Foreword

By Yonas Ashine and Fana Gebresenbet (Guest Editors)

Ethiopia (or Ethiopian politics) is a consumer of history and also a prisoner of its past. Indeed, as Bahru Zewde (2002, p. 141) argues "there are few people as obsessed with their history as Ethiopians." Contestation over the past is a common occurrence. The radical student movement and their articulation of nationalities' question made the contestations more intense and consequential in Ethiopia (Teshale, 1995; Merera, 2003). This has been further intensified following the 1991 institutionalization of ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of the state. The centring of ethno-nationalism was a rupture from the pre-1991 trend, thereby opening an unending cascade of contestations and conflicts over interpretations, selective remembering and forgetting of the past. This is often presented as 'conflict over history', and there are calls for historians to resolve the contestations and what some take as 'revisionist stands'.

This special issue proposes that the solution to these contestations might not lie so much on/in history, as a field of study, but in collective memory studies, and makes a bold step towards recasting contestations over the country's past into the latter. However we do not want to imply that history is not important to resolve the contestation. In fact, there are few normatively framed studies suggesting history writing as a site of harmony and reconciliation (Levine, 1974; Clapham, 2002). Rather, the point we want to make is that even if historians of various hues agree on how exactly things unfolded in the past—after taking their time and dedicating their expertise, energy and resources—the political elite and activists will not necessarily stop selective remembering and forgetting of the past. Neither will communities drop identity-stabilising myths and half-truths held dearly. In this respect, new contestations are likely to emerge; historians and their articles and books will not dry up the attractiveness of using the past to make advances in current conflicts/contestations. Moreover, as a retrospective production of the past, history may change as the present changes, at least thematically (Clapham, 2002). This change of history as the present changes however appears more relevant in particular construction of a past called memory.

Collective memory is the ordinary person's representation of the past, while history became the professional's take on the past (de Saint-Laurent, 2017; Grau, 2014). Below we present five inter-related reasons for why we should focus on collective memory than history. These are: degree of claimed objectivity; space left for contestation; relative power of the subaltern; reach to and buy-in by the wider public; and impact on (mobilized) identities.

Firstly, unearthing all the evidence and writing the past as it really happened is the dream of historians, while collective memory studies unabashedly recognize that the human gaze into the past is subjective. Collective memory "is as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated" (Kansteiner, 2002, p. 180). In the empiricist tradition "the role of [the] historical is to reveal the past, to discover or at least, approximate the truth" (Trouillot, 1995, p. 5). At the core of collective memory studies, however, is the investigation of how different groups 'own history' (French, 2012), often through the selective and subjective interpretations of the past to serve immediate interests (French, 2012). If history is 'preservationist', memory studies is 'presentist'. To put it differetntly, collective memory is bound to be subjective and adaptive to present needs.

Secondly, the lower degree of claimed objectivity opens up spaces for legitimate contestation and debate. This attribute is a corollary of the first mentioned above. Collective memory studies do not pretend to make the particular representation of the past universal. It gives space to subaltern representations of the past to be studied and brought to the fore. As summarised by de Saint-Laurent (2017, p. 11) "because the past is always open to interpretation and our relation to it is evolving, performing collective memory is proposing a certain version of the past that has the potential to change how it is perceived, both by self and others."

Third, these contestations over the past do not happen in a power vacuum. The 're-production of the past' always involves power and there is no equal access to the means (Trouillot, 1995). The historian holds a privileged position in the production of an authoritative account of the past, and alternative representations of the past by the public could easily be dislodged as 'biased' and 'unprofessional'. History does not leave room for the subaltern to contest it, rather wants to become hegemonic and impose itself on people's minds. Studies into collective memories help us see and understand the past from the vantage point of the average person.

