

The Conflict of Ethnic Identity and the Language of Education Policy in Contemporary Ethiopia

Teshome G. Wagaw
Afro-American and African Studies
The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

Introduction

This paper examines the current language policy of Ethiopia, especially its significance for the educational systems of that country¹. The policy in its present form was proclaimed in 1991 after the present government drove out the former Marxist-Leninist military junta, which had ruled the country for the preceding twenty years². The language policy, along with other human rights and ethnic-related policies, was incorporated into the new constitution that took effect in 1996. Among other things, the policy provides for Ethiopia's more than 90 language groups to develop and use their respective languages in the courts, in governmental and other political entities, and in cultural, and business communications as well as in education. The policies do not, however, specify which, how many, or in what order they would enjoy priority in governmental support for further development, nor do they hint at any limits as to the number and extent of the languages. In the absence of any limit or specification, the presumption is that all of them would have the right to find the necessary resources, whether through competition for governmental support or through other means. Practical considerations would suggest that, given limited resources in the country or any given linguistic community, the law would provide some guide to efforts to balance the ideal and the practical. It does not do this, consequently, some time soon, conflict among the tribal groups, is almost certain.

The Antecedents

The notion of Ethiopia as a "museum of peoples" is legitimate. One of the most ancient civilization in the world, it has been and remains to this day a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual country. Amharic, arguably the most advanced African language in that continent, has been the official language since 1270. Its predecessor, Ge'ez, still remains the liturgical and devotional language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the language of literature and learning for those who would pursue vocations in that Church. Ethiopia's present population of almost 65 million speaks at least some 90 different

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language and many more vernaculars. ³For the most part only Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrigna, and Oromogna are written. The others are not yet effectively in written forms. The number of first-language speakers of latter languages is also relatively small as shown in Table 1.

Close to 40 percent of the people speak Amharic as their mother tongue, and perhaps 80 percent or more of the total population speak and use Amharic either as a first or second language. Between 40 percent and 50 percent speak a variation of Oromogna, the language spoken by the second largest number of mother tongue speakers. Tigrigna is

³ The demographic data are approximation. The last census was published in 1994, and since then, annual projects have continued to be made. The same approximation applies regarding the total numbers of languages existing and the speakers thereof. Hence, for instance the figures given in Table 1, do not necessarily agree with the projections.

Table 1- The Major Languages of Ethiopia and Their Uses

Languages	Mother Tongue	(L1 Speakers)	Second Language	(L2 Speakers)
	Total number of speakers	Percentage of the total population	Total number of speakers	Percentage of the total population
Amarigna	17,372,913	32.7	5,104,150	9.61
Oromigna	16,777,976	31.58	1,535,434	2.89
Tigrigna	3,224,875	6.07	146,933	0.28
Somaligna	3,187,053	6	95,572	0.18
Guragigna	1,881,574	3.54	208,538	0.39
Sidamigna	1,876,329	3.53	101,340	0.19
Welayitigna	1,231,673	2.32	89,801	0.17
Affarigna	965,462	1.82	22,848	0.04
Hadiyigna	923,958	1.74	150,889	0.28
Gamogna	690,069	1.3	24,438	0.05
Gedeogna	637,082	1.2	47,950	0.09
Keffigna	569,626	1.07	46,720	0.09
Other Eth. Lang.	139,047	0.26	24,447	0.05
Other foreign Lang.	20,418	0.04	58,372	0.11
English	1,986	0	169,726	0.32

Note1: The numbers of ethnic groups do not always correspond due to the fact of the one ethnic groups, but uses another language as first language (L1). E.g. By ethnicity one can be an Oromo but uses Antiaric as L1 etc.

Note 2: The suffix “gna” indicates the language of the ethnic category. Thus Amara (Amaric) is Amarigna, etc.

