

2021-12-27

‘The Cult of Victimization’ in Ethiopian Ethnic
Politics: the subjection of Amharas to triple-
victimhood.

Author Contact Information:

Girma Berhanu

Department of Education and Special Education (Professor)

University of Gothenburg

Box 300, SE 405 30

Göteborg, Sweden

E-mail: Girma.Berhanu@ped.gu.se

Point of Departure

*Death toll in western Ethiopia 'massacre' reaches 207: Red Cross (25 Dec 2020)*¹

At the time of writing this short article on Victim Play in the new Ethiopian politics, again some 200 plus of the Amhara and other minority groups had been slaughtered in the Benishangul region, merely several hours after the prime minister of Ethiopia had left the area apparently due to security-related matters². 'The assailants torched the homes of sleeping villagers, and shot and stabbed people in Wednesday's attack. The attack came a day after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited the region. It is unclear who the attackers were, but they appeared to have targeted ethnic minority communities viewed as "settlers" in the region, Rights group Amnesty International said³, "At least 100 deaths have been reported so far. With dozens still unaccounted for and homes still ablaze, the death toll is likely to rise and there must be an urgent investigation into this horrendous attack. Perpetrators must be brought to justice and the Ethiopian authorities must make clear that this kind of violence will not be tolerated" (ibid).

In the past two years only, several thousands of Amhara and Agew residents have been murdered brutalized, and tens of thousands displaced and made homeless. We have been hearing that TPLF⁴ had been planting the seeds of hate and that it is directly and indirectly behind the pogroms and genocidal crimes against, in particular, the Amhara ethnic group and the Orthodox faithful. The TPLF had been blamed for pitting the Oromo against Amhara; they had been instigating armed groups in the Bensihangul region against the Amhara with the help of their lackeys⁵. Although the Amhara were and are being used as their bogey man, the ultimate objective of the TPLF was to dismantle Ethiopia. That was what we have heard and documented until a few weeks ago. The November military action by the Ethiopian Federal forces seems to have crippled the TPLF; it has cleaned these thugs out of most areas of Tigray, and their leaders have either gone into hiding or have already fled out of the country, while some have already been arrested.

We have heard "The Juntas are completely defeated". One wonders then who is behind the recent attacks in Benishangul and Oromia region? Can we safely say that TPLF operatives are still involved? Armed groups operating independently? Supported by Egypt or the Sudanese government? Who represent the armed groups? How much are the local security forces implicated in the crime? Whoever committed the atrocities, the central government and the

¹ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/25/death-toll-from-attack-in-western-ethiopia-reaches-222-red-cross?utm_campaign=trueAnthem%3A+Trending+Content&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_source=facebook

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55428322>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55428322>

⁴ TPLF was, until two years ago the main and most powerful party within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the so-called *ruling political coalition* which consists of four political parties. The TPLF-backed Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front took power after the collapse of the Derg in 1991.

⁵ The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, which was one of the constituent parties of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, has always considered ethnic Amharas an enemy. It has used their perceived historical dominance as the basis for forming a coalition of minorities to oppose their push for a united Ethiopia.

regional military-political and security leaders are anyhow responsible. The prime minister himself, for instance, cannot possibly be absolved or freed from the guilt of the consequences thereof.

The people of Amhara ethnicity identify themselves for the most part, if not primarily, as Ethiopians and secondly with their place of origin (i.e. provinces or districts). Moges (2020) rightly wrote that ‘Historically, public consciousness has been based on sub-regions, (Gojjam, Gondar, Shewa, or Wollo), or even smaller zones or districts. Anything larger has been Ethiopian national identity’. Up until the last quarter of the 20th century, “Amhara” was only used (in the form *amariñña*) to refer to Amharic, the language, or the medieval province located in Wollo (modern Amhara Region). Still today, most people labelled by outsiders as “Amhara”, refer to themselves simply as “Ethiopian”, or to their province (e.g. Gojjamé from the province Gojjam). According to Ethiopian ethnographer Donald Levine, “Amharic-speaking Shewans consider themselves closer to non-Amharic-speaking Shewans than to Amharic-speakers from distant regions like Gondar.”⁶ Amharic-speakers tend to be a “supra-ethnic group” composed of “fused stock”.⁷ Ethiopianism and Amhara are inextricably intertwined, which is one reason for their endless persecution! Anti-Ethiopia elements have aversion to the Amhara’s zealously⁸ about Ethiopia.