Fourth, while the works of historians are found in formats and forms (for example, articles, books, conference proceedings…) accessible to the few, collective memory is constructed in a manner which is accessible and packaged in a manner (e.g.: music, poems, political speech.) which reaches a large section of society. As such, although compared to historical works, the representations painted in collective memories are less likely to capture the past as it unfolded, collective memory might be more consequential in terms of informing peoples' social and political actions.

Fifth, the shadow of the past could pervade many aspects of contemporary political and socio-economic life. Collective memory is a crucial basis for

construction of identities, in terms of defining the core of what makes 'us' unique from 'them', i.e., drawing social boundaries. The sharing of a particular past and its remembering in a certain manner shapes how a group (ethnic, religious, nation) sees, constructs and defines itself (de Saint-Laurent, 2017). As such, collective memory provides a foundation to the 'imagination' and subjective construction of the group's identity, by giving a sense of temporal continuity of the group across generations (French, 2012). This could relate to what Mitzen (2006, p. 342) dubs 'biographical continuity,' i.e., "the need [for identity groups] to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person [group] in time —as being rather than constantly changing — in order to realize a sense of agency." Politicians could further mobilize these identities in elite contestations, including involvement in violent conflicts.

Applying collective memory in Ethiopian studies: Polycentric and polyphonic Memory of Adwa

The qualities of collective memory made the past a potent material for political entrepreneurs who mobilise and animate members of a group into some action. That is what nationalism partly does—by, among others, drawing on a certain glorious past/grievances from the past, the elite mobilise potential followers into following them and taking political action following their cue. Ethnic/Ethiopian nationalism, expressed in various texts, discourses and means of representation, is essentially about that (Zubrzycki & Wo´zny, 2020), not only representing the past for its own sake but also shaping a group's future.

The focus here will be on the strategic utilisation of the past in rhetorical frames predominantly used by the political elite in identity construction (Cruz, 2000). We could not imagine the extreme forms of ethno-nationalism/Ethiopian nationalism without the elite's strategic and selective remembering of grievances and glorious moments from the past.

Ethiopia has been far from searching for a path towards a reconciled interpretation of the past. The trend has been endless production of narratives and interpretations of the past to shape the present and future politics of the country. The hope, every time this trend is raised, is that there would be a reconciled past when the old and the official narrative is challenged enough by new ones. There was hope to democratize the official memory when challenged from below and from periphery. For Alessandro Triulzi this reconciliation would unfold when "old and new stereotypes of self-assertion and exclusion are disbanded" (2002, p. 276). However, the trend continued unchecked for long and Ethiopians' connection with their past in a form of historiography and memory is multiplied, fragmented,

diversified but essentially kept the old form: i.e., uncritical stereotypical self-assertion and exclusion of others. This however now transcends mere binaries of official and unofficial; top down and bottom up as well as old and new etc. mainly when it comes to memory. The horizontal and popular displaced the old vertical politics of history and memory. With localisation of struggles for resource and power, old battles over the past got decentralised.

In her plausible theoretical classification of memory in Ethiopia, Netsanet Gebremichael (2019) argues that there are at least four mnemonic themes: the national historiography; praxis of memory, commemoration and monument; memory in cultural grain; and memory from subalternity. This classification is not fixed and the boundaries between these themes are blurred. For example the national historiography, particularly of Adwa, is between a monument and document (Triulzi, 2003). National historiography has also become a contested terrain in which now there is hardly a central narrative in it, making the old boundaries of center-periphery irrelevant (Tehsale, 1997; Ezekiel, 2008). If memory has a place in national historiography, it is by transforming the later into making it polycentric. This is because as Maimire Mennasemay argues "collective memory is complex, multiple, and contradictory" (1997, p. 48). In this polycentric memory the subaltern can also remember and forget to the extent such mnemonic actions disturb and disrupt the old hegemonic memory, and contribute towards making new ones. The trend is a dynamic production of fragile hegemony in the face of multiple counter-mnemonic praxes of subalternity.