Source: The 1994 and Housing census of Ethiopia , Volume II, Addis Ababa, June 1999.

the mother tongue of some 6.07 percent of the population. The other languages are spoken by relatively smaller segments of the population. Some of these, especially those identified by linguists as Ethio-Semetic, such as Amharic, Ge’ez, and Tigrigna, share similar characteristics. They are believed to have been derived from the same Ge’ez

roots. The other languages are very different from one another and have not as yet developed their own written characters. Whether the existing Ethiopian alphabets or Latin characters should serve as the basic alphabets is in fact a matter of great controversy. The issues surrounding this question are very complicated. Since any decision would have further implications for political arrangements, and since the constitution limits the power given to the central government, any action taken would have grave consequences for communal development and for teaching and learning within the national polity. Oromogna, in all its variations, has a very limited literature and does not have its own alphabet. Over the last couple of decades a controversy has arisen among Oromogna scholars and politicians. Some, in their effort to develop Oromogna as a language of work and learning, have argued that using the Latin alphabet instead of the Ethiopic one would enhance the interest and further development of the language with the mother-tongue speakers. Further, the proponents argue that since English is a major international language of literature, science, and technology, and is a second language in Ethiopia, it is more efficient to introduce the Latin characters to the children early in their schooling. This way the children would learn Oromogna or other languages used in Ethiopia more easily. In other words, circumventing the national language, Amharic, would create a short cut to advanced learning for the children. Opponents argue that the Latin characters are far removed from any other used in Ethiopia, and therefore adopting the Latin alphabet would create further disparity among the country's languages and would be detrimental rather than beneficial to the lasting interests of all concerned.

At this writing, there are serious disagreements among the Oromogna speakers. The government, aware of the political ramifications of the controversy, is keeping silent. No final decision has been made about which form to adopt. Meanwhile the use of the Oromogna language is being implemented in the schools, courts, and other institutions. Neither the necessary teaching skills nor materials have been developed for this de facto movement, and I fear that if they insist on implementation before the necessary foundations are properly laid down, for this and other languages, more harm than good will ensue, especially for the children and youth in schools. I will return to this topic later.

The Census of Ethnic Politics Limited to Education

An increased consciousness of ethnic and linguistic differences, and translation of that consciousness into political actions, are related to the development of a "modern," or public and secular education system. Most of this happened after Ethiopia's liberation from a five-year interlude of fascist Italian rule (1936-41). For the first time in the country's long history, Ethiopians who had hitherto been isolated, due to lack of transportation, communications and other modern conveniences, came together to participate in the venture of learning. It is to the lasting credit of the government at that time, led by the late Emperor Haile Selassie I, although geographic accessibility determined which children enjoyed access to education opportunities, that the policies did not in any significant way discriminate against any group of people. In fact, on many

occasions governmental leaders instituted special measures to support and encourage ethnic minority youth's and children's access to schooling at public expense.

As the educational level, number, and ethnic mix of Ethiopian university students increased, questions about nationalities became accentuated. At the same time, conflicts going on in Eritrea in the north, Sidamo in the south, and Somalia in the southeast were perceived by the student leadership as directly related to the country's ethnic issues. The main target of all the conflicts was the very regime led by Emperor Haile Selassie I, who had prided himself, in many ways justifiably so, as the father of modern education in Ethiopia. What the Emperor did not understand was that education by its very nature is the antithesis of dictatorship. Equipped with education and training, even under constrained circumstances, youth would prove unwilling to continue to support the unworkable and unworking obsolete policies. Ultimately, the strength of the student organizations, with limited support from some progressive elements in the national community, turned out to be fatal to the political and cultural status quo.

