

Fano: A living saviour of the Amhara people And the Ethiopian spirit

ፋኖን እወዳለሁ፣ ፋኖንስ አልጠለ፣
ተኳሽ እወዳለሁ፣ ተኳሽም አልጠለ፣
ሲደክሙኝ አርፋለሁ፣ በጎፈሬው ጥላ።
ፋኖ አገሩ ገባ፣ ሳይሰናበተኝ፣
እሽኘው ነበረ፣ ምንም ቢታክተኝ።¹

This song and the article is dedicated to Eshete Moges and his son Yitagesu Moges.

Contact information:

Girma Berhanu (Professor)

Department of Education and Special Education

University of Gothenburg

Box 300, SE 405 30

Göteborg, Sweden

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

Introduction

Fano is a historical term used in Ethiopian struggles against injustice and foreign invaders. It is mainly shown as a youth movement that has played a significant role in preserving the concept of Ethiopian nationhood. As a youth group, it has emerged from within the Amhara ethnic group and has features of reminiscent of classical political, religious, or even social movements that drive youthful frustrations into acts of agitation until they achieve a measure of reform. Traditionally, the Fano struggle had focused on fending off attacks against Ethiopia. In recent years, Fano has become a household name and a crucial movement tasked with saving the very existence of the Amhara population as well as the integrity of Ethiopia. In this, it differs from other similar youth movements in the country, whose aim is to dismember the Ethiopian state into ethnic components. Fano is made of a defiant and patriotic youth which is able to shoulder an Ethiopia that is arising from the ashes bequeathed to them. This revolutionary generation and movement has to be nurtured. Fano is not just an embodiment of the physical defiance but also an intellectual movement that abhors ethnic fascism, narrow nationalism, apartheid policies, internal colonialism and all forms of pseudo-legal acts of political corruption. Instead, it upholds a civic sense of public duty, patriotism and vision for the good of the entire country.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an objective insight in to the Fano and explore its potential as a powerful social movement that has the potential to transform the course of Ethiopian history that has been “soiled” by ethnic chauvinists and radical ethnically-based movements. Indeed, youths have been deeply important to every progressive social movement, including the United States Civil Rights movement, successive waves of feminism, environmentalism and environmental justice, the labor, antiwar, and immigrant rights movements, and more. In each of these cases, young people took part in many ways, including through the appropriation of the “new media” tools of their time, which they used to create, circulate, and amplify movement voices and stories. Unfortunately, youths are nowadays framed by mass media as an apathetic, disengaged, and removed generation.

At worst, the youths (in the U.S., particularly the youth of colour) are subject to growing repression: increased surveillance, heightened policing, stop-and-frisk policies on the streets, overbroad gang injunctions, and spiraling rates of juvenile incarceration.² I discern some similarities with the experiences of the Fano in Ethiopia that is repression and increased surveillance. In this article, I argue that we have much to learn from our Fano who are already engaged in mobilizing their peers, families, and communities towards defending the marginalized ethnic groups in Ethiopia and fostering positive social transformation. I discuss key challenges, and provide recommendations for educators and adult allies of this defiant youth movement.

The philosophical foundation/methodology that undergirds this study is critical theory with elements of post-structuralism and post-colonialism. The strategies used to collate and collect data is meta-analysis (data synthesis), some form of discourse analysis, personal accounts, and a limited amount of sociological introspection. The study shows that it is high time to stop the madness and readdress the chronic and pervasive disparities within and between groups. It is an imperative that we focus on our similarities and common destiny. “The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people.” It is about the Ethiopian people. It is just unacceptable to seek self-aggrandizement, as seen among radical Tigrayan and Oromo ethno-nationalists, for ourselves—or for our specific ethnic group, and increase power and influence to draw attention to own importance—and forget about progress and prosperity for the multitudes of ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own. I argue Fano has captured this essence.

