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Ethnicity across regional boundaries: migration and the politics of inequality in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Increasing migration across the world has transformed the politics of identity in recent decades, which has influenced how people experience and narrate ethnicity. The rigid Ethiopian political system of ethnic federalism makes ethnicity an official and permanent component of individual identity and group belonging to ethnic-based regions. At the same time, the government has enabled increased internal migration and facilitated ethnic diversity on university campuses. In this article, I explore experiences of migration across regional boundaries among people from the Tigray region towards ethnically diverse urban centers in Ethiopia, such as Addis Ababa. This paper illustrates how an emic conceptualisation of identity can be understood as a response to state categories of ethnicity, but also argues that contextual and temporal politics generate conditions and experiences that in turn reshape those conceptualisations.

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Introduction

In 2016, hundreds of people were killed in protests across Ethiopia.¹ Protestors from Oromo and Amhara backgrounds opposed the Tigrayan-dominated government that has been in power since 1991. Many expressed their discontent with the ethnic-based political system and suggested that it was rigged in favor of the Tigrayan ethnic group.² In addition to the violent clashes between security forces and protestors, there were reports that properties associated with the Tigrayan ruling party were targeted in the city of Gonder and that many Tigrayans fled north to Tigray.³ The protests were eventually suppressed, but contestation over ethnic inequality has a long history in Ethiopia and continues to be a concern in the lives of many of its citizens.

In Ethiopia, the state ascribes ethnicity to people. Through the political system of ethnic federalism individuals' identities and group belonging are tied to specific regions of the country. In identity cards, ethnicity is solely based on the ethnicity of an individual's father, regardless of place of birth, language, mother's ethnicity or any other factors. Despite this fixity of ethnicity, the government has, over the past two decades, enabled intensified migration within Ethiopia through massive road construction and

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improvements, legal changes and a generally safer environment than during the civil war (1974–1991). Although Ethiopians can travel, live and work anywhere in the country, migration across regional boundaries effectively results in the movement of people from the territory to which their ethnicity is anchored into areas where they do not belong ethnically, according to how ethnicity is territorialized by the government's demarcation of regions. Despite the possibility and right to move relatively freely to other regions, such migration may create tension between Ethiopians' national sense of belonging and their regional and ethnic sentiments. This paper examines how contrasting ideas of belonging has contributed to regular violent contestations over presumed ethnic privilege and inequality, especially directed towards migrants originating from the Tigray region, which is also where the majority of the ruling party in government originates from.

Ethnicity remains a contentious issue across the world. There are numerous examples of where ethnic identity was a factor in large-scale violence, such as in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the early 1990s (Appadurai 2006), and more recently against the Rohingya in Myanmar (Prasse-Freeman 2017). These events have received much attention both in the media and among scholars, and with the intensification of globalisation since the 1990s there has been an increase in autochthony movements across the world. Geschiere explains that autochthony 'seems to represent the most authentic form of belonging: 'born from the earth itself''. He elaborates that the self-evidence of this idea emerges in similar ways in countries like Cameroon and Belgium, despite their very different economic and social circumstances (2009, 2). Such ideas have contributed to political conflict and contestations over belonging where the focus often is on excluding 'allochthons' (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). For Eriksen (2010), ethnicity becomes politically and symbolically important in encounters where cultural differences and tensions between members of groups emerge. As such, autochthons relies upon allochthons to define themselves and the characteristics that make them distinct from others; thus, ethnicity is not fixed but constantly negotiated (see Barth 1969).

With an increasing academic focus on migration and interactions between people from different backgrounds throughout the world, ethnicity is a central concept because it speaks directly to fundamental concerns about social relations. Much of the literature that examines the relationship between migration and ethnicity focuses on international migrants after arrival, especially in Europe and North America (see e.g. Dahinden 2008; Fleischmann et al. 2012; Somashekhar 2018). There is also increasing recognition of the magnitude of migration within Africa (Flahaux and De Haas 2016), but little is known about how the meanings of individual and group identities transform when people migrate within African countries. When taking into account intensifying migration within countries, these dynamics offer a compelling case to analyse the politics of ethnic identity within a national identity.

Migration and subsequent social encounters in distinct fields of ethnic power relations present individuals with shifting meanings of ethnic belonging in Ethiopia. In concentrating on internal migration, this paper focuses on an understudied dimension of how ethnicity is shaped, contested, and reproduced. Like Mains and Kinfu's (2016) study of how road construction materialises the politics of ethnicity in contemporary Hawassa in southern Ethiopia, my focus is on the social outcomes of a distinctly politicised discourse around ethnicity. Instead of roads, infrastructure, and other material manifestations of inequality, however, I center my attention on how the government has made domestic

migration across ethno-regional boundaries relatively easy in recent decades, while simultaneously situating individuals in static ethnic categories. More specifically, this article examines what happens to people's experiences and conceptualisations of ethnicity when they migrate within Ethiopia.