It is worthwhile here to examine more thoroughly the position of the student-led movement since it is so important to understanding the present political situation in general and the language policy in education in particular. In the November 17, 1969, edition of the university students' major publication, *The Struggle*, the student organizations set forth their understanding of the existing political and economic conditions in the country, and of the positions of the various ethnic groups under that umbrella⁴. Walelign Makonnen, one of the most articulate and gifted student leaders, declared that the student-led revolutionary movement "was a prelude to the anticipated armed struggle which was to organize and educate the masses for action toward liberation that would take full account of the question of nationalities and languages." In the same issue were listed some of the major Ethiopian nationalities and their status in relationship to the country's dominant Amhara-Tigray languages. In the past, Makonnen continued, Ethiopians were led to believe that the "true" Ethiopian was one who spoke Amharic, listened to Amharic music, believed in the Amhara-Tigray religion, and wore Amhara dress. Sometimes, he added, to be "authentic," Ethiopians even had to change their names and fake their true identities⁵.

Changes had to be effected and soon, Walelign Makonnen urged. Previous conflicts about ethnicity and domination had been led by people of the middle class; from now on, said the student revolutionary, the peasant masses must be mobilized to take action against the feudal state. Thus the student movement sought to link the poor condition of the various nationalities or ethnic groups of Ethiopia to the prevailing economic, political, and cultural conditions in the country.

The Haile Selassie government, however, remained defensive, insolent, stagnant, and ineffectual. Instead of taking the initiative to bring about badly needed reforms, it

⁴ *Struggle*, v.5, no. 2, the entire issue was devoted to the question of the nationalities. This term is used to mean ethnicity and refers to groups of people set off from the rest of the population of the nation-state on the basis of racial, religious, cultural, and ancestral criteria.

⁵ . *Ibid.*

became offended and defensive. Instead of seizing the occasion to re-examine available alternatives, the Emperor and his government once again appealed to youth for respect for traditional norms and values as embodied by the institutions of family, religion and government, notions which already had been discredited and attacked by youth. The older generation, including the parents and the village elders to whom appeals were directed to controlling the youth, had become for the most part, non-literate or traditional. They, themselves, would not have understood why youth became so disobedient and abusive. In this respect they were on the side of the Emperor and for tradition. The whole phenomenon revealed the huge generation and educational gaps existing in the country.

Eventually, it was the military that took power. In the winter of 1974, a “creeping coup,” instigated by elements of the armed forces, overthrew the government of 83-year-old Emperor Haile Selassie I; (he was murdered a year later while under house arrest). The students and the intellectuals who had been instrumental in bringing down the old regime were unable to form a front strong enough to replace it. Instead, the military, as the only organized entity in the country, assumed the reigns of power. The new military government tried to recruit factions of the intellectuals but was able to attract only some of the most radical students who had been biding their time in Europe and North America. These student leaders from abroad rushed to Addis Ababa and were encouraged to form the first “politburo,” under the chairmanship of the Oromo sociologist Haile Fida. They began to collaborate with the military junta leaders and, no doubt, helped to shape its initial utterances and programs regarding the nature of the new government.

The new military regime, which called itself the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), issued a series of proclamations, (among other things, abolishing the monarchy and the constitution), downgraded the position of the state-supported church, and began the search for the replacement of these institutions. At that point, the ancient land of Ethiopia, as it had been known for ages, ceased to exist.

The military junta, which assumed power, was very well aware of the issues that led to the demise of the old regime. On April 20, 1976, the “Program of the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia” was promulgated, seeking to begin to legalize what the student leaders had been agitating for until that time. The tone and substance of the document were undeniably inspired by the platforms of the student associations. The first issues that the PMAC had to address involved “self-determination of the nationalities.” Article V, section 1 of the document provided that “the right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and duly respected... No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, languages and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The unity of Ethiopia’s nationalities will be based on the common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and all reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on equality brotherhood and mutual respect. Given Ethiopia’s existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full rights of self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide

on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic, and social life, use its own languages and elect its own leaders and administrators to head its own internal organs.⁶”

