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Ethiopia's civil wars: Postcolonial modernity and the violence of contested national belonging

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Abstract

This article investigates the historical and structural foundations of the war between the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia and the federal government. It does so by employing Mamdani's theoretical framework of rethinking the politics of national belonging. The article considers one of the central propositions in Mamdani's broad vision of political decolonisation, that of reimagining the relationship between nation and state in the face of violent contestations over national belonging. The article argues that the recurring civil wars in Ethiopia indicate that the country's ongoing pursuit of a nation-state is a futile exercise that will continue to produce cycles of political violence. Despite not being colonised, Ethiopia has not escaped the destructive consequences of colonial modernity that the rest of the postcolonial world continues to grapple with. The article thus locates Ethiopia's protracted and violent search for nationhood within the narrative of postcolonial modernity in Africa.

KEYWORDS

civil wars, Ethiopia, national belonging, postcolonial modernity, violence

1 | INTRODUCTION

The war in Tigray is a reminder of the violent contests over national belonging that continue to plague the African continent. Ethiopia is currently experiencing the political rupture that was predicted by John Markakis in his 2011 book

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Ethiopia: The last two frontiers. Markakis (2011) doubted the extent to which the nation-state in general and ethnic federalism, in particular, would resolve the long-standing contestations over national belonging in Ethiopia. Markakis' inquiry primarily focused on the inclusion of the regions on the periphery of the state into the political community. Even he could not have imagined that the imminent rupture would emerge from within the traditional and historical core of the state. This is the empirical and analytical puzzle that is presented by the current civil war in Ethiopia—that contested national belonging encompasses multiple nationalities, those traditionally part of the historical core and those external to that core. To make sense of this puzzle, the war in Tigray must be examined by tracing the history of contested national belonging. This history reveals that the war is rooted in a violent past of contested nationhood. The war is thus another manifestation of the failure of the Ethiopian state to deliver inclusive national belonging. The article provides historical context to this failure through a reading of political theory that problematizes the foundations of the nation-state, which are grounded in colonial modernity. The article is inspired by theoretical interventions that highlight the continued relevance of political theory in ongoing debates about state and nation building in Africa.

In November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali ordered an offensive—a law enforcement operation on the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the ruling party of the northern Tigray region—for allegedly attacking a military base and stealing weapons (Gavin, 2021). This was just over 2 years since he came to power and approximately a year after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. A few months earlier the TPLF openly defied a federal government directive to postpone regional elections due to the Covid19 pandemic. These are some of the surface level triggers of the conflict, but the actual build-up to these events began in 2018 when Abiy Ahmed came to power and embarked on a purge of the TPLF from positions of power and related state institutions. Abiy and his allies came with a contrary imagination of the Ethiopian nation-state, one that viewed federalism as an aberration. In 2019, Abiy had published the book *Medemer* which means to 'merge together'. In examining the symbolism and meaning of the book against the context of war, it can be argued that the book served as a precursor to the wholesale rejection of multinational federalism and was in preparation for the reassertion of a unitary Ethiopian identity (Tibesu & Abdurahman, 2021). Much can be said about the role of Abiy in this ideological shift; however, this article seeks to demonstrate that the actions of the prime minister can be located within the structures of a longer historical process of contested nation building in Ethiopia.

This article conceptualises nationhood as inclusive and equal citizenship, that is, a broadly imagined political community. This is due to the fact that previous governments have pursued exclusionary nation-building strategies that sought to erase and exclude the political voice of several ethnic minorities and majorities. Recent and past attempts at nation-building in Ethiopia have been accompanied by violent contestations that have left death and destruction in their wake. This is sufficient evidence to convince us that previous and current approaches to nation building and the ways in which the nation-state has been imagined have not worked. Since the late 19th century, successive Ethiopian governments espoused nation-building approaches that have left a significant number of people outside the boundaries of the imagined nation. The consequences have been the proliferation of ethno-nationalist movements that have sprung up in different parts of the country, most of whom have pursued two main goals: to force their inclusion in the state or to alter the state through some form of self-determination. The term nation is also used to define the various 'nations and nationalities' that were given some form of recognition under federalism after 1991.

This article employs a qualitative case analysis that draws on historical archival sources and secondary sources to argue that the uncritical pursuit of nationhood in Ethiopia is not going to end the country's recurrent political violence—the civil wars. This is because the Ethiopian vision of nationhood is rooted in a modernist conception of political community that finds significant influence in colonial modernity. In this instance, colonial modernity is conceived as the Eurocentric logic that informs the dominant structures and patterns of power in the modern era (Mignolo, 2017; Quijano, 2000). Mignolo (2017) notes that when Quijano conceived the term 'coloniality', he envisaged coloniality and modernity as two sides of the same coin. Thus, one cannot speak of one without the other. To counter the towering and destructive influence of colonial modernity, the article proposes Mamdani's (2021) political theory of political decolonisation to make its arguments. Mamdani demonstrates how colonial and postcolonial

modernity have been central to the problem of extreme violence in the postcolonial period. The article also draws on Wolde Giorgis' (2010, 2019) ideas of theorising Ethiopian modernity. The article demonstrates the enduring consequences of Ethiopia's entanglements with colonial modernity and how its location within a regional and global context of postcolonial modernity contributes to the violence that underpins the project of nation building. The first aim of the article is to make sense of the war in Tigray by locating it in a broader political and historical context of state and nation building in Ethiopia. The second aim is to contribute towards expanding the theoretical lenses through which we approach the study of modern Ethiopia with the objective of challenging the idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism.