Fano and the plight of authentic Ethiopians

Fano is a traditional volunteer fighter, or a rebel against the system and landlords, mostly in Gonder and Gojjam. Some of them act alone or may band together into groups³. They normally walk around on foot, that is why they are called Fanos, according to my respondent. ‘Some of them are bandits or outlaws, really. They don't have to be young’. However, the essence of Fano has changed after 2016 onwards. They became defiant Amhara youngsters who were fed up with the hegemony exercised by a small Tigrayan clique over the Amhara and the rest of Ethiopia. According to one account ‘while the Qeerroo was peacefully protesting and dying, the Fanos followed the traditional heritage protest, if shot at, they would kill and die or kill and escape to ambush the killer later. Those who took up arms would elect a leader or የጎበዝ አለቃ among the most elderly and experienced person, like Gobiye, and became a nightmare to Woyane (TPLF). አርበኛ (patriots) is more matured Fanos.’

The brave story of Eshete Moges and his son Yitagesu Moges embodies the Fano spirit. No Surrender: a Father and his son— an Extraordinary act of heroism and valor continues to live forever—the story reads:

Eshete Moges was born in the Qewot district near Shewa Robit. The 56-year-old man was the father of seven children and a resident of Shewarobit. He was also a businessman in town. When the troops of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) approached Ataye, which is near Shewarobit, in late November 2021, he tried to mobilize fighters in Shewa Robit and asked them to fight. His words were that “If we don't defend Shewa Robit, who will? I will not leave Shewa Robit and go”. First, he started fighting the TPLF forces from Shewa Robit. Since he was defiant to everyone else, his mother had to intervene, as in tradition, to get him to leave the city. He moved with his son to a place called Salaysh, which is only 15 kilometers from Shewa Robit, but the TPLF forces also reached Salaysh in a very short time. He was again advised to abandon Salaysh and withdraw. This time he refused and decided to fight the TPLF forces with his son. When the TPLF troops reached the house where they

lived, Eshete Moges took down five TPLF forces. His son killed two others when they tried to break into the building of the house they lived in. The son had only one handgun, but his father was armed with an AK-47. The son had to go out to get a rifle from one of the TPLF forces that he shot. And they had to change their positions. They retreated to the back of the house, where there was a sorghum farm. Unfortunately, Eshete's son, Yitagesu, was killed in the process. In the meantime, Eshete had to call his brother-in-law and tell him his situation. "Listen to me. Yitagesu has been killed. Can you hear me? Pay attention. He has been killed by the sorghum farm near Assefa Taye's house. I am near his body. I have been surrounded and I will die there too. Our body will lie there ... I'll pay you in heaven." The brother-in-law tried to convince the father to leave his son's body and flee, but the father refused and decided to fight until his last breath. The number of TPLF forces he killed following the phone call is unknown. But he killed two right after TPLF fighters killed his son. Since then, the retrieved transcript of the telephone conversation between Eshete and his brother-in-law has been published, offering Ethiopians of all walks of life a tangible example of duty and sacrifice in what is, to all accounts, an extremely moving and brave act. ⁴

