

Full Length Research

Inter-ethnic Relations among Amhara and Kemant Ethnic Groups in North-Western Ethiopia

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Being a home of diverse ethnic groups, Ethiopia experienced multihued ethnic interactions. North-Western Ethiopia in particular is known for its conventional ethnic interaction for millennia. Considering this fact into account, this study assessed the historical economic and social interactions among the Amhara and Kemant people. To do so, the study employed qualitative case study design via consulting wide ranges of primary and secondary sources. The finding of the study unveiled that the two groups have had long period of amicable relations expressed through economic interdependence, inter-ethnic marriage and companionship in religious based social practices. The politicization of ethnicity by ethnic elites polarizes differences between the two groups since 1991. Ethnic polarization creates ethnic conflict since 2015 that resulted in the loss of human life and destruction of immense properties. Accordingly, the paper argues that the mere existence of ethnic difference is not a cause for hostile inter-ethnic relations unless manipulated by ethnic entrepreneurs for political and economic motives. The egoistic intrusion of ethnic entrepreneurs in the communal as well as social life of the Amhara and Kemant people brings ethnic suspicion and identity based conflict.

Keywords: Amhara, ethnic relation, Kemant

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INTRODUCTION

In any investigation of inter-ethnic relations, the geographical setting of the groups, economic life, nature of socio-political organizations, language, religion and myth of ancestry plays a pivotal role in determining the nature of interactions of the groups in any given time and condition. It is thus mandatory to assess the origin, settlement pattern and ways of life of the Amhara and Kemant to better understand the nature of their relations. Agreement is lacking among scholars on the ancestry and origin of the two groups. Amhara, the second largest ethnic group in Ethiopia in terms of number, situated in the present day Wollo, Gojjam, Gondar and Shewa

provinces¹. The group diffused in different parts of the country through migration, resettlement program of the military regime (1974-1991) and marital relations with other ethnic groups. The Kemant people are currently living in North Gondar administrative Zone. Their historical homeland stretches from the area around north

¹ To know more about the history and origin of the Amhara people see D, Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of Multiethnic Society* (Chicago, 1974); G. Taye, *Ethiopian History* (Asmara, 1922), 12-34.; Y, Mekkonen, *Ethiopia: The Land, its People, History and Culture*. (Tanzania, 2013); T. Mekuria, *Ethiopian History: The Rein of Nubia, Axum and Yikuno Amlak*. (Addis Abeba, 1983), 25-47.

of Lake Tana to rural areas of Gondar².

The notable Ethiopian evangelist and writer Aleqa Taye illustrated that Amhara or *Amara* means cultivator. Others see it as an ethnic name that can be linked back to the himyarites, or claim that it derives from Ge'ez, meaning free people. Kessate Birhan Tessema in his part claims that the word Amhara comes from the Ethiopian word *Amari* which means pleasing, agreeable, beautiful and gracious³. In a televised speech, Mengistu Hailemariam also tried to define the term Amhara by elaborating it as the word Amhara consists of Hebrew terms *Am*, which means people, and *Ham*, which means mountain. He then argues that Amhara means people who live under the mountain.

The ancestor of Amhara is the son of Yoktan and the grandson of Shem. The tribes of Yoktan (Agazian) come from near-east to Ethiopia across the Red Sea. These tribes include Saba, Habesa, Homerit or Himyarite. Of such tribes, the so called Homerit or Himyarite has changed its name into Amhara after long periods of gradual modification and interaction with other ethnic groups⁴. The evidence which shows that the Amhara people are the race of the tribe of Shem, the descent of Yoktan and the lineage of Israel is their bearing, custom, appearance, names and place names. They are also similar in terms of dietary culture.

The Abyssinian/Ethiopian state is identified with the Amhara ruling class and the people. Politically, economically and historically they are the par excellence of Abyssinia. Credited for revitalizing the effort to provide a political and cultural center for Ethiopia goes to this ethnic group⁵. Amharic, the language of Amhara, has been served as the language of court and nobles of the empire. It served as the official language of the country for centuries and currently served as the working language of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). Agriculture is the dominant form of economic activity among the Amhara society. They are among the earliest people in Africa to develop plows and harnessing the oxen to pull them. Grains such as millet, *teff*, and barley are the dietary staple among the Amhara community. They also raise cattle, goats and sheep with

² To know the history and origin of the Kemant people see F. Gamst, *The Qemant: a Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia*, (New York, 1969), 11-33.; G. Nega, *The History of Kemant People*, (Gondar, 1993), 3-26.; J. Quirin, Caste and Class in Historical North-West Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900. *The Journal of African History*, 39:4 (1998), 195-220.

³ See Mekonnen, Ethiopia -

⁴ Taye, Ethiopian, 18-9.; Mekuria, Ethiopian, 41-2.

⁵ To know more about the contribution of Amhara in Ethiopian civilization see Levine, Greater; J. Fellman, Amhara verbal behavior, *Anthropological Linguistic*, 18:1 (1976), 8-10.

donkey serving as a draft animal.

The name kemant has not been found in written sources before the eighteenth century. The first mention of Kemant in written source is Liberato da San Lorenzo in 1714⁶. Although it is mentioned in written source in this century, the question of 'who are the Kemant' has been one of the contentious issues in Ethiopian politics since 1991. There are a lot of myths in what Nega Gete calls it 'gossips' about the origin of the Kemant. The first myth is that during the time when the Canaan land in Middle East has faced with drought and hunger, Aynar and his families came to Ethiopia passed by the today's Egypt. Aynar has been identified as the great grandson of Canaan, grandson of Ham and son of Noah⁷. Although there is a lack of further information about Aynar, it is believed that he used to live in the forest area of Karkar. According to Nega the Kemants are labeled as the 'son of wood' because of the gossip that Aynar has lived in the forest by enclosing his body through wood flake. But, for Zelalem this claim is in contrast to the fact. Zelalem in his empirical study claims that the Kemant are named as the child of wood because of the fact that the Kemant supplied the Gondar town with firewood after the construction of the castle of Gondar⁸. Since then the name Kemant has become synonymous with wood. On the basis of this mythology, some traced their origin to the mythical ancestors to Canaan and Aynar and their root to Israel.