The article is divided into two main parts. The first part begins with a discussion of Ethiopia's experience with colonial modernity. The section employs Mamdani's framework and attempts to locate the Ethiopian experience therein. This section presents evidence on the conjuncture of European and Ethiopian imperial interests in the 20th century. This moment was pivotal in the evolution of Ethiopian modernity and came not long after the country became an internationally recognised sovereign state, leading to the formation of an Ethiopian colonial modernity. Ethiopian sovereignty is central to this discussion as it offers clues to the logic behind the subjective motives of the imperial state vis-à-vis its subjects. This section also reveals that the imperial state's feudal structures and post-war processes of state modernisation from 1941 were rooted in colonial modernity. The second part of the article shifts focus to the recurring violence during the process of setting the boundaries of the emerging political community. This section highlights the inherent challenges of ethnic federalism which was adopted after 1991 and points to 2018 as a crucial moment in that experiment. The final section of the article is the conclusion.

2 | ETHIOPIA'S ENCOUNTER WITH COLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE BIRTH OF THE NATION-STATE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

The challenge of nation building in Ethiopia has occupied many scholars who study the modern Ethiopian state. Many have taken to this task by seeking to reinforce the idea of the nation-state in Ethiopia. On the imperial period and its homogenising discourse of the nation, a number of Western and Ethiopian writers advanced the notion of 'Greater Ethiopia', an idea that reduced the history of Ethiopia to the central highlands and privileged the Amhara identity as central to the formation of the modern nation-state (Getachew, 1986; Perham, 1969; Ullendorf, 1960). Following the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution that brought an end to imperial rule, the literature began to reflect a much needed methodological and analytical shift. These changes were necessary as the revolution had shattered the myth of an Ethiopian national identity that was, up to that point, ostensibly endorsed by multiple ethnic groups (Keller, 1981, p. 522). Instead, agrarian history and urban history emerged as new themes in the late 1980s (Crumney, 1990; Eshete, 1988). The transformation of Ethiopian studies from a narrowly defined sub-field to a broader African studies agenda has been made possible by a number of Ethiopian scholars (Hassen, 1990; Jalata, 1996; Wolde Giorgis, 2010, 2019). Yet some Ethiopian scholars struggled to conceptualise Ethiopia within the discourses of colonialism and decolonisation that dominated African studies. Ethiopian scholars and intellectuals such as historian Bahru Zewde, for instance, are said to have distanced themselves from the agenda of the radical left as they were trained through the Orientalist gaze of Western institutions (Tibebu, 1995, p. 45). Wolde Giorgis (2010, 2019) further argues that although Zewde acknowledged and grappled with the arrival of modernity through colonialism in Africa and Ethiopia, he did not unpack the politics of knowledge associated with the modernisation process.

In the main, the task of examining Ethiopian modernism and, in some cases, linking it to the broader contexts in which it evolved—colonialism and decolonisation in Africa—has been left to those who challenge the idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism. For instance, Wolde Giorgis (2019, pp. 21–22) argues that 'it is impossible to appreciate the conditions of Ethiopian artistic modernism in the twentieth and twenty first centuries without considering the political and cultural implications of colonialism and the politics of decolonisation'. Such a conceptualisation enables

us to consider Ethiopian modernity more broadly, and it helps to dispel the otherwise myopic conceptualisations of this process. Wolde Giorgis (2010, p. 85) further notes that the analyses of modernity and modernism in Ethiopia are contingent and contextual on how the nation was imagined and narrated. This is what the present work seeks to highlight in arguing that the nation-building project in Ethiopia has been closely intertwined with the global project of universalising the nation-state model. And as Mignolo (2017) argues, we have to contend with the inevitability of the 'bad' side of modernity—coloniality. This article demonstrates that the Italian occupation and the contested British Military Administration (BMA) became the backdrop for modernisation in Ethiopia, a process that was influenced by broader regional and international logics of colonial modernity, which Ethiopia had adopted and localised. Some of the literature that shifted the narrative on Ethiopia's national identity foregrounded the centre-periphery dimension of the state. After the fall of the imperial regime, many ethnographic studies began to investigate the peripheries and their social systems, thus highlighting the peripheries as constituent parts of the whole (Donham & James, 2002). This literature highlighted the contradictions that lay at the centre of the nation building project. These contradictions became more glaring after the Marxist regime known as the *Dergue*¹ came to power in 1974 (Clapham, 2002, p. 14). The centralised authoritarianism of the socialist state exacerbated the existing tensions between the centre and the peripheries leading to the emergence and proliferation of ethnic-based movements that sought self-determination. It was against this historical background that the rebels that defeated the *Dergue* and came to power in 1991 sought a radical redefinition of the nation-state in Ethiopia. The introduction of ethnic federalism sought to address some of these historical tensions and, indeed, to minimise the cyclical incidents of violent contestations over national belonging. Yet even this seemingly radical break with the past showed cracks, enough to prompt warnings about its sustainability (Markakis, 2011).

