

**EPRDF'S NATION-BUILDING:
TINKERING WITH CONVICTIONS AND PRAGMATISM**

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The Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) is often considered a turning point in the nationalist discourse of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the main cause of the reactivation of a strong Pan-Ethiopian nationalism (here taken as synonymous with Ethiopianness), after the introduction of "ethnic federalism" in 1995. This paper argues that Pan-Ethiopian and "ethnic" nationalism coexisted in TPLF-EPRDF's nationalism before the 1998-2000 war. As a political and pragmatic tool to grasp and keep power, the "multifaceted" nationalism of the EPRDF was adapted and adjusted to new circumstances. This explains the ease with which Pan-Ethiopianism was reactivated and reinvented from 1998 onwards. In this process, the 2005 general elections and the rise of opposition groups defending a Pan-Ethiopian nationalism also represented an important influence in EPRDF's nationalist adjustment.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), Ethiopianness, opposition

A EPRDF e a construção da nação: Ajustes nas convicções e pragmatismo

A guerra Etiópia-Eritreia (1998-2000) é frequentemente considerada um ponto de viragem no discurso nacionalista da Frente Democrática Revolucionária do Povo Etíope (EPRDF) e a principal causa da reativação de um forte nacionalismo pan-etíope (considerado aqui como sinónimo de etiopianidade), após a introdução do "federalismo étnico" em 1995. Este artigo argumenta que o nacionalismo pan-etíope e "étnico" coexistiram no nacionalismo da TPLF-EPRDF antes da guerra de 1998-2000. Como ferramenta política e pragmática para conquistar e manter o poder, o nacionalismo "multifacetado" da EPRDF foi adaptado e ajustado às novas circunstâncias. Isso explica a fácil reativação e reinvenção do pan-etíopianismo a partir de 1998. Neste processo, as eleições gerais de 2005 e o surgimento de grupos de oposição que defendem um nacionalismo pan-etíope também representaram uma importante influência no ajuste nacionalista da EPRDF.

Palavras-chave: Etiópia, Frente de Libertação do Povo do Tigré (TPLF), Frente Democrática Revolucionária do Povo Etíope (EPRDF), etiopianidade, oposição

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The fall of the military regime of the *derg* in May 1991 and the coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)², not only meant the military victory of the latter, but also the imposition of a certain conception of Ethiopian statehood. As a "byproduct of the Ethiopian student movement" (ESM) (Gebru, 2009, p. 82) the TPLF had forged its nationalist discourse in terms of the "national oppression thesis", derived from the Stalinist theory of nationalities, as opposed to other competing interpretations of Ethiopia's imperial period, *i.e.* the "nation-building thesis" (defended by the Ethiopian Democratic Union, EDU), the "colonial thesis" (notably defended by the Oromo Liberation Front), or the "multinational Marxist thesis" (defended by other branches of the ESM like the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, EPRP)³. The new 1995 constitution recognized the "Rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" (NNPs)⁴, supported decentralization policies from which autonomous NNPs should benefit, while the new leadership violently condemned the preceding imperial and *derg* conceptions of Ethiopian nationhood, as the following extract of EPRDF program clearly shows:

The chauvinist ruling classes adhere to the principle of "Itiopiawinnet" (Ethiopianness) which kills identity based on nationality. So they do not follow the principle of forming a nation-wide organization through a union of nationality-based organizations. They aspire to form a dominant multi-nation organization composed of individuals from various nationalities and ethnic organizations that have betrayed the causes of their people and bowed to these chauvinists. Secessionists and narrow nationalist organizations do not want the fulfilment of the peoples' common interests. So, they, too, do not want to form a nation-wide organization together with other nationality-based organizations⁵.

As Clapham notes, the EPRDF "(...) therefore conceived Ethiopia in terms very different from those of previous regimes" (Clapham, 2002b, p. 25). Imperial symbols and heroes were in fact denigrated and new ones were made founding myths. For instance, the imperial flag was presented as a mere "piece of cloth"

² The EPRDF is a coalition formed under the auspice of the TPLF at the end of the 1980. It took its definitive form at the beginning of the 1990s and comprises four political parties: the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front.

³ See Merera (2003). On the origins of the TPLF, see Young (1997); and for the view of a former founding member of the Front, see Aregawi (2009).

⁴ Article 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The preceding *derg* regime had already started to organize a federal Ethiopian state under the Stalinist theory (creation of the Institute for Ethiopian Nationalities, and the national *Shengo* which officially represented these nationalities according to the 1989 constitution). But in practice, the *derg* continued to defend a centralized, violent and unitary conception of the Ethiopian nationhood (Clapham, 1989; Dias, 2008, pp. 175-176).

⁵ EPRDF (1993). Our Revolutionary Democratic Goals and the Next Step (1985 EC). *Ethiopian Register*, June 1996.

and King of Kings Menilek II (r. 1889-1913), until then celebrated as a national hero and symbol of resistance against European colonialism, was condemned for his "genocidal campaigns" within its Ethiopian empire. The EPRDF thus revisited Ethiopian history from 1991 onward, considered the Aksum Empire as the historical core of Ethiopia and dated the modern Ethiopian state back to Menilek II's conquests in the nineteenth century (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 58; Gascon, 2009; Clapham, 2002a).

However, less than a decade later, the battle of Adwa (1896) was celebrated again as a national victory against colonialism, and giant pictures of the former emperors (including the *derg's* leader Mengistu Haile Mariam) reappeared in Meskel Square, in Addis Ababa, at the occasion of the Festival of the Ethiopian Millennium (September 2007 - September 2008). The Festival celebrating "two thousand years of Ethiopian history" (according to the Ethiopian calendar) was also the occasion to give a tribute to the Ethiopian flag, since then presented as one of the strongest national symbols of Ethiopian "unity in diversity" and celebrated every year (Bach, 2013)⁶.