The other myth for the origin of Kemant is stipulated by Taye. For Taye the father of Kemants was migrated from Egypt to Ethiopia around 2410 B.C. He left Egypt with his wife, Entela, at a time of prolonged famine. He opposes the view that the Kemants descended from those people who came from Israel with Minilik I as servant⁹, which is the third myth on the origin of Kemants'. The difference between the first and the second myth is the place where the so called Kemant father is come from. All this claims and myths are considered as gossips and rejected by some Kemant members including the former *Womber*, literally interpreted as seat and is the title of the Kemant politico-religious leader. For such groups, Kemant's place of origin is nowhere but Ethiopia. One of the supporters of this claim is Nega. He claims that the above myths are a mere fabrication and the truth is that Kemant has the same origin with Amhara and Tigre. The present Amhara

⁶ Quirin, 'caste', 203.

⁷ Nega, history, 4-5.; O.Tourny, *Kedassie: a Kemant (Ethiopian Agaw Rituals)*. Proceeding of the 16th International Conferences on Ethiopian Studies. (Trondheim, 2009), 1225-1233.

⁸ L. Zelalem, 'The Kemantney language: a sociolinguistic and grammatical study of language replacement' (Unpublished PhD thesis, AAU, 2000), 28-53.

⁹ Taye, Ethiopian, 11-12.

and Tigre are converted Kemant; both were Kemant before the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia¹⁰. But, this view is the result of the attachment of the ethnic origin of the Kemant with the territory they inhabit and ultimately with self-determination. The last view is propagated by those groups of Kemants serving for Kemant's quest for recognition and self-governance.

Linguistically, the Kemant people speak a dialect of Agaw, a Cushitic language. Kemantney, the name of the language of Kemant, is a sister language of the Awign of Gojjam, the Xamt'ana of Wollo and the Bilan of Eritrea¹¹. Currently, the Kemant language is on the way of extinction. Amharic is widely spoken among the people of Kemant. Even the people are more fluent in Amharic than Kemantney. Historically, the role of Kemant religion was essential for providing a sense of identity and belongingness. The religion of kemant, which is branded as Hege-lebona, provided its members with a sense of group identity, reinforcing their basic values and rigidly defining boundaries between them and their neighbors¹². Hege-lebona comprises of many Hebraic and some Christian elements. It also comprises some elements of paganism. It is from this fact that Gamst named the Kemant as Pagan-Hebraic peoples. According to the Kemant tradition, they believe in one God known as Adara or Mezgana. Mizgana is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient and that everything was created by him. In economic aspects, The Kemants are indistinguishable from their neighboring Amharas in terms of economic activities. They conduct plough agriculture and subsistence agricultural system of production.

THE NATURE OF AMHARA AND KEMANT RELATIONS

From historic points of view the neighboring Amhara and Kemant peoples have had a long period of amicable ethnic relations. Even though it is difficult to find a comprehensive work conducted on the inter-ethnic relations between Amhara and Kemant peoples, oral tradition show that there was no violent conflict between them before the intrusion of ethnic federalism in the country's political environ¹³. Basically, the two peoples are indistinguishable in terms of livelihood, diet, weeding and mourning ceremonies. In fact, there is a controversy

whether Amhara culture is the original culture or Kemant culture which is original. Some Kemant elders claimed that it is the Kemant culture which is original due to their assumption that the Kemant people are part and remnant of the Agaw people who were the founders of civilization in Ethiopia. In contrast, other scholars claim that the Agaw culture is assimilated by the Amhara culture since 1270 onwards as a result of the restoration of the legendary dynasty, *Solomonic*, and the subsequent territorial expansion by Amhara emperors.

Their similarity in terms of wedding and mourning ceremonies, eating and closing styles makes them live together in peace for a long period of time. Despite differences in terms of religion and language before the conversion of Kemant into Christianity, the kemant opted to live in harmony with Amhara through paying tribute. Oral tradition in the area suggests that Kemant aspired to live in peace with their neighboring Amharas because of their fear of the Bete-Israel, the strongest rivals at the time, to make Amhara as their supporter¹⁴. This makes the Amhara not to impose their religion, Christianity, on the Kemant. Through this long period of harmonious interactions, however, the Kemant have come to adopt the culture of the Amharas and forged an Amhara identity mainly voluntarily and to some extent by force.

According to oral traditions the peaceful interaction between Amhara and Kemant became more vivid when the son of *Womber Jikry* helped to escape the son of *Tetemke Medhin*, an Amhara priest who was killed by a Muslim merchant called *Hajji Umar* at a place called *Geladeba*. The oral tradition is narrated as:

Once up on a time, Tetemke Medhin and Hajji Umare lived in harmony at Geladeba. However, the two persons were engaged in conflict for unknown reasons. Tetemke Medhin was killed and his property was confiscated by Hajji Umar's family. It was at this time that the son of Womber Jikry helped the son of Tetemke Medhin called Tekle Gioris who was captured by his enemy to escape. After successfully helping Tekle Gioris to escape, the two persons along with other fellows joined the army of Gelawdeos (1540-1559) (Year Added) as soldiers. After many years of military services, Tekle Gioris, the son of Womber Jikry and others come back from Shewa to Chilga. After returned back to Geladeba, they surrounded the Geladeba area and destroyed the Muslims' town¹⁵.

In doing so, Tekle Gioris was assisted greatly by the

¹⁰ Nega, *The History*, 5.

¹¹ Zelalem, 'The Kemantney', 33.

¹² For more on Kemant religion see M. Getachew, 'Capacity Building for Local Development: A Comparative Study of "Formal" and "Informal" Organizations in Gondar, Northern Ethiopia', (unpublished PHD Thesis, Carleton University, 1998), 125-129. Tourny, 'Kedassie', 1227.

¹³ Interview with Mihirete Abebe, Ayikel, 5 February 2018.