The nationality question dominates the analyses of violent conflicts in the Horn of Africa (Markakis, 1987; Reid, 2011; Tronvoll, 2009). Reid (2011, p. 9) argues that the region has a uniquely violent character that exists independently of individual states, which he attributes to 'a corridor of conflict that has the Ethiopian highlands (and their Eritrean extension) as its centrepiece'. He traces this peculiarity to the pre-colonial configuration of the region; however, I argue that it was the colonial experience that transformed this conflict dynamic into something more structural and thus permanent. For example, the development of Eritrean nationalism and the eventual independence of that country in 1993 and the violence that has plagued Sudan since independence can all be connected to the history of Italian and British colonialism, respectively (De Waal, 2005; Sorenson, 1991). Another example is the case of Somalia and the Somali people who at face value appear to be a nation with a shared culture, language and religion. Yet the historical trajectory of Somalia has not resulted in the formation of a nation-state (Laitin & Samatar, 1987). This is because during the colonial period the Somali people were divided territorially and through the politicisation of their identities, a history that has resulted in recurring political violence in the postcolonial period.

The political development of the modern Ethiopian polity changed dramatically with the Italian defeat at the battle of Adwa in 1896. It can be argued that the victory stands out less for its occurrence² and more for its implications. Unlike *Isandlwana* among the Zulus in Southern Africa, Adwa secured Ethiopian independence permanently as it set in motion a series of events that led to the international recognition of Ethiopian sovereignty. Adwa brought significant shifts to the political and territorial landscape of the Horn of Africa. The recognition of Ethiopian independence by Britain and France marked the point where the interests of the Ethiopian imperial state and those of the European colonial powers converged. Colonial archives demonstrate how legal international agreements carving up north-east Africa were entered into by Ethiopia, France and Britain shortly after 1896.³ Quite significantly, the Scramble for Africa in the Horn also coincided with the resurgence and extension of central authority by the ruling Amhara class in Ethiopia (Touval, 1963, p. 47).

These developments took place when Emperor Menelik, who is known to have held grand territorial ambitions, was consolidating power around the *Shoa-Amhara* ruling class (Rennell-Rodd, 1948). Border making and the signing of boundary treaties between imperial Ethiopia and the European colonial powers was one of the central features of the European nation-state model that Ethiopia embraced. At the time of signing boundary treaties the emperor had

been expanding his territory and incorporating into the empire peoples and territories to the south, east and west of the highland core. However, these territories were not guaranteed and the boundaries were not yet determined. These processes formed the basis for how and why imperial Ethiopia would later employ different features of what Mamdani (2021, p. 14) describes as 'technologies of colonial modernity'. These processes coalesced into emergent ideas of the nation-state and became even more pronounced after the 5-year Italian occupation of Ethiopia. After this period, Ethiopia increasingly exhibited elements of colonial modernity that rested on war, domination and racism, among others.

Ethiopian sovereignty is highlighted here as one of the institutions that are derived from the modernity-coloniality nexus. It is used to illustrate how it influenced the emerging logic of colonial modernity in Ethiopia. The main thesis in the debate about different forms of sovereignty is that there are not one but multiple forms of sovereignty (Clapham, 1998, 1999; Poggi, 1978). Although we might be led to believe in the 'Westphalian Commonsense' that conflates all sovereignty to the European experience, sovereignty has followed different patterns in different parts of the world (Grovoqui, 2002, p. 316). This is true of Ethiopian sovereignty which was politically circumscribed by the influence Europeans wielded in the affairs of the country from the time of its independence (Zewde, 1991). The limits of Ethiopian sovereignty were plainly illustrated by the Italian occupation in 1935, after which the imperial rulers focused on the domestic dimensions of sovereignty. As such, after the occupation, the imperial state cemented its claims of legitimacy over the territory and increasingly drew on the 'instrumentalities of sovereignty' (Grovoqui, 2002, p. 317). In Ethiopia, this took the form of entrenching imperial authority by consolidating its power over the whole territory.

2.1 | Modernity as state centralisation and modernisation

Upon his return to Ethiopia in 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie faced a challenging domestic and international context. His country was in the process of being placed under a British Military Administration which severely limited his powers, and the world was in the midst of a deadly world war. The first Agreement and Military Convention between the United Kingdom and the imperial Ethiopian government was signed in 1942 and the second one in 1944.⁴

The territorial boundary played an important role in efforts to restore the sovereignty of the imperial state. In an effort to regain the state's sovereignty, the practice of indirect rule was taken up and implemented in different parts of the Somali regions of Ethiopia. These are the areas where Ethiopian sovereignty was most challenged by the BMA. For Mamdani (2021, pp. 12–14), indirect rule divided colonised groups into territorial homelands where the divisions were drawn along cultural and ethnic lines. Such divisions resonated with the Ethiopian rulers who up to that point had been unable to assert their sovereignty over the vast regions on the margins of the empire.

The presence of the BMA and the threat it posed to Ethiopian sovereignty led to a pronounced awareness of the state's national identity. And this identity was broadly imagined and defined as that of a unitary nation-state. BMA attempts to blur the boundary lines between Ethiopia and British Somaliland only intensified Ethiopian resolve to revert to the pre-occupation status quo of clearly demarcated boundaries and uncontested sovereignty. Although there was tension between the imperial government and the BMA, there were also instances where their interests converged, most notably in the administration of the Somali inhabited areas (Matshanda, 2019, p. 665). The Somalis were effectively subjects of both the British colonial government and imperial Ethiopia.