Despite being an unpaid, under-resourced, self-armed volunteer defence group, Fano has proven to be a complete game-changer in the current war directed at destroying Ethiopia and eradicating the Amhara population. Fano has continued its offensive on the enemy with perseverance and bravery until the safety of the people of Amhara and Afar is assured and until the rebel group (TPLF) ceases to cause suffering on Ethiopians ever again. Fano has carried out successive lightning offensives on enemy forces that had been deployed in the Amhara region. And, Fano is determined to carry out successive offensives and score victories until the safety of the people of Ethiopia is secured regardless of where the enemy resides and how intensely it fortifies itself. The Fanos are feared groups of fighters, not because they fight for glory but to save their people from annihilation. They are the embodiment of Amhara spirit and defendant of Ethiopia throughout history. Even the government sees them with suspicion fearing the potential force of the movement in unifying Ethiopia and protecting the Amharas who are in a precarious situation due to the endless succession of genocidal acts committed against them. They endured sabotage and unfair treatment by some corners of the army and local governments. In spite of attacks from every side, Fano has grown in strength and confidence and become a formidable force to be reckoned with. In a video I watched few days ago, I have seen a Fanno commander teaching his fellow subordinates to treat captured Tigrayan combatants humanly in God-fearing, compassionate and disciplined manner despite the fact that the Tigrayan forces have been terrorizing people, by killing civilian summarily, creating unprecedented and unmanageable destruction to private and public property, tarnishing religious site for the last 5 months. In this respect, Fano symbolizes "Mission first, people always." It is a motto that rings true and cuts to the heart of what the Fano is about. Fano exists to deploy, fight and win our nation's wars as we witnessed newly, yet every aspect of operations remains a human endeavor. A Fano is behind every *weapons system* in order to accomplish the mission. It is a 'public soldier', an Ethiopian son or daughter, who takes an oath to support and defend the lives of Amhara and the Ethiopian nation at large, who stands ready and courageously on point for the nation and who understands the sacrifice involved in being part of a purpose greater than self. The following links⁵ show the 'super humanity' of Fano.

These renewed movements by Fano to destroy the enemy reflect our current digital age, in which young people can increasingly connect with one another in their own countries and across borders. In doing so, they are exposing the gap between the promise of opportunity and the grim reality of unequal chances that Ethiopians and in particular the Amharas had to endure. The brave and moving way in which, out of their anguish and pain, Fano are telling the world that the discrimination, marginalization and ethnic cleansing of the Amhara will be the thing of the past and that they are

determined to change the political landscape, perhaps permanently and fundamentally. It's not just in Ethiopia that a youth-led revolution is coming alive. In Africa and around the world, young people are becoming a power in their own right. Millions of young people are now engaged in what has become the civil-rights struggle of our time – the fight for every child's right to go to school, and to do so in safety and live a decent life. The Amharas have been deprived of those basic rights since TPLF came to power in 1991 and now it has reached the climax. In the recent invasion of Amhara region by the TPLF, thousands of schools, health centers and other basic amenities and infrastructures have been looted or destroyed. The intellectual and cultural genocide is well documented.

Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous state, has a young population with more than 70 percent of its inhabitants below the age of 35. Ethiopian regimes have a history of youth neglect and repression, and more recently, co-optation through patronage politics. Unemployment and political marginalization have continued to be a major challenge for young people (Mycock and Tonge, 2012).⁶ Fano has witnessed this in real life. It is an important moment for us authentic Ethiopians—both inspiring and chastening for those of us who were children of a 1960s or 70s cultural revolution [student movement] that failed to fulfill its promise, and now find ourselves overtaken by new movements with far more global potential for good. The torch is not being passed to this new generation; this new generation has had to seize it. They deserve our support⁷. There are other youth movements in Ethiopia with some features of Fano: The *Querro* in Oromia, the *Ejeto* in Sidama, the *Zarma* in Gurage and the *Yelega* in Wolayta.⁸

The fluid politics of Ethiopia and the role to be played by Fano

In the fluid politics of Ethiopia in the post-2018 period, the youth would remain important actors for several reasons including their sheer size, increased activism and involvement in violence. In addition, political parties and the government seek to entice the youth to their side. As a result, it is expected that both youth development programmes and institutions for youth representation will continue to be utilized by incumbent governments. In this way, major youth policies in Ethiopia may not actually empower the youth, but rather bind them in patronage relationships and thereby reinforce their marginalization. The Fano have been watching this carefully. They have been victimized and subjected to continuous surveillance. One example is documented on March 28, 2020 (Ezega.com):

“An armed group in Amhara state of northern Ethiopia known as "Fano" has accused the regional and federal governments of joining hands to get rid of its structure by force. The Chairman of Fano Solomon Atanaw said the “Fano” will not lay arms down before the demands of the Amhara people are met. In an interview with local media, Solomon said the demands include the return of Welqait, Raya, Dera, and Metekel zones to be part of the Amhara region. The Chairperson also said members of the national defense forces and security forces of regional government have launched attacks against the Fano group and killed its members”.