This paper takes the Ethiopian context as a case to analyse how emic meanings of ethnicity, both on individual and group levels, are shaped through diverse social, political and symbolical processes. I differentiate between state discourse and the perspectives of ethnically diverse urban residents in different Ethiopian cities, as well as social media representations, to examine what happens when people claiming belonging to the Tigrayan ethnic group – often perceived to be at the top of the ethnic hierarchy – migrate across regional boundaries. By comparing the experiences of ethnic diversity of Tigrayans who migrate for university studies with those of Tigrayans who migrate to urban centers after higher education, I analyse the ways in which contestations of perceived ethnic inequalities unfold in different urban spaces. The ethnographic examples of how ethnic identities are lived and narrated on a day-to-day basis in different contexts in Ethiopia demonstrate how migrants develop new ways of attaining and representing ethnic identity in response to diverse ethnic-based contestations over socioeconomic inequalities. Drawing on more than a year of participant observation and interviews in Addis Ababa and the Tigrayan city of Adigrat⁴, this paper demonstrates that emic conceptualisations of identity can be understood as responses to state categories of ethnicity, but also that contextual and temporal politics generate conditions and experiences that in turn reshape those conceptualisations.

Relating ethnicity and migration

Ethnicity is a concept often applied to explore the formation of individual identities and groups in the meetings between people from different backgrounds. It has been particularly used with the increased focus on international migration, globalisation and transnationalism. In his study of large-scale violence, Appadurai (2006, 51) identifies a recurrent pattern across the world where other social categories are portrayed as a threat to the existence of a group 'defined as a we'. To analyse the politics of ethnoracial categories, ethnonationalism and violence, he emphasises how 'anxiety of incompleteness' generate 'predatory' identities where majorities contest minorities' place in the nation as a whole (2006, 8). A decade earlier, Appadurai (1996, 33) coined the term 'ethnoscape' to highlight how migration changes the landscape of social relations because 'moving groups and individuals constitutes an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.' These trends of violence related to ethnic identities, as well as continuous shifts in ethnic relations through migration, reflect a growing politicisation of ethnic identity.

A central reason for the contentious role of ethnicity in many countries is how it is perceived to intersect with notions of belonging and access to resources. In the sub-Saharan African context, Comaroff and Comaroff argue that people often consider inequalities in material, political and social power to be related to group membership, and that these differences contribute to shaping ethnic identities (1992, 56). Through such processes ethnicity tends 'to take on the 'natural' appearance of an autonomous force, a 'principle' capable of determining the course of social life' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 60). At the experiential level, then, ethnicity is often perceived to be a factor that determines

group privilege and inequality. Amidst the increase of autochthony movements in Africa and across the globe, Geschiere finds that it is not sufficient to equate them to 'indigeneity', but that these processes are related to new forms of globalisation and, primarily, to 'efforts to exclude others from access to new circuits of riches and power' (2009, 26). Ethnicity remains central in such processes.

Scholars have demonstrated that structural shifts have impacted on meanings of ethnicity in Africa. Dorman, Hammett, and Nugent (2007, 8) point out that African regimes have been turning towards producing 'autochthons' and that 'those very nation-building strategies themselves contained the seeds of the present polarisation.' Under circumstances where questions over belonging are used for political gain, ethnicity has emerged as a particularly contentious issue. Conflicts over resources can partly be understood in relation to the growing inequalities emerging through global and local forms of neoliberal capitalism (Geschiere 2009). However, there are also examples of less contentious relations between resources and ethnicity: Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) have examined, for instance, how a group of 'traditional' chiefs in South Africa turned ethnicity into a business venture (among other examples). They argue that ethnicity is becoming increasingly commoditised through such enterprises and that these processes have implications for changing relationships between 'culture' and market. The chiefs' strategy can be understood as an attempt to reframe the meanings of ethnic groups in ways that are to their advantage. This and other contributions have made it clear that understandings of ethnicity have become increasingly complex, not only to researchers, but also for the subjects of their studies.

Despite shifting meanings of ethnicity, common ideas and narratives of belonging tend to focus on inclusion and exclusion. Such thinking and practice tend to rely on an essentialisation of belonging, but Jenkins argues ethnicity is not 'something' people 'have' or to which they 'belong', but a process of identification through which people 'construct an ongoing sense of themselves and an understanding of their fellows' (2008, 15). To avoid reifying and replicating the essentialised social categories people use to refer to 'ethnic groups', and instead account for the ways in which feelings of group belonging and identity become important in people's lives (Brubaker 2004), this paper analyses the shifts in emic conceptualisations of ethnicity through moments of conflict in Ethiopia.