The federal system is responsible for the Amhara’s suffering and persecution because Amharas in various regional states are now considered settlers in their own country. “The government of Ethiopia has failed in its duty to protect the safety of its citizens”, Dessalegn Chanie, a senior member of the opposition National Movement of Amhara party, told The Associated Press, adding that Ethiopia’s language-based federal system is the main cause for the killings: “Ethnic Amharas residing outside [of] the Amhara region are being labelled as outsiders and are exposed to repeated attacks”. Shiferaw (2020⁹), in a recent article titled *Uglier faces of discrimination against the Amhara people in Ethiopia*, wrote that discrimination has become a culture in Ethiopia. And the government seems to be rather too busy with justifying and socializing citizens that they be comfortable with discrimination in different aspects, than appropriately correcting the prevailing gaps that are the sources and catalysts of the rife animosity and recurrently erupting conflict. The problem is most vividly manifested in the spheres of workplace, employment, and personnel position appointment as well as promotion.

6 Donald N. Levine "Amhara," in von Uhlig, Siegbert, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*:A-C, 2003, p.231.

7 Takkele Taddese "Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?" in Marcus, Harold G., ed., *Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 1994, pp.168–186. Takkele Taddese (1994) further wrote that he Amhara can thus be said to exist in the sense of being a fused stock, a supra-ethnically conscious ethnic Ethiopian serving as the pot in which all the other ethnic groups are supposed to melt. The language, Amharic, serves as the center of this melting process although it is difficult to conceive of a language without the existence of a corresponding distinct ethnic group speaking it as a mother tongue. The Amhara does not exist, however, in the sense of being a distinct ethnic group promoting its own interests and advancing the *Herrenvolk* philosophy and ideology as has been presented by the elite politicians. The basic principle of those who affirm the existence of the Amhara as a distinct ethnic group, therefore, is that the Amhara should be dislodged from the position of supremacy and each ethnic group should be freed from Amhara domination to have equal status with everybody else. This sense of Amhara existence can be viewed as a myth.” This statement can be contentious, though.

8 As many observers have testified, the Amhara people are a **symbol of patriotism**, bravery and part of the core Ethiopian national identity and soul. The continuity and prosperity of Ethiopia is also in the Amhara people’s enduring interest (Moges, 2020)..

9 <http://www.branapress.com/2020/03/04/uglier-faces-of-discrimination-against-the-amhara-people-in-ethiopia/>

Unfortunately there are no political leaders or strong organizations that protect the human rights of this ethnic group¹⁰. The Amhara civil, political, economic, cultural, and social rights are violated through various means. Though all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the legally binding International Covenants of Human Rights are considered essential, there are certain types of violations we tend to consider as more serious. Civil rights, which include the right to life, safety, and equality before the law are considered by many to be “first-generation” rights. Political rights, which include the right to a fair trial and the right to vote, also fall under this category. The Amhara living in the regional states of Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia are denied all of those rights and liberties. The mother of ethnic-focused mass killings or genocidal root causes in parts of present day Ethiopia are the deliberately TPLF conscripted and TPLF hatched manifesto that have resulted in covert ethnic attacks, systemic dysfunction and community atrocities. In 1994, these problems were purposefully subscribed and labeled by TPLF and its cohorts as the so called “Ethiopian Constitution”.

