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## Flag Politics in Ethiopia and the Ethio-American Diaspora

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### Abstract

Flags hold “rich symbolic and political connotations,” yet the examination of their use has been “relatively neglected in research on nationalism” (Eriksen, 2007, p. 1-2). Our study explores the transnational politics of Ethiopia’s national flag, exploring its manifestation within the Ethio-American community in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, where the largest Ethiopian diaspora population in the United States resides. We also examine the historical roots of Ethiopian flag politics within Ethiopia’s historical political economy. The country’s well-known imperial flag, containing the emblem of the Lion of Judah against green, yellow, and red stripes, emerged by the late 19th century as Ethiopia defended itself against colonial intrusion. The flying of the flag, an essentially invented tradition, was originally used to reinforce the legitimacy of Ethiopia’s imperial elite. Ultimately, however, flags—all flags—became associated with deep patriotic meaning. The tricolor stripes of the imperial of the flag became an important Pan-African and anti-colonial symbol after the country’s resistance to Italian occupation during the first part of the twentieth century. Later, a plain tricolor flag of green, yellow, and red, without the Lion of Judah, was used by the Derg—the collective of military and police forces that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, imposing socialist rule under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, until 1991. The Ethiopian People’s Democratic Revolution Front (EPRDF), which came to power in 1991, has promoted its own national flag, marked by an emblem symbolizing its vision of an ethnic federalism based on the self-determination of the country’s ethnic and religious populations. The authority of the EPRDF has been challenged both by Ethiopian nationalists—who see ethnic federalism as fragmenting the country’s long-standing national coherence—and by the peoples on Ethiopia’s margins, who have been frustrated by the EPRDF’s unwillingness to devolve authority to them. The severe reaction of the EPRDF against its opposition hardened political identities and stances. This conflict culminated in the declaration of a state of emergency on October 9, 2016. The political tensions within Ethiopia are displayed and played out within Ethiopia’s diaspora, which is one of the fastest growing African immigrant populations in the United States. This study draws on the 2015 fieldwork of Goshu Wolde Tefera, conducted in the Washington, DC area, as well as on the library- and internet research carried out by Tefera and A. Peter Castro.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, Ethiopian Diaspora, Transnational Politics, Flags, Ethnic Nationalism, Ethnic Federalism, Dissent, Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front

Every summer, the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America (ESFNA) holds a tournament that brings together 30 affiliated soccer clubs, involving more than 800 players and coaches from the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States and Canada. Thousands of Ethio-Americans and Ethio-Canadians regularly attend this week-long festival, proudly displaying flags and other symbols of their cultural and national backgrounds. The ESFNA is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-religious organization, founded in 1984 to promote greater solidarity within the diaspora through improved physical and economic well-being. Youths, both female and male (though the tournament itself largely focuses on the latter) are encouraged to participate in sporting events. In addition, the ESFNA raises funds for student scholarships and mentoring. The annual tournament brings significant benefit to its host city, attracting large numbers of visitors, who also bolster diaspora-owned businesses. Although focused mainly on the Ethiopian immigrant community, the ESFNA has sent humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, including to recent drought victims ([www.esfna.net](http://www.esfna.net)). The 2015 ESFNA tournament took place in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, which has the largest number of first- and second-generation Ethiopian immigrants in the United States (MPI, 2014). In attending ESFNA tournament events in 2015, the widespread display of flags by members of the public impressed Goshu Tefera, an Ethiopian and then-graduate student at Syracuse University and intern at the Washington, DC Mayor's Office on African Affairs. Many flags from the country's past were on display at the games, particularly the well-known plain tricolor flag, containing the green, yellow, and red stripes of the country's imperial flag (without the royal Lion of Judah emblem).<sup>2</sup> There were also some imperial flags flown at the tournament matches, featuring the Lion of Judah symbol associated with Emperor Haile Selassie. Conspicuous by its absence, however, was Ethiopia's current national flag, distinguished by its yellow pentagram set against a light blue disk. Had this public sporting event been held in Ethiopia, only the current national flag, associated with the ruling regime, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), could be legally displayed. There, the plain tricolor flag—and all other flags—are banned, with those who fly them facing imprisonment and fines.

Through formal and informal conversations with members of the Washington-area Ethiopian diaspora, Goshu came to understand that at public events such as the sport tournament, flag choice frequently reflects political sentiment, representing an open yet subtle way for Ethio-Americans to express dissatisfaction with, if not disaffection from, Ethiopia's ruling regime. Though subtle, this form of political expression should not be overlooked or underestimated. Smith (2013, p. 192) contends that cultural values held by many Ethiopians, such as *yelūññeta*, urge deference to those in authority, or at least discourage open disagreement with authority figures. Fear of reprisal for political expression is another consideration, as reports of the Ethiopian government conducting surveillance of its diaspora populations have surfaced (Horne, 2014). The flying of officially banned flags at the ESFNA tournaments involves yet another political context. Despite ESFNA's non-partisan status, current ESFNA leadership feels that it should not stand completely "silently on the sideline" when incidents of injustice occur in Ethiopia ([www.facebook.com/ESFNA](http://www.facebook.com/ESFNA)). In 2010, ESFNA's subtle political engagement meant inviting Birtukan Mideksa, an Ethiopian jurist and opposition leader recently released from jail, to that year's tournament as a guest of honor. Some tournament directors objected to this move, and they quit the ESFNA to form another Ethiopian sports organization, with its own soccer clubs and annual tournament, financed through the philanthropy of Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Al Amoudi, a billionaire Ethiopian-Saudi and close supporter of the EPRDF government. A subsequent lawsuit and the ensuing acrimony that developed between the ESFNA and the newly

created organization, which eventually became called the All Ethiopian Sports Association, attracted the coverage of *The Washington Post* (Shinn, 2012). Thus, political divisions in Ethiopia had become evident within the formerly apolitical realm of soccer, and the type of Ethiopian flags displayed at any given soccer match or tournament depended on which tournament one attended.