Inspired by socialist ideology, informed by the Ethiopian realities as understood by the nationalist, and based on the students’ rhetoric, these political formulations were prophetic and formed the fundamental structure for later dialogue. As we will see shortly, subsequent governments tried to implement various aspects of the nationalities policy. From then on, to think differently would be associated with backwardness. Which was an anti-progress or reactionary position. The question of nationalities was also intimately linked with other issues, such as governance, culture, language, and human rights. A few months later, under the political pressure brought about by the Eritrean question, the military junta further clarified its intentions: “Study each of the regions of the country, the history and interactions of the nationalities inhabiting them, their geographic position, economic structure and suitability for development and administration. After taking these into consideration, the government will at an appropriate time represent to the people the format of the regions that can exist in various levels and decide upon it themselves.”⁷ Clearly these proclamations intended, at the first level, to please the intellectuals and student leaders who had been major proponents of such issues, by securing their understanding and support; and at the second level to show the nation and the world that the present government was indeed progressive and against the feudal regime it had replaced.

After having made such public commitments in response to challenges from different groups, and wishing to accommodate the intellectuals and the progressives, the government took further actions. It created an institute for the study of the true condition of the various ethnic or tribal groups of the country, the first of its kind in the country’s history. Members of the institute were some of the best linguists, geographers, and political scientists drawn from Addis Ababa University. The government also initiated adult literacy programs in no fewer than 15 languages. Radio programs were already being broadcast in four different languages in addition to Amharic. The more than 20 rounds of national-literacy in the self-determination and self-sufficiency for the nationalities. The earlier emphasis on creating a literate society that speaks one language was replaced by the goal of literacy in the mother tongue, which could facilitate access to the amenities of development for all. There was, for a time, genuine excitement in the land.

The military regime by now transformed into the *Derg* (Committee) was fully aware that the old national institutions it had destroyed had to be replaced with viable institutions acceptable to the majority of the Ethiopian people. Even while they grappled to find or create such institutions, there were many civil conflicts. The war with Eritrea was still festering. The Tigray Liberation Front, which eventually overthrew the military regime, was waging war. At one time at least fourteen such wars were going on between the

⁶ . T.G. Wagaw, “Emerging Issues,” *Northeast African Studies*, v. 2, no. 3 (1980-1981), v. 3, no. 1 (1981) (combined number) pp. 72-73.

⁷ . *Ibid.*, p. 73.

central government and the various ethnic-based factions. The regime's embrace of socialist policy was intended to create political institutions that would command the allegiance of the population. But in spite of the hard coercion in practiced, the regime could not ultimately win the majority of Ethiopians to the alien values represented by that policy. What the long struggle showed was that the Ethiopian people, the better informed segments of them, were searching for a lasting solution to their many problems, including civil, cultural, linguistic, and human rights issues.

The Recent Situation

In May 1991, The Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front (EPRDF) captured the capital city of Addis Ababa and overthrew the very unpopular military dictatorship of the Mengistu Hailemariam regime. The EPRDF was formed by the ethnic-based Tigray Liberation Front along with its kin, also ethnically based, the Eritrean Liberation Front, which had plenty of opportunity to reflect and refine the nationalities issues during its 15-year battle against the central regime. Elements of other ethnically based political parties that had also been fighting the ruling junta were, almost as an afterthought, incorporated into the EPRDF. Soon after assuming power, the EPRDF hastily assembled people from the various ethnic groups for a four-day conference in Addis Ababa. From that assembly emerged a provisional charter which prescribed the principles of Ethiopia's present policies regarding human rights, self-determination, the administrative divisions of the country, and language policies. The final document that was ratified in 1994 and became the constitution of the land more or less followed the guidelines outlined in the provisional charter.

Article I, section B of the charter states that the "...right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self determination is affirmed." Each of these entities, i.e., ethnic or tribal groups, is guaranteed the right "to preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history, and use and develop its language...administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation." The right of self-determination includes the right to secede from the union if such an entity becomes convinced that its rights are impinged upon and that adequate redress is not forthcoming.

To make the picture complete, Article XII of the same law establishes local and regional councils for local administrative purposes defined on the basis of nationality. Thus, the basis of the current language and administrative policy is ethnic identity and ethnic affiliation. Accordingly the country is divided into 14 administrative *Kilil* (regions) simply based on ethnic affiliations. The 14 regions are assigned numbers instead of names. Every region has many sub-regions, each of which is again divided ethnically. All the sub-regions have the important powers to decide on many issues of national import including what language(s) to use or not use and where and when to use them.