More than ever before it is now time to give due attention to creating a reconciled and inclusive polycentric memory praxis, replacing the unending process of disrupting the old and remaking of a new hegemonic remembering. In this collective endeavour, the Adwa battle of March 1896 and its victory as seen from Ethiopia is central. There is no other politics of memory that fits the above as the politics of memory of Adwa does. Adwa has a central place in national collective memory and it is also significant in the transnational context.

Memory of the Battle of Adwa in itself appears to be a commemorative act dotted by moments of silence, performativity and narrative. As it is hegemonic act of remembering, it is also deployed as subversive praxis and resistance from subalternity. Above all, memory praxis of Adwa has increasingly become polycentric, dynamic and fluid. However, as Alessandro Triulzi argued, the trend in production of memory and history to date is more towards the production of monuments than critical documents on Adwa. Moreover, this polycentric collective memory of Adwa is yet to be an emancipatory site through generating critical dialogue, internal soul searching praxis and critical theory that looks inside

to Ethiopian and African community (Maimire, 1997). Horizontal, internal, critical dialogue between communities in Ethiopia is absent and historical events such as Adwa have been remembered within each centre (of the polycentric memory field), further reifying division than productively engaging across centres.

Despite the depth and breadth of contestation, Adwa is perhaps the most conducive historical event to initiate a negotiation and reconciliation in search for inclusive meaning and collective remembrance in which neither hegemonic nor subalterity get reproduced. Adwa can be seen as the most spectacular historical event that Ethiopians as members of the modern state may associate with, albeit differently. It is a successful historical political project which Ethiopian elites and the masses, classes and nationalities all together authored. Through this collective authorship of Adwa as a historical event, Ethiopians also authored their membership to a modern political community called Ethiopia and their historical place in an evolving international order. If one thinks through social contract, Adwa can be re-casted as Ethiopia's *Magna Carta*. However, Ethiopians remember and associate with different sections of the script. This diverse, fluid and dynamic act of remembering can be made constructive, accommodative and inclusive, if not reconciled. This can be realised by reading the different sections of the script each individual, group, class and nationalities remembers and associates with together.

This special issue can be seen as a modest attempt to read our different sections from the Adwa document as retrospectively imagined from polycentric memory praxis of the present. Our aim is to continue as well as practically respond to the call by many Ethiopianists, such as Maimire Mennasemay, to consider Adwa as an internal mirror, a theory and method through which we can see, ask and discuss our predicaments, problems and possibilities within the ethnographic present. A dialogue with the past, instead of battling with/over any usable past, particularly a dialogue with Adwa shall be made to create possibilities for emancipatory and democratic dialogue among Ethiopians today. The collection of articles in this volume depict the polyphonic and polycentricity of memory of Adwa.

This special issue presents six of the thirteen works presented at the international conference held on 25 and 26 February 2021 at Ras Mekonnen Hall, Addis Ababa University on '*Remembering Adwa at its Quasquicentennial Commemoration: Politics of History and Memory at a Unique National and Global Moment*.' The Conference brought subaltern memories and history, and stressed the need to re-imagining and re-narrating Adwa to make the victory more

useable to domestic and global struggles for equality and emancipation. Below we provide a concise summary of the five articles and the short communication.

Kebadu Mekonnen in "Working through the past: The victory of Adwa revisited" explores Adwa's ethical role in healing our collective memory. Using two conceptual tools, *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* (working-off-the-past), and *Vergangenheitseinlösung* (redeeming or casting in on the past), Kebadu argues this redemptive use of the past would only be possible when it passes through what he calls 'the Adwa test' defined by being liberating, uniting and capable of constructing our collective future from the divided/divisive collective past.