¹⁴ Quirin, 'caste', 204.

¹⁵ Interview with Nigussue Tilahun, Geladeba, 31 January 2017.

son of womber Jikry. In the latter time, however, the ruling classes of the area favored Amharas and those who were *Amharanized*, one who adopt Amhara culture and speak Amharic language, in government positions and land allocation. Because of this favoritism, the Kemant people often cite the saying, *yetetemike lij sinesa, yejikry lij ayiresa*, which is literally interpreted as 'whenever Tetemke's son is recalled, Jikry's son should not also be forgotten'. However, after Tekle Giorgis seized power, land was allocated proportionally. Therefore, it is believed that it was during the governorship of the area by Tekle Giorgis that the Kemant and Amhara divided the land equally as *rist*, traditional land use right.

The peaceful cooperation between Amhara and Kemant peoples helped the Kemant people to preserve their ancient Pagan-Hebraic religion until the reign of Emperor Yohannis IV¹⁶, albeit there was direct contact between them. The two ethnic groups developed the culture of tolerance which helped them to create an interesting multicultural society in the area. This togetherness is still available in the rural parts of the area where the two groups lived adjacently. As one member of the regional special security force told me in an informal conversation the two groups celebrated the Ethiopian Epiphany together. The people told him that, 'you come here to protect us from conflict between us...but we are living in peace...we were never disconnected and will be lived as usual. The food that you eat is collected from both Amhara and Kemant'¹⁷. One undeniable fact is that there are some sorts of suspicions between them after the initiation of ethnicity as an organizing principle of federalism since 1991 in the country. This creates the construction of a clear ethnic boundary between them. To take coffee and tea, in the towns in particular, one has to prefer his/her own fellow ethnic group's bar and restaurants.

From this historic ethnic relation I can deduce that primordial elements are not a cause for the emergence of the notion of ethnic otherness and ethnic suspicions. According to Geertz primordial elements are the cause for the emergence of the notion of ethnic otherness which leads to hostile ethnic relations¹⁸. The Ethiopian past shows that ethnic groups have cherished with incessant interactions through trade, migration, intermarriage and social practices irrespective of language, religious and cultural differences. Studies on the political history of the country indicate that there has been very little antagonism between the various ethnic groups. The

same holds true for Amhara- Kemant relations. Even though the primordial elements such as myth of ancestry, religion and language of the Amhara and Kemant peoples are different and even contradictory, they had lived in peace for centuries.

The intrusion of external factors, mainly state policies, has been the main factor behind the polarization of differences between the two groups. Oral traditions on the Kemant side show that there was a prophecy about Emperor Yohannis IV before coming to power. The prophecy is told in Amharic as, *tenegsalah, alemin tigezaleh neger gin yaltetemeke yatefahal*, which is literally interpreted as 'you will be crowned, you will govern the world, but the unbaptized will destroy you'¹⁹. To prevent the curse of this prophecy, Emperor Yohannis IV issued a decree which baptized all non-Christians in Ethiopia. However, this was not the intention of Emperor Yohannis IV as some scholars argue. For such group of scholars, the Emperor issued the decree to establish a more strong state with homogenous society to defend the territorial integrity of the state from foreign aggressions. As such, the Kemant as followers of Pagan Hebraic religion were some of the victims of religious conversion. This created religious contradiction between the Amhara and Kemant people.

The present state policy, ethnic based ways of restructuring the state, created ethnic entrepreneurs that mobilize their constituencies to access state budget and power in the name of ethnic recognition and self-determination. Kemant elites mobilize the people to access identity recognition and self-administration rights immediately after the introduction of ethnic federalism. The failure of the government to give response for their demand makes the elites to mobilize the people by recalling the past glorious elements and primordial identity markers. In addition, they strongly politicize the denial of Kemant as an ethnic group in the 2007 population census as 'silent identity genocide'. Primordial identity markers have been exploited to advance economic, political and ideological objectives²⁰. It gave rise to a strong nationalist sentiment and political awareness across urban and rural areas, leading to mass mobilization and engagement. This makes the society emotional and case sensitive for their unique identity to be recognized. This perception changed the attitude of the Kemant towards the Amhara. The Kemants feel that they lost their identity because of the assimilation, dehumanization and stigmatization of their identity by the Amharas.

As a counter attack, the Amhara elites particularly the members of Amhara National Democratic Movement

¹⁶ Gamst, The Qemant, 6-7.

¹⁷ Informal conversation with Sagin Demis Belew, Eza Mariam, 25 February 2018.

¹⁸ C. Geertz, Primordial Ties. In J. Hutchinson & A. Smith (eds.). *Ethnicity*. (Oxford, 1996), 125-146.

¹⁹ Interview with Chernet Legesse, Ayikel, 2 March 2018.

²⁰ P. Brass, *Ethnicity and nationalism: theory and comparison*. (India, 1991). 8.

(ANDM), the party which rule the Amhara National Regional State, engaged in political mobilization of their fellow Amharas. Land is the focus of Amhara culture, social life and personal concerns. In various cultural villages of Amhara land is the source of personal and communal conflicts. Knowing this fact, the Amhara elites mobilize their fellow ethnic group members by telling the people that 'the Kemant will remove you from your *rist* after their quest for self-determination is answered'. They told the public that once the Kemant acquire self-autonomy, boundary and territorial demarcation will be implemented. Amhara elites recalled the past glorious elements of the Amhara people that make the masses to be emotionally charged. They informed the people that after the Kemant quest for self-determination is answered 'you will be ruled by them, which is in contrast to your long periods of autonomy'. This created emotional sentiments and ethnic mobilization against the Kemant people which in the end brings the 2015 ethnic conflict and the post-conflict ethnic tensions.

CORDIAL RELATIONS

Economic Interdependence

Economic interdependence had been the most significant form of harmonious relations between Amhara and Kemant peoples without which the very existence of the groups would be jeopardized. According to Gamst the economic interactions between the Amhara and Kemant peoples are too ancient²¹. Even though their means of livelihood is the same, they are interacted economically through trade, aiding each other in times of famine and drought, performing agricultural tasks together through a traditional cooperation mechanism called *debo* and land rent²². This is in contrast to the argument that similarity in economic activity brings economic competition that further transcend into ethnic conflict.