The U.N. office on genocide prevention has condemned targeted attacks against civilians based on their ethnicity or religion, including hate speech and incitement to violence, in Ethiopia. It has warned that ethnic violence “has reached an alarming level over the past two years,” and the new rhetoric sets a “dangerous trajectory that heightens the risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”¹⁰

Why, over the past century, have good people repeatedly ignored mass murder and genocide? In a compellingly insightful article entitled “*If I look at the mass I will never act*”: *Psychic numbing and genocide*¹¹, Slovic (2007) wrote that most people are caring and will exert great effort to rescue individual victims whose needy plight comes to their attention. These same good people, however, often become numbly indifferent to the plight of individuals who are “one of many” in a much greater problem. Of course, every episode of mass murder is unique and raises unique obstacles to intervention. But the repetitiveness of such atrocities, ignored by powerful people and nations, and by the general public as we witnessed in the case of the Amhara plight, calls for explanations that may reflect some fundamental deficiency in our humanity — a deficiency that, once identified, might possibly be overcome.

One fundamental mechanism that may play a role in many, if not all, episodes of mass-murder neglect involves the capacity to experience *affect*, the positive and negative feelings that combine with reasoned analysis to guide our judgments, decisions, and actions. Paul Slovic¹² draws from psychological research to show how the statistics of mass murder or genocide, no matter how large the numbers, fail to convey the true meaning of such atrocities. The reported numbers of deaths represent dry statistics, “human beings with the tears dried

10 While Amhara nationalism has had an impact on the political consciousness of the youth and articulated common interests, it is still characterized by a lack of ideological clarity, and a dependable institutional bulwark, a cohesive social base or even, as opposition politician Yilikal Getinet has pointed out, a centre of gravity. (Moges 2020).

11 Paul Slovic *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April 2007, pp. 79–95

12 በኢትዮጵያ ክልሎች ውስጥ በብሔር ላይ ያተኮሩ የጅምላ ግድያዎች ወይም የዘር ማጥፋት መሰረታዊ መነሻ ምክንያቶች ሆን ብለው በሕወሃት የተመረጡ እና በሕወሃት የተፈለፈሉ ስውር የጎሳ ጥቃቶችን፣ የሥርዓት መበላሸትን እና የሕብረተሰቡን ግፍ ያስከተሉ ማኒፌስቶ ናቸው። እ.አ.አ. በ 1994 እነዚህ ችግሮች ሆን ተብለው በህወሀት እና ግብረአባሮቻቸው “የኢትዮጵያ ህገ-መንግስት” ተብሎ በሚጠራ መልኩ በደንበኝነት ተመዝግበው ተሰየሙ። ይህንን የተሳሳተ እና የተፀነሰ ህገ-መንግስት ለማስወገድ እንታገል! (Personal communication, Dr Tadesse Zerihun 2021.12.27). Let us fight to remove this ill-conceived constitution!

off,” that fail to spark emotion or feeling and thus fail to motivate action. The case of Amhara genocide is one case! Recognizing that we cannot rely only upon our moral feelings to motivate proper action against genocide, Solvic argues that we must look to moral argument and international law¹³. The 1948 Genocide Convention was supposed to meet this need, but it has not been effective. It is time to examine this failure in light of the psychological deficiencies¹⁴ and design legal and institutional mechanisms that will enforce proper response to genocide and other forms of mass murder.

In this short paper, I reflect on the discourses characterized by victim playing in Ethiopian ethnic politics. The Oromo and the Tigrean Nationalists have actively adopted the Dangerous Politics of Playing the Victim at the expense of the Amhara lives. In this victimhood play, the Amhara are triply victimized. 1) The Amhara are the ones who are the primary victims, targets of atrocity crimes (first-tier victimhood); 2) The ethno-nationalists claim that they, rather than the Amhara, are the victims (ጭኩጭን ቀሙኝ) (second-tier victimhood); and 3) the international community is misinformed and manipulated by the ethno nationalists, the majority of whom are so-called the ‘educated diaspora’. The Amhara have increasingly become “The forgotten people” whose blood is thin? The global media and public opinion are indifferent to the humanitarian crisis and genocide facing the Amhara population persecuted by the ethno-nationalist armed groups, including some different sections and units of the security apparatus within regions where the Amhara reside. This is the third-tier victimhood: the statistics of mass murder or genocide, no matter how large the numbers, including mass graves¹⁵ (Benishangul Gumuz region), fail to convey the true meaning of those atrocities, psychic numbing both by the international community and the Ethiopian government.