In the same statement, the regional government demanded the group to disarm and surrender to the government peacefully. The regional government also proposed to members of the rebel force to end the fighting and submit to the regional administration in exchange for offers, including jobs as members in the national defense forces on condition of meeting requirements, plots of land for small scale investments and farming as well as loans. “Fano will disarm if the demands of the people are met. We do not have any intention to be included in the government's security structure. We want to lead our lives as farmers, traders or public servants,” Solomon added. This is actually an old

story. The Fano has been transformed in recent months following its successful actions in defending the Amhara region (and Ethiopia), and pushing back the invaders.

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 one opposition politician has pointed out, a center of gravity (Moges 2020).⁹ This I believe can be filled by the Fano movement. The fano youth activists believe that explicitly challenging all the evil forces whose eyes are stuck on the Amhara remains a crucial task for social and political transformation. Around the globe, wherever we look closely at social and political movements, we find that some of the most “invisible” young people are also the most active, engaged, and creative in movement strategy and tactics, as well as media production and use. Youth are often dismissed for a lack of civic engagement, or attacked for being disruptive. Yet disruption of oppressive laws, norms, and practices is a crucial aspect of all liberatory movements. We should recognize and respect The Fano youth movement has potentially powerful social movement actors, and allocate resources to support, amplify, and extend their impact.¹⁰

In the past two years only, several thousands of Amhara residents have been murdered and brutalized, and hundreds of thousands displaced and made homeless. The TPLF 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 faithful¹¹. The TPLF had been blamed for pitting the Oromo against Amhara; they had been instigating armed groups in the Benishangul region against the Amhara with the help of their lackeys.¹² 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”. The alarm was stated a year ago. During this past year and in particular the last five months have been a hell of a life for the Amharas and Afar civilians. The destruction of properties and life are unimaginable. The Amhara region is the frontline for the bloody conflict wracking Ethiopia. Genocide has become a reality with 3.7 million people now in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. More than 80 percent (7.8 million) of those in need of assistance in northern Ethiopia, moreover, are behind the lines of combat. That opens up various opportunities for humanitarian agents.¹³ The International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue listed that women are raped at gunpoint, robbed and assaulted; there is a lack of medical care, housing, water, and sanitation services; other trends, perhaps too numerous to list, contribute to what has become an ongoing genocide.

In a compellingly insightful article entitled “*If I look at the mass I will never act*”: *Psychic numbing and genocide*,¹⁴ 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. The Fano is vividly aware of this injustice from within and beyond.¹⁵

Concerns over disinformation, fake news and grievance politics

In Ethiopia, concerns over disinformation, fake news and grievance politics by ethnic-nationalist groups such as the TPLF and OLF/OLA have intensified in recent years. The disinformation includes mischaracterizing the Fano movement. Policymakers, researchers and observers worry that these groups (TPLF and OLF) team up with notorious Western journalists to spread false narratives and disseminate rumors in order to shape international opinion and, by extension, government policies. The available evidence suggests that the strategic effects of disinformation are real in the Ethiopian case. Fake news, hate speech and misinformation is creeping through all social media platforms and regular media outlets. With more and more people relying on social media as a source of news, there are legitimate concerns that such content could influence audiences unable to distinguish truth from fact or news from propaganda. This “infodemic,” as Dustin Carnahan calls it, puts misleading information front and center —adding fuel to politically contentious fires and escalating social issues to the level of crises. Instead of being places where people stay connected and share the details of their lives, modern media/social media platforms are increasingly being used as sources of information. A recent report — *Disinformation in Tigray: Manufacturing Consent For a Secessionist War* (Published on May 9, 2021) by New Africa Institute — vividly showed the tragedy that is unfolding. The report has shown how the TPLF started the Tigray conflict by attacking the Northern Command on November 4, 2020 with the goal of triggering an ethnic war that could potentially pave its way back to power in Addis Ababa. According to Bronwyn Bruton (2020), despite the massive human rights violations that were associated with TPLF rule—despite the authoritarianism and theft, the imprisonments and the torture that have been laid at its door—TPLF international allies have neither repudiated those well-founded concerns, nor have they examined their own inappropriate investment in the TPLF welfare. International analysts, in their assessments of the current crisis, have pointedly and repeatedly failed to even raise any concern about any aspect of the TPLF dishonorable maladministration and intransigence (See also Nemozen, 2021/06/24 *Pay any price, bear any burden* and Al Mariam, July 2, 2021).¹⁶ In this grotesque chain of events and travesty of justice, the role played by Fano has so far been exemplary, and the potential to represent the disfranchised Amhara in the international arena has become more obvious.