The primary thing that the two ethnic groups interacted economically had been through trade transaction. In a society where there is contiguous settlement trade relation is common. Different local markets have been available in which the Amhara and Kemant peoples exchange what they produced. Geladeba market, for instance, was a prominent market center in the 1540s and 1550s through which individuals from both groups bartered what they produced such as *Itan*, *Zabib* and *Tuaf*. The market of Geladeba still is held on Thursday and Saturday. Individuals from both groups are exchanged their agricultural products like Maize, Barley, Vegetables and other related products. In addition to the Geladeba market, there are many other local market

centers through which the Amhara and Kemant peoples bartered what they produced. The local markets of Ayikel, Aimba and Negade Bahir are the most prominent local markets through which both groups meet together and conduct exchange of commodities. The flow of products according to elder informants is from surplus areas to places where there is shortage of commodities.

In addition to trade relation, the two ethnic groups had been aiding each other in times of chronic famine and drought. Focus group discussants from both groups said that in a situation of chronic problems both groups were never isolated. One focus group discussant, for instance, clearly said that:

Let alone after the conversion of Kemant into Orthodox Christianity, the two groups were even assisted each other before. The two groups were working together to resolve their common economic problems. As our forefathers told us those who were better in terms of economy from both groups provided assistance in the form of loan and grant for those who were under abject poverty during the Kifu Qan (1888-1892) (Year added) of the Minilik II era and the drought and famine of the Haile Selassie I regime. In fact, it is the common manifestation of all ethnic groups in different corners of Ethiopia. All ethnic groups in Ethiopia were never separated in times of such kinds of chronic problem. Accordingly, it is not surprising for the Amhara and Kemant to cooperate in times of famine and drought which is a chronic problem of Ethiopia's long history²³.

The speech clearly illustrates that like any other Ethiopian ethnic groups, Amhara and Kemant people were cooperatively worked to resolve their common economic problems particularly in a situation of chronic drought and famine. The peoples considered it as a norm. The same sorts of cooperation were experienced in the incident of the 1977 drought and famine. In the 1977 drought and famine as one informant says, "*let alone among themselves, the Amhara and Kemant peoples were provided food, clothe and material assistances for migrants from Wollo and Tigray*"²⁴. A committee having seven members from both groups was organized to support people in need. The committee facilitated ways through which the poor were accessed assistance from the rich. Divorced women and poor families were the main beneficiaries of the aid program of the local community.

The loss of soil fertility in the areas where Kemants

²¹ Gamst, The Qemant, 12

²² Interview with Zegeye Merisha, Eza Mariam, 3 March 2018.

²³ Focus Group Discussion with Waga Endale, Ayikel, 24 January 2018.

²⁴ Interview with Chernet Legesse, Ayikel, 2 March 2018.

lived as a result of natural and man-made reasons led to another forms of economic interaction. The Kemant people move to the Amhara areas to work as a farmer and shepherds. One informant said that, *“the scarcity of land in the Kemant area is very serious as a result of high population density. This resulted in the migration of the Kemant into the vast Amhara areas to engage in agricultural activities through land rent and hired as workers of Amhara”*²⁵.

In sum, in a society where there is contiguous settlement like the peoples of Amhara and Kemant, economic interaction is common. In a world where no one is self-sufficient economic interdependence is essential. In the same vein, the two groups have been economically interdependent through trade, solve economic problems together, land rent, perform agricultural tasks cooperatively and share agricultural materials in harvesting season. Economic interdependence has its own direct implications on other social relations. It led, for instance, to the establishment of close relations through intermarriage, social capitals and religious based social practices.

Religion as Ethnic Dichotomy and Connectors

As many scholars pointed out before the conversion of Kemant into Orthodox Christianity, religious difference was served as a boundary maintaining mechanism between Amhara and Kemant²⁶. The difference in terms of religion created some sorts of positive self-image and negative images for others between the groups. The Kemant as followers of Pagan-Hebraic religion considered the Amhara as ‘unclean’ because of their religion. The Amhara considered the Kemant as ‘wood worshiper’ or ‘son of wood’ because of the latter’s special outdoor places of worship in a certain grooves of trees called *digina*.

This notion of self-image and image of the others created ethnic dichotomies in some forms of social interactions between the two groups. Groups’ self-image and its image of the others represent basic dichotomizing aspect in ethnic groups’ categorization. The nature and degree of stereotypical representation of the other influences inter-ethnic interactions. The Kemant claims that eating with the non-Kemant will desecrate them²⁷. However, interviewees said that the kemant religion doesn’t prevent eating with the Amhara with the exception of meat that is not slaughtered by the follower of their religion. This belief is also advocated by Amhara as a follower of Orthodox Christianity. Thus, with the

exception of meat they ate together when they celebrate certain social practices.

In addition to their eating habits, the difference in terms of religion also prevented interethnic marriage. Both groups were rigid enough in this context. Particularly, Kemants’ religion was served as an iron curtails not to engage in inter-ethnic marriage with the Amhara. Kemants’ women began to wear large wooden earring because of their desire to remain separate from the non-Kemant. In fact, this tradition was started after Chewsas’ (a Kemant leader) refusal to give his wife to the King who desires her²⁸. The oral tradition is stated as follows:

*The wife of Chewsa was very beautiful and desired by the king. The time was during the reign of Yohannis I (1667-1682). The king told Chewsa to bring to him, but Chewsa said he could not do that because it was her menses. Then he pierced her ears so that in a few days her ears became infected and smelled bad. Thus, when she finally went to meet the king, he ordered her to leave immediately because of the stench*²⁹.

The oral tradition clearly illustrated that the kemant sacrifice even their parts of body to remain separate from their neighboring Amhara. In fact, the symbol of separation such as wood earring was finally abolished by the Kemant leader Dejzmach Bitewa during the reign of Minilik II. In relation to marriage, Amharas were also rigid enough to create marital ties with non-Christians though they have no specific oral traditions to ascertain it. It is considered as a sin if one married the unbaptized.