The contestations between the Ethiopian and British authorities reflected the latter's general condescending attitude towards what they perceived as a backwards native country.⁵ However, this sentiment was difficult to fully express in relation to Ethiopia because of the country's sovereign status prior to the Italian occupation. Nonetheless, the establishment of a Tribal Organisation by the Ethiopians was a clear indication of their intentions to regain their sovereignty. Towards the end of the period of BMA in the mid-1950s, the Ethiopians had created a parallel native authority. The Tribal Organisation operated alongside the BMA's own organisation. Central to both the Ethiopian and British organisations was the concept of indirect rule. They each established a native authority known as Chiefs

in eastern Ethiopia, a foreign concept among the decentralised Somalis of this region (Matshanda, 2019, p. 671). The Somali chiefs acted as intermediaries between the imperial government of Ethiopia and the general population of the region. What emerged resembles what Mamdani (2021, p. 13) terms as 'territorial indirect rule'. The territory–Somali region, parts of which were under BMA–embraced customary authority and law of institutional indirect rule. More than the Ethiopians, the British had by this time recognised and exploited some of the areas of difference among the Somalis. This is evident in the politicisation of these differences, for example, between the pastoralists and the more sedentary groups. The Ethiopians followed suit and pursued these divisions further. This experience laid the foundations for the political fragmentation and contestations of power and authority that have consumed this region since 1991 (Hagmann, 2005).

The modernisation of the state was an important element in the incorporation of the Ethiopian state into colonial modernity. At the onset of the Italian occupation in 1935, Haile Selassie had made a rallying call to his people, a proclamation of *ketet* (war) (Wolde Giorgis, 2010, p. 86). In this speech, the Emperor invoked the idea of the nation as contingent on a cultural politics that was used to advance a sense of Ethiopian nationhood (Wolde Giorgis, 2010, p. 88). This invocation of the nation can be attributed to the patriotic resistance that ordinary Ethiopians had demonstrated against the Italians, which, in turn, was influenced by the memory of Adwa. This conceptualisation of the nation extended to how the Ethiopian government sought to redraw provincial boundaries after the occupation. In the course of these changes emerged the province of Hararge, a fief of the imperial family that became the largest province of the empire (Markakis, 1974). In the process of provincial re-structuring, the demarcation of lowland provinces tended not to have cultural or ethnic considerations. Markakis (1974, p. 289) notes that cultural heterogeneity and historical identity gave way to considerations of political and administrative convenience. Hararge province was home to Somali, Oromo, Harari and other ethnic groups. The ethnic and cultural composition of the new provinces revealed significant heterogeneity, which indicates that imperial authorities perceived these populations as subjects rather than as distinct nationalities. The process of provincial restructuring was informed by notions of modernity that sought to entrench a homogenising discourse of the nation.

As state modernisation was being pursued, a parallel process was unfolding—the centralisation of imperial power and authority. This project encountered resistance, most notably in the northern region of Tigray. After liberation from the Italian occupation, under dubious conditions, the emperor reintroduced the taxation system that had been lifted by the Italians; he also refused to recognise the local nobility's autonomy in Tigray (Prunier, 2010). He appointed a *Shoan* governor and channelled tax revenue to Addis Ababa and eroded the previously autonomous nationalities that had, up until the Italian occupation, managed to stave off the authority of the imperial state (Prunier, 2010). The Emperor found it difficult to rely on the loyalty of the Tigrayan nobility as some had sided with the Italians during the occupation or had decided not to join the patriotic resistance. The impetus for state centralisation can, therefore, be understood within the context of general instability in the country (Reid, 2011). The situation presented an opportunity for the emergence of a competing Tigrayan national imaginary that was rooted in the ancient Axumite civilisation up to and including the Era of Princes that ended with the death of Yohannes IV in 1889 (Prunier, 2010). The Tigrayans held the potential for alternative myths and values of the nation because their forbears were at the centre of the historical Kingdom of Axum. The Axumites had presided over the expansion of the Abyssinian Empire that spread over the Ethiopian highlands (Berhe, 2004, p. 570). This alternative myth of the nation would have posed significant challenges to the Amhara ruling class.

Devastated by changes in their ability to self-govern and having to contend with a rapidly transforming domestic political context, peasants in south and central Tigray began an uprising, the *Woyane* revolt in 1942–1943 (Gilkes, 1975; Tareke, 1996). The *Woyane* revolt and, indeed, other popular 20th century peasant revolts in Ethiopia were a direct response to the transformation of feudal power structures that were occasioned by the modernising state (Tareke, 1996). There is agreement that the Tigrayan rebels had no secessionist aims but that the revolt and the conditions that resulted thereafter helped to crystallise a sense of Tigrayan nationalism, which was posited against the dominant *Shewa-Amhara* ruling class (Berhe, 2004; Prunier, 2010; Young, 1996). The Tigray peasant

revolts were primarily a response to the changes brought about by the extensive transformation in political organisation—the modernisation of the state (Tareke, 1996).

The homogenising discourse of state modernisation and centralisation encountered resistance due to the cultural and ethnic heterogeneity of the imperial state in the early 20th century. This section turns its focus to another element of Ethiopian modernity that owes much of its origins to colonial modernity—the racialisation of ethnic identities. This discussion emanates from the competing interpretations of nation building that gave rise to what some have called a case of Ethiopian colonialism (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990; Jalata, 2008). The converging interests of Ethiopian and European colonial powers in the late 19th century are said to have given Ethiopia's imperial rulers the capacity to subjugate various nations under the expanding polity (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, pp. 2–8). The question of the Oromo stands out in these assertions. The imperial state stands accused of a paternalistic attitude towards groups such as the Oromo. This attitude is said to be grounded in a cultural and racial hierarchy that foregrounds Semitic culture above others within the polity (Jalata, 2008).