The 1998-2000 war which opposed Ethiopia and Eritrea is most often presented as the decisive reason for this change in EPRDF's nationalist discourse⁷. Ethiopianness⁸ would have been, since the war, surprisingly reactivated (Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut, 2005, p. 109). Logically and interestingly, the question raised by observers has revolved around "how the war affected the EPRDF project of remaking the state along ethnic lines" (Dias, 2008, p. 208). Clearly, the 1998-2000 context of the war reactivated the resort to a national historiography inherited from the preceding regimes. On the one hand, as Tronvoll brilliantly demonstrated, "the discourses on identity in Ethiopia changed radically with the outbreak of the war. Suddenly, Ethiopianness rose like a phoenix from the revolutionary ashes, positioning itself at the centre of the political discourse on identity" (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 58). And on the other, in the aftermath of war "the emphasis on diversity and decentralization (...) was increasingly substituted by the focus on unity and on a revived and more salient centralizing trend" (Dias, 2008, p. 208). Assefa Fisseha went even further in describing the EPRDF's nationalist "shift" after the war, and

⁶ Since the first Flag day in 2008, the national Ethiopian flag has been celebrated every year, on different dates.

⁷ On the war, its causes and its aftermaths, see among others Tekeste & Tronvoll (2000); Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut (2005); Dias (2008).

⁸ I shall define Ethiopianness as a nationalist discourse based on a conception of the Ethiopian national identity as transcending people's particular identities, inherited from the imperial times (Bureau, 1987) and aiming at legitimizing a "great" or "utopian Ethiopia" (Gascon, 1995).

more precisely after the 2001 split within the TPLF-EPRDF⁹, when he noted that “(...) the tone of discussion seems to have shifted toward the dangers of ‘narrow nationalism’ and the ‘manipulation of ethnic identity for parochial purposes’” (Assefa, 2006, p. 147).

But this way of considering the pre-war and the post-war periods as coinciding with two radically diverging and opposing discourses (ethnic-based before the war, and Pan-Ethiopian after the war) of the EPRDF leadership seems questionable when we focus on TPLF’s discourses before the war, and even before 1991. In fact, except a very initial period during which the Tigrayan Front claimed independence for Tigray (the famous 1976 *Manifesto*), the TPLF fast reoriented its claims for a unitary and democratic Ethiopia within which the “nationalities” would be freed from oppression (Gebru, 2009, p. 86), and harshly condemned “narrow nationalism” (EPRDF, 1993). Further, in the early 1990s, Ethiopianness appeared as second-zone identity but still compatible with “primordial” ones. In Meles Zenawi’s own terms: “Ethiopianness” was then considered “a right, not an obligation” (Meles Zenawi, 1994). And after the 1998-2000 war, the annual celebrations of NNPs (festival of the NNPs) have shown that Ethiopianness has not replaced “primordial” identities in EPRDF’s nationalism.

Thus, the role played by the war must be tempered, for EPRDF’s centralized practice of power and the resilience of Ethiopianness in the early 1990s indicate that “ethnic federalism” was not such a radical turn as it could initially appear (Barnes & Osmond, 2005; Abbink, 2009). Beyond the formal discourses and ideological views inherited from the ESM, “ethnic federalism” has to be considered above all as a concrete political strategy in order to deal with diversity within the country on the one hand, and to deal with – or exclude – political opponents on the other. In fact, the great challenge facing the EPRDF at the beginning of the 1990s consisted in transforming an inherited empire into a “new” state. That meant proposing a regime capable of absorbing the inherent tension of (empire or) state-building resulting from the simultaneous process of “integrating and differentiating” different groups (Burbank & Cooper, 2008, p. 497). The question raised by Burbank & Cooper is still very relevant in the Ethiopian case, in the imperial or current periods: “After the rapid expansion of the empire, how to build a lasting power?” (Burbank & Cooper, 2009, p. 15). Concerning political opponents, “ethnic-federalism” appeared to be an efficient way of excluding every group (and sometimes former enemies fought during the struggle, like

⁹ The war exacerbated internal tensions first within the TPLF and then in the other parties of the coalition. Meles Zenawi eventually imposed his views and TPLF “strong nationalist” members were expelled (like Gebru Asrate, former president of Tigray Region). See Medhane & Young (2003).

EDU or EPRP former members) defending another conception of the Ethiopian nationhood or ethnic representation (Vaughan, 1994). Ethiopianness and ethnic-federalism shall not be considered incompatible nationalisms that would have replaced each other alternatively, but rather two levels of EPRDF's nationalism whose articulations have been determined by specific circumstances. Tronvoll argued that "Ethiopian nationalism today (...) comes in the plural" in the war aftermaths (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 207). Here, I would like to show that TPLF-EPRDF nationalism was already plural before the 1998-2000 war.

Based on official sources (TPLF-EPRDF discourses, interviews) collected during about twelve months of fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2011, this article argues that a closer look at TPLF's discourses and policies before and after 1991 suggests that "ethnic federalism" did not fundamentally call into question Ethiopia's unity even before the 1998-2000 war (except for the recognition of Eritrea's independence in 1993). EPRDF leadership's ideology has remained a flexible political tool for pragmatic and concrete control of the state, explaining why the resort to Ethiopianness and the myth of unity during the war was so easily reappropriated by the Ethiopian leadership. Further, I shall argue that the rise of a Pan-Ethiopian discourse after the war and during the 2005 general elections among opposition groups also explains this nationalist "shift", showing that opposition discourses also matter and influence EPRDF's discursive strategy.

The article is organised into two parts, in order to distinguish two distinct periods during which both a Pan-Ethiopian and a primordial conception of Ethiopian nationhood were articulated by TPLF-EPRDF. First, a focus on the struggle period against the *derg* and the beginning of the 1990s until the 1998-2000 war will show that the myth of Ethiopian unity was not rejected by the TPLF-EPRDF. The second shall demonstrate that not only the war but also the 2005 general election and its aftermaths played a very significant role in adjusting these two levels of nationalism, *i.e.* "primordial" nationalism and Ethiopianness.

From rebellion to government: playing with a multifaceted nationalism (1976-1998)

Following the fall of the *derg* regime and the coming of the TPLF/EPRDF to power, one can observe that the nation-building strategy as elaborated by this front stressed the "primordial" belonging to "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" as the basis of Ethiopians' identity. Nevertheless, Ethiopianness soon reappeared in EPRDF's discourses in the early 1990s. This multifaceted nationalism is to be explained by particular circumstances and also by the inheritance of a certain

perception of the state by the TPLF leadership, related to their ambition to reshape the Ethiopian state and nation, rather than destroying it.