With the exception of their eating habit and intermarriage, the difference in terms of religion didn’t prevent other kinds of social relations such as celebrating wedding and mourning ceremonies together. The two groups were engaged in friendly relations through a traditional system called *yetut lij* (breast child). *Yetut lij* is the kind of relation between the newly born child and father/mother. The relation has been needed mainly if one has no close families, land and wealth. In fact, wealthy families with small or no families engaged in such kinds of relationship to have burrier and inheritor of their wealth.

The Kemant people converted into Christianity through gradual process by force (e.g. during the reign of Yohannis IV and to some extent under Haile Selassie I regime) as well as based on the will of the people (e.g. during the reign of Tewodros I and Haile Selassie I). The conversion of Kemant into Christianity changed the

²⁵ Interview with Nigussue Tilahun, Geladeba, 31 January 2017.

²⁶ See Gamst, *The Qemant*, 8.; Getachew, ‘Capacity’, 126.

²⁷ Gamst, *The Qemant*, 8.

²⁸ Quirin, ‘caste’, 207.

²⁹ Interview with Chernet Legesse, Ayikel, 2 March 2018. The story is also found in the work of J. Quirin.

nature of social relations between the Amhara and Kemant peoples. The change of religion primarily created a homogenous society in terms of language and religion. This was because once the Kemant baptized they give up their language along with their religion because of their perception that Amharic language and Christianity are one and the same. This is followed by deep social interactions such as *ye kiristina lij* (God child), to some extent similar with *yetut lij* but religious based, inter-ethnic marriage, participation in social practices.

Inter-ethnic Marriage as a Social Tie

Inter-ethnic marriage is used as a mechanism for enhancing inter-group cohesion in Ethiopia. As a result of inter-ethnic marriage between ethnic groups in Ethiopia there is no pure province³⁰. This contributed for the creation of multiethnic greater Ethiopia with amicable ethnic relations. In the same scene, marriage relations contributed a lot for the sustenance of harmonious relations between Amhara and Kemant peoples until recently. In fact, there were limited marriages between Amhara and Kemant peoples before the conversion of Kemant into Christianity. Even immediately after their conversion there was limited and unilateral flow of marriage between the two groups.

Elder informants from both groups contend that let alone between Amhara and Kemant, there were criterions to establish marital relation even between the same ethnic groups. In Amhara society, for example, there were traditional social stratifications which prevent marital relations. The so called *balabats* (highest caste) were not interested to marry with the perceived 'inferior' peoples such as *buda* (evil eye), *Baria* (slave) and *shemane* (waiver)³¹. The later societies are culturally considered as incomplete creatures by the so called *balabats*. These kinds of social practices are still available in the rural parts. Similarly, there are two groups among the Kemant society called *kiber* and *yetinti*. In contrast to the Amhara marriage tradition, marriage between *kibir* and *yetinti* were possible³². However, it was socially punishable to establish marital relation with individuals from the same social status because of the fact that individuals from the same social status were considered as close relatives.

After the introduction of Orthodox Christianity into Kemant, the line of separation disappeared. In fact, it is impossible to say that there was no marriage between

Amhara and Kemant before the latter's mass conversion. A high degree of intermarriage was took place between the Kemants and the Amhara people. During the reign of Tewodros II, for example, the Kemant men were arranged marriage relations with Amhara women to advance high position in the Ethiopian politico-military hierarchy³³. Some Amhara priests were also established marriage relation with Kemant females after baptizing them for the reason that converting the unbaptized into Christianity is considered as blissful. But, there was low degree of intermarriage between them despite such few religious and political purpose marriage incidences³⁴.

After Yohhanis IV and Haile Selassie I religious conversion, intermarriage between the peoples of Amhara and Kemant become a common phenomenon. Christian Kemants started to marry with Amharas. The Kemant were more interested to establish marital relation with Amhara. In contrast, the Amhara were reluctant to marry with the Kemant. This was happened because of the inferiority complex of Kemant and the superiority complex of Amhara. For the Kemant, marital relations with Amhara were considered as acquiring a high social status. It was a great pride for them to marry with Amhara³⁵. Later religious mission was given for Amhara priests to create marriage relation with the Kemant that changed the limited and unilateral flow of marriage into a bilateral flow of marriage. In addition to this, Emperor Haile Selassie I himself ordered the governor of the area to establish marriage relation with the Kemant to make the religious conversion successful. Elderly Kemant used to tell a story about the event that happened in 1959 when the Emperor visited the area. The elderly peoples narrate the story in such a way:

The king was told about the existence of a distinct ethnic group in Gondar area having a different language and religion. After listening to the report he patiently said the governor of Alafa, 'why don't you eliminate them'? The governor interpreted the king's response wrongly and he wanted the Kemant to be eliminated through the use of force. The governor said to the king, 'it is a matter of giving an assignment to a small group of my soldiers to put an end to them'. The king's retributive remark was this, 'when I said eliminate them, I did not mean that you should kill them, but reduce their number through intermarriage'³⁶.

³⁰ K. Daniel, the Causes of the Failure of the Present Regime in Ethiopia. *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1:1 (2003), 177-213.

³¹ Interview with Alemayehu Belte, Tikil Dingay, 22 March 2018.

³² Interview with Tadesse Abebe, Ayikel, 7 February 2018.

³³ Quirin, 'caste', 209.

³⁴ Interview with Tadesse Abebe, Ayikel, 7 February 2018.; Interview with Alemayehu Belte, Tikil Dingay 22 March 2018

³⁵ Interview with Chernet Legesse, Ayikel, 2 March 2018

³⁶ Interview with Dessalegn Kebede, Aimba, 21 February 2018.

The speech shows that intermarriage between the Amhara and Kemant peoples were even supported by the government mainly to reduce the number of Kemant in the area. Priests started to marry Kemant females by baptizing them. The nobilities and their man servants also started to marry Kemant women. Not only priests and nobilities ordinary Amhara also engaged in marriage relations with Christian Kemants. Those who still practiced endogamic marriage also started to engage in marriage relation with Christians as a result of the reduction of the number of the followers of their religion.

