', nothing such happened. It is even probable that the committee never met, as no further news were ever given. The return of Tigrayans to Wolqayt remained an undebatable question, as Amhara authorities repeated that the status of Wolqayt, Tsegedé, Tselemt and Raya was '*not a question for discussion*.'⁸⁴ Concretely, everything has been done to make a return impossible. In resettlement villages like Division, Tirkan and Ruwassa, many houses of the people who

left have been destroyed, as were some churches and administrative offices. Division's hospital has been looted and emptied. Starting from May 2021, around 700 'returnees' were relocated there, coming from Sudan. They were ethnic Amharas who had left Ethiopia during the civil war against the *Derg* or over the 27 years of EPRDF rule. When fighting over the Fashaga Triangle started between Sudanese and Ethiopian armies in December 2020, they were left with few options but to 'come back' to a country some had never seen. They received laissez-passer from the Ethiopian consulate in Gedaref but were left to themselves once they reached Ethiopia.⁸⁵

The arrival of returnees added a category of population claiming access to land, while peasants from different localities and investors were already in competition over this resource. The main point of contention was Division land, redistributed in May and June 2021. Farmers living in the highlands of Tsegedé *wereda* were allocated 5-hectares plots in Division, while young farmers from Wolqayt *wereda*, spatially closer to the coveted land, had not been given this right. At the zonal offices in Humera, representatives from seven villages neighboring Division, whose inhabitants were denied access to land, had strong words towards the government: '*This land issue is one of the sufferings we have been subjected to by the Woyane [the TPLF] government. So, if the government of Change [i.e. the Abiy administration and new Amhara authorities] does not find a solution, where is the change?*'⁸⁶

A great deal of opacity and confusion surrounded land transactions, and land redistribution was carried out without any attempt by the new authorities to understand local land uses and perceptions of territory. The administration was even denying proceeding to a land redistribution, as the head of the Prosperity Party of the zone argued: '*We have not started redistributing land. Only the investment land, for one year, because it doesn't have to lie fallow*'. About the ongoing redistribution to households '*repatriated*' from Sudan, he said: '*This is not a redistribution of land. These are people who have been tortured for years and are now returning to their country, and we are giving them what they are entitled to.*'⁸⁷

Competing offices assumed the authority of distributing land. In early December 2020, the very fresh zonal authorities had dealt with investors to make sure that cereals left on fields because of the fighting would be harvested: Investors reaping these fields could keep 60% of the harvest and had to leave 40% to the new *zone*. Reportedly, only 2 million birrs were gathered as part of this scheme.⁸⁸ Meanwhile,

investors and CRAIWT members appropriated warehouses and land parcels. Furthermore, investors who took part in the 40/60 scheme soon claimed a permanent right to use the lands they harvested. Most of them were coming from elsewhere in the Amhara region, raising complaints by local investors and youth activists:

*'We want the land repartition to be entirely revised. The one that has been done now should be cancelled. [...] Most of the land has been given to investors from Gojjam, they had a meeting in Bahir Dar to prepare that. Only 20% of the people who were granted land are from here! [...] And the people they invited last year to harvest the fields, now they claim these lands as theirs and they farm them.'*⁸⁹

The auction he refers to was made by the Amhara region on May 10th, 2021, inviting investors to declare interest for land in Wolqayt. As for the 60/40 scheme, non-Wolqaytie investors were favored. Criteria were set to access land: within seven days, applicants had to submit bank statements, although no minimum amounts were specified. Each investor had to bid on a specific lot, with a list of the investors already in the area attached to the auction. Former land holders, mostly Tigrayan investors whose names were made public, were allowed to re-enter their land, subject to the same criteria. However, in case of conflicts over a plot, priority was given to those who did not have land: this provision *de facto* entrenched the priority given to new Amhara investors over former landholders. Muluaem Milmilé, a sesame tycoon, was attributed thousands of hectares. In addition, land was sold off: a tax of 50 birr, like the one applied to peasants, was charged per hectare. The general logic remained favoring agricultural investment over peasant agriculture on larger plots requiring more advanced mechanization,⁹⁰ but in a context of violence and destruction of previous property and access rights. This policy also favored patrimonialism as Col. Demeqe, Negga Bantihun and other leading CRAIWT figures or their supports secured huge estates.

CONCLUSION

Amhara nationalism was almost unheard of five years before Amhara forces annexed Western Tigray, in November 2020. Amhara nationalists soon seemed to dictate the federal government's policy during the Tigray war: Wolqayt-Tegegé became a new zone of the Amhara region, the ASF fought and ruled in Metekel and some areas of Wellega, and the identification of the whole Tigray population to the TPLF and hence the enemy spread throughout the years 2021-2022. Paradoxically, the leading role Amhara élites have retaken in opposition to the TPLF it is the result of their own provincialization and conversion

to ethnicity as a mobilizing discourse. If the use of both Ethiopian and Amhara nationalisms seems contradictory, it does not impede mobilization. On the contrary, mobilizing in the name of the Amhara became synonymous with defending Ethiopia in the context of the civil war. Amhara nationalists organized to react against the violence perpetrated against Amhara populations in the peripheries and by framing claims of autonomy brought forward by other peoples as an ‘*existential threat*’ – a threat that was later taken over by the government who presented the war as a ‘*existential campaign*’ to save Ethiopia.