Rethinking Ethiopian nationhood: the inheritance of the “national oppression thesis”

After the fall of Mengistu’s regime, the Ethiopian “nationalities” became the core of a renewed conception of the Ethiopian nation derived from the “national oppression thesis” defended by the TPLF rebellion during the struggle (1970s-1980s). The TPLF leadership thus remained devoted to their interpretation of Ethiopian people and to their opposition against preceding regimes’ Ethiopianness considered the root cause of Ethiopia’s troubles.

For instance, the battle of Adwa (1 March 1896), symbolising the success of Ethiopia’s resistance against European colonisation, was still celebrated¹⁰. But its hero, emperor Menilek II, was not celebrated as a national hero anymore. Tribute was rather given to the Ethiopian “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” (NNPs) who fought Italian claims, while Menilek was condemned for the “genocides” he committed against Ethiopian NNPs. An imperial hero in the former regimes, Menilek II appeared as a criminal, responsible for many massacres during his military campaigns towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Oromo and Tigrayan martyrs were on the contrary celebrated as victims of these imperial expansions: the commemoration of the battle of Chelenqo (1887) which allowed Menilek to control the eastern commercial road to Harar gave tribute to “Oromo martyrs”. The “massacre of Annolee” during which, according to the new official sources, 75 000 Oromo fighters were then said to have lost their lives¹¹, was also commemorated every year from 1992 on, and the violent repression of Tigrayan uprising in 1943 (*Weyane*) by Haile Selassie’s regime after the Second World War were denounced for being “expansionist”, “violent” and “tyrannical”¹². In fact, Haile Selassie’s and the *derg* regimes were both presented as imperial criminals, heirs of Menilek’s policies:

¹⁰ The battle occurred in the night and morning of the 1st of March, 1896. It opposed the Italian army and its locally recruited soldiers (*askari*) going south from their colony in Eritrea (about 10 000 men) to the huge Ethiopian imperial army led by Menilek II and its generals (*Ras*) coming from all the Ethiopian empire (about 100 000 men). The Italian army was eventually defeated. See Maimire (1997); McClellan (1996, p. 63); see also Getachew & Paulos (2005).

¹¹ This number, as exaggerated as it appears, is quoted by Berhanu Legesse, “In memory of Oromos martyrs at Chelenko”, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 2nd April 1996.

¹² Berhanu Legesse, “In memory of Oromos martyrs at Chelenko”, *op. cit.*; Getachew Kejela, “Annolee Martyrs Day commemorated”, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 7 January 1992. On the *Weyane* uprising, see Tareke (1996, pp. 89-124).

Menilek's genocidal campaign against the Oromos has not so far been exposed since his successors (...) both the Haile Selassie and *Derg* regimes (...) sympathized with Menilek's causes (...). Menilek took all inhuman measures to eliminate the Oromos from the face of the world¹³.

At the occasion of a press conference given in September 1992, Meles Zenawi, then President of the Transitional government (1991-1995) and leader of the TPLF/EPRDF, exposed his vision of the new Ethiopian nation which was to be built. He explained how the new government aimed at building a new Ethiopian identity "from below", which would emerge from "first" and "real" identities of Ethiopian peoples, *i.e.* their "ethnic" belonging¹⁴. Meles Zenawi moreover stressed the fact that every Oromo, Tigrean or Kembata would consider himself first as an Oromo, a Tigrean or a Kembata and only then as an Ethiopian. An Oromo would prefer being an Oromo rather than lose his identity: "People should be proud of their identity and ethnic identity" (...). "What incites disintegration is the view that we are all one"¹⁵.

These recurrent discourses from the beginning of the 1990s represent a quite radical turning point compared to the previous regimes which used the Adwa victory in order to unify the Ethiopian people in a context of civil (against the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, and then the TPLF/EPRDF and affiliates) and international wars (against Somalia at the beginning of the 1960s under Haile Selassie and later at the end of the 1970 under the *derg*).

One can attribute this relative deconstruction of Ethiopianness by the new TPLF/EPRDF leadership and its reconstruction on the basis of NNPs to three main factors. First, the conception of the Ethiopian nation of the new leadership remained strongly influenced by their ideological background, *i.e.* the "national oppression thesis" inherited from the 1960s and 1970s (Merera, 2003). New regimes need renewed myths and mythologies in order to stress the contrast with past regimes and build their power and legitimacy¹⁶. It is about demarcating themselves from the previous fallen regimes against which they fought. Second, one can say

¹³ "Menilek's genocidal campaign", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 5 January 1992.

¹⁴ "President Meles Zenawi replies to questions posed by journalists", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 23, 24, and 25 September 1992. These ideas were confirmed in an interview of Meles Zenawi by Donald Levine published the same month. See Levine (1992).

¹⁵ "President Meles Zenawi replies to questions posed by journalists", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 23, 24, 25 September 1992.

¹⁶ The *derg* also defended the idea of "unity in diversity" and promoted, during the very last years of the regime, a federal reconfiguration of Ethiopian state based on the recognition of the different nations. But although it created the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities in 1983 in order to list the different nationalities that had to be represented in the national Assembly (*Shengo*) from 1987 on, the groups so identified had no real power and the *Shengo* remained an appendix of the *derg*. As Clapham writes, in post-1991, "the Stalinist theory of nationalities had life only after death" (Clapham, 2002b, p. 25).

that TPLF/EPRDF's leadership had to satisfy other national groups (Oromos, Afar, etc.) with whom they had been fighting during the struggle and who were now expecting a reward for such alliances (autonomy, independence). Finally, the relatively peaceful regional context did not necessitate a broad Ethiopian mobilisation against an "external" enemy. National "enemies" were at the moment just those who opposed such a deconstruction of Ethiopianness within Ethiopia¹⁷. In fact, this new strategy of state- and nation-building implied an ethnic interpretation of all Ethiopian conflicts, as the new leadership ideologically considered economic, social and political marginalization of NNPs (here synonymous of ethnic, even if this term is barely used by the former guerrillas) as the main source of conflicts under previous regimes. For them, the eradication of any national "oppression" through "multinational federalism" and the rethinking of the notions of state and nation in terms of NNPs had to respect Ethiopian diversities and preserve the country from any future conflict¹⁸.