If Tigrayans posed the threat of a legitimate competing national myth from within the historical core of the imperial state, then the Oromo held the potential for an equally threatening myth from outside that core. The Oromo are the historical face of the dominant other that has been subjugated and excluded from the political community in Ethiopia (Hassen, 1990). This reality has led to the evolution of their group identity up to a point where they fashioned themselves as a nation (Keller, 1995). However, the fact of their numerical dominance has not guaranteed the Oromo an upper hand in their struggles for recognition and equality. The Oromo discourse comes with some complexity. For instance, it is difficult to speak of the Oromo as occupying a completely marginal existence in Ethiopia. The Oromo have a long history of integration and extensive assimilation to the Amhara political and cultural centre. This complexity is noted by Gudina (2006, p. 125) who argues that 'the irony of Oromo history, therefore, is that they were part of the conquerors as well as the conquered'. This ambiguity indicates the complex processes of categorisation, identification, inclusion and exclusion that have underlined the project of crafting the nation in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, in this article, Oromo and Tigrayan identities and experiences are used to illustrate the nature and extent of contestations over national belonging within the Ethiopian state.

In discussions about national inclusion and exclusion, Ethiopian ambivalence towards Blackness needs to be mentioned (Habecker, 2012). Regardless of the romantic narratives of black consciousness that Ethiopia evoked among Africans in Africa and in the diaspora, Ethiopian leaders have failed to demonstrate any meaningful engagement with black politics (Wolde Giorgis, 2019, p. 24). This ambivalence revealed itself in the exclusionary narrative beginning in the late 19th century where the nation was presented as a Semitic, Amhara and Christian Orthodox nation. This identity was embedded in the twin processes of state modernisation and centralisation and became the epitome of political modernity in Ethiopia (Wolde Giorgis, 2010). Consequently, embracing this political modernity meant embracing the epistemic conditions that were created by Europeans to distinguish the nation as civilised and therefore justifying glorifying the nation at the expense of those seen as uncivilised (Mamdani, 2021). This framing of the nation left many on the outside with little opportunity to express their cultural and political identities.

This section has discussed the conditions that integrated Ethiopia to the European political modernity of the 19th century—coloniality. The evolution of Ethiopian modernity, as Wolde Giorgis (2010, 2019) demonstrates, cannot be removed from the influences of colonial modernity as Ethiopian modernists were constantly drawing parallels and making comparisons between Ethiopian and European modernity. State building became the structural basis on which the nation was to be imagined and constructed particularly in the period after the Italian occupation. Notions of nationhood occupied both the intellectuals and state builders of the time, and they all drew inspiration and motivation from the European experience. Tigrayan identity emerged as a threat from within the dominant national identity, whereas the Oromo identity emerged as a threat from outside it, in both cases, every attempt was made to silence them. The role of the monarchy, the centrality of the Christian Orthodox religion, sovereignty and the divine role of the monarch to preside over populations formed the basis of the Ethiopian nation. The next part of the article outlines the violence that marked the different forms of opposition to this national imaginary.

3 | POSTCOLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA

Mamdani (2021) notes that violent confrontations over national belonging are rooted in the belief that society must be homogenised in order to build a nation. The overriding sentiment is that any and every potential source of competing identity must be eliminated in order to homogenise the nation. In Ethiopia, this was presented in the form of the dominant Amhara national identity at the expense of numerous others, such as the Tigrayan and Oromo identities. The idea of the nation was contingent on a cultural politics that was used to advance a pan-Ethiopian identity. Keller notes that imperial social policy paid no attention to the 'national question' in spite of the fact that the imperial state consisted of culturally subordinated groups (Keller, 1981, p. 534). Indeed, the existence of an 'Amharised Ethiopian state' was an undeniable fact of life (Tronvoll, 2009, pp. 10–12). In Ethiopia, the development and entrenchment of an Amhara national identity created two very powerful struggles and forms of resistance: a nationalist opposition and a class struggle.

The period following the height of political independence elsewhere on the African continent brought Ethiopia in direct confrontation with post-colonial modernity and its corresponding violence; it also created the conditions for a social revolution. The emergence and proliferation of Somali, Eritrean and Oromo nationalism brought to the fore contests over national belonging. The inherent contradictions in the modernisation and centralisation policies began to unravel. However, it was drought that finally cracked open the contradictions and revealed the shortcomings of the imperial state. It was drought and famine that became 'Haile Selassie's political coffin' (Schwab, 1985, p. 12). Initially led by university students, the dominant force in the protests between 1960 and 1974, civil unrest swept across urban centres in Ethiopia (Tareke, 2009). There is no doubt that the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution was influenced by the wave of political independence that was taking place elsewhere in Africa. But there was more in Ethiopia as a combination of political, social and economic factors sought to replace the old order with a new one.

Here, we find some limitations to Mamdani's framework. Mamdani (1996, 2001, 2021) has consistently directed his gaze towards the political while downplaying the role of political economy. Focussing on the political alone does not fully account for the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia, which had clear social and economic motivations. Mamdani's position is that the political economy framework could only explain political violence as either revolutionary or counterrevolutionary, when it was simply non-revolutionary (Mamdani, 2001, pp. 651–652). This may well be true in the Ethiopian case too because although genuine class and nationalist struggles converged and resulted in the revolution, the revolution did not bring an end to the nationalist struggles. Some of the ethno-nationalist movements that emerged in Ethiopia shortly after the revolution had both class and nationalist foundations (Keller, 1981, p. 46). In analysing the conjuncture of class and ethnicity in the context of the revolution, Keller (1981) argues for a relational model that accounts for both variables. He stresses the importance of the sociocultural context in any theoretical endeavour (Keller, 1981, p. 44). Such an endeavour comprises what the present article seeks to do—cutting through the myths that surround Ethiopian statehood. The strength of Mamdani's framework lies in the fact that although class and material contradictions are not explicitly cited as the causes of political violence, they are implied. For instance, what Keller (1981, p. 46) calls the 'fact of conquest' is important for explaining not only the political topographies of coloniality but also the links to the world capitalist system. In Ethiopia, a growing opposition to state nationalism and increasing marginalisation from social and material power of the state led to the proliferation of violent confrontations with the state (Markakis, 1987). Markakis' is mainly referring to the groups on the territorial, political and cultural margins of the state. Yet one of the biggest class and nationalist movements to emerge out of Ethiopia in the 20th century, the TPLF, could hardly be classified as marginal. After the revolution, the TPLF embarked on a sustained nationalist struggle against the usurpers of what Mamdani (2001) would call a non-revolution.