Our study seeks to explore the roots and implications of the flag politics that have arisen among members of the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States. The research problem first emerged as Goshu Tefera was working as an intern, collecting information for a master's thesis in the Department of African and African-American Studies at Syracuse University. Goshu (2016) explored how ethnic and racial identities<sup>3</sup> among members of the Ethiopian diaspora in the Washington, DC metropolitan area influenced individuals' efforts toward economic mobility in the United States and their attitude towards politics in their country of origin. Although flag politics formed only a part of Goshu's analysis, both Goshu and his academic advisor, A. Peter Castro, a member of the faculty within the Department of Anthropology at Syracuse University who has carried out his own ethnographic research in Ethiopia, felt that the topic deserved closer examination. As an Ethiopian blogger observed, there is "no doubt that the Ethiopian flag is the most [politicized] symbol" (Etyopian Simbiro, 2009). Indeed, as this paper was being drafted in the summer and fall of 2016, protests within Ethiopia and among its diaspora worldwide increased and intensified, with visual and written sources revealing the widespread presence of flags at public events as emblems of dissatisfaction and dissent. Discourse about and attention to flag politics became more open and explicit. For example, the BBC reported on September 8, 2016, that diaspora activists entered Ethiopia's British embassy in London, demonstrating on behalf of their countrymen in the Oromia and Amhara regions of Ethiopia, who were, at the time demonstrating against.... The intruders replaced the current national flag with the tricolor flag. When told by an embassy officer that their act was illegal, an activist replied: "This is not illegal. It is an Ethiopian flag.... People are dying for this flag." Another added: "We know the government flag and we know the Ethiopian flag." The growing seriousness of the political unrest in Ethiopia was revealed by the EPRDF government's attempt to stifle public displays of dissent at the Oromo Irreecha thanksgiving festival on October 2, 2016 at Bishoftu, south of Addis Ababa, which resulted in large numbers of casualties (Kuo, 2016). A week later, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn declared a six-month national state of emergency. In doing so, he blamed "elements that have allied with foreign forces" (Al Jazeera News, 2016) for the ongoing tension. This is the first such declaration in 25 years. This paper seeks to promote understanding of the transnational nature of these politics and political events, as Ethiopia and its diaspora communities are strongly linked.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2007, p. 1-2) has pointed out that flags hold "rich symbolic and political connotations," yet, he says, their explicit political use has been "relatively neglected in research on nationalism." Flags are important symbols, but their exact roles in political expression are complex and, like identities, are situationally defined. Flags embody the presumed unity, comradeship, and harmony of imagined political communities (Anderson, 1991),<sup>4</sup> becoming objects of high emotional content. Beyond their association with patriotism, flags can also assume a sort of cultural "sacredness." Flags can also serve as symbols of fierce competition for followers, legitimacy, and control. As such, they are deeply tied to definitions of the sovereign state and nationalism (Neumann, 2007). In Ethiopia, the nature of sovereignty and nationalism changed dramatically over a brief period, from the supposed timelessness of the imperial regime, which fell in 1974 to revolutionary socialism under the Derg,<sup>5</sup> to the defeat of

the latter and its subsequent replacement by the current ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolution Front, an organization that combines ethnic federalism with central hegemony under a ruling coalition. Each regime has used flags to represent its identity and agenda. The past four decades have also seen the rise of transnational Ethiopian diaspora communities, especially in the United States.

Our study shows how Ethiopia's national political tensions are mirrored in the flag politics of its Ethio-American diaspora. It is possible that divisions within the diaspora may increase in time, reflecting the growing conflicts within the country. Members of the diaspora might play a constructive role in leading their homeland toward greater openness, if national leaders are willing to listen and provide space for dialogue and interaction. The future remains uncertain. Nevertheless, conflict, if dealt with in a positive and peaceful manner, can serve as the basis for promoting progressive change. Within Ethiopia and in the diaspora, members from the largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara—historically often seen as rivals—have started coming together to denounce the recent killings by government forces, demanding respect for human rights and democratic reform. Awol Allo, a fellow in human rights at London School of Economics, told the Voice of America (2016) that within the diaspora, ethnic rivalry has given way to partnership, saying, "... What [has] happened over the course of the last one year is that people on both sides [have] tried to come together and sort out the things that prevent them from having a conversation with one another, so there are already very interesting expressions of solidarity between the Oromos and the Amharas." This growing solidarity has the potential to change the trend in the diaspora-home politics. Increased or sustained inter-ethnic collaboration, whether among Ethio-Americans or in Ethiopia, is by no means certain.

### **Ethiopia: History, Nation, and Image**

Knowing the general outline of Ethiopia's past—including the center-periphery struggles that have long shaped its society and politics—is vital in understanding the country's sense of nationalism. Interpretations of the past serve as important points of reference for contemporary arguments about civic and ethnic nationalism in the country. Ethiopia is a multiethnic society in which states originated deep in antiquity (Phillipson, 1998). The long-time linkage of people to states has undoubtedly influenced dominant cultural values, which have placed emphasis on "hierarchy, conformity, and structure," though drives for "equality and meaningful citizenship" also exist (Smith, 2013).

Though its borders have historically, fluctuated, today, Ethiopia is a landlocked country in the Horn of Africa, covering more than 1.1 million sq. km., about the size of Bolivia. It has nearly 100 million inhabitants. A land of considerable ecological and cultural diversity, Ethiopia has long sparked imaginations beyond its boundaries, being mentioned in the Bible, by the Greek historian Herodotus, and by other ancient sources.<sup>6</sup> It fully participated in the first wave of economic and cultural globalization that linked parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe in trade and the transfer of ideas, including religious ones, more than two thousand years ago. Judaism was introduced during this period, casting a strong cultural influence. Christianity entered very early on as well, becoming the state religion under King Ezana of Axum around the same time in the 4th century that the Roman empire similarly adopted it. Islam appeared in Ethiopia soon after its founding in 7th century. Early followers who had been forced to flee Arabia were offered protection by the Axumite rulers, the dominant power in the northern highlands (Pankhurst, 2001).