"Ethiopianness: a right, not an obligation" (Meles Zenawi, 1994)

But the idea of Ethiopianness, while strongly rejected in internal EPRDF papers, was not that radically condemned publicly, and even progressively increased again from the middle of the 1990s. In fact, it would be excessive to conclude from these first observations that Ethiopianness purely and simply disappeared as from 1991 in EPRDF's discourses. Indeed, the Ethiopia-scale national discourse was not totally abandoned at the beginning of the 1990s, although it then appeared like a "second class identity", beyond the "Rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples". It is also worth noting the ambiguity created by the coexistence of a dual identity after 1991: while the domestic citizenship was defined in terms of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, it had to coexist with a remaining international Ethiopian identity (Dias, 2008, pp. 144-152)¹⁹.

During the transitional period (1991-1995), rather than a complete rejection of Ethiopianness, one could observe a complex articulation of these two conceptions of Ethiopian nation. While primordial identities got a legal and constitutional status (Transition Charter and then the Art. 39 of the 1995 Constitution), Ethiopianness

¹⁷ Opposing such a new vision of the Ethiopian nation and defending an Ethiopia-broad identity, the All-Amhara People's Organization was thus tendentiously accused of sponsoring "war" and was erased from the political scene.

¹⁸ See "No alternative to peace and democracy", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 21 January, 1992; and "President Meles briefs local, foreign journalists on current Ethiopia situation", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 2 February 1993. On the consequences of such an externally defined and imposed identity in terms of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, see Abbink (1998).

¹⁹ For a stimulating development on the implications of such an ambiguous identity and the consequences of the 2003 Proclamation No. 378 on Ethiopian (and Eritrean) nationality after the 1998-2000 war, see Dias (2008), especially chapter 4.

was relegated to an identity of secondary importance. "Ethiopianness [has become] a right, not an obligation", declared Meles Zenawi as early as 1994²⁰. When journalists asked him about the coming evolution of Ethiopian citizenship, Meles Zenawi declared in 1992:

Previous approach [*derg*] was [...] to deny his nation, nationality identity in order to be an Ethiopian. [...] The greatest danger to unity is not accepting the fact that we can jointly retain and ascertain our Ethiopian identity while at the same time speaking our own languages, wearing our ethnic costumes and administering our own respective regions [...]. If the danger is done away with, federalism will only further strengthen Ethiopia's unity and not lead to disintegration²¹.

I just can't comprehend why being organised on the basis of nationalities and the respect on nations and nationalities should conflict with the notion of being an Ethiopian [...]. It is possible to be both an Ethiopian and one's own ethnic origin, why is it that we insist that he chooses one of the two? [...]. Why is it that he can't be both? When he retains both identities, he can at the same time be a Kembata and an Ethiopian, an Oromo and an Ethiopian, as well as a Tigrean and an Ethiopian all at the same time [...]. Most of the time no person desires to lose his identity²².

Actually, the EPRDF has been proposing a new vision of Ethiopian identity, where primordial identities can coexist with an imperial inherited Ethiopianness without being mutually exclusive. Several internal and external events, as well as long term causes, explain the fast putting in perspective of the ethnic discourse and the slight rehabilitation of Ethiopianness as from the middle of the 1990s.

Explaining the national compromise: conjunctural stakes and long term inheritances

The strained relationship between the EPRDF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is one important reason explaining the resilience of Ethiopianness in the first half of the 1990s. The former Oromo ally during the struggle boycotted the 1992 elections, later left the Transitional government and took up arms against the TPLF/EPRDF. Dissatisfied with the leading group's desire to monopolize the political process and rig elections, the OLF reiterated its demands for the independence of the Oromo "colonized" peoples. But as the Oromo state represented

²⁰ "Ethiopianness, a right, not obligation: Meles", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 11 February, 1994. It is for instance revealing that conflicts are no longer considered to be ethnic from then on. In September 1994, Meles Zenawi himself declaring in 1994: "It is inaccurate to talk about ethnic strife in Ethiopia", Interview of Meles Zenawi, Eye Witness, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 4 September 1994.

²¹ "President Meles Zenawi replies to questions posed by journalists", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 23, 24, and 25 September 1992.

²² *Ibid.*

what was becoming the federation's biggest and richest region in the middle of which the capital city, Addis Ababa, stood²³, the TPLF/EPRDF had no choice but to calm ethnic tensions and regional demands in order to avoid Ethiopia's implosion. By recognizing ethnic conflict as a reality, the government would have been accused of implementing the same oppressive policies as the former regimes. This may partly explain why the ethnic discourse was tempered from the middle of the 1990s onward, in order to maintain the still fragile unity of the territory and to optimise the economic potential in a country that had to be rebuilt.

A second event may have played an important role in the preservation of Ethiopianness: the conflict in neighbouring Somalia. After the fall of Siyad Barre in 1991, the different groups in power could not reach any agreement for a peaceful and inclusive transition. This led to the "collapse" of the young Somali state. Within that period, the Ethiopian government press presented this conflict as emerging from inter-clan tensions and resulting in a state of "chaos" and "anarchy". This vision of the Somali conflict probably scared the Ethiopian leadership which had the task of stabilizing the country after more than fifteen years of a cruel civil war. Ethnic tensions may have carried a strong potential for violence very hard to deal with. Ethiopianness then appeared very useful as a common Ethiopian sense of belonging able to deal with "unity in diversity".

The 1994 massacres in Rwanda could also explain the inertia of Ethiopianness as a third and external event. The genocide in Rwanda confirmed the danger in institutionalizing ethnicity and the politicization and manipulation of the latter when defined "from above". In fact, this episode of Rwanda contemporary history was very present in Ethiopia as the government sent a contingent to participate in the United Nations peacekeeping mission there. Even recently, two months before the 2010 general elections in Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi justified the banning of two radio stations (*Voice of America* and *Deutsche Welle*) by accusing them of inciting hatred, the Prime minister explicitly comparing the stations to *Radio Mille Collines*, and underscoring the important role played by the radio in the genocide (Bach, 2011, p. 488). This explicit reference to the Rwanda genocide was already very present in anti-opposition discourses from the EPRDF during the 2005 general elections, against Ethiopian opponents (ICG, 2009, p. 9).