Disputed ethnic hierarchies in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, essentialised perspectives on ethnicity emerge from a long history of highland domination over peoples in the surrounding lowlands. From the 1890s onwards, Amhara rulers dominated other ethnic groups in the lowlands of the country (Donham and James 1986). While colonisers created other multi-ethnic states in sub-Saharan Africa, Aalen observes that Ethiopia 'was built by incorporating peripheral peoples into a state which already possessed a strong identity and historical core' (2011, 25). People who spoke Amharic and originated from the highlands often controlled the means of production and were in a position to subjugate people from other ethnic groups. Consequently, Aalen argues that '[i]nequality based on ethnic affinity has been part of Ethiopian governance since the establishment of the modern state at the end of the nineteenth century' (2011, 4).

These dynamics persisted and remained a source of conflict throughout most of the twentieth century. Bjerén's (1985) study of migration to Shashamene towards the end of the rule of Haile Selassie (1916–1974) highlights how ethnicity was a central factor in social hierarchies in urban centers, and that it was mainly people of Amhara origin who were in positions of power. The 1974 revolution arose partly in response to the contrasts between the ruling class's excessive wealth and the deep poverty of the broader population, and many Ethiopians perceived the abolishment of the monarchy as an opportunity to transform Ethiopia into a modern, socialist state in which such inequalities could be reduced. However, the new regime (known as the *Derg*) relied heavily on force and violence to carry out its policies, which led to increasing opposition and alienation (Donham 2002). For example, in the 1980s, forced resettlement and villagisation programs relocated about 10 million people (Pankhurst and Piguet 2009). In addition, the socialist regime restricted internal movement by requiring permits for travel between cities (Young 1997).

After the civil war (1974–1991) that ended the *Derg*'s rule, in order to legitimise its rule the victorious Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), had to show that it could sustain peace in a multi-ethnic nation, that it was less oppressive than its predecessors and that it could make the country prosperous (Gagliardone 2014, 284). The EPRDF responded to these challenges by reconfiguring the Ethiopian political system into a form that came to be known as 'ethnic federalism' (Abbink 2009). Ethnic federalism was, in part, an 'effort to redress centuries of hegemonic rule over Ethiopia's marginalized peoples' (Riggan 2011, 137) and a means to give the different ethnic groups and regions more autonomy (Joireman 1997; Fiseha 2006).

Although the government's policies partially reflect popular perceptions of ethnic groups, or 'nationalities', this designation of ethnicity contributed to essentialise ethnicity because it does not take into account the continuous constructions, flexibility and performative aspects of ethnicity. Thus, the imposition of a static system of regional belonging ignored the long history of, for instance, intermarriage and migration. For example, Markakis (1998) has demonstrated how migration and increasing interaction with people from different backgrounds over several decades has shaped ideas of the Gurage as an ethnic group with a distinct language and cultural practices, but also that the government's current approach to distribute resources along ethnic lines has turned it into a 'political asset'.

With Tigrayan politicians in control of the EPRDF and the government since 1991, it soon became a common perception that Tigrayans were 'attempting to monopolise political power and channel state resources to their own region in the north of the country' (Aalen 2011, 4; cf. Abbink 1995, 156). The systematic subjugation of the political opposition as well as other ethnic groups (Jalata 2009; Tronvoll 2011), and the government's usage of its cadres to control federations and local governments created widespread distrust towards Tigrayans (Tronvoll 2001). Furthermore, 'extra-judicial killings and arbitrary arrests' (Tronvoll 2008, 68), exacerbated perceptions of an ethnic-based system of inequality. Academic studies of ethnic federalism and the broader politics of ethnicity in contemporary Ethiopia have often emphasised the subjugation of non-Tigrayans (see e.g. Tronvoll 2008), or, as Mains and Kinfu (2016) argue in their study from Hawassa, Ethiopia, that those who had close ties to the political regimes in the past

are in a better position to benefit from the current government's investment in infrastructure.

Coinciding with the intensified politicisation and essentialisation of ethnicity, opportunities for migration within Ethiopia have transformed since 1991 (Kiros and White 2004). The absence of war, large-scale construction and upgrade of roads (ERA 2012), as well as the constitutional right to free movement implemented in 1995 (Constitution 1995, article 32, paragraph 1), have all facilitated internal migration. The rapid increase of higher education institutions in Ethiopia since 2000 (Breines 2017) and the government's policy of mixing students from different regions on university campuses (Saint 2004) have been influential in shaping ethnic encounters and relations. Abbink (2011) argues that the political system of ethnic federalism influences people's reasons for engaging in internal migration, but also that ethnicity is a factor that shapes experiences and outcomes of migration. To understand the formation of ethnic identities, I here turn to non-Tigrayan informants' understanding of ethnicity and inequality in contemporary Ethiopia.

Resisting classification and essentialising Tigrayans

My non-Tigrayan informants regularly problematised their own ascribed ethnicity. For example, Aster,⁵ 21, was born in the countryside to parents of Gurage origin, but lived most of her life in Addis Ababa. She recently started a university degree in accounting at Aksum University in the Tigray region. She responded to my question about her ethnicity stating:

Aster I'm Ethiopian.