The evolution of the TPLF on the one hand, and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) on the other, demonstrates the impossibility of a single Ethiopian national identity. Both fronts and their respective constituencies were exposed to and were on the receiving end of an exclusionary political community that was perpetuated by successive Ethiopian governments. This experience led to their formation—the TPLF in 1975 and the OLF in 1974 (Berhe, 2004,

p. 569; Jalata, 1993, p. 393). The Oromos had long identified themselves as a colonised people under imperial rule, and their struggle gained momentum in the 1960s when they started to organise through self-help associations, no doubt influenced by the decade of African decolonisation. The key organising principle in the formation of the OLF was 'revolution and decolonisation of Oromia' (Jalata, 1993, p. 393). For the Tigrayans, the *Woyane* rebellion and other struggles that took place in Tigray against imperial rule laid the foundations for the emergence of the ethno-nationalist TPLF (Berhe, 2004). At the time of their formation, the OLF and TPLF were thrust onto a violent national political landscape that was dominated by multiple ethno-nationalist struggles against the *Dergue* regime. Yet the TPLF presented something different from the other liberation fronts. They were from the traditional 'core' regions and could not be deemed as a marginal group, nor did their struggle have secession as its main objective, they sought inclusion.

Gebregziaber (2019) traces the ideological shifts of the TPLF since its establishment and reveals a political formation that is founded on pragmatism and a strong desire for power and domination. The TPLF can be seen as a product of a violent postcolonial modernity in Ethiopia. Tigrayan struggles under the imperial rule of Haile Selassie led to a strong articulation of Tigrayan needs and aspirations within Ethiopia. We see this in the role played by various Tigrayan intellectuals in earlier political agitations. From the onset, the Tigrayan intellectuals framed and articulated the Tigrayan struggle along class and ethno-nationalist lines (Berhe, 2004; Gebregziaber, 2019). The Tigrayans expressed tangible grievances about the peasant existence and marginalisation of Tigray by the imperial government, which continued under the *Dergue*. The ethnic-nationalist sentiment was triggered by the power held by the Amhara feudal class, the forced Amhara ethnic hegemony over the polity and the recent history of rebellions in Tigray, Bale, Gojjam and Eritrea (Berhe, 2004, p. 580).

The decision of the TPLF and OLF to pursue an armed struggle against the *Dergue* locates the Ethiopian search for nationhood within the violent contestations over national belonging that we see elsewhere in the postcolonial period. In the 1970s, Ethiopia was besieged by violent confrontations over the definition of the nation and who belongs in it. This is highlighted by the Eritrean struggle for independence and the TPLFs role therein. The evolution of the relationship between the Eritrean and Tigrayan fronts can be traced to the period of the *Dergue* regime when these liberation fronts joined forces (Young, 1996). Tigrayans living in Eritrea had made connections with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the wake of an increasingly repressive military regime. However, this coalition faced a number of challenges that had to do with how each envisioned their respective national identities. The cooperation between the Tigrayan and Eritrean forces was, as Young (1996) argues, underlined by tensions and pragmatism. The two liberation fronts held divergent objectives in their armed coalition against the *Dergue* regime, with opposing end goals. The history of these differences can be traced to the *Woyane* revolt of 1943. Prunier (2010) argues that one of the inheritances of the revolt was a deep schism between the Tigrigna speakers of Tigray and Eritrea. The political and socio-economic conditions of the Ethiopian Tigrigna speakers under imperial rule had set them quite apart from their Eritrean cousins who had a slightly different experience under Italian rule. This Tigrayan split revealed itself quite violently during the 1998–2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war.⁶

3.1 | Defining the nation under federalism

Following 17 years of protracted civil war, the TPLF alongside its Eritrean allies and other groups defeated the *Dergue* regime in 1991. The success of the TPLF/EPLF alliance carried nationalist undertones for each of these fronts. However, it was not until each of them had gained political power in their respective polities that we would see the full extent of their nationalist ambitions. The TPLF came to power with a plan to radically restructure the Ethiopian state. Central to this plan was a redefinition of the nation and nationhood which came in the form of a federation that divided the country into smaller decentralised 'ethnic' units known as regional states. Despite the adoption of federalism, the idea of the Ethiopian nation remained a salient part of the restructured state. This was

evident during the war with Eritrea between 1998 and 2000. In Ethiopia the war was not a wholly Tigrayan affair, although it was quite important to the TPLF, many others responded to the national call to take up arms against the enemy. Many were surprised by the popular support of this war (Last, 2004). The appeal to the nation and Ethiopianness played a big role in the national war effort. Contrary to the multinational rhetoric, in the time of war, the TPLF-led government followed in the footsteps of Emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie and made an appeal to the 'nation' (Wolde Giorgis, 2010, p. 87). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has also galvanised national support in a similar fashion in the ongoing civil war against the TPLF.