Furthermore, this evolution of the Ethiopian nation-building process and TPLF/EPRDF's conception of the Ethiopian nation can also be explained by the TPLF's perception of the Ethiopian state and their pragmatic strategies during the struggle. That actually reveals the complexity of TPLF's nationalism itself. In fact,

²³ According to the 2007 Census published by the Central Statistical Agency, the Oromo region covers about 280 000 km² and contains 36,5 % of the Ethiopian population.

from the 1970s, TPLF's nationalism was built on the tension between historical Ethiopianness and the ideological "national oppression thesis". Except a brief period of hesitation at the beginning of the movement's formation during which the young Tigrayan front claimed independence for the Tigray region (*cf.* the *Manifesto* of 1976), their objective then shifted: the control of the Ethiopian state. This shift became clearer when the "Shire, Adwa and Axum group", fighting for an autonomous Tigray within Ethiopia, overpowered an internal dissident group calling for independence. The creation of the EPRDF, under the auspices of the TPLF, and above all the decision taken by the Front to struggle beyond Tigray in order to liberate the whole Ethiopia in the second half of the 1980s (at the occasion of the foundation of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray within the TPLF) represent an important step from Tigray nationalism to Ethiopian nationalism (Aregawi, 2009, pp. 176-185; Young, 1997, pp. 138-139). As Tronvoll noted, once the Tigray region was liberated from the *derg* armies at the end of the 1980s, this decision to continue the struggle until Addis Ababa had two major implications:

First, the Front had to readjust its ideological platform so that the revolution of Tigrayanness and political autonomy could also include an Ethiopian solution to the problem of other suppressed 'nationalities' [...] And, secondly, it had to establish alliances with other ethnic fronts outside Tigray in order to carry on the military struggle on 'foreign' ethnic soil (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 55).

This evolution is actually not surprising. The Tigrayan leadership had condemned Menilek II who was accused of having "abandoned" parts of Tigray to the Italians (Hamassien and the Northern part of the Mereb river) after the battle of Adwa (1896). Haile Selassie was equally condemned for the repressions of any attempt of Tigrayan's resistance against his state-building enterprise (*cf.* the *Weyane* uprising in 1943; Gebru, 1996). But the Tigrayan rebels and elites considered Tigray itself not only as part of the Ethiopian state, but as its historical core (Medhane, 1999, pp. 1-64; Gascon, 2006, p. 75). In fact, Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889), former King of Kings of Ethiopia, just before Menilek II, originated from Tigray. In 1872, he was crowned in Axum, the religious and former centre of the empire, hence reinventing a tradition abandoned since the crowning of Yassou IV in the same place in 1693. Yohannes IV thus confirmed the moving of the Ethiopian political, religious and symbolic state "centre" to Tigray at the end of the XIXth century, anchoring the Solomonic ascendancy of its authority (Ancel, 2006; Henze, 2004, p. 147). He thus definitely connected what was becoming the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to state-building in order to legitimize his power. *Ras* Alula, the head of Yohannes' army and defender of Tigray against both external and

internal threats, did not get any official title as a hero at the Ethiopian level, but has remained a major hero in contemporary Tigrayan memories (Erlich, 1996). Besides, his statue in Asmara was destroyed just after EPLF took power (1991) (Medhane, 1999).

Tigray was seen to stand at the core of Ethiopia's long-term history, a frontier region between two state- and nation-building processes, the emerging Eritrean nation-state in the North and the Ethiopian empire in the South. For instance, the TPLF attachment clearly appears through the names given to military offensives during the struggle against the *derg*. While the latter launched the "Operation Adwa" in 1988 and the "Operations Aksum I" and "Aksum II" in 1988 and 1989 against Eritrean and Tigrayan Fronts (Gebru, 2009), the TPLF/EPRDF appropriated the image of the King of Kings Tewodros II (r. 1865-1868) by naming its massive and determined offensive against Mengistu's armies "Operation Tewodros" (Fontrier, 1999, pp. 287-294). By calling the military operation "Tewodros" (instead of Yohannes or Alula, which would have narrowly referred to Tigray), the Tigrayan movement used a federating image of the founder of "modern" Ethiopia and sent a strong signal to its Ethiopian allies (like EPRDF groups among others) in order to dispel the remaining doubts of the 1976 *Manifesto*.

The following extracts published in 1977 in the press department of the TPLF *Vanguard* is revealing of such a strategy:

Contrary to Ethiopia's false claim 3 000 years of history originating before the era of the Axumite Kingdom (...) the ancient Kingdom was the Kingdom of Axum and not the Kingdom of Ethiopia. From the fall of Axum and the advent of Italian colonialism the people of Eritrea lived under chains of feudal fiefdoms, in constant resistance to foreign aggressions²⁴.

By referring to Axum and by getting rid of the Solomonic filiation, the TPLF/EPRDF was redefining the historicity of the Ethiopian state and Ethiopianness, but not rejecting it. By replacing Solomon and the Queen of Sheba with Axum, Ethiopian history "lost" 1 000 years of history²⁵. It made it possible for the TPLF to defend and place itself in the core of Ethiopia's long-term history. Already, during the struggle against the *derg*, the TPLF/EPRDF project had acquired a strong Pan-Ethiopian scale aimed at unifying Ethiopian nations by using and reinterpreting the Ethiopian empire's mythologies and heroes. Finally, it revealed the weight and usefulness of Ethiopian imperial history during the struggle, thus explaining

²⁴ *Vanguard*, April 1977, p. 3.

²⁵ A. Gascon (2009) wrote this particular relevant remark: "L'actuelle république (...) a amputé 1 000 ans de son histoire préférant se référer au royaume d'Aksum [plutôt qu'au mythe salomonien] dont l'existence historique est indéniable".

the capacity of post-1991 leadership to clearly resort to strong Ethiopian symbols in the course of the 1990s, especially from 1998-2000 until today. Combining the "national oppression thesis" with Ethiopian imperial symbols and nationalism, Tigrayan rebels were not fighting *against* the Ethiopian state, but *for* the Ethiopian state – contrary to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front which contested the Ethiopian state and Ethiopianness and (re)invented an Eritrean identity anchored in Italian colonization within the colonial frontiers.

Thus, the combination of imperial Ethiopianness with "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples", *i.e.* the two main scales of Ethiopian nationalisms, rather than two sequences of Ethiopian nation-building or rather than two conceptions of Ethiopian nationhood rejecting each other, dates back to the struggle period where they already coexisted. This explains why a strong reactivation of the Pan-Ethiopian nationalism by the EPRDF was possible (and worked) when the war with Eritrea broke out in 1998.