Author OK, but what does it say in your ID card?

Aster It says Gurage, but I don't think like that. I only think of myself as Ethiopian.

It was common among people who originated from outside of the Tigray region to disagree with the government's formal designation of ethnic identity. Aster's denial of her official group as registered in her documents is similar to a statement made by Abebe, a 26-year-old man in Addis Ababa who made a living by importing goods from China:

For me, I don't think that I have an ethnicity. My parents are from Tigray, but I was born in Bahir Dar and grew up there, which is in the Amhara region. I don't think I'm Tigrayan or Amhara, I'm Ethiopian. However, in my ID card it says Tigray, but I don't think like that.

The reflections of my informants whose ascribed ethnicity did not correspond with their first language or who for other reasons did not feel that ethnicity was central to their (national) identity often diverged from the government's discourse. Rather than referring to their ascribed ethnicity, several informants from other backgrounds primarily spoke about themselves as 'Ethiopian'. Their emphasis on nationality over ethnicity highlight that people's ways of identifying themselves varied and that ethnicity is more complex than the official ascription.

At the same time as many Ethiopians contested the focus on ethnicity, many referred to Tigrayans as a distinct ethnic group. Since the change of government in 1991, it has become a well-established narrative, underpinning opposition against the regime, that the Ethiopian government allocates disproportionate resources to the Tigray region and that individuals of Tigrayan ethnicity benefit unfairly from the current political power

structure. During my stay in Ethiopia, it became clear to me that many people in Addis Ababa, and beyond, perceived Tigrayans as a distinct and privileged group. Many expressed these opinions in conversations that ranged from inquiries about conditions in Tigray to heated discussions about Tigrayan political dominance and their perceived plot to deprive the rest of the country of power and resources. For example, Habte, in his late twenties, had migrated from Nazret to the capital and identified as Oromo. He was working as a hairdresser and suggested that his predicament of low-paid employment and poor prospect of becoming rich was a result of the government favoring Tigray:

- Author How do you feel about Meles Zenawi [the former prime minister] passing away?
 Habte I'm happy, he had been in power too long. On TV, they showed only people crying, but in the streets people were cheering. Meles was a thief. He was just like Saddam and Gaddafi, killing any opposition.
- Author Are you not exaggerating?
 Habte No, there is no work here and all the tax goes to Tigray.
- Author How do you know that the government allocates more money to Tigray? Have you been there?
 Habte No, I haven't, but Tigrayans are always wearing gold rings and necklaces.

Even though the representations of Tigrayans as a privileged group draw upon the same problematic assumption that the government employs in its rigid and fixed approach to ethnicity, and fail to acknowledge the inequalities and varying ethnic identities among people from and in Tigray, assumptions of ethnic-based inequality and Tigrayan advantages were common in Addis Ababa. Individuals originating from the Tigray region were considered to benefit from their ethnicity even if they lived in other parts of the country. These ideas were not limited to people who lived precarious lives on small incomes, and many affluent people of different origin shared the sense of a state-implemented ethnic inequality. A 50-year-old who was classified on her ID card as a 'foreign national of Ethiopian origin', Hana had lived in Europe for more than two decades and been educated in Norway and the United Kingdom. She stated that 'It is said that a lot of resources are going to the north [Tigray], that nice hospitals and factories are being built there. I think Tigray is favored because the government is controlled by Tigrayans.' Despite being a sensitive issue, ethnic inequality was a common topic of conversations in multi-ethnic Addis Ababa. As will be shown in the following section, these ideas were also communicated online.

Representations of Tigrayan privilege

Media censorship in Ethiopia (Stremlau 2011) has made it increasingly difficult for newspapers and magazines to publish critical pieces about the current political system. At present, Ethiopian magazines, newspapers, radio or TV cannot explicitly portray unfair distribution among the diverse ethnic groups that make up the country. As a result, it is primarily on websites run by Ethiopians living abroad and on social media that there are explicit arguments about Tigrayan dominance and privilege.

Among my informants, many regularly used the internet and Facebook was especially popular. Many had a large number of 'friends', often from different ethnic groups. They would regularly come across posts from different political perspectives being posted and shared, and there are numerous Facebook groups where the Tigrayan domination of power is discussed. For example, the groups called 'All Amhara' and 'Amhara Press'

frequently post pictures, memes, videos, and texts focusing on the politics of ethnicity. These include, among other items, news and stories about recent events related to ethnic inequalities, caricatures of the former prime minister Meles Zenawi, pictures of documents that ‘prove’ the existence of policies of discrimination against other ethnic groups and the distribution of a greater share of resources to Tigray, as well as video clips from demonstrations and close-up images of people who have been shot or abused in other ways by the police or security forces. Anti-government and anti-Tigray sentiments pervade much of the material.