By this time, according to Levine (2004), within part of present-day Ethiopia, some people already shared a national political identity, with different regions and societies mobilizing themselves on the basis of belonging to distinct sovereign polities. He asserted that Ethiopia, like Japan, developed nationalism centuries before nationalism emerged in Western Europe, which is usually portrayed as its birthplace. This is not to say that regional, ethnic, religious, or elite competition or exclusion—either within the state or between the state and the periphery—did not exist during this time. In fact, tensions between Ethiopia's political and cultural core in the northern highlands and the peoples of its lowland periphery has shaped the country's past and present (Bahru, 2002; Markakis, 2011). There were always limits to the inclusiveness of the country's national identity, which some scholars portray as Abyssinian rather than Ethiopian; likewise, there have long been related issues of cultural hegemony (Smith, 2013). Furthermore, the nature of nationalism in Ethiopia, including how national identity is defined, has been dynamic and contested, reflecting its shifting circumstances.

Ethiopia's interaction with the outside world waxed and waned for centuries. In the 1500s, Portuguese forces seeking to dominate Indian Ocean trade routes arrived, helping the highland Christian kingdom repel an invasion by the Adal sultanate in present-day Somalia. The Portuguese were soon expelled for intervening in Ethiopian political and religious affairs. The Europeans were largely absent from the Horn of Africa until the late 1800s, when the infamous Scramble for Africa took place. Ethiopia was the only indigenous African state to successfully resist conquest and partition. Consolidation of modern imperial rule, underway since the mid-19th century, proved instrumental in fending off colonization. Emperor Menelik, who ruled from 1889 to 1913, used diplomacy and warfare to maintain his country's sovereignty. The defeat of the Italian army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 was especially momentous. Emperor Menelik's military also extended the imperial boundaries far into the lowlands. Local populations saw this expansion as an invasion, while imperial rulers considered it to be the reclaiming of areas once governed emperors (Markakis, 2011).

Ethiopia's ability to stay independent was viewed by many colonized peoples, including the former slaves of African descent in the United States, as an inspiring victory in a White dominated world. Black nationalists such as Marcus Garvey held Abyssinia—the former name of Ethiopia—as a symbol of both political and cultural pride. The rule of imperial Ethiopia reached its pinnacle and ultimately its conclusion with Ras Tafari, who served as regent from 1916 until 1930, when he became Emperor Haile Selassie I, a position held until 1974. Hailed as the Conquering Lion of Judah, King of Kings, and Elect of God, Haile Selassie gained international renown as a statesman for resisting Fascist Italy's brutal invasion of Ethiopia in 1936. He emerged as a Pan-African leader, with the emergence of Pan-Africanism being reflected in the 1963 founding of the Organization of African Unity, predecessor to the current African Union, in Addis Ababa. The emperor also served as a cultural inspiration worldwide, most dramatically seen in the Rastafari religion, which regards him as divine (Pankhurst, 2001). The influence of Ethiopia and its emperor was displayed, literally, in the flags of many other African countries and Pan-African groups, which incorporated Ethiopia's national flag's distinctive three colors (green, yellow, and red) into their own designs.

The Marxist military regime known as the Derg deposed Haile Selassie in 1974. His autocratic rule had been increasingly condemned for the country's persistent underdevelopment and poverty, starkly revealed in rural famines. Ethiopian citizens also decried their lack of political voice and demonstrated growing impatience with the repression that met their calls for reform. Ethiopia was also rife with center-periphery regional conflicts related to the borders

drawn in the late 19th century, when Ethiopian forces raced to set borders with colonized neighbors, conquering tracts of land that previously lay outside Ethiopian borders. Imperial elites portrayed these actions as reestablishing control over areas once within their realm; the conquered peoples, however, saw it otherwise (Markakis, 2011). The Derg promised major reforms, moving society from a collection of imperial subjects to a population of citizens in a revolutionary state (Smith, 2013). It implemented land reform, tempered by placing national control over all territory, thus gaining direct state control over the country's most important resource. Under the leadership of Mengistu Hailemariam, the Derg used repression to implement other policies which also involved strong centralized control over Ethiopia's political economy and society. During the period of Red Terror, from 1976 to 1978, the regime killed tens of thousands of its accused opponents or critics (Tronvoll et al., 2009). Armed resistance arose, some of it organized on an ethnic basis. The Somali uprising in the Ogaden region, in eastern Ethiopia, was aided by Somalia, and uprisings also occurred in Eritrea, Tigray, and elsewhere. Self-congratulatory events marking a decade of socialist rule in 1984 became overshadowed by rural famine, the first such disaster to be heavily broadcast by the global news media (Moeller, 1999). Triggered by drought, the famine also revealed the more fundamental failure of the government's agrarian policies, as well as its criminal use of hunger as a weapon against areas viewed as disloyal (de Waal, 1997). Mengistu finally fled to Zimbabwe in 1991 as the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), the leading faction among rebel groups, approached Addis Ababa.