The Language of the Schools

This law establishes specific education language policies. But these are intricately interwoven with the other ethnic-marking factors. This specific aspect of the law is also informed by the imperatives of political ideology rather than sound pedagogy or existing realities of the country, such as the availability of sufficient human and material resources; or the degree of preparation on the part of most of the population to support such initiatives. In effect, the education-language policy states thus: Given that the nations, nationalities and peoples have the right to determine, cultivate, and use their own cultures and languages; Given that previous government had suppressed or ignored the language and cultural rights of the peoples; Given that education is at the center of self and national development, the charter establishes the following standards: Where Amharic, the national language, is the home language, learning and teaching will continue in Amharic. For the rest of Ethiopia's languages, those that are relatively developed, such as Tigrigna, Oromogna, Somaligna, and Sidamigna, children in grades one to six will be taught in those native languages, while they also learn that language as subject. For the other undeveloped languages, ways and means will be found where students can both be given instruction in their own languages and study the same as subjects until they reach sixth grade. One area near the Sudanese border, where the local language of communication is primarily Arabic, will use that language as a language of instruction as it has in the past. Amharic will be introduced as subject later on. In the meantime, English as an international language and *de facto* the second national language (second to Amharic) will be taught as a subject beginning from grade one, and will continue to be the language of instruction beginning at the junior high school level, i.e., grade seven level.

Since it is necessary to retain one common national language, Amharic was to continue to be the means of communication, commerce and government at the national level. Consequently, beginning in the sixth grade, students were also to learn Amharic as a subject. Beginning in 1992, ways were to be found to implement the study of the various languages at the secondary level. The language of examinations and evaluations at the sixth, eighth, and twelfth grades were to be determined after proper studies have been conducted. The teachers were to be trained in the local languages in locally-established training centers, and curricular materials were to be prepared centrally with input from local representatives. Furthermore, the nations and nationalities could establish specific policies regarding language use and other factors related to their local cultures. The current policies provide only a broad outline of the educational language-policy goals. The policies do not provide for budgetary, human, or physical resources. The documents consistently fail even to mention the financial implications of the various policies. This failure has been repeatedly mentioned to me by people charged to implement some of these policies. The language policies seem to be primarily formed and guided by political ideology rather than pedagogical merits.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach means that, among other things, non-Amharic speakers, or the minorities, will suffer the most under the present provisions, at least for the present. Since Amharic remains very powerful both as a national language

and a language of education, although it is not named as such, those whose home language is Amharic will continue to enjoy the advantage of using their own language throughout the schooling years and beyond. Also most of the curricular materials are produced in the Amharic language and the others are translated from the Amharic or English texts. That, too, works to the disadvantage of those whose home language is other than Amharic. Speakers of the other languages, on the other hand, will have to deal with three or more languages, i.e. their mother tongues, Amharic, and English. Since teachers are not yet trained in most of the other languages and teaching aids are very undeveloped, and since examinations will continue to be in a very disadvantageous position. Perhaps the most important shortcoming of the present language policy is the unbelievably disingenuous stand taken by the political authorities. Although they agitated the masses of people into accepting the rhetorical value of self-determination, they have failed to inform the same national audience of the problems attendant to the new policies.

Field observations and extensive interviews with practitioners revealed many problems in connection with the new education language policy. Already, in several regions, many qualified and experienced teachers and administrators are being removed for no other reason than ethnic incompatibility with the region, despite the fact that they had been there for years. Other teachers are being brought in to take the place of discharged teachers for no other reason than their membership in the local tribe. The authorities forbid teaching in other than the local language. Consequently, teaching and learning is suffering. One shudders to think what kind of graduates will come forth from such a confused and confusing system in the near future. Meanwhile, there is a deafening silence prevailing on the part of scholars regarding meaningful, informed dialogue and criticisms of the important issues in the country. Experts and professionals have concluded that it is not their place to criticize the government policy; they know who signs their paychecks. Contrary to what I have observed in South Africa and Namibia regarding their respective language policies, in Ethiopia the dictated dogmas are the only ones that are talked about in official circles. The Ethiopian Teachers Union had been vocal by offering valuable criticism but even that organization has now been silenced by the imprisonment or banishment of its leaders.