The lifespan of the TPLF has been characterised by pragmatism and ideological shifts that are rooted in a quest for political domination in Ethiopia (Gebregziabier, 2019; Young, 1996). They constructed the definition and meaning of nationhood from a similar standpoint. Ethnic nationalism was one of the main ideas that led to the establishment of the TPLF, driven by the belief that national oppression against the Tigrayan ethnic group was alive and well in Ethiopia (Gebregziabier, 2019). We saw this belief manifest itself in the introduction of federalism by advocating for group rights over individual rights. Yet, as the years progressed and the challenges of ethnic federalism appeared, the TPLF was able to rethink its position and adopt a tried and tested approach of deferring to the idea of a common national identity. Orłowska (2013) demonstrates how the TPLF used the celebrations of the Ethiopian millennium in 2007 as an opportunity to try and bridge the gap between the divisive outcomes of ethnic federalism and the outdated nationhood associated with the Semitic culture and Orthodox Christianity. They employed pragmatism in order to preserve the federal arrangement while also appealing to the memory of a unifying national imaginary.

Abbink (2012, p. 600) notes that considering the repression and the civil war that had ravaged Ethiopia for decades, the adoption of ethnic federalism was likely 'the best possible model' for Ethiopia at the time, a move that was designed to hold a divided multi-ethnic state together (Orłowska, 2013). However, more was needed in order to sustain these 'politics of difference', and this proved much harder than was initially anticipated (Orłowska, 2013). The institutionalised divisions caused significant challenges in practice among the divided 'nations and nationalities' of Ethiopia. Despite these challenges, the architects, leaders and supporters of ethnic federalism still believed that Ethiopia could still be a viable nation-state. It never occurred to the TPLF and its ruling coalition that the relationship between state and nation 'produces a vicious cycle, whereby the nation imagines the state as its protector and aggrandizer, the state fulfils this role and the nation's investment in the state's bestowal of privilege only intensifies' (Mamdani, 2021, p. 334). The focus remained on gaining and maintaining power over the state, whose capture is seen as central to protecting group rights and privileges. If we take Mamdani's (2021) postulate that the only way to escape perpetual political violence is through the decoupling of state from nation, then ethnic federalism was never going to be the solution in Ethiopia. For Getachew (2021), federal structures that maintain the politicisation of tribal and ethnic identity do not resolve the pathologies of the nation state. Instead, she argues that in federal structures, the coupling of nation and state is produced and reproduced internally by tribe and ethnicity (Getachew, 2021).

The flaws in Ethiopia's ethnic federal experiment can be seen in the different trajectories of the TPLF and the OLF since 1991. The OLF was among the groups that gathered in the early days to craft a new Ethiopia. They could not claim any major military victories, yet they had also contributed to the fall of the *Dergue*. The OLFs participation as a junior partner in the transitional government provided the Oromo people an opportunity to articulate their vision of ethnic nationalism (Jalata, 1993, p. 397). However, the initial experience of the OLF with the EPRDF led the former to doubt the commitment of the ruling coalition to grant unlimited freedoms to nations such as the Oromo. The establishment of the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the support it received from the EPRDF in the first election led the OLF to believe that a strategy of 'divide and rule' was being pursued by the TPLF-dominated coalition, and they left the transitional government (Jalata, 1993; Keller, 1995). This set the tone for the decades of strained relations between the OLF and the EPRDF. In its efforts to construct a modern multi-ethnic nation-state, the EPRDF government did what many African states have been attempting to undo without success for decades—entrenching politicised ethnic identities. We thus need to see the escalation of political violence in Oromia, Amhara and Southern regions up to 2018, and the subsequent war as part of the definition and redefinition of the boundaries of political community in Ethiopia.

The scramble for more secular and inclusive national symbols during the millennium celebration points to a misguided commitment to the nation-state. But more than this, the search for a modern definition of the Ethiopian nation was a pragmatic move to legitimise the EPRDF government and to maintain its political dominance at the expense of an inclusive national politics. Orlowska (2013, pp. 299–300) notes that the millennium celebration came at a particularly sensitive time following a highly contested election in 2005 that led to unrest and bloodshed. The political violence that followed the 2005 elections fits a typology of what has come to be known as electoral violence—a form of political violence that we find in many African countries (Birch et al., 2020). The post-election violence pointed to the precarity of the Ethiopian political community and a failure to address long-standing questions of inclusion and exclusion. Analyses on the post-election violence focused on the political system and the kind of democratic ethos that was emerging in Ethiopia, including the reproduction of ‘neopatrimonial tendencies’ (Abbink, 2006, p. 180). Others saw the electoral violence as indicative of the contested nature of political identities in Ethiopia and the tensions over ethnic identities and inclusive citizenship (Smith, 2009). Central to the violence was contestation over boundaries of the political community, a recurring problem that has never been adequately addressed using political means. Instead, the EPRDF government proceeded to criminalise political violence almost as a state policy—a response that only perpetuates the status quo ante (Mamdani, 2021).