Violent acts and the construction of grievance-based identity

For more than 30 years, the EPRDF/TPLF targeted the Amara as their main enemies, they spread animosity and hate against the group, falsely accusing them of being invaders, Neftegna, settlers, rulers etc. The Rwandan genocide began with similar labels, classification and polarization. Yet once again, in Ethiopia under the TPLF dominance and the current government, a hidden genocide was and is being committed against innocent civilians because of their being Amhara.¹⁶ The intention here is not to detail the atrocities committed against the Amhara population and other minority groups.

The dehumanization and the violence are untold and moreover diverting attention away from acts of abuse by claiming that the abuse was justified based on the group’s behaviour (typically the victim). What the ethno-nationalists have been doing is grooming for abusive

13 <https://ethiopiapoint.com/the-banality-of-evil-how-tplf-has-evolved-into-a-nefarious-and-villainous-death-machine/>

14 I will get back to these psychological deficiencies at a later date.

¹⁵ See Appendices

16 The Amhara Genocide Ignored by the World A study of the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Amhara ethnic group from 1991 – 2015. Moresh Wogene Amhara Organization Research and Study Department Washington DC Contact Details: Tel: 202 6770094;9085100337 2016

power and control by soliciting sympathy from the international community in order to gain their assistance in supporting or enabling the abuse of the Amhara (known as proxy abuse). It is common for genociders or abusers to engage in victim playing¹⁷. This serves two purposes¹⁸:

- Rationalisation and justification to themselves, known as existential validation in transactional analysis, a way of dealing with the cognitive dissonance that results from inconsistencies between the way they treat others and what they believe about themselves as groups.
- Justification to others, third party or outside observers, as a strategy of evading or deflecting harsh judgment or condemnation that they fear will inevitably arise or might be provoked due to their abuses.

Research lends support to the conclusion that while portraying *oneself* or own group as a victim can be highly successful in obtaining goals over the short-term, it is nonetheless a method that tends to be less successful over time.

The chaos created after the death of the popular singer Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020 is worth mentioning. Hundreds were killed during the attack on mostly the non-Oromo in the Oromo region. Thousands were injured and most of the victims are members of the Amhara, Gurage etc. ethnic groups. Reports¹⁹ compiled by Human Rights organisations detail horrible killings,²⁰ looting and other violence targeting the non-Oromo. Armed groups of so called Queeroo,²¹ according to the reports, carried out these organized attacks against members of other ethnic groups. The attacks were driven by a misguided urge to fully get rid of the non-Oromo from the entire region. Schools, hospitals, business centers, places of worship and public facilities were attacked and destroyed, and houses and villages burned down. An informant characterized the Queeroo movement as being mostly led by OLF's ideology, and 'OLF politics is Nazi politics of false flag operation'. Eskinder Nega, a journalist and activist, has previously compared the organised groupings of Oromo youth to the *Interahamwe* youth militia that participated in the Rwandan genocide. The saddest thing in this episode is the denial or the belittling of the damage by some politicians. The denial is not confined in Ethiopia. Diaspora radical Oromo nationalists aggressively deny the genocide and some of them in reverse argue that it is the Oromo that are the victims of genocide by the Government's use of excessive force. The denial of the massacre is "baseless, ignorant and hateful." It is beyond question that any denial or minimization of this terrible crime is intolerable and altogether unacceptable. An acquaintance, a University Professor with Oromo background, having read my article *From a Struggle for Democracy to an Ethno-Fascist Mob: How a*

17 Simon, George K (1996). In *Sheep's Clothing: Understanding and Dealing with Manipulative People*. ISBN 978-0-9651696-0-8.