Meles Zenawi, chairman of the TPLF, became head of state under a new ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, which included organizations set up to represent the Oromo, Amhara, and 'Southern' Ethiopians). He served in this role until his death in 2012, vowing to transform Ethiopia into a democratic developmental state. His regime placed priority on state-managed developmental policies emphasizing economic growth (Gill, 2010; de Waal, 2015). The country underwent market reforms and enticed private foreign capital, yet the state still played a major role in directing the economy. In recent years, Ethiopia has been among the world's fastest growing economies (World Bank, 2014). Under Meles, ambitious infrastructural works, including dams, roads, electrical grids, and urbanization, were initiated (Assefa, 2012). Considerable progress was achieved in trying to meet the Millennium Development Goals between 2000 and 2015 (Ethiopia, 2015). Meles' chief political reform, however, was to convert the country into a federal system organized along ethnic lines. This policy nominally aimed to address long-standing core-periphery tensions. Under it, Eritrea, annexed since World War II, became a separate nation-state. Other regions were promised greater control over their own affairs through decentralization. Markakis (2011) found that this ambitious reorganization of governance ran up against two powerful trends: Ethiopian nationalist opposition—centered in urban areas, where citizens viewed ethnic federalism as a threat to the country's singular identity and cohesion—and growing frustration among some in the periphery due to ongoing, entrenched inequity in their relationship to the country's political center, seen under the TPLF as dominated by a Tigrayan elite (also see Assefa, 2012; Smith, 2013).

Ethiopian nationalism served as one of the key focal points for political opposition to the EPRDF, manifesting itself in bitterly contested 2005 elections. European Union electoral observers reported that voting procedures failed to meet international standards and included human rights abuses against its opponents, many of whom refused to accept the EPRDF's victory (BBC News, 2005). The government violently suppressed dissent following the election, and it continued to stifle critical voices and organizations through a variety of means, including

controls over the press (Assefa, 2012). Telecommunications and the internet, for example, are operated by a state-owned company, permitting a vast surveillance system of its users to be set up (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2015) ranks Ethiopia as the fourth most censored country in the world. Still, the EPRDF managed to increase party membership from 760,000 to more than 4 million in the three years after the 2005 election, offering “preferential access to state-allocated benefits, ranging from enrolment in higher education to subsidized fertilizer and small-scale credit” (de Waal, 2015, p. 169). The EPRDF also emphasized its achievements in stimulating rapid economic growth and striving to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

Using the proverbial stick and the carrot, by 2015, the ruling coalition won all 547 parliamentary seats, completely shutting out any dissenting voices. According to Freedom House’s (2016) recent global survey of political rights and civil liberties, Ethiopia falls decisively into the “not free” rankings. Markakis (2011, p. 254) observed: “The ruling party’s refusal to engage the opposition showed that the promise of democracy is hollow and limited to the familiar institutional and procedural facade for authoritarian rule.” Will Jones and colleagues (2013) classified Ethiopia’s EPRDF as one of Africa’s “illiberal state-builders,” comparable to the governments of Angola, Rwanda, and Sudan in pursuing far-reaching policy agendas in an authoritarian and often violent manner. Political tensions have increasingly erupted along ethnic lines, with the government unleashing massive repression and violence against protests in Oromia (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Ethiopian athlete Feyisa Lilesa’s gesture of protest as he won a medal at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics drew global attention to the Oromo grievances. A wave of demonstrations and boycotts have been taking place in the Amhara areas against perceived boundary gerrymandering favoring TPLF interests. The Ogaden region has also seen periodic unrest among its Somali population. Although de Waal (2015, p. 173) regards Ethiopia as “the leading candidate for establishing a development, institutionalized state in the Horn of Africa,” he acknowledges that the country’s prospects are uncertain. A recent analysis of political protests in the country by *New York Times* journalist Jeffrey Gettleman (2016) opens with the question: “Is Ethiopia about to crack?” Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn provided an answer on October 9, 2016, declaring a national state of emergency in response to anti-government unrest. What exactly this state of emergency entails is unclear, though significant implications are likely for its diaspora community. Many anti-EPRDF activists fled the country, especially in the wake of the 2005 elections (Gill, 2010).

### **The Ethiopian Diaspora in the United States**

In 1974, Ethiopia was among the countries with the smallest proportion of its citizens living abroad. Five years later, it reportedly had the highest proportion of its people living outside its borders (Levine, 2004). Most of these transplants were Ogaden War refugees in neighboring Somalia. But others fled the country as well, including royalists; political opponents of the EPRDF and intellectuals, targeted in the Red Terror; and members of other oppressed ethnic groups, including Oromos and Tigrayans (Hailay, 2015). The industrial market economies of the destination nations offered not only a safe haven but tremendous economic opportunities for Ethiopian emigrants. The number of Ethiopians in the United States was probably a few hundred in 1973, rising to 10,000 around 1980. Today more than 250,000 first- and second-generation Ethiopians reside in the United States (MPI, 2014). Within the United States, the largest concentration of Ethiopians remains within and around the Washington DC metropolitan



area, which has an estimated population of 40,000-plus Ethiopian residents, most of whom live primarily in Silver Springs, Maryland and Alexandria, Virginia, having moving on from their earlier DC proper Adams Morgan and Shaw neighborhoods (Reed, 2015). Most Ethiopians came to the US after 2000, obtaining access via family reunification and diversity visa programs, or through refugee status. Despite being recent arrivals, almost half of all Ethiopian immigrants to the US have attained American citizenship (MPI, 2014). The level of educational attainment within the Ethiopian diaspora in the US is similar to that of the US population as a whole, though the Ethiopian immigrants disproportionately hold lower-skilled jobs and thus earn correspondingly less. At the same time, many Ethiopians who come to the US as students end up staying in America, drawn by relatively lucrative employment, thus contributing to their home country's brain-drain. Overall, the Ethio-Americans are not a homogeneous group despite powerful bonds arising from many shared cultural characteristics. There are significant divisions of ethnicity, religion, class, educational attainment, occupation, and political outlook.