Beyond rhetoric, irredentism had very concrete effects, most notably in the territory erected as a symbol of the Amhara revival: Wolqayt. There, nationalists used state structures to expel Tigrayans, appropriating their lands and belongings, multiplying massacres. Ethnic cleansing in Wolqayt exemplifies how nationalism, even when it is first articulated with claims of emancipation and the protection of minorities, still carries what Gellner had identified as its main danger: a wish to make territorial political units ethnically homogeneous.⁹¹ New paradoxes have surfaced after the annexation of Wolqayt to the Amhara region, when the remaining local population started to bring nuances to their Amharanness and articulate criticism towards the new administration, complaining about the lootings and violence committed by the *fanno*. The case of Wolqayt shows the plasticity of ethnic and national categories: faced with more difficulties in accessing resources and state services, Wolqayt inhabitants use the ‘Wolqaytie’ label to criticize Amhara irredentism, while avoiding contradicting its very principle that ‘*Wolqayt is Amhara*’. This tactic had limited efficiency, as the evolution of military balances impacted the definitions of ethnic groups. At each military setback for the federal government, massacres of Tigrigna-speaking individuals multiplied in Western Tigray. It appeared that claiming oneself Wolqaytie was not sufficient anymore to spare violence, or that if ‘*Wolqayt is Amhara*’, all Wolqaytie were not Amhara anymore. From 2023 onwards, Amhara nationalist would be the targeted of the government’s repression, opening a new chapter of brutal violence in Ethiopia’s civil war - and showing once again the fluidity of political identities and alliances.

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- ⁵⁵ Interview, Gondar, 08.01.2020.
- ⁵⁶ Interviews with displaced Qimant people, Babikri, Sudan, 5-8.12.2022. See also Gardner, *The Abiy Project*: 179-180.
- ⁵⁷ Østebø & Tronvoll, ‘Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia’.
- ⁵⁸ Phone interviews, 2019.
- ⁵⁹ Gardner, *The Abiy Project*, 171-174.
- ⁶⁰ Interview, Gondar, 08.01.2020.
- ⁶¹ Interview, Soroqa, 02.11.2020.
- ⁶² Fieldnotes, Soroqa, 03.11.2020.
- ⁶³ Interviews with displaced people, Sheraro, November 2023.
- ⁶⁴ Fieldnotes, Tirkan, 14.12.2020.
- ⁶⁵ Fieldnotes, Humera, March 2021.

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- ⁶⁶ *Junta* was the derogatory term used by Abiy Ahmed to describe the TPLF in his first TV speech during the first night of the war. It gained popularity within urban Amhara men and was then found acceptable to refer, depending on the context, to the TPLF or the entire people of Tigray.
- ⁶⁷ Interview, Humera, 12.03.2021.
- ⁶⁸ Interview, Adebay, 13.03.2021.
- ⁶⁹ Fieldnotes, May Deli, Division & Dansha, 13-17.06.2021.
- ⁷⁰ Interviews, Sheraro, November 2023. See Labzaé, ‘The ethnic cleansing policy...’.
- ⁷¹ Interview, location withdrawn, 12.03.2021.
- ⁷² Fieldnotes, Addi Ramets, June and July 2021.
- ⁷³ Interview, Ketema Nigus, 09.03.2021.
- ⁷⁴ Interview with former May Gaba militiamen, Sheraro and Enda Aba Guna, November 2023.
- ⁷⁵ *Woyane* is the (often pejorative) TPLF nickname, formed after its name in Tigrigna: *Hizbawi Woyane Harnet Tigray*.
- ⁷⁶ Group interview with the *qebelé* administration team, 16.03.2021.
- ⁷⁷ Interviews with people displaced from Adebay in early 2022, Sheraro, November 2023.
- ⁷⁸ Interviews with displaced people from Adebay and May Gaba, in Sheraro, Shire, and Enda Aba Guna, November 2023.
- ⁷⁹ As Atalaye Zafé, once prominent member of the CRAIWT, repeatedly made clear. See *VOA Amharic*, “Our question is an identity one” [In Amharic], 16.04.2018: <https://amharic.voanews.com/a/atalay-zafe/4350550.html>
- ⁸⁰ Fieldnotes, Gondar, 07.11.2020.
- ⁸¹ Fieldnotes, Dansha, December 2020.
- ⁸² Interview, Dansha, 08.06.2021.
- ⁸³ Interview with CRAIWT members, Gondar, 26.10.2020.
- ⁸⁴ *Deutsche Welle*, “The Amhara Region on the Wolqayt-Tegedé and Setit-Humera question” [In Amharic], 12 July 2021: <https://www.dw.com/am/የአማራ-ክልል-ስለወልቃይት-ጠገኔና-ስተት-ሀመራ-ጉዳይ/a-58243287>.
- ⁸⁵ Fieldnotes, Dansha and Division, June 2021.
- ⁸⁶ Field notes, Humera, 16.06.2021.
- ⁸⁷ Interview, Humera, 16.06.2021.
- ⁸⁸ According to Wolqayt and Tsegedé administrators met in March 2021.
- ⁸⁹ Fieldnotes, Dansha and Humera, March and June 2021.
- ⁹⁰ Atakilte, *Agricultural transformation in Ethiopia*.
- ⁹¹ Gellner, *Nations and nationalism*.