In the discourse of Tigrayan dominance, ethnicity shapes a clear distinction between Tigrayans and other people. Mains (2012) and Di Nunzio (2017) have both demonstrated that ethnicity is not necessarily the primary source of group identity among young Ethiopians living in ethnically diverse urban centers. As such, they highlight a discrepancy between how state policies ascribe ethnicity and individuals’ lived experiences, which suggests that the state cannot exclusively determine ethnic identity. Still, tensions between legally determined ethnicity and the ways in which people perceive ethnic identities suggest that ethnicity depends on national policies as well as upon political power dynamics and conceptualisations of privilege and inequality. The widespread perceptions and representations of Tigrayans as privileged illustrate the centrality of ethnicity in social hierarchies and its role in discrediting and undermining the government. Bayart (1993) argues that ‘African elites’ seek to control the state and ‘eat’ its resources, whereas in the case of Ethiopia, other ethnic groups consider Tigrayans to be the ones that consume the wealth of the country. Consequently, the representations and perceptions of Tigrayan dominance and privilege resemble what Van den Berghe refers to as ‘ethnic nepotism’ (1987). Although non-Tigrayans use a range of strategies to access what is perceived to be a disproportionate distribution of resources (for example by migrating to the Tigray region) can highlight important aspects of the formation of ethnic identity, I turn to the perspectives of my Tigrayan informants to assess how migration across regional boundaries has shaped their highly contested ethnicity.

Migrating for higher education: inter-ethnic encounters and conflict

The political system of ethnic federalism plays a central role in Ethiopians’ conceptualisation of ethnicity, but my Tigrayan informants’ perspectives on ethnicity differed from those who described themselves as non-Tigrayan. All my informants who originated from the Tigray region, and had grown up there, responded to my inquiries about their ethnicity by stating that they were Tigrayan. For instance, 40-year-old Robel in Adigrat, who had been a soldier for the TPLF towards the end of the civil war, told me: ‘My ethnicity is Tigrayan. Both my parents are Tigrayan.’ This understanding of ethnicity resembles the government’s discourse, but also differs from the official approach that classifies a person’s ethnicity based only upon the father’s ethnic background. Many referred to both parents to clarify their ethnic background, as Mehari also did: ‘My ethnicity is Tigrayan, but I can say I’m half Irob because my mother is Irob. On my ID card it says Tigrayan because my father is Tigrayan.’ Thus, my Tigrayan informants generally adhered to the official categorisation but also questioned it by highlighting that it was based on a gendered system favoring their fathers’ background. Non-Tigrayans, as shown above, more commonly identified themselves primarily as Ethiopian. These differences constitute a

factor in the encounters between people from different ethnic backgrounds, which is the next focus.

A large-scale expansion of higher education, from two universities in 2000 (Saint 2004) to 31 in 2016 (MoE 2016), has intensified interactions between young people from all over Ethiopia. Mains and Kinfu (2016, 653) point out that Tigray is 'Ethiopia's most culturally homogenous province', and for my informants who had grown up in the region, university campuses in other parts of Ethiopia were often their first experiences of significant ethnic diversity. Tekle, a 35-year-old man, told me about his first experience of university in Addis Ababa in 2001: 'Until then, I had only been living in Korem [in Tigray]. I met a lot of people from all over Ethiopia. In the dormitory, there were people who spoke other languages and had other religions. Some had other food customs and there were many different styles of clothing.' Initially, my informants generally appreciated meeting people from different backgrounds and the opportunities to widen their perspectives through inter-ethnic encounters.

However, in regions where perceptions of Tigrayan privilege prevailed, my Tigrayan informants occasionally faced dangerous situations. The majority who had gone to university in other regions said that they experienced discrimination and violence because of their Tigrayan ethnicity. For example, Petros, a 25-year-old man who lived in Adigrat and worked for a local NGO, told me about his experience while at Gonder University in the Amhara region: 'I was talking on my mobile phone and some guys on the street asked me 'Why do you talk in Tigrinya? Why don't you speak Amharic?' Then they beat me and kicked me.' Petros was, in his view, attacked because he spoke Tigrinya in a region where the official language is Amharic,⁶ and targeted for a presumed ethnic affiliation with the government.

Most of my informants from Tigray experienced relatively minor incidents of violence and harassment during their university studies, but in some cases, the campuses became sites of full-fledged ethnic contestation. For example, in 2004, men who were claimed by the police to be members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) attacked a gathering of students from Tigray on the Addis Ababa University campus.⁷ My informant Tekle, who had embraced the diversity on campus, was one of the victims and explained:

Some Oromo students who had joined OLF threw a grenade into the TV room when there were Tigrinya programmes on. One guy from Adigrat, one from Dessie and myself were injured, and one from around Debre Markos was killed. I had to stay in the Black Lion Hospital for one year after the attack. I still have some problems with my leg.