18 Dangerous victims: on some political dangers of vicarious claims to victimhood. Williams, G. 2008 In: *Distinktion - Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*. 9, 2, p. 77-95. 19 p. Journal article

19 <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-07-14-my-son-died-the-worst-kind-of-death-horrific-details-of-violent-unrest-in-ethiopia/> ; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/160-killed-ethiopia-protests-singer-murder-200705063929720.html>; <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-death-toll-doubles-from-unrest-over-singers-murder/a-54059817>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html; <https://www.france24.com/en/20200716-we-have-nothing-ethiopia-s-ethnic-unrest-leaves-destruction-in-its-wake>.

20 https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3180459308711453&id=123960474361367 (FBC (Fana Broadcasting Corporation S.C.) በጋራ ማንነት ላይ የተቃጠው ጥቃት

21 The *Queeroo* (also Qeeyroo or Qero) is a movement of young Oromos in Ethiopia for political change.

Genuine Oromo Youth (Queerroo) Movement is Hijacked, Radicalised and Derailed From its Course wrote an e-mail to me in an *ad hominem* manner:

Dear Prof Girma,

Some body sent to me the enclosed file and I have a question for you. As a scientist, is it possible to write an article based on fabricated information[?]. A scientist is expected to do [a] deep investigation before writing anything. According [to] the Ethiopian government, out of the 167 who were killed just after Hacalu's assassination, 114 Oromos, 46 Amharas, and 7 other nationalities, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1281754967364079617>. In Ambo, on the date of [the] funeral, 27 killed and all of them are Oromo[s] and all were killed by [the] military. As intellectual and scientists, I think we need to feel [a] great responsibility. [The] Oromo and Amhara lived together even before the creation of this country and I strongly believe that we shouldn't spoil and damage this eternal and strong relationship.

I think you recall what we have been discussing on our forum (COVID 19), that we should work hard to bring together the fragmented communities.²²

With best regards,

XXXXX

2020-07-25 10.20 pm

Too many *devilish* and *unconscionable* acts have been committed against individuals and the nation Ethiopia the consequences of which may last several decades. Six weeks ago, more than one thousand unarmed civilians were massacred by TPLF forces (a youth group) in Maikadra area, which is only 30 kilometres away from Humera town, upon which TPLF placed important strategic significance due to access to Sudan and Sudanese port.²³ Apparently, the attack was ethnicity-based;²⁴ and it specifically targeted men. The attackers profiled people, often mainly through their identification cards, as Amhara and Wolkait. Some Tigrean groups are claiming that they are the victims of this incident²⁵. A blatant lie! Second-tier victimhood that the Amharas are subjected to (ጩኸጩ? ቀመኝ). The dangerous allure of victim politics has been documented. It is plaguing Ethiopia.

In his review of the book *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide* (Melvern, 2004), Dubinsky (2005, p.113)²⁶ draws an ominous lesson from what happened in Rwanda: Despite its morally unambiguous heinousness, despite overwhelming evidence of its occurrence (for example, two days into the Rwandan carnage, the US Defense Intelligence Agency possessed satellite photos showing sprawling massacre sites), and despite the relative ease with which it could have been abated (the UN commander in Rwanda felt a modest 5,500 reinforcements, had they arrived promptly, could have saved tens of thousands of lives) — despite all this, the

²² I did a small grammatical corrections to make the letter readable.

²³ A Tigrayan youth group stabbed, strangled, and bludgeoned to death at least 600 civilians with the collusion of local security forces during a massacre in the town of Mai Kadra, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission said on Tuesday. <https://in.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-massacre-idINKBN2841X1>

²⁴ The TPLF murdered more than 1,500 innocent people in Mai Kadra because they were non-Tigrean. The TPLF preidentified and murdered non-Tigrean members of Ethiopia's Northern Command in Mekele. It also sponsored other murders in Ethiopia. The TPLF perpetrated rocket attacks. (<https://www.satenaw.com/time-for-ethiopias-friends-to-designate-the-tigray-peoples-liberation-front-as-terrorists/>) Dr. Aklog Birara: Time for Ethiopia's Friends to Designate the Tigray People's Liberation Front as Terrorists (December 2, 2020).