As a result of a high degree of intermarriage between the two groups, the cultural process through which marriage is conducted is similar. There are two kinds of marriage system i.e. religious marriage and cultural/civil marriage. Religious marriage is conducted based on the dogma of Orthodox Christianity. One priest informant who refused to tell his ethnic origin said that in this kind of marriage divorce is impossible unless committed adultery. The cultural/civil marriage is conducted mainly by the oral discussions and agreements between the families of bridegroom and bride. As my informants said that the cultural/civil marriage is conducted in the following way.

Before the nuptials day is decided, oral promise between the two families is conducted. They discussed several issues like the future fate of bridegroom and bride, their respective contribution for the future life of the bride and bridegroom, and finally decide the nuptials day. After that they prepared festive meal based on their economic capability and invite their relatives and neighbors for the nuptials day. In the nuptials day, the bridegroom with his escorts and best man went to brides' house. The best man particularly acted as a brother of the bride. She confides her secret to him and the best man provide food, beverage and water to her. The escorts and best man have also the responsibility to liven the ceremony through war song and weeding songs. Finally, they returned back to the bridegrooms' house with the bride³⁷.

Here my intention is not to show the process through which cultural/civil marriage is conducted. The message here is that a high degree of ethnic interaction such as inter-ethnic marriage leads to the interpenetrations of social practices from one group to the other. This in turn creates a multicultural society having uniform cultural practices with stable ethnic relations.

³⁷ Interview with Chernet Legesse, Ayikel, 2 March 2018.

Companionship in Religious Based Social Practices

Since they lived adjacently, the Amhara and Kemant peoples has been interacting and interconnected each other through religious based social practices. These kinds of ethnic interaction were started mainly after the mass conversion of Kemant into Christianity. This is because of the fact that membership for religious based social practice is open only for the followers of the same religion, mainly Orthodox Christianity. Hence, after the Kemant adopt Orthodox Christianity, the two groups tied together through religious based social practices.

Through participating in religious based social practices, Amhara and Kemant peoples developed the culture of cooperation to resolve personal as well as communal problems. The primary aim of religious based social practices is mainly to feast on days of Saints and on the Sabbath day. In addition to this, as one informant said the religious based social practices have also social purposes. In *iddir*, a customary institution used for ceremonial of sorrow and happiness, for instance, members are cooperating in burial and mourning activities as well as social security activities³⁸. Members of *mahiber*, an association which is organized for the feast of saints such as St. Michael, also aided among themselves in mourning and weeding ceremonies and undertaking agricultural tasks together. In general, in religious based social practices through which the Amhara and Kemant peoples were participated, personal and communal problems such as loss of property due to fire and other accidents, death, illness, flood and famine are resolved collectively. This created inter-ethnic harmony between the two groups.

In addition to such religious based social practices, the two groups have been established personal friendship through a system called *yekirstina lij*. This is the most prominent religious based social practices that bring the two groups together since the mass conversion of Kemant into Christianity. This practice is almost similar with that of *yetut lij* with the exception of the religious basis of *yekirstina lij*. Those who are tied together under such a practice are considered as close relatives.

HOSTILE RELATIONS

Historically, as discussed above, the Amhara and Kemant ethnic groups have had a long period of harmonious relations which is followed by a deep social intermixing. If one to say there was conflict, it was not between the two groups but with the Ethiopian state. As a result of the oppressive rule of the imperial and Derg regimes, the two groups were in constant grievances with

³⁸ Interview with Alemayehu Belte, Tikil Dingay, 22 March 2018.

the ruling system³⁹. During the imperial regimes, the Kemant were in a constant conflict with the Ethiopian state. This was because of the religious conversion program of successive Ethiopian emperors. During the era of Emperor Yohannis IV (1872-1889), for example, Dejazmech Bitewa refused to assist Ethiopian soldiers in the fight against Sudan as a result of religious grievances⁴⁰. The feudal mode of production was also the main cause of conflict between the two groups with the Ethiopian state. The misappropriations of crop products of farmers by nobilities in the form of tithe in the area led to social grievance. During the Derg regime, both the Amhara and Kemant peoples experienced the oppressive policies of the regime. Both Amhara and Kemant youths, academicians and politicians were imprisoned and tortured by government forces by attaching different name like the fan of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

Despite such state-society grievances, there was no inter-ethnic conflict between the two groups before the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) come into power. In fact, it is a common experience of diversified Ethiopian ethnic groups through which inter-ethnic conflict was uncommon. This is because of the fact that the previous systems advocate common citizenship rather than preaching the gospel of ethnic division⁴¹. Similarly, there was no place for the Amhara and Kemant to quarrel each other as a result of intrinsic ethnic hatred. Even until 2015, there were no reported ethnic based conflicts between the two groups. The situation changed after November 2015 as a result of offensive mottos that was aroused in the illegal demonstration held in the area by both groups.

One undeniable fact is that there were interpersonal conflict such as property looting, abduction and land conflict. Such kinds of conflicts were also common in almost all ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The interpersonal conflict between the two groups, however, were not transcend into ethnic based conflict. They were resolved easily through the employment of customary practices and state involvement.

Interpersonal Conflicts

Interpersonal conflicts are the most frequently incidents

³⁹ Getachew, 'Capacity', 125.

⁴⁰ Interview with Demis Zeleke, Gondar, 1 March 2018

⁴¹ See G. Alemante, Ethnic federalism: its promise and pitfall for Africa. *The Yale University of International Law*, 28:5 (2003), 51-107.; J. Abbink, Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 24:3 (2006), 389-413.; Levine, Greater, 54.

that happened everywhere and virtually in all societies. To acquire cattle, pasture and grazing land, slave, control over trade route and secure trophies to prove masculinity, virtually all ethnic groups in Ethiopia were in a hostile interaction with one another⁴². The conflicts were more of interpersonal rather than ethnic based conflict. Concomitantly, the historical facts and oral traditions indicate that interpersonal conflict has been experienced between the Amhara and Kemant peoples. These conflicts include land conflict, property looting, act of homicide and abduction. As elder informants said such kinds of conflicts are common even among the same ethnic groups by illustrating an Amharic proverb, *gulicha ena gulicha enkuan yigachal*, which is literally interpreted as even trivet and trivet are collided each other.