Michael Girma Kebede's "Beyond Exception and Supremacy: Adwa in the Black Radical Imaginary" delves into the contradiction behind the memorization of the battle of Adwa at two levels. First, Michael demonstrates how exceptional, distinctive image, that some Ethiopians, particularly in the diaspora, give themselves vis-à-vis other people who have been identified as blacks, harms Black solidarity. He demonstrates two forms of such exceptionalism, namely exceptional non-Blackness and exemplary Blackness, by borrowing methodological leaf out of Centime Elleni Zeleke's 2021 *Ethiopia in Theory* in the form of *Tizita*. As a way out, he promotes the thinking of Adwa as part of the Black radical imaginary, a concept he developed from the works of scholars like Cedric Robinson. Second, Michael also unravels the controversial reception of Adwa *within* Ethiopia through analysis of three cultural artefacts and calls the need for retelling the story inclusively for it to be a source of solidarity among Ethiopians and within Ethiopia.

Brian Yates in "Does Adwa have a colonial legacy? Assessing the viability of the colonial thesis for understanding late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ethiopia" critically questions the colonial thesis which casts the making of modern Ethiopia as a colonizing process, emperor Menelik II as colonizer, and Adwa as a war between colonial forces. Using Mahmood Mamdani's theory on colonial administration defined by the production of settler-native identity, Yates explored the policy followed by Menelik after Adwa and concluded that define and rule and invention settle-native identity never happened during his reign.

In "Performing Guzo Adwa: Power, politics and contestations" Fana Gebresenbet and Yonas Ashine recast our attention from the re-conceptualization of Adwa as Black radical imaginary (Michael Girma) and the meaning contestation of Adwa by political elites (Brian Yates) to a memory project initiated and led by cultural elites. While it is a given that memory projects will have other alternative contestant projects, including in the case of Adwa, this article opens up the 'black box' and looks into the politics of contestation within one memory project. *Guzo*

Adwa is a performative memory project which involves walking for more than 1,000 km from Addis Ababa to Adwa Mountains. Fana and Yonas argue that behind the officially stated meaning of remembering Adwa in a particular manner which puts Emperor Menelik, his wife and his war generals at the centre while not ignoring other less known/uncelebrated heroes and heroines, the *Guzo* Adwa project hides deeper internal contestations over ethno-nationalist interpretations of Adwa (which pay less attention to the former) and political-economic interests.

The fifth article written by Asher Gamedze and Semeneh Ayalew situate Adwa within centuries' old and contemporary processes of racial capitalism and Black resistance, and view Adwa only as one instance of success in this struggle. Furthermore, the authors stress the necessity of re-telling/re-narrating Adwa to make it relevant to help Ethiopia heal internally and support contemporary movements for equality, emancipation and autonomy, such as Black Lives Matter. Asher Gamedze and Semeneh Ayalew, in "Contingencies, contradictions and struggles for Black freedom and emancipation: Adwa and decolonisation today" dedicate the first half of their article to Adwa's "affinities with other struggles of black people" and how it inspired, informed and animated political imaginations and activism, particularly in the years immediately following the Battle. The "fragility of political independence"—until and unless a complete victory is achieved in other realms as well—is not lost to the authors. In the second half of the article, the two authors grapple with the contradictory legacy of Adwa in Ethiopia. Gamedze and Semeneh take Adwa as an important event to solve the contemporary conundrum the country is in, if only its memory is constructed as a "source of 'collective pride'." This, according to them, could come through a politics of solidarity and recognition of suffering of others, be it under imperial conquest or in the most recent war in Tigray, Amhara and Afar.

The final contribution of the special issue is dedicated to Adom Getachew's interesting interview with Nadia Nurhussien about her recently published book *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America* published by Princeton University Press. Published in 2019, *Black Land* exhumes into nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American artistic and journalistic depictions of Ethiopia, illuminating the increasing tensions and ironies behind cultural celebrations of an African country asserting itself as an imperial power. The interview recapitulates the vicissitudes behind the reception of Ethiopianism among African Americans during the time span that was covered in the book. In the process, it also sheds lights on how imperialism operated across cultural, contextual and temporal spaces.

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