Violence on university campuses suggest that the government's policy of mixing people from different backgrounds did not always generate inter-ethnic understanding; indeed, at time it helped to turn campuses into battlegrounds over ethnicity. The grenade attack by Oromo students can be understood as a political contestation of Tigrayan power over other ethnic groups, but also as an event that transformed Tekle's understanding of his own ethnicity and what it meant to be Tigrayan. He had been aware of ethnic tension prior to the attack, but this experience transformed his initial perceptions of ethnic diversity on arriving at Addis Ababa University, described above. Through migration to other regions, my informants from Tigray became increasingly aware of the perceptions of Tigrayan privilege; under these circumstances it became impossible to remain 'neutral' to the politics of ethnicity. As such, the popular conception of ethnicity as

fixed, and the impossibility of exiting the ethnic game due to legally ascribed ethnicity together made ethnicity a hotly contested topic in day-to-day interactions and could potentially lead to injury or even death.

Experiences of extreme violence were uncommon among my informants, but in 2005, an election year, ethnic conflict escalated. Many Oromos contested the Tigrayan-dominated regime and their experience of long-standing subjugation by highland Amhara governments. Violence intensified on university campuses when it became clear that EPRDF was to remain in power, and claims of fraudulent elections emerged. The police and security forces clamped down on protestors with ‘excessive use of force’ (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009). Around this time, informants from Tigray who had migrated to towns and cities in other regions, such as Oromia, experienced discrimination and violence. Mehari, 25, had studied at Jimma University in Oromia before moving to Addis Ababa for two years, and, subsequently, returned to work in his place of origin, Adigrat. He told me about the conditions at Jimma University: ‘When I think of the campus I can only think of the racism. There was a lot of racism. Everybody was talking about Oromo, Amhara, Tigray.’ As a Tigrayan in an environment of intensified emphasis on ethnicity, Mehari got involved in conflict with non-Tigrayans several times, as exemplified by the following incident:

Once I was going back to campus with a Tigrayan friend around eight pm, and two policemen called us over and asked, “Where are you going?” We said we were going to the campus and they asked, “Where have you been?” It’s none of their business where we’ve been and we got scared because we understood they wanted to bother us. We said we’d been with a friend or something, but they wanted a reason to beat us and asked for our ID cards. We showed it to them and there was no problem. They didn’t have any reason, and then one of the policemen asked, “What is this hair?” while pulling it at the same time. I had an Afro back then and answered “hair” and the policeman hit me with a flat hand. I hit him back with a flat hand and shouted “*wedi shermuta!*” [son of a whore] to him and then it started. My friend attacked the other policeman, so we fought one-on-one. More policemen came and they pushed me to the ground and beat me with sticks. Then they pulled me by my legs through the mud and took me to prison. The police were racist. They didn’t know us at all and they wanted to beat us only because we spoke Tigrinya.

Tension between university students of all ethnicities and the police is common in Ethiopia, and many students have experienced beatings by the police. Police violence can be understood in the broader contexts of the state exerting power over young men and enforcing conformity. Weiss (2005) observes how particular hairstyles have led to tense relations between young men and the police in Tanzania, and Mains (2012, 108) highlights the power dynamics between the police and young men in Ethiopia by giving an example of the police forcing a young man to cut his ‘provocative’ hairstyle. Mehari’s encounter with the police took place near the university campus – an environment where ethnicity is particularly politicised. In Mehari’s experience, the attitude of the police and their use of force towards him and his friend was because they were Tigrayans in a part of Ethiopia where there was a lot of resistance to the Tigrayan-dominated regime. In this case, their ethnic origin could be identified through the language they spoke, but also the ‘messy’ hairstyle that was associated with TPLF rebel fighters arriving in central Ethiopia towards the end of the civil war. As such, physical distinctions contributed to reproducing ethnic stereotypes that enabled people to identify ethnicity through appearance.

The reports of violence directed towards Tigrayans in Gonder in 2016 fit into a trend of contestations of ethnic inequalities. The essentialised assumptions of privilege as well as

the violent contestations of Tigrayan dominance, distribution of resources and power acquainted my informants with a distinct set of meanings of being Tigrayan attributed to them by non-Tigrayans. The ‘coercive, involuntary and violent genesis of cultural distinctions’ have, as Bourgois and Schonberg (2007) demonstrate from the United States, consequences at the individual level. Through migration to ethnically diverse university campuses their ethnic affiliation with the Tigrayan-dominated EPRDF government entangled them in discourses of ethnic inequality where their ethnicity determined by ethnic federalism became a key factor in their social relations. While ethnic identities were particularly contentious on university campuses, migration to other regions simultaneously contributed to enhance Tigrayans’ awareness of the multiple meanings of ethnicity. The following section turns to how Tigrayans responded to these perceptions of them as a fixed ethnic group that benefits unjustly from government policies in ways that enabled them to re-imagine and develop forms of Tigrayan ethnicity that were more compatible with ethnically diverse settings.