The first and major kind of interpersonal conflict between Amhara and Kemant has been land conflict. The issue of land and access to land plays an important role in Ethiopian conflict dynamics. This is because in Ethiopian historical experience land had a major existential and identity aspects of the people. The Amhara and Kemant people's means of livelihood is agriculture. As result of this, land becomes an important and essential aspect of their life.

The Amhara and Kemant kept control of their own *rist* for centuries. However, the increasing migration to the area, population growth and soil erosion in the area led to land disputes during the *Gonderaine* era⁴³. The same author noted that this dispute was settled when the state recognized the claim of *Azaj* Chewsas to supervise Kemant workers on the construction of Gondar castles during the reign of Yohannis I (1667-1682)⁴⁴. The researcher, however, can't verify this narration from primary sources as a result of the informants' lack of knowledge on the issues concerned. The only thing they told me is that land conflict was common between the two groups since they lived adjacently for a long period of time.

During the imperial regime, land was used as an instrument of religious conversion of the Kemant society. The unbaptized person's land was confiscated by the state and awarded for those who were converted. The Emperors appoint local governors in the area to implement religious conversion program and confiscation of land. Such kind of religious conversion program was highly employed by Emperor Yohannis IV. This creates resentment between not only with the state but also between Christians and non-Christian Kemants. This indicates that the issue of land indeed resulted in conflict between individuals within the same ethnic groups.

During the Haile Selassie I regime, competition for scarce land soon induced conflict between the Amhara

⁴² Levine, Greater, 65

⁴³ Quirin, 'Caste', 206.

⁴⁴ Ibid

and Kemant peoples in the Kemant highland areas. The Amhara look for land in the Kemant areas. The Amhara were not used forceful eviction since the Kemant have *rist* titles. According to Getachew the Amhara sought to take over the churches in the Kemant area, so that they could use them to control the land and impose taxes on the population⁴⁵. This led to conflict between the Amhara and Kemant peoples. The 1975 land reform policy nationalized all rural and urban lands that ended all sorts of land disputes in the area. In fact, this policy brought a significant relief to both societies since it destroyed feudal rule over land.

In addition to land conflict, property looting, abduction and homicide was common among the two ethnic groups. In unexpected day, the member of one ethnic group looted the property of the other along with females and herdsman. The member of the other group also takes retaliatory measures. This creates conflict between the two groups. As a result, homicide and revenge for the death of relatives become a common experience between the two groups. Getachew illustrated such kinds of retaliatory action by conducting interview with his informants as he said, "*in one instance, one group of Amhara killed seven members of one Kemant family. The only remaining brother left his job as a police man to take revenge by hunting down and killing seven Amharas*"⁴⁶. Interviewees from both groups argue that such kinds of activities are the result of some sloth individuals from both groups. Such kinds of conflict was not transcend into ethnic based conflict.

Since conflict is the natural aspects of human life, it is not surprising for the Amhara and Kemant peoples to experience interpersonal conflict. One thing that must be clear here is that the interpersonal conflicts between the two groups were not the result of an intrinsic ethnic hatred. Rather, such kinds of conflict are shaped by a wide range of factors such as the demographic patterns and trends, economic factors, government policy initiatives and social privileges⁴⁷. Thus, the interpersonal conflict between the Amhara and Kemant peoples were mainly the result of economic condition such as land problem and social privileges such as to prove ones heroines by killing the members of the other group. Government policies have also its own share in exacerbating the interpersonal conflict between the two groups. The feudal mode of production and the religious conversion program of the imperial regimes created conflict between individuals of the same ethnic groups in addition to interpersonal conflict between Amhara and Kemant peoples. This is in contrast to the argument that

enmities are based on intrinsic difference in terms of language, religion, ancestry and color. The oral traditions from both groups shows that there was no ethnic mobilization to revenge against the members of the other groups when interpersonal conflicts was erupted between the two groups.

Identity Based Conflict

The pre-EPRDF Ethiopian history was shaped by conflicts between central government and the local governors and some rebel forces and interpersonal conflicts⁴⁸. The institutionalizations of ethnicity in 1991, however, changed the nature of the conflict into identity based conflict that tears apart the previously peaceful ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups were engaged in identity based conflict immediately after the institutionalization of ethnicity in Ethiopia. Other ethnic groups entered into identity based conflict after several years of ethnic federalism's experiment.

The Amhara and Kemant ethnic groups did not experienced identity based conflict immediately after the introduction of ethnic federalism. Though the quest for identity recognition and self-determination on the Kemant side started immediately after the establishment of ethnic federalism, the prolonged and cherished mutual relationship has been disrupted in the end of 2015. In November 2015 violent conflict with disastrous consequences up on human life and destruction of immense property occurred between the long time friendly peoples. One government official in Ayikel town said that the year 2015 was a difficult year for the two groups since it was difficult to tell ones ethnic origin for strangers.

The immediate cause for the 2015 identity conflict was the conduct of illegal demonstration in Chilga *woreda* and other neighboring *kebeles* like Shinifa which is found in Mettema *woreda*. The interim committee of Kemant applied the quest to conduct peaceful demonstration in Ayikel town on June 15, 2015 for North Gondar Zone Administration. The administration rejected the quest for unknown reasons. The youth who came from Lay Armachiho *woreda*, however, aroused the society to engage in the demonstration before one day of the demonstration to be held. This led to conflict between the Kemant youth and the regional State special security forces. As a result of this conflict four and eight kemants were killed and wounded respectively⁴⁹. On November

⁴⁵ Getachew, capacity, 25

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ For more see M, Brown, & S. Ganguls. Introduction. In Brown, M., Ganguls, S. (ed.). *Government policies and ethnic relations in Asia and Pacific*. (London, 1997), (3-24).