The Larger Implications of Language Policy

The language policies governing education described here are, of course, only part of the larger national language and ethnic policies. As already pointed out, the political party in power since 1991 (TPLF) has established that each nationality has the right to determine how it governs itself, as well as to develop and use its own languages. Each region is given total autonomy in all matters except in such areas as foreign policy, national defense, and currency control. In fact, the regions collectively can overrule the central government on any issue. Moreover, since the regions are divided purely on ethnic lines they have legal right to include or exclude other ethnic group members from living and working in the tribal areas. They have already demonstrated their willingness to do just that. Some have called such actions tantamount to “ethnic cleansing.”

Ethnic gerrymandering, however, is not simple. In the past, all ethnic and religious groups in Ethiopia have intermarried and lived in different parts of the country. Now some local groups are forcing out those people whom they believe do not belong in a given area. The central government is insisting it is powerless to intervene in local matters. Therefore it is apparent that something like apartheid and ethnic cleansing is going on in different parts of the country resulting in mass dislocations and loss of life and property. Teachers and other government employees have been fired; businesses have been confiscated; and some citizens have lost their homes, simply because they happen to belong to ethnic groups different from that predominant in that region. This is despite their many years of residency in these same region and fluency in the local language. The government says that it cannot legally intervene in matters that have to do with local affairs.

For reasons such as those mentioned above, many informed Ethiopians have come to question, even challenge, the government's motives for enacting the present ethnic-driven education language policies. Such policies, they argue, are not designed to advance the welfare and rights of the nationalities, but to undermine, weaken, and eventually to destroy the notion of Ethiopia as an independent political and cultural entity. For example, the regime in power since 1991, led by the narrowly ethnic-based Tigray Liberation Front, is very well aware of its weak position on relation to the other, larger and more powerful groups especially the Amharas in the country. Convinced how hard it would be to gain acceptance and support from such powerful groups it saw political advantage to foment mistrust among ethnic groups by emphasizing the difference among them. My conclusion is that, as they stand now, the language policies related to education and training will not lead to nation building or serve the educational and training needs of the children and youth of any segment. Rather, the policies are designed to promote artificial divisions among Ethiopians, even at risk of creating hatred and divisiveness which might lead eventually to deep rancor and fighting. It is tragically ironic to see that Africans reinvent for themselves the policy of apartheid, notions which colonial powers have been forced to abandon everywhere in the world.

Implications

Other things being equal few challenge the desirability of using the mother tongue as vehicle for business, education and every day life. Certainly in terms of cognitive introducing the child to the world of learning in his or her own home language is the most desirable thing to do. Unfortunately most languages are not equal or are ready to enhance the lasting interests of the child in terms of education job opportunities if they are made to serve as medium of learning in the school setting. They can be nurtured and developed but that takes time and resource commitment over a long period of time. But in the case of Ethiopia at present the basic tenets and the implication of the policies remain unexplained to the general public, teaching aids, and trained teachers are practically unavailable, and those that are available are of low quality most of which are poor translations from the Amahric version. In addition even in the classroom teachers are told not to revert to explain terms in any other language than the local one even when students request it. In the face of a growing rate of illiteracy and the fast growing population and in the face of acutely diminished resources that could be devoted to the learning system

the sudden introduction of the policy is untenable. As a matter of fact it can be concluded that as things stand in Ethiopia, for the most part, the language policies pertaining to education are untenable; injurious that would cripple the future interest of the children and youth and ultimately the well being of the national community

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