Levine (2004) claimed that the Ethiopian diaspora has emerged in a "post-melting pot America." By this he meant that Ethiopian immigrants did not encounter as much pressure to assimilate to US cultural norms as earlier immigrants did. Instead, he asserts, they live in an American society generally more tolerant of different cultures and identities. Recent anti-immigrant displays and attacks on multiculturalism suggest that Levine may have been over-optimistic. Nevertheless, economic globalization, with affordable instantaneous telecommunication and lower-cost travel, fosters transnationalism. Ethiopians in America stay well-connected to events in their homeland (Kassahun, 2012). Their remittances directly link them with the lives and livelihoods of family, while bolstering the Ethiopian national economy. Remittances are probably the country's leading source of foreign currency earnings (Gofie, 2016). It is estimated that Ethiopian immigrants in the United States sent home more than \$180 million in 2012, the largest amount sent by any of its diaspora communities worldwide (MPI, 2014). Because of their greater access to electronic media, members of the diaspora in the US have been leaders in creating Ethiopian news and cultural-centered websites, which have drawn home-country participants.

Some organizations founded by Ethiopian immigrants also seek to promote development in Ethiopia. Ethnic-based associations focus on providing assistance to their particular home areas. Hailay (2015) reported, for example, that the Tigray Development Association, based in Washington, DC, has given support to hundreds of schools in their region of origin. Diaspora groups also offer help on a broader basis within their home country. For example, the Ethiopian North American Health Professional Association offers distance education, the services of medical teams, and other tangible support to their country of origin (Lyons, 2007). Other community-based groups are directed towards the diaspora itself, either for self-help or for promotion of cultural activities. Many such groups are non-partisan, aiming to serve a broad clientele in terms of networking and organizing cultural events, offering access to training or resources and related activities. Such groups include the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America, the Young Ethiopians Professionals Network, the Society of Ethiopians Established in Diaspora, the Ethiopian Community Services and Development Council, and the Diaspora Resources of Ethiopians in America's Metropolis. These entities also serve as informal settings for the exchange of information and views about events and situations, including politics in their homeland (Kassahun, 2012; Gofie 2016).

The era of globalization and transnationalism has drawn Ethiopia and its emigrants closer together. As Levine (2004, p. 12) points out, "The referent of nationhood has become

increasingly detached from physical space.” Not surprisingly, politics in Ethiopia have had an increasing impact on the Ethio-American community, and vice-versa. Estranged relations exist between the diaspora Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the EPRDF government. The latter is accused of interfering in church affairs, particularly in its selection of the patriarch, whose authority is largely not recognized by US churches (Walle, 2013). The political role of the diaspora, both in the United States as well as Europe, was displayed during the highly contested Ethiopian national elections in 2005. While the government drew on its followers among the emigrants, it was the opposition groups that received the bulk of diaspora support. Opposition groups, who had boycotted past elections, obtained considerable encouragement and assistance from emigrants in 2005 (Lyons, 2007). The outcome of the election proved frustrating, but the diaspora has continued to make its presence known through extensive lobbying of US policymakers and institutions such as World Bank on matters regarding Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government recognizes the importance and influence of the Ethiopian diaspora. When sharp factionalism developed within the TPLF in 2001, each group quickly sent major delegations to mobilize supporters within the United States (Lyons, 2007). Ethiopian government officials appreciate the diaspora’s economic clout, particularly its providing of remittances. The EPRDF regime has tried to entice more financial and other support from the emigrants. It has offered to emigrants who gained citizenship elsewhere the ability to obtain a “Person of Ethiopian Origin” card, bestowing on them most of the rights held by Ethiopian nationals. Almost 5,000 Americans had registered for the card by 2011 (Chacko and Gebre, 2013). Emigrants were also offered investment licenses, the ability to have foreign currency banking accounts within Ethiopia, and special “Diaspora Bonds” as investment instruments to pay for the construction of the country’s new big dams (Gofie, 2016). The government organizes a “Diaspora Days Festival,” inviting people to return for a week to see investment and cultural sites (*Ethiopian Embassy News*, 2016). The Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, DC also hosts an annual “Diaspora Day” as well as events highlighting particular regional states, fulfilling both economic and social roles. There is also an appreciation on the part of the Ethiopian government of the need to wage a hearts-and-minds campaign that will expand and solidify Ethio-American support for the Ethiopian government. The establishing of the All Ethiopian Sports Association, with funding from EPRDF ally Sheikh Al Amoudi, offered an opportunity to use community relations as an inroad for building support.

Despite efforts toward sustaining relations between the EPRDF and the Ethiopian diaspora, Ethiopian national leaders remain ambivalent and distrustful about the diaspora’s real and potential political role. Debate exists among scholars whether diasporas serve to promote peace or conflict in their countries of origin (Hailey, 2015). For the EPRDF, this issue is irrelevant given its view of the relationship between the state and civil society, which assumes that the state “controls” its populace and that “good” citizens are those who support the state. According to Jones et al. (2012, p. 8), “For Africa’s illiberal state-builders, the appropriate role of civil society is not understood as counterweight to the state, but rather as collaborative partner in advancing the state’s agenda; [organizations] which do not play this role are shut out, defunded, or dismantled.” In Ethiopia, this approach is embodied in the government’s Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009, which severely regulated civil society organizations, especially their relationship to external entities. When promulgated, the law was “the most restrictive of its kind in Sub-Saharan Africa” (Yalemzewd et al., 2009, p. 4). The EPRD’s proclivity for control, compared to the substantial latitude for self-expression members of the diaspora experience in the United States, offers a recipe for political conflict. Information

technology has offered a major battleground for this clash of interests. The Ethiopian government has been accused of interfering with diaspora-based news sources by, for example, jamming the transmissions of Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT), a diaspora-based group based in Amsterdam with an office in Washington, DC (ESAT News, 2015). Dissidents claim that the Ethiopian government used malware to keep surveillance on them (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2015). The EPRDF regime also regularly blocks Ethiopians from accessing diaspora sites seen as unfavorable to it, while keeping tabs on critics (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Tension and conflict surrounding the EPRDF within the diaspora has mirrored the two trends of opposition facing the EPRDF on its home soil, noted by Markakis (2011), appearing among emigrant Ethiopian nationalists, who stand against the perceived ethnic fragmentation of their country and among emigrants from the Ethiopian national periphery such as the Oromo and the Somali regions, who see themselves increasingly marginalized by the hegemonic center, led by a Tigrayan elite. In other words, the politicization of identities in contemporary Ethiopia has “affected the institutions of and interactions within the Ethiopia emigrant population” (Gofie, 2016, p. 143). In addition, The EPRDF’s restrictions on political participation and the repression of the opposition itself have served as a constant source of disapproval and dissent.