²⁵ <https://ethiopoint.com/the-banalilty-of-evil-how-tplf-has-evolved-into-a-nefarious-and-villainous-death-machine/>

²⁶ Dubinsky, Z. (2005). The lessons of genocide [Review of the book *Conspiracy to murder: The Rwandan genocide*]. *Essex Human Rights Review*, 2(1), 112–117.

world ignored genocide. And it is doing the same that is ignoring genocide in Ethiopia. The Third –tier victimhood! International analysts, in their assessments of the current crisis have pointedly and repeatedly failed to even raise any concern about any aspect of the atrocity crimes, massacres and displacement of, in particular, the Amhara ethnic group. Warnings Ignored over and over again: We don't take alarms seriously. Genocide Watch is, however, updating its Genocide Emergency Alert on Ethiopia. The organization now considers Ethiopia to be at Stage 9: Extermination (November 2020)²⁷.

Conclusion and the way forward

To sum, first and foremost, as a moral imperative, the Ethiopian Government and international community must once and for all denounce the genocide denial and the manipulation as well as victim playing, in Pope Benedict's words, as "intolerable and altogether unacceptable." 'If the international community has learned any lessons from its past sins, it must take stock of the gravity of recent acts perpetrated against Christians and Amharas in Ethiopia, and must do everything possible to hold those responsible to account and to prevent further escalation'²⁸. Stanely Cohen (2013)²⁹ stated that three forms of denial are possible with respect to what is being denied: *literal, interpretative and implicatory*. All these forms of denial are manifested in different forms and utterances by the government officials and some *ethno nationalist groups* in Ethiopia. Literal denial implies that the knowledge or the raw facts are blatantly denied: "nothing happened," "there was no massacre or genocide." We have seen that by Oromo ethno nationalists and TPLF adherents, in particular, by those residing abroad and inciting, fomenting and stirring up massacres and property destructions. With interpretative denial, the raw facts are not denied but are attributed a different meaning: "it was intercommunal conflict or unplanned spontaneous violence on the aftermath of the murder of the popular singer" or "collateral damage" (and not a massacre). Implicatory denial refers to the denial or the minimization of its significance or of its implications. That, calling the tragedy as it is by its proper name save the nation. Working to prosecute the perpetrators of genocide, **remember its victims**, and move forward is an enormous undertaking but it is the right one, in order to bring about reconciliation, justice, accountability, and peace in that ancient country, the proud of blacks and browns!.

A meaningful and sustainable peace process implies an impartial and unbiased view of the past, the present and the future. The past has to be dealt with before one can benefit from the present to its fullest extent and (re)build in preparation of a more peaceful future. When one's suffering intensifies under the influence of "old and "new stressors, one is left with precious little resources to deal with his or her own daily battles and even less to (re)construct or transform one's environment and society. Denial [including victim playing, 'grievance-based false identity', the cult of victimisation (ጩኸቲን ቀሙኝ)] prevents the survivors from moving on as he or she is repeatedly thrown back into the past where they relive and attempt to sort out what happened, why, how, and the then what³⁰.

²⁷ <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/update-genocide-emergency-alert-on-ethiopia-november-2020>

²⁸ Executive Committee, SAGE. August 7, 2020. (Personal Communication, 2020).

²⁹ Cohen, Stanley. States of Denial. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

³⁰ Parent, Genevieve (2016) "Genocide Denial: Perpetuating Victimization and the Cycle of Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2:38-58.

The Amharas, the second largest population in Ethiopia, urge the international community to demand that the Ethiopian government takes the following actions:

- 1) To reach out immediately to the survivors and protect them from the criminals who are coming back again and again for mopping up operations, as seen in Benshiangul Gumuz this week.
- 2) To find ways of supporting the victims so they can reclaim their shattered lives, and provide help for the orphans and widows.
- 3) To establish a transparent and independent investigation made up of both local and international investigators and check if government officials were involved in these acts of genocide.
- 4) To tackle hate speech and hate crimes against the Amhara people and protect them from ethnic cleansing and a potential large-scale genocide.
- 5) To help stop the **Victim Playing politics** and the false **grievance-based identity**

Appendices: 1 & 2