Tigrayan migrants asserting ethnic equality

After obtaining their degrees and returning to their places of origin, several of my informants from Tigray pursued migration to urban centers in other parts of Ethiopia despite their experiences of ethnic tension during their university studies. These experiences were significantly less violent, but the representations and perceptions of Tigrayan privilege remained a source of tension in their social relations. In these ethnically diverse urban spaces throughout Ethiopia, my informants reconstructed their identities, contributing to the formation of a Tigrayan ethnic identity that was unique to those who migrated to urban centers and were forced to respond to their ascribed ethnicity and stereotyping by non-Tigrayans. I turn here to the ways in which Tigrayans attempted to achieve ethnic identities that would enable them to initiate and sustain social relations in other regions.

Many of my informants were aware of conceptions of Tigrayan privilege prior to migration (due to their university experience), but it often became even more tangible after moving to other regions. For example, Anbessa, 30, told me about a headline he saw in a newspaper in the early 2000s after migrating from Mekelle (in the Tigray region) to Addis Ababa. It read *Ethiopian admto Mekellen mashebreq*: ‘Bleeding Ethiopia to decorate Mekelle’. Representations of Tigrayan privilege were more explicit in printed media in those days, after the EPRDF-led takeover but before the government became proactive about stifling critical voices following the ethnic conflict in 2005 (Stremlau 2011). My Tigrayan informants, however, disagreed vehemently with these accusations. Anbessa had studied and worked in Addis Ababa since his late teens, apart from when he pursued a MA degree in Denmark. Even though he spoke fluent Amharic and had close friends from the Amhara and Oromia regions, these representations of Tigrayan privilege continued to be a concern for him:

The ideas that Tigrayans are taking the resources and sending money to Tigray upset me because it’s not true. I’ve lived there and I know what’s happening there. Maybe in federal governments there are more Tigrayan ministers than from other ethnic groups, but this is changing with time. In terms of budget there is a formula for allocating resources throughout the country based on the number of the population and level of development in each region.

Having lived in Mekelle, Anbessa argued that the claim that the government extracted resources from the rest of the country to beautify Mekelle was unconvincing, but at the same time, he expressed concern that people who had not actually been to Mekelle and seen the conditions there for themselves would believe such portrayals. It was within these assumptions of the inherent connections between Tigrayan ethnicity and privilege that my informants had to strategically position themselves when navigating life in ethnically diverse urban centers.

My informants' identities as Tigrayans often became an issue in inter-ethnic social relations. Elias, 28, had trained as a medical doctor and worked in Tigray before moving to specialise in Addis Ababa about a year previously. He explained: 'Some people think differently about you because you are from Tigray. There are people who think that Tigray is being given advantages and that all the money goes to Tigray.' Through migration, my informants became engaged in interactions where it was evident that people from other backgrounds related to Tigrayans in distinct ways. In such social situations, some felt compelled to negotiate with the prejudices against them, as Elias elaborated:

My friends don't judge me for my ethnicity, but we often discuss it. Even today we discussed it, but in a reasonable way. I use my own experience to explain to my friends that I don't have any advantage over them. I tell them about my family's situation, how they live in the countryside and that my father was a freedom fighter. I try to make them understand that our situation is the same; we are doctors and get the same salary. I don't get one penny [*ammest santim*] more than them. There is a gap between people's understanding and reality. If they believe me when I say that the government is not carrying money to us, they understand the reality.

Amidst recurrent claims of Tigrayan privilege, all my informants from Tigray denied having ever experienced any favorable treatment. The history of Tigrayan ethnic mobilisation during the civil war and the political system of ethnic federalism had contributed to the ways in which people from Tigray spoke about their ethnic belonging and individual identities as a distinct ethnic group. At the same time, they generally considered themselves equal to other ethnic groups and maintained that there was no ethnicity-based system of inequality. Conversations and discussions about the facts of distribution of resources and inequality between ethnic groups with people who held a different perspective transformed my informants' capacity to navigate a contested topic. Elias and other informants asserted their Tigrayan ethnicity in such inter-ethnic interactions where they sought to correct prevailing ideas and representations of their privilege by highlighting the poverty that Tigray shared with the rest of the country, as well as common employment conditions and salaries throughout the country.

Despite contrasting perspectives on ethnic privilege and inequality, inter-ethnic social relations were common among informants who had a higher education and lived in urban centers outside Tigray. Over five years in the capital, Hewan, 26, had obtained a BA degree in electrical engineering and found employment with Ethiopian Electric Power while pursuing a part-time MA degree. Through these engagements, her social network had widened:

Author	Do you have friends from other parts of Ethiopia?
Hewan	Yes, I get along with people easily and my friends are from all over the country. The woman who called a few minutes ago is from Gonder. I have friends from Shamene, Arba Minch and other places, though many are from Adigrat.