While political affairs in Ethiopia matter to members of Ethiopian emigrants in America, for a long time, it appeared as if members of the diaspora were not highly politicized. Gofie (2016, p. 143) quoted a member of the Ethio-American business community as saying that most of his fellow immigrants tended to be “silent” regarding political matters. Ethiopian officials interviewed by Gofie (2016, p. 125) used similar language, stating that the EPRDF had its “dutiful supporters” and “opponents” but that most emigrants fell into “the silent majority.” Such silence may be partly culturally driven. Cultural values in Ethiopia such as *yelunñeta* emphasize deference to others, particularly the avoidance of open disagreement with those in authority (Smith, 2013). Fear of Ethiopian governmental surveillance also plays a role. Yet as Scott (1985) points out, even people who are not used to or comfortable with “open, organized, political activity” often find other subtle and informal ways to make their perspectives and interests known. We contend that the public display of Ethiopian flags offers such an opportunity for making a statement of opposition to political hegemony. Of course, the displaying of flags examined in this paper is not analogous to a “form of peasant resistance,” as the flag flying examined here occurs in a very different social context from peasant uprisings, though it certainly consists of action along the same political continuum. The heating up of the situation within Ethiopia, with its repression and protests, is sparking unprecedented political response within the Ethiopian diaspora, propelling the use and significance of flag flying as a political statement. As will also be seen, supporters and explicit opponents of the EPRDF regime also make use of national flags to promote their agendas.

### **Ethiopia’s Flags**

In 1963, Stanislaw Chojnacki, Librarian at the University College of Addis Ababa and a close friend of Emperor Haile Selassie (Jolivet, 2010), observed that Ethiopians regarded the origins of their distinctive green, yellow, and red-striped flag as having been situated in antiquity. The flag had been supposedly used “from immemorial time,” with “God [having] especially reserved these three [colors] for Ethiopia, marking his predilection for this nation” (Chojnacki 1963, p. 50). An excellent historian with a deep interest in Ethiopian culture, Chojnacki (1963, 1980) carefully examined the origin and development of the Ethiopian national

flag, finding a complex story involving many variants through time. The current tricolor flag (shown in Table 1) appeared by the late 19th century, following Emperor Menelik's defense of the country's independence against Europeans. The flag's standardization, such as the sequencing of the colors, took several years. In the 1920s, the imperial regime deliberately "propounded the myth" of the flag's ancient and sacred origin through articles by local scholars. Such claims were made in publications under the supervision of regent Ras Tafari. Their narrative enhanced the legitimacy of the imperial rulers by reinforcing their links to the country's antiquity and to the Bible. As in other parts of the world, Ethiopian elites had used an "invented tradition" to further their nationalist project (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Chojnacki (1980, p. 40) stated, "...These stories were agreeable to Ethiopians and corresponded to their traditional concept of history. No wonder, therefore, that the ancient origin of the Ethiopian flag almost immediately assumed a status of credible fact." Yet the importance of the flag went beyond being essentially "the right idea at the right time." The emotional bond to the flag was soon strengthened by its role as a symbol of patriotism and resistance during Italy's brutally violent invasion from 1936 to 1941 (Negussay, n.d.).

Besides the plain tricolor flag, Ethiopia has had other official flags, mainly differentiated by their central emblems (FOTW, 2016). The design and use of these flags have been little more than exercises in what Eriksen (2007) calls "flag waving from above": efforts by elites to rally the people to various state or imperial, socialist, and ethno-nationalist agendas. During imperial times, the Ethiopian royal flag featured an emblem containing the Lion of Judah, a syncretic symbol combining Judaic and Christian elements (see Table 1). The Derg initially modified the emblem in this state flag, eliminating imperial and religious elements from the Lion. It later adopted an emblem containing an Axum obelisk and other designs. Meles Zenawi's EPRDF regime first returned to the plain tricolor flag before introducing its own national emblem, a yellow pentagram surrounded by a light blue circle, in 1996 (see Table 1). The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, adopted in 1995, stated that the flag represented the equality and unity of the country's nations, nationalities, peoples and religious communities. When introduced as the new national emblem for the flag, the EPRDF's pentagram provoked protest, however. Shaleka Admassie addressed the Ethiopian Parliament, contending that the tricolor flag should be retained, saying: "[The tricolor] flag has liberated many and bestowed democratic rights for many and it is to honor this flag and to maintain the unity of the country that our ancestors fought and died." He added, "Ethiopians will be disappointed if a single point is added to or erased from the flag that our ancestors laid their lives for" (Goshu, 2016, p. 88). The proponents of the new national flag viewed these criticism as being propelled by "a habit of rejectionism or lack of information," or as simply a political attack by "the extreme Right" (Berhane, 2011). The new flag was nonetheless formally adopted by official proclamation, sparking the defiant flying of the tricolor flag. The EPRDF regime initially ignored some of these incidents (Berhane, 2011). In 2009, the government issued a new Flag Proclamation, which prohibited, under penalty of fines and imprisonment, the flying of national flags without the emblem. Under the direction of the ruling coalition, there could be no public display that challenged, even symbolically, a federal Ethiopia, not even a display based on the peaceful self-determination of its peoples.