The 1998-2000 war and the 2005 elections: balancing Ethiopianness and NNPs

Eritrea gained independence in 1993 after the struggle opposing the Eritrean People's Liberation Front led by Issayas Afewerki against the *derg*. The EPLF has remained in power since then. The 1998-2000 war between the TPLF and the EPLF regimes was unexpected, even though the relationship between the former Tigrayan and Eritrean Fronts went through some crisis during the struggle (Young, 1996). Within a few weeks, a boundary clash in contested territories fast became a large scale war in which both countries lost in total about 100, 000 soldiers (Tekeste & Tronvoll, 2000; Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut, 2004; Dias, 2008). From the beginning of the conflict, the EPRDF elites clearly adopted a renewed discourse of Ethiopianness using symbols and myths used by the previous regimes and relatively undermined since 1991. This tendency was reaffirmed after the 2005 general elections in which opposition groups defending a "real Ethiopianness" obtained some successes. That eventually led to a readjusted nation-building strategy in which Ethiopianness and NNPs have been more equally balanced.

The 1998-2000 war: reactivating a strong Ethiopianness

Tronvoll has demonstrated the impact of the 1998-2000 war on "the formation and conceptualisation of identities in Ethiopia", and the (re)construction of enemies' and allies' images in its aftermaths (Tronvoll, 2009). I would like to focus here on the perspective of the Ethiopian government as nation-builder, and on

the way some national symbols, rejected by TPLF/EPRDF rulers at the beginning of the 1990s, were then re-appropriated and used by these post-1991 Ethiopian rulers in order to fight against a “new” Eritrean enemy.

Empires-, states- and nation-building is marked by some pivotal events referring to different levels of nationalism, their (re)activations depending on particular contexts. The “liberation” struggle and the fight against imperial and *derg*'s nationalism gave sense to a nationalism based on Nations, Nationalities and Peoples after 1991. The war against Eritrea meant resorting to broader federating symbols and pivotal events stressing the “unity” and solidarity of Ethiopian peoples. That implied the increasing use of another dimension of nationalism at state level, inherited from the imperial period – which, once again, had not disappeared since 1991. These different nationalisms do not switch places with each other, but became articulated so that the Pan-national repertoires embraced those who consider themselves as Tigrayan, Oromo, Kembata *and* Ethiopian, or those who felt they belonged to both ethnic and Ethiopian identities.

In this context, the battle of Adwa appeared a very powerful pivotal event for the Ethiopian leadership in 1998-2000. In fact, it symbolized the union of Ethiopian peoples in their resistance against external enemies. In the 1990s, the commemorations of the battle of Adwa were occasions to celebrate Ethiopian NNPs. Then, in 1996, while Ethiopianness was quietly reactivated as noted above, a great celebration was organised to mark the centenary of Adwa victory against Italian aggressors, showing a growing interest for such an imperial event²⁶. The outbreak of the 1998-2000 war definitely rehabilitated the symbol.

The most illustrative fact of the reappropriation of Adwa by the TPLF/EPRDF is undoubtedly the 1st of March 1999, the date on which one of the most important Ethiopian offensives against Eritrean troops in the disputed area of Badme was launched (*Operation Sunset*). One could read on the first page of the governmental newspaper the following day: “It is propitious that the Badme victory was scored just as Ethiopians were preparing to observe the 103rd anniversary of the Battle of Adwa today”²⁷. The next day, the 3rd of March 1999, the same newspaper published a special issue on the two events. At the top of the first page, one could read: “Adwa Victory Day Colourfully Celebrated”, and at the bottom of the same

²⁶ See “Adwa centenary worthier than commemorations of Normandy landings, V-Day”, and “We are all children of Adwa (A. Triulzi)”, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 27 February, 1996. See also the proceedings of the conference given at this occasion (Ahmad & Richard, 1998). For a historical and general view on the event, see Getachew & Paulos (2005).

²⁷ “Operation Sunset culminates in success”, *The Ethiopian Herald*, 2nd March, 1999.

page: "Badme Victory – A Heroic Spirit Kindling". This "Double Victory!" was celebrated during the whole of the following week²⁸.

The 1998-2000 war did not only prove the strength of Ethiopianness, but also its usefulness for the Ethiopian political elite in place. The conflict against Eritrea incited the Ethiopian government to resort to the "colonial" memory, presenting the Eritrean regime as the heir of the Italian invaders. The TPLF/EPRDF endorsed the role of defender of the Ethiopian state, as did the preceding regimes against European countries. The use of the Adwa memory further revealed the inertia of imperial history and its symbolism, showing how the same set of mythologies could be used in different ways, in different contexts and for different political objectives (Girardet, 1986, pp. 9-24). Badme, since then, has been laden with such a strong mythology that the Ethiopian government could not allow to lose the place – even though it has been situated in Eritrea according to the decision given by the Independent Border Commission of the United Nations in 2002 (Lyons, 2006). This partly explains why the Ethiopian government has been systematically obstructing the implementation of this decision. Badme, as Adwa, has become a symbol of the Ethiopian nation and its martyrs, showing how old imperial places combine with new ones as markers of national and territorial memories. The former empire thus remains connected with the present, with the current Ethiopian state.

This connection was also obvious at the occasion of a new symbolic event associated with TPLF/EPRDF's own victory: *Ginbot 20* (28 May). This date marks the fall of the *derg* regime and the entry of EPRDF's troops into Addis Ababa in 1991, and has become a pivotal event as a national celebration day still symbolising the rebels' fight as well as the source of their legitimacy. The 28th of May 1999 also connects the past and the present through a war, as the celebration poster published at the occasion established a direct link between *Ginbot 20* and the national military offensive. In fact, on the poster published for 28 May 1999, one could read in the "8" of "28": "Operation Sunset"²⁹. TPLF/EPRDF leadership has thus superimposed its own victory against the regime on national resistance, hence operating a double and negative assimilation: on the one hand, Pan-Ethiopian nationalism (Ethiopianness) and TPLF/EPRDF's mythology are becoming confused, and on the other hand Eritrea is assimilated into the former regime of the *derg*. In a violent conflictual context, allies and enemies are thus redefined, thanks to assimilations and oppositions, using and rejecting the Ethiopian past at the same time in order to reinvent the party and state legitimacy. Adwa, *Ginbot 20*, *Operation Sunset* and

²⁸ "Double victory celebrated", *The Ethiopian Herald*, 9th March, 1999.