The war in Tigray is a continuation of the violent historical contests over the boundaries of the political community in Ethiopia. These cycles of violence are made possible by the fact that ‘the nation-state itself prevents the subordination of violence to non-violent political action, for it renders effective nonviolent political action impossible in many cases’ (Mamdani, 2021, p. 334). We saw this in the absence of a meaningful commitment to democratic practice in Ethiopia since 1991. The recurring political violence in several regional states since 1991 and the war in Tigray is evidence of the failure of the nation-state project in Ethiopia. The greatest inheritance of colonial modernity—the nation-state—has been as devastating in Ethiopia as it has been in the rest of the African continent. A living contradiction, Ethiopia continues to occupy the minds of some of the country’s thinkers who at times ponder the ‘predicament of the coloniality of our uncolonized land’ (Wolde Giorgis, 2019, p. 26). What Ethiopia needs is a reimagination of the political. The war in Tigray demonstrates the inherent danger in the pursuit of the nation-state model at all costs. Aptly capturing the past and present state of affairs in Ethiopia, Mamdani (2021, p. 333) cautions,

As long as the state form continues to be pegged to the nation, new grievances will arise over time as people learn to think differently about their place in the political community. Not only that, but yesterday’s victim is likely to seek benefits and become tomorrow’s perpetrator: once the victim’s grievance is satisfied through his elevation to membership in the political community, he will be in a position to prevent others’ access, even as he retains the narrative of victimhood.

At some point, this cycle must be broken and a new form of politics has to emerge. This applies to the rest of the African continent and beyond where societies are still held hostage to ideas of colonial modernity. Mamdani’s (2021) solution of decoupling state from nation may take long to realise; in the meantime, we need interventions that will reduce the prevalence of political violence. The widespread suppression of democracy and democratisation in Ethiopia during the period of ethnic federalism arguably hastened the failure of this project. What is urgently needed in Ethiopia as elsewhere in Africa is a commitment to decolonise the political and to make space for more inclusive, indigenous and accountable forms of political community.

4 | CONCLUSION

Addressing the structural and historical causes of political violence is a productive place from which we can start to think about reimagining modern society in Africa. This article has sought to make sense of the war that erupted in Ethiopia in November 2020 between the TPLF and the federal government, yet another instance of civil war in that

country. The article argues that the continued embrace of the nation-state model in Ethiopia is not the solution to the country's cycles of political violence. This is because the Ethiopian vision of the nation is rooted in a modernist conception of political community that is influenced by elements of colonial modernity. The foundations of Ethiopian nationhood preclude the equal inclusion of other nations and nationalities. This is evident in the histories of the OLF and the TPLF, two very different ethno-nationalist fronts that have each resorted to violent means in order to advance the national ambitions of their people vis-à-vis the Ethiopian state.

This article foregrounded Mamdani's (2021) provocations on decolonising the political—a welcome critique of the dominant epistemological and cultural projects of modern politics. The article has focused on one part of Mamdani's broad inquiry into political modernity—explaining the violent expressions of nationhood in the period after the end of formal colonisation. The article found Mamdani's assertions on the conjuncture of colonial and postcolonial visions of modernity particularly useful. The homogenising imperative and the global embrace of the nation-state has had devastating consequences on African societies since independence. The power of Mamdani's framework is evident when we consider it in relation to the idea of coloniality. Coloniality has had a major influence on Ethiopia regardless of the absence of formal colonisation by a European power. Quijano's (2000) assertions hold true in Ethiopia, where modernity has coexisted with coloniality. Key institutions of colonial modernity such as sovereignty formed the basis of Ethiopian modernity. Consequently, notions of inclusion, exclusion, domination and racism interacted within this context to inform the national imaginary. Ethiopia has not embarked on a comprehensive process of decolonisation because the country has not reckoned with its entanglements with coloniality. The structures of exclusion and domination remain intact, despite the social revolution of 1974 and the attempt to decentralise power after 1991. This suggests that for as long as the nation continues to be imagined alongside the state in Ethiopia, violence will continue to mediate patterns of exclusion and inclusion.

Through this framework, we can dispel the notion of Ethiopian exceptionalism as it is evident that Ethiopia has not escaped the vestiges of colonial modernity that the rest of the African continent continues to contend with. In fact, the Ethiopian case illustrates the limits of decolonisation and the shortcomings of this endeavour elsewhere in Africa. If a comprehensive decolonisation had taken place, then nation-states would have ceased from being the main sites of political violence in the postcolonial period.

Ultimately, the solution to the problem of contested nationhood and the corresponding political violence lies within the affected societies. A comprehensive agenda to decolonise the political and room for inclusive models of political community must be prioritised, regardless of whether the outcome is a decoupling of state from nation.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Socialist military regime that usurped the 1974 revolution and took over power.
- ² The African defeat of a European colonising force in modern times had taken place in the Anglo-Zulu battle at Isandlwana in 1879.
- ³ Foreign Office (FO) UK Government 881/6943, September 1897 *Confidential Papers respecting Mr Rodd's Special Mission to King Menelek*.
- ⁴ Foreign Office (FO) UK government 535/138/13 *Agreement and Military Convention between the United Kingdom and Ethiopia*.
- ⁵ Colonial Office (CO) UK government 535/138/13, *Ethiopian Annual Review*, 1949, the Colonial Office to Ernest Bevin, Britain's Foreign Secretary
- ⁶ For more on this see Iyob R (2000) The Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict: Diasporic vs. hegemonic states in the Horn of Africa, 1991–2000. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 38 (4): 659–682. And the edited volume by Jacquin-Berdal D and Plaut M (eds.) (2004) *Unfinished Business, Ethiopia and Eritrea at War*. Asmara and Trenton: Red Sea Press.

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How to cite this article: Matshanda, N. T. (2022). Ethiopia's civil wars: Postcolonial modernity and the violence of contested national belonging. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12835>