### **Flag Politics**

The EPRDF's Flag Proclamation of 2009 also established a National Flag Day, to be held annually on the second Monday of Meskerem (September 11 to October 10), the first month in

the Ethiopian calendar. Meskerem is a time of celebration, marking Enkutatash (New Year) and Meskel, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's festival of the discovery of the True Cross. In 2015, Addis Ababa Stadium hosted the National Flag Day ceremonies, with speeches by Abadula Gameda, Speaker of the House of People's Representatives, and Diriba Kuma, mayor of the capital city. They stressed the new flag's importance as a symbol of the country's unity of nations, nationalities, and peoples, as well as its renaissance under the EPRF leadership. Similar events were held at Ethiopian embassies worldwide, emphasizing similar themes of national strength through cultural pluralism and the country's ongoing developmental transformation (Ethiopian Embassy, 2015). The *Ethiopian Embassy News*, issued by its embassy in Washington, DC, also showed the national flag prominently featured at its various political and cultural events.

For diaspora-based critics of the EPRDF, the new flag serves as a symbol of all that is wrong with the ruling regime's policies and actions. The internet has provided a forum for deeply angry denunciations about the new official flag. An online essay by Negussay Ayele (n.d.), a professor who has taught at the University of California, Los Angeles, and other institutions, has made many politically- and emotionally-charged statements about the EPRDF, citing numerous examples of disrespect shown to the national flag by Meles Zenawi himself and the TPLF, including the time that the TPLF temporarily flew the TPLF flag over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when the TPLF drove out the Derg in May 1991; an infamous incident in which Meles referred to the national flag as "a rag" during an interview; a 2008 TPLF rally during which the national flag was used as a cover on a donkey cart; and a 2012 meeting with other East African heads of state during which Meles held the national flag upside down. Negussay points out that such actions by the prime minister constituted an offense under his own government's 2009 Flag Proclamation. The EPRDF's new flag was seen by Negussay as simply part of the ruling party's overall "campaign of summary politicide" against "Ethiopian identity, unity, sovereignty, dignity, history, liberty, integrity as well as its sacred name" (Negussay, n.d., p. 2). The concern and anger that characterize his essay are by no means atypical of other online commentary critical of the national flag and EPRDF policies.

Some opponents of the EPRDF government have engaged in public action. Burning of the national flag at public protests has occurred, with the events digitally immortalized in online videos. Less common but more dramatic have been incidents in which the official flag has been removed from a site associated with the government or its supporters and replaced by the tricolor flag. In August 2016, for example, angry protestors replaced the national flag at the Holy Covenant Church in Jerusalem, drawing attention to the EPRDF's ethnic policies, protesting not only the EPRDF's offenses in the Amhara region—where officials have been accused of boundary gerrymandering—but also its ongoing involvement in the affairs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Borkena, 2016). The lowering of the national flag has also taken place within Ethiopia recently, with protestors replacing the national flag with the tricolor flag in Amhara or with the Oromo Liberation Front flag in Oromia. In September 2014, the Ethiopian embassy in Washington, DC, had its national flag lowered by protestors, who tried to hoist the tricolor flag in its place. An embassy official responded by firing a gun, which set off a police and diplomatic incident resulting in the arrest and expulsion of the individuals involved from the United States. The embassy charged that the protestors were associated with the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab, which the protestors denied (TesfaNews, 2014). US Secret Service and Washington police did not press further charges. In San Jose, California, members of the Ethiopian American Council have used lobbying to convince city officials to allow them to use the tricolor flag as

part of their annual flag-raising ceremony at their civic center. They have resisted complaints by other ethnic groups and organizations within the diaspora, notably the Union of Tigrians in North America and the Tigray Development Association, along with the Ethiopian counsel general in Los Angeles (Abebe, 2013). The flag raising ceremony honors the Ethiopian diaspora's presence in the Silicon Valley, and the tricolor flag was reportedly the first foreign flag to fly over San Jose's city hall. More recently, members of the Ethiopian diaspora community in Seattle held a large downtown protest in August 2016, with a photograph in *The Seattle Globalist* featuring a tricolor flag as wide as a large city street. The protestors targeted the TPLF for criticism, while also displaying Oromo flags as a show of solidarity (Damme, 2016).

Many of Ethiopian emigrants retain active interest in the politics of Ethiopia, yet they are not necessarily politicized. Nevertheless, Goshu Tefera observed during his research in Washington, DC that Ethio-Americans generally held clear preferences regarding which flag best represented their original homeland. His formal and informal interviews indicated that most members of the diaspora regarded the tricolor flag as the most "legitimate" symbol of their country. His informants generally cited this flag's traditional and historical importance, especially its link to events such as the Battle of Adwa in 1896, when Ethiopian forces defeated Italian colonial invaders, or the struggles against Fascist Italy from 1936 to 1941. (Of note was one dissenting interviewee, who stated that the tricolor flag had been discredited by its association with the Derg, as well as its association with the dominant Amhara and Tigrayan ethnic groups.) A few of those interviewed felt that the most legitimate flag was the current official one. One interviewee said, "The new Ethiopia is a country where all nations and nationalities live equally sharing the country's resources fairly; the blue star tells me that." For the most part, however, the tricolor flag was preferred among the diaspora as a symbol of the Ethiopian people.