²⁹ *The Ethiopian Herald*, 28th May 1999.

Badme enter the core of a reinvented Ethiopian mythology, showing once again how imperial Ethiopianness and the new nationalism based on the “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” have to be considered as interdependent instead of opposed. The war against Eritrea has reconciled the Ethiopian empire with the post-1991 revolutionary state, as well as their respective nationalisms.

The aftermath of the 2005 general elections: balancing “multinational federalism” and Ethiopianness

In 1991, the relative change of national identity and the subsequent revision of Ethiopia’s history at the beginning of the 1990s appeared more controversial than the implementation of the federal system itself (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 58). In fact, multinational federalism was strongly condemned by observers for being the “denial” of “Ethiopianist feeling” supposedly born in Adwa, putting at risk national unity (Worku, 1993; Aberra, 1995) and eventually leading to the “country’s disintegration” (Maimire, 2005, p. 253; Getachew & Paulos, 2005).

Very early, political movements defending Ethiopia’s unity expressed their concern about the “ethnic divisions” Ethiopia would be facing (Levine, 1992, p. 16). Three main arguments structured the opposition’s criticism then: the first two were based on Eritrean and Somalian experiences, and the fear that Ethiopia would follow and disintegrate; the third one underscored the risk represented by a coming secession of the Oromo region from Ethiopia. This was for instance the case of the All Amhara People’s Organization (AAPO), or the Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party (EDUP), whose political programs were based on the unity of a “Greater Ethiopia” and the defence of a strong Ethiopianness. The AAPO was one of the most representative of these groups. Created in 1992 and chaired by Asrat Woldeyes who defended a unitary Ethiopia and condemned EPRDF’s multinational project, AAPO strongly opposed the independence of Eritrea, one of its main slogans being: “One Nation, One Country”³⁰. Haylu Shawel, then responsible for external relations of the movement, declared:

Since childhood, we have been told that we are Ethiopians. Being Ethiopian is the only thing we know. But those forces allergic to this idea have left no stone unturned to incite inter-ethnic conflict in our country. All these attempts have failed. This was because the Ethiopian people have never fought wars along ethnic lines. They showed great maturity in the face of investigations which could have possibly led to great suffering elsewhere (...). At times, I fear that a situation like that of Lebanon or Yugoslavia could develop in Ethiopia (...)³¹.

³⁰ “AAPO leaders speak out”, *Ethiopian Review*, March 1993, pp. 15-16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Parties defending the Ethiopian state's and nation's unity, and criticising multinational federalism have not disappeared. Quite logically, they just reappeared and increased after 2000, in the post-war context. In fact, opponents defending a unitary Ethiopia found in the war the occasion to legitimize their thesis and prove they were "right" at the beginning of the 1990s when they warned of imminent new conflicts, for which multinational federalism was accused of being responsible. This resurgence of a Pan-Ethiopian nationalist discourse clearly emerged at the occasion of the 2005 regional and federal elections and got a new dimension.

The May/August 2005 general elections can be considered as the freest and fairest since the fall of the *derg*. For the first time in Ethiopian history, debates between different (and opposed) parties were publicised and aired on TV and Radio, thus giving opposition groups the occasion to publicly broadcast their views and programs (Schmidt, 2005; Abbink, 2006; Gilkes, 2007). The most remembered event symbolizing this opening of the political space may be the TV debate which opposed the Deputy Prime Minister, Addissu Legesse, to Berhanu Nega, one leader of the most important coalition of opposition groups, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD, or *Kinidjiti*)³². Many Ethiopians that I met these last years remember the feeling of freedom they felt for the first time when they peacefully gathered at Meskel Square and contested EPRDF's power.

But the greatest hope also turned out to be the greatest deception. The CUD won 137 of the 138 seats of Addis Ababa city Council. It thus had the majority in the regional and federal level (CUD won 109 seats in the House of People's Representatives), which marked a turning point in Ethiopian political history (the opponents had been almost absent in the lower House till then). 172 seats were won by the whole opposition, 372 remaining to the EPRDF and its affiliated parties. This was a big surprise for the EPRDF which did not expect losing that much, particularly in the rural regions. But in the aftermath of the ballot, the CUD leadership and other opposition groups contested the electoral fairness and people began to demonstrate in the streets.

³² Formed in October 2004, the main components of the CUD were: the All-Ethiopian Unity Party, the United Ethiopia Democratic Party-Medhin, the Ethiopian Democratic League, and Rainbow Ethiopia (see Abbink, 2006; ICG, 2009). The United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF, or *Hibrät*) led by the Addis Ababa University Professors Merera Gudina (Oromo National Congress) and Beyene Petros (Ethiopian Social Democratic Federal Party), represents the second most important coalition challenging EPRDF's power in 2005. Contrary to the CUD, the UEDF did not reject multinational federalism, but condemned what they considered authoritarian practices and EPRDF's monopolization of power. UEDF is composed of Ethiopian-based parties (mainly in the Southern regions) as well as exiled groups (in the United States). The coalition strongly criticizes EPRDF for the issue of the 1998-2000 war, considering that Ethiopia should have rejected the 2000 Algiers Agreement (ending the war) and (re)integrate the "lost" region.

Thousands of CUD and opposition members³³, journalists, human rights activists were arrested and accused of national “treason”, and about two hundred civilians were killed by security forces while demonstrating in Addis Ababa and in the main Ethiopian cities between June and November 2005 (ICG, 2009; Piguet, 2006; Abbink, 2006; Tronvoll & Hagmann, 2012)³⁴. Some opposition leaders were freed in September 2007 due to the combined influence of a mediation organized by an Ethiopian “council of elders” and pressure from the US Administration and Congress. These opponents were “pardoned” and released before the opening of the National Festival of the Millennium in August and September 2007³⁵, after having officially recognized their “responsibility” for the violent events a couple a years before.

The impressive electoral progress of CUD in the Addis Ababa city council elections, in the Amhara region and in the House of People’s Representatives is a concrete illustration of the appeal of a strong discourse based on Ethiopianness which regained some credit during the 1998-2000 war. The issue of Eritrea was at the core of this vision defended by the CUD in 2005. EPRDF’s leadership was notably criticized for the way they “abandoned” what most of CUD leadership considered an “Ethiopian region”, first in 1993, and then in 2000. It is then not surprising to find Haylu Shawel – AAPO chairman after the death of Asrate Woldeyes in jail – chairing the Coalition for Unity and Democracy in 2004/2005.