- Author And do you try to explain what the conditions are like in Tigray when you talk to them?
- Hewan No, I don't want to discuss it with other people, it's better to be quiet when it comes up.

Yet the perceptions of Tigrayans as privileged because of their ethnicity often forced them to respond, demonstrating how essentialist ideas of ethnicity and the politics of Tigrayan otherness influenced their social interactions in everyday life. At the same time, my informants strived maintain inter-ethnic relations. As Hewan's choice to avoid discussions about Tigrayan privilege illustrates, she negotiated her Tigrayan identity differently from Elias' more proactive and confrontational approach in denying the existence of ethnic-based privilege. Their contested status as Tigrayans remained important in ethnically diverse settings – even if there was less violence in these contexts than at university campuses. It was, in particular, state-ascribed ethnicity in combination with distinct perspectives on the folk-model of ethnicity that shaped social relations for my Tigrayan informants in the capital. Regardless of the strategy they chose in response to these contexts of politicised and contested social positions of being Tigrayan, they sought to balance their assertion of ethnicity in ways that would enable them to maintain social relations with people from other backgrounds and avoid conflict, or, in other words, to de-politicise their ethnicity to achieve a Tigrayan ethnic identity that is compatible with other perspectives in diverse urban settings.

Conclusion

Tigrayan migrants' experiences of diversity demonstrates that in Ethiopia ethnicity remains a key source of controversy, both on university campuses and in urban centers. The EPRDF government politicised and essentialised ethnicity to an unprecedented extent by territorialising ethnicity and ascribing it to individuals. The official ethnic classification of Ethiopians has constrained opportunities for developing identities that surmount ethnicity. Currently, then, Tigrayan identity is effectively constituted and constructed by other Ethiopians' opposition towards what they perceive to be Tigrayan hegemony. Rather than ethnicity being only a political tool for the government to dominate non-Tigrayans, this paper demonstrates that prevailing representations of Tigrayan privilege and power makes ethnicity a sensitive issue also for people originating from Tigray. Tigrayans who migrate to other regions encounter, face-to-face, essentialist representations and recurrent claims of their perceived privilege and ethnic-based inequality, which partly determine and restrict their opportunities to claim non-ethnic identities in inter-ethnic interactions where non-Tigrayans seem to be freer to present themselves as Ethiopian. Ethnic federalism, then, essentialises Tigrayan ethnicity in ways that are to their disadvantage despite the benefits they supposedly derive from sharing this ethnicity with members of the government. To my Tigrayan informants, their presumed privilege was worth very little as it materialised into distrust, resentment, discrimination, and outright violence, challenging the common representations of the political system as inherently beneficial to them.

Migrants' exposure to ethnic diversity and conflicting perspectives on the relationship between ethnicity and inequality also widens their experiences in ways that enable them to

amalgamate the ideas of ethnic privilege with their subjective ways of constructing their identities as Tigrayans. My informants who obtained higher education gradually honed the skills needed to handle inter-ethnic relations and to negotiate the meaning of their contested ethnic belonging under shifting social circumstances and to avoid conflict in subsequent migrations to urban centers. While these findings illustrate that ethnicity is, as Eriksen (2010) suggests, both ascribed and achieved, it is also clear that individuals' opportunities to manoeuvre their ethnic identities depend on the varying and shifting meanings of ethnicity in different locations and political contexts.

The social processes surrounding ethnicity in Ethiopia resemble the ways in which 'anxiety of incompleteness' (Appadurai 2006) and 'autochthony movements' (Geschiere 2009) are shaped in other parts of the world. What has been demonstrated in this paper in relation to the Ethiopian case, is that the politicisation of ethnicity by the government has contributed to the reification of ethnic belonging, which has influenced how individuals have responded by making claims to resources and power in ethnic terms. In combination with intensifying internal migration patterns, these policies and individual practices serve to construct migrants who cross regional boundaries as allochthons, which in turn reinforces violent identity politics. Following Abiy Ahmed becoming prime minister in 2018, Ethiopia has experienced massive changes – the normalisation of relations with Eritrea, release of political prisoners and return of exiled opposition leaders – that have been seen as potential moves towards a more democratic and stable country. How these changes will affect persistent grievances towards Tigrayans and ethnic relations on the ground remain to be seen. There is little to suggest that issues relating to ethnicity have been resolved in Ethiopia.

Notes

1. BBC (2017).
2. Davison (2016).
3. Yibeltal (2017).
4. Please see the (online) appendix for a discussion of the methodology on which this paper is based.
5. I have given all informants pseudonyms.
6. Tigrinya and Amharic are relatively similar languages, but Tigrinya has certain sounds that makes it easy to distinguish from Amharic.
7. More information about the incident can be found on Ethiomedia.com (2004).

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