The tricolor flag was prominently displayed at the annual tournament by Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America in the summer of 2015. The flag is also commonly seen at other cultural events and businesses in the Washington DC area. It also has a major presence online. Levine (2004) pointed out more than a decade ago that electronic media had become a major site within which Ethiopian nationhood and nationalism are asserted and debated. A look at leading non-EPRDF websites, newspapers, and services for members of the diaspora in the District of Columbia/Maryland/Virginia region reveals that the tricolor flag remains the most frequently displayed flag on the websites and other materials associated with those organizations. Table 1 summarizes the selected sites on which flags are shown. Three possible flags were identified as options: the tricolor flag, the official national flag, or the imperial flag. The tricolor flag was overwhelmingly favored, with one site using the imperial flag. None of the 16 websites surveyed in February 2016, used the current national flag on their displays. It must be emphasized that the websites were not contacted regarding their motives in displaying the tricolor flag. In addition, it should be noted that the colors green, yellow, and red are not exclusively Ethiopian in their cultural connotation but also represent Pan-Africanism and Rastafarians. This listing of sites that chose to display the tricolor flag is intended to illustrate a trend, rather than constitute a statistically valid sample. In short, the common and widespread public use of the tricolor flag, contrasted by the limited use of the official national flag by members of the Ethio-American community is revealing. Flag choice takes place in a context in which the EPRDF is under criticism for many of its policies and practices. Flying the tricolor flag allows members of the Ethiopian diaspora living in the US to affirm a connection to Ethiopia while also chiding, albeit gently, the country's rulers.

## Conclusion

People of Ethiopian heritage constitute a small but rapidly growing segment of the American population. They have arrived relatively recently, mostly since 1980, and particularly after 2000. In this era of transnationalism, the Ethio-American community, composed of both US citizens and permanent residents, remains closely linked through emotional, social, economic, and political ties to their homeland. Diaspora organizations, electronic media, and the Ethiopian government all serve to promote these connections. The troubled politics of Ethiopia, which has undergone dramatic regime changes over the past 40-plus years, have been a significant part of the diaspora experience, often serving as a factor propelling people from their original homes. Ethio-Americans have also played diverse roles in their homeland's politics. While the current EPRDF regime seeks to cultivate supporters, opposition groups try to mobilize support as well. Although many of those in the diaspora constitute a supposed "silent majority," this study suggests that Ethio-Americans' overwhelming preference for displaying the tricolor flag (or any flag other than the current national flag) reveals their discontent and dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in Ethiopia.

The study has highlighted the significance of flag politics, historically, within Ethiopia, and now within its diaspora. Flags are a symbol that can not only unify but also identify, if not intensify, difference. People imbue flags with considerable emotional and cultural meaning. The discourse about Ethiopia's flag politics is especially characterized by expressive, even shrill, references to flags "made sacred by the blood of patriots," or flags denigrated by callous politics and public acts of disrespect. Yet there has been a low-key dimension to flag politics as well, as illustrated when the flag is flown at sporting or other public events as an act of defiance or protest, albeit a quiet one. The study has noted that the drivers of protest against the EPRDF regime in Ethiopia and in the American, especially Washington, DC-area based, diaspora, are similar. Ethiopian nationalists see EPRDF policy as destroying the country's long-standing sense of civic nationalism. Peoples on the periphery are increasingly dissatisfied with the promise of decentralization versus the realities of tight central management. The repression of opposition, coupled with ongoing violence, makes the EPRDF seem like illiberal state-builders instead of builders of the democratic development state, as it promised. It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify whether the Ethio-American community can, or will, play a positive role in addressing the country's substantial political problems. It is not hard to imagine, however, how their contributions *could* be indeed very positive, if given the opportunity to make them in a more open and secure institutional setting. Such a setting might also generate enormous positive participation and creativity by citizens in Ethiopia in shaping a peaceful and prosperous future.

Table 1: Flags Represented on DC-Area-Based Ethiopian Diaspora Websites

	Name of the website-newspaper-radio	Tricolor 	Official 	Imperial 
1	ESFNA	X		
2	Ethiopia Community Services and Development Council	X		
3	ECADF	X		
4	Tadias.com	X		
5	Amhara times	X		
6	Mefthe	X		
7	Ethio 7 Day's Entertainment	X		
8	Quatero	X		
9	The Ethiopian Community Center, Inc. (ECC)	X		
10	Shagga Coffee & Restaurant	X		
11	Ethiopia Visa Services			X
12	Zethiopia	X		
13	Nazreth.com			
14	Ethio Hahu	X		
15	Addis Dimts Radio	X		
16	Addis Ethiopian Restaurant	X		

Source: Websites compiled by Goshu Wolde Tefera, February 2016;

Flags retrieved from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag\\_of\\_Ethiopia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Ethiopia)

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The colors green, yellow, and red have long appeared on Ethiopian banners and flags, with red representing the blood spilled for country, the yellow representing harmony, and the green representing hope and fertility. These colors were associated with Ethiopian identity and Pan-Africanism before the Derg (1974-1987) took power. Under the Derg rule, the three colors remained on the flag, and only the royal emblem was eliminated.

<sup>3</sup> A reviewer queried the use of the terms "ethnic and racial identities," suggesting that the former was sufficient to cover identities held by Ethiopians. Goshu looked at how Ethiopians reacted to America's socially constructed race-based identities and concluded that use of both terms was warranted, as identities in the Greater Horn of Africa, including in Ethiopia, sometimes include their own socially constructed identities based on regional ethnicity.

<sup>4</sup> In referring to "imagined political communities," Anderson (1991, p. 6) was not simply saying that these political entities are imaginary but that their members, who are mainly strangers, imagine themselves to be a part of a community. He asserts that "in the minds of each [individual] lives the image of their communion."

<sup>5</sup> The Derg or Dergue, meaning "committee" or "council" refers to the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army, which took power after deposing Ethiopia's last emperor in 1974. Mengistu Haile Mariam became its leader. The Derg executed and imprisoned thousands of political opponents without trial and was abolished in 1991. Its official flag, however, the tricolor flag, was imbued with patriotic meaning beyond that of its association with the state.



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<sup>6</sup> Debate exists whether antiquity's references to Ethiopia might actually refer to other places such as Meroë. Many Ethiopians have assumed that such references are accurate, though Sorenson (1993) points out that this discourse has its own political economy of knowledge related to the modern Ethiopian state and its need for legitimacy.

<sup>7</sup> Our reference list follows where appropriate Ethiopian naming convention, in which the person's first name is their unique name.

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