⁴⁸ J. Markakis, Nationalities and the state in Ethiopia. *Ethnicity in World Politics*, 11: 4 (1989), 118-130.

⁴⁹ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC). A human right protecton report on the pandemonium and turmoil in

13, 2015, demonstration was held in Ayikel town by Amhara people as a response for the Kemant.

The mere conduct of the demonstration was not the immediate cause for ethnic conflict between the Amhara and Kemant peoples. The demonstration was accompanied by offensive mottos against each other. The Amhara demonstrators rolled offensive mottos against the Kemant like “the Kemant nationality are migrants and stop the illegal treatment against the Amhara”. The Kemant demonstrators also raised the same offensive mottos against the Amhara like “Chilga is the historical place of the Kemant, the quest for self-determination is not the concern of the Amhara Regional State and there is no development before identity”⁵⁰. In addition to this, the Kemant beat influential Amhara when they held demonstration because of their belief that they are the primary bottlenecks for their quest of recognition and self-determination. This creates grievance between the two groups that resulted in conflicts in different parts of the area.

Unlike the previous inter-personal conflicts, after 2015 incident personal conflict now transcend into identity based conflict. There is also a fear that conflict will be happened between the two groups even after the quest of Kemants’ for self-determination is implemented. As of my informal conversation with different individuals of both sides the situation of Ayikel town will be the future conflicting area. Both groups claim Ayikel as their own administration town. This is in line with the argument that the quest for recognition and autonomy led to competition over certain districts and *kebeles*, local administration, units that resulted in ethnic conflict between the Amhara and Kemant peoples.

In sum, the 2015 conflict and the post conflict tension between the two groups is clearly branded as identity based conflict. A conflict is identity based if conflicting parties claim that their distinct identity is the reason why its members can’t realize their interests, why they do not have the same rights and why their claims are not satisfied. Identity based conflict may happen when ethnic minorities tend to believe that their identity is not recognized, that they are given few opportunities for development and that their culture and some of their existences are challenged⁵¹. The majorities, on the other hand, may also perceive that the minorities as a challenge to their security. This paper unveiled that both groups feel a sense of insecurity because of their distinct identity in contrast to their long periods of togetherness. The Kemant perceive that their quest for identity recognition and self-determination that are entitled for

other ethnic groups in Ethiopia is undermined because they are assimilated by the dominant Amhara culture and Amharic language. The Amhara, on the other hand, feel unsecured because of their belief that the Kemant will remove them from their *rist* after the later achieved self-autonomy. This contrasting ethnic perception begets ethnic grievance, which brings the rolling of offensive mottos in the demonstrations against each other.

CONCLUSION

The diverse ethnic groups in Ethiopia lived in a fairly amicable relation for centuries by tolerating their differences. The Amhara and Kemant people enjoyed such amicable relations for long periods of time irrespective of their differences in terms of language, religion, ancestry and tradition. The two groups focused more on those things that unite them rather than dividing elements. This validates that ethnic diversity could not inherently be a cause for the emergences of ‘we’ and ‘them’ category. Group categorization is a normal social phenomenon and doesn’t necessarily cause group rivalries by itself as illustrated by the Amhara-Kemant case.

Oral traditions from the two ethnic groups show that there was little antagonism between the two groups irrespective of their differences in terms of language, religion, ancestry and traditions. They have had long periods of amicable relations. Their affable relations are expressed in terms of economic interaction, inter-ethnic marriage and companionship in religious based social practices. Economic interdependences have been the most important forms of amicable relations between the two groups without which they can’t sustain their life. The two ethnic groups are interdependent through trade transactions, aiding each other in times of famine and drought, performing agricultural tasks together through a cultural association called *debo* and sharing of agricultural materials. Economic contact between the two groups has led to the establishment of close relations through inter-marriage, personal friendships like *yekirstina lij* and *yetut lij* and participation in *iddir* & *mahiber*.

Religious difference was served as a boundary maintaining mechanism between the Amhara and Kemant peoples before the conversion of Kemant into Orthodox Christianity. However, it didn’t prevent social relations with the exceptions of eating meat together and inter-ethnic marriage. With the exception of such dichotomies, however, the two groups celebrated weeding and mourning ceremonies together, performed agricultural tasks in cooperation and established friendly relations through a cultural practice called *yetut lij*. After the conversion of Kemant into Orthodox Christianity by the policies of successive imperial regimes, the lines of

Amhara and Oromia National Regional States. (Addis Ababa, 2016).

⁵⁰ Interview with Col. Endawoke Belew, 23 March 2018.

⁵¹ D. Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkley (1985).

separations are broken. Inter-ethnic marriage became a common social phenomenon and they got involved in religious based social practices. The two groups also started to create amicable relations through a religious based social practice called *ye kirstina lij*.

Although the two groups have had harmonious ethnic relations, it is far from the reality to deny the existences of interpersonal conflict. Land conflict, abduction, property looting and homicide were common forms of interpersonal conflicts between individuals of the two ethnic groups. However, there were no ethnic mobilizations against one another. The conflicting issues were mainly the concerns of combatants only. However, in November, 2015, identity based conflict was erupted between the two groups which resulted in huge loss of human life and destructions of immense property. This conflict was accompanied by group mobilization against each other. After this conflict, there is a tendency through which personal matters are transcending into an ethnic issue.

The historical amicable relation between the Amhara and Kemant people is changed because of the emergences of new political questions on the Kemant side. The intrusion of ethnic federalism in Ethiopian political atmosphere since 1991 creates ethnic suspicion between ethnic groups. Ethnic federalism grants the right to ethnic recognition and self-determination to each ethnic group for the sake of protecting their cultural and linguistic rights. Nevertheless, it failed to grant this constitutional right for the Kemant. The failure of the government to grant self-determination right for the Kemant is followed by demonstration, which creates ethnic suspicion between the two groups that finally led to bloody ethnic conflict.

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