Conclusion

We should recognize and respect the young people who are part of the Fano movement as potentially powerful political, military and social movement actors, and allocate resources to support, amplify, and extend their impact. Educators and adult allies who want to strengthen the fano can help in many ways. *Respect and Recognition*: we should start from a place of respect for the movement’s autonomy, opinions, desires, and actual capacity to take part in and lead this powerful political and social movement that can truly transform the situation in Ethiopia, saving Ethiopia and guaranteeing the survival of the Amhara population¹⁷. In addition, do not dismiss youth who do engage in prefigurative politics as “unfocused,” “ineffective,” or “idealistic.” Young people considered rash by their elders have often sparked social transformation that was later seen as “inevitable”.¹⁸ It is high time to engage in open dialogue about strategy and tactics and take the Fano youth opinions seriously. *Representation*: Challenge *ethnicist* or narrow nationalist representations of people wherever you find them. Lift up and share examples of young people in the Amhara region and beyond who do get involved in social, political and military movements, or even better, help create opportunities for Fano youth activists to share their own experiences with peers and adults alike. *Real talk*: It is imperative to create open conversations with youth and in particular active members of the Fano movement about systems of power, oppression, resistance, and liberation. Ethno nationalism, Capitalism, Racism, and Patriarchy, as well as Individualism, Competition, and Consumerism, are interlinked systems that deeply impact all young people's lives and in particular the Amhara youth who are subjected to brutal attacks and discrimination.¹⁹ Discuss

them together in intergenerational spaces [with brave elders with their fascinating narratives], without trying to impose one “correct” way of understanding them. Together, the Fano youth and adult allies can surface alternative narratives like unity, equity, diversity, respect, inclusion, bravery, and connected fate. Encourage, rather than suppress, gender and ‘ethnic talk’, and explicitly address structural and institutional discrimination and marginalization the source of which is the apartheid Ethiopian constitution, while supporting the development of an intersectional and interregional analysis. Real talk helps the Fano youth build real movements.

“All too often, when we see injustices, both great and small, we think, That’s terrible, but we do nothing. We say nothing. We let other people fight their own battles. We remain silent because silence is easier. Qui tacet consentire videtur is Latin for ‘Silence gives consent.’ When we say nothing, when we do nothing, we are consenting to these trespasses against us.” — Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*

¹ <https://youtu.be/QmfpRtdjSPc>

²² Youth and Social Movements: Key Lessons for Allies December 17, 2012. Sasha Costanza-Chock. The Kinder & Braver World Project: Research Series (danah boyd, John Palfrey, and Dena Sacco, editors)

³ According to one of my respondents, a former diplomat and military officer “Fanos are not organized bodies. They are groups not centralized but fighting for one cause at different times at different places for different causes related to the threats Ethiopians face at all corners of the nation” (Dec 24 2021).