The 2005 events thus confirm the resurgence of a Pan-Ethiopian unitary nationalism rejecting multinational federalism since the beginning of the 1990s. The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea created an opportunity for such a movement for a political revival, which has remained prominent since then. The result of the 2010 general elections (EPRDF won 99,6% of all HPR seats) illustrates not only how the EPRDF has been able to react since 2005, but also the difficulty of the opponents to federate out of this national vision – in a political context marked by EPRDF’s strong control of the whole electoral process³⁶. Five years later, arguments and repertoires elaborated by CUD and parties like Ethiopian Democratic Party in the 2010 campaign clearly echoed those five years earlier. The following declaration of Lidetu Ayalew (EDEPa, led by Lidetu Ayalew, a former CUD mem-

³³ Among those arrested were: Berhanu Nega, Mesfin Wolde-Maryam, Bertukan Mideksa, Haylu Shawel, etc.

³⁴ See also “Ethiopia legislative elections 2005”, European Union Election Observation Mission, Final Report, <http://www.eueom.eu/files/dmfile/FinalReport.pdf>

³⁵ Between September 2007 and September 2008, the Festival of the Millennium celebrated the 2000 years of Ethiopian history. Initiated by the government, it was the occasion to celebrate what was presented by EPRDF officials as the Ethiopian Renaissance.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, *One hundred ways of putting pressure: Violations of freedom expression and association in Ethiopia*, March 2010.

ber) during a TV electoral debate aired on Ethiopian Television in February 2010 illustrates that continuity:

Multiparty system will never be implemented as we like as long as there are political parties which are based on ethnicity in accordance with the constitution. There should be a political party that believes in the unity of all Ethiopian ethnic groups and individual rights³⁷.

During another debate, Lidetu Ayelew explicitly resorted to the argument of the risk of fragmentation. He first showed a map representing Ethiopia, and then a second one representing Ethiopia without the Oromo region, declaring:

Sorry to say but Ethiopia is at risk. The bad experiences we have come across³⁸ can evidently justify our fear. Let us think and imagine Ethiopia without Oromia – the biggest and richest regional state. If a demand for secession generates from such wealthy portion of Ethiopia, you can imagine what Ethiopia would look like³⁹.

Ato Legesse spoke for *Kinidjit* and, like EDePa, defended a united Ethiopia, just as the Coalition did in 2005⁴⁰: “Ethnic federalism, we think, will erode togetherness and unity, which in turn leads to identity complex. We are not underestimating ethnic groups at all, no ever. We are only against ethnic federalism”⁴¹.

If we wish to understand the post-war evolution of nation-building as defined and expressed by EPRDF's leadership, we need to take into account the success of the Pan-Ethiopian *Kinidjit* in the 2005 general election, and more broadly the resurgence of this persistent Pan-Ethiopian agenda defended by a large part of the opposition⁴². CUD's nationalism being an obvious inheritance of imperial Ethiopianness, the EPRDF had few options but to (re)appropriate and reinvent the national set of mythologies which is a complex mix between myths inherited from imperial, *derg* and current regimes. Through this discursive strategy, the EPRDF aimed at federating Ethiopians which partly explains why different levels of nationalism are so clearly superimposed in the present day Ethiopia.

³⁷ Lidetu Ayalew, Six-party debate, Ethiopian Television, “Democracy, election and multipartism in Ethiopia”, February 2010. These abstracts are unofficial translations from Amharic.

³⁸ This must refer to Eritrea's independence in 1993.

³⁹ Six-party debate, Ethiopian Television, “Federalism and decentralisation”, First Part, February 2010.

⁴⁰ After the 2005 elections, the CUD disintegrated and many parties left the Coalition (Lidetu Ayalew's Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party was one of them), so that the CUD in 2005 is far from being as strong as in 2005.

⁴¹ Six-party debate, Ethiopian Television, “Federalism and decentralisation”, First Part, February 2010.

⁴² Many opposition parties do not reject federalism or ethnic federalism. This was for instance the case of the coalition EUDP (*Hibrät*) in 2005, or the new coalition *Medrek* (“Forum”) in 2010 whose main leaders were professors Merera Gudina and Beyene Petros. These groups criticize EPRDF's policies and “authoritarian practices”, but not “ethnic federalism” *per se*.

Conclusion

Anchored in the “national oppression thesis” inherited from the Ethiopian student movement, the EPRDF leadership has been defending a conception of Ethiopian society structured “from below” and rooted in ascribed primordial identities. That representation determined the new discourses aiming at supporting nation- and state-building in post-1991 Ethiopia (Merera, 2006; Vaughan, 2011). Nevertheless, the radical deconstruction of Ethiopianness expressed to exclude competing political groups was fast reactivated. As Tronvoll writes,

the officially sanctioned nationalism designed and expressed by the EPRDF government was not powerful enough to neutralise other competing nationalist discourses, creating a complex and sometimes contradictory context of nationalist expressions (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 207).

The developments above confirm that the 1998-2000 war is essential but not sufficient to explain the complex reconfigurations, adaptations and reinventions of Ethiopian nationalisms since 1991 (and before). The Ethiopian case very interestingly illustrates Girardet’s idea that large “mythological sets” or “constellations of myths” remain despite the different ways their inherent symbols, images or heroes can be used and reinvented (Girardet, 1986, pp. 12-20). Rather than a research of a “real past” or historical “truth”, myths and mythologies thus have to be studied above all for what they tell about the present.

These articulations of Pan-Ethiopianness and primordial identities have to be understood out of the main challenge of state- and nation-builders consisting in transforming an empire into a “modern” state. That process has implied the need to reinvent the Ethiopian nation in order to find a way to federate different groups in a coherent national project, but also in order to control them (Burbank & Cooper, 2008, pp. 500-501). The EPRDF had to deal with the tension between integration and differentiation rooted in Menilek’s conquests from the end of the 19th century. The current polymorphous nationalism (like all nationalisms may be) tends to resolve the “persistent dilemma of empires”: how to incorporate different populations in a coherent political entity by maintaining, at the same time, distinctions and hierarchies on which domination is based. The Ethiopian case proves how thin the line remains between fallen empires and the states which replace them (Bertrand, 2006; Brown, 2011), and how problematic the challenge remains.

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