⁴ <https://newsbeezee.com/ethiopia/eshete-moges-yitagesu-eshte-brave-father-and-son-paid-in-life-together/>

⁵ <https://t.co/Vn8fLrKJLL> <https://twitter.com/AbraarSuleiman/status/1474330017240866819?t=OK35QhhA1Ee4Klu2WDRm7g&s=03>.

Amhara Fano’s high moral standard! <https://t.co/1WDosR77vj>

(https://twitter.com/anteneh_asnake/status/1474744981889986560?t=n3E2nF9v_ELhVZX5UViLeQ&s=03)

⁶ Neglect, Control and Co-optation: Major features of Ethiopian Youth Policy Since 1991. Asnake Kefale, Mohammed Dejen, [Lovise Aalen](#) (2021). Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI Working Paper WP 2021:3) 26 p

⁷ Youth and Social Movements: Key Lessons for Allies December 17, 2012. Sasha Costanza-Chock. The Kinder & Braver World Project: Research Series (danah boyd, John Palfrey, and Dena Sacco, editors)

⁸ In both Oromia and Amhara, semi-organised networks of youth emerged, centred around each ethnic groups’ longstanding demands and against the repression by the ruling party. These are known as the *Querro* in Oromia and the *Fano* in Amhara. Similar youth activism gradually evolved also beyond Oromia and Amhara. Since 2015, we have seen the development of the same kind of youth movements in many ethnic groups, raising political demands such as enhanced autonomy for their ethnic communities. These among others include networks in the largest ethnic groups in Southern Ethiopia – the *Ejeto* in Sidama, the *Zarma* in Gurage and the *Yelega* in Wolayta (Asnake Kefale, Mohammed Dejen, Lovise Aalen (2021).

⁹ <http://www.ethiopatriots.com/pdf>. UNTOLD MASSACRES AGAINST ETHNIC AMHARAS IN ETHIOPIA Quarterly Report on the Human Rights Violations Against the Amhara People of Ethiopia: January – March 2021

¹⁰ Occupy Research. (2012). Summary of Findings from the Occupy Research General Survey. In K. Khatib, M. Killjoy, & M. McGuire (Eds.), *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*. Oakland, CA: AK Press. <http://www.akpress.org/wearemany.html>

¹¹ The authorities are *accomplices* in a number of major attacks on the civilian population in Oromia and Benshangul regions. These aiding and abetting within the system (military and security) has been well documented. Ethnically targeted measures, hate speech and allegations of atrocities occurring in the country are deeply worrying. The demonization of ethnic groups, in particular the Amhara ethnic group, is a vicious and lethal cycle from which Ethiopia must be spared.

¹² <https://ethiopioint.com/the-cult-of-victimization-in-ethiopian-ethnic-politics-the-subjection-of-amharas-to-triple-victimhood/>

¹³ www.icdd.info ICDD is recognized by Europa’s Transparency Register as well as the ESA’s Civil Society System (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs).

¹⁴ Paul Slovic *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April 2007, pp. 79–95

¹⁵ 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 the legally binding International Covenants of Human Rights are considered essential, there are certain types of violations we tend to consider 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 Amharas living in the regional states of Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia are denied all of these.

¹⁶ <https://zehabesha.com/the-incestuous-relationship-between-western-politics-and-western-media/> (Girma Berhanu)

¹⁷ How many understand this? Amharas were reclaiming lands that belonged to them, not newly conquering others. Not only that: they were also including as many tribes and land on African soil as possible to protect them from White colonialism! From Donald Levine's "Wax and Gold" <https://www.facebook.com/100006406093590/posts/2998282837061890/?sfnsn=mo> [Tedla Melaku 25 December 2021 kl. 18:38]

¹⁸ Applied Research Center.(2012). Millennials, Activism, and Race. Dominique Apollon. <http://www.arc.org/millennials>

¹⁹ file:///C:/Users/Gissa2/AppData/Local/Temp/KBWYouthandSocialMovements2012_0.pdf