

SPEAK OF ME AS I AM: Ethiopia, Native Identities and the National Question in Africa

The Westphalian principles, rooted in the 1648 Treaties signed in the European region of that name, have been monstrously mis-applied when it comes to the African continent, yet they established modern [international relations](#), particularly the inviolability of borders and non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states.

The default position of a certain generation and class of African nationalist, is to cleave unto the “new” nation born at Independence, as the only legitimate basis upon which African progress can be conceived and built. Everything else, especially that dreaded category, ‘ethnicity’ is cast as a diversion and dangerous distraction.

This is the tone that runs through Ugandan Professor Mahmoud Mamdani’s one thousand-word opinion piece: [The Trouble With Ethiopia’s Ethnic Federalism](#), published on 3rd January for the New York Times by (and patriotically reproduced in Uganda’s *Daily Monitor* newspaper), bearing a total of fifty-four iterations of the word ‘ethnic’.

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At Independence, the Westphalia protocols were conferred on to the former colonial contraptions. The results were economic stagnation and political repression. For over five decades,

these new nations have been the focus of intellectual and political agitation among Africa's thinkers. When, after all that rumination and fulmination, our thinkers still get things horribly back to front, we all get stuck at a crossroads.

Mamdani's essay comes as our current Exhibit A in this long history of intellectual malfunction. Current Prime Minister, the youthful Abiy Ahmed is faced with a many-sided series of demands from a deeply frustrated population. Many of these relate directly to the lack of an economic growth model that palpably raises living standards. Others reach further back to the age-old question of land ownership and reform. Naturally, the demand for greater civic rights to speech and assembly come as a prerequisite. One feature common to these demands is the tendency for the Ethiopians to speak through, and/or on behalf of the various constitutionally recognised native identities within the country. Some may have even formed militias for this purpose.

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Mamdani engages with this to make an analysis not just of the Ethiopian crisis itself, but of the question of what he terms "ethnicity" which, he sees as the issue – or more accurately, the 'problem' – permanently bedevilling African politics. "Fears of Ethiopia suffering Africa's next interethnic conflict are growing," he warns.

Prime Minister Abiy has been quick to concede much, and roll out as many reforms as he can. Most notably, he has ended the two-decade stand-off with his northern neighbour, Eritrea.

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This may not be enough, Mamdani tells us. The real problem, as he sees it, is the introduction of ethnicity into Ethiopian governance, and its central position in the Ethiopian constitution. This, Professor Mamdani says, was done by former Prime Minister, the late Meles Zenawi, who served as the de facto Ethiopian strongman from 1991 to 2012. Mamdani describes this as an attempt to replicate a similar strategy of ethnic organization that, in his view, was introduced to Africa as part of the colonial method of governing:

“In most of Africa, ethnicity was politicized when the British turned the ethnic group into a unit of local administration, which they termed ‘indirect rule.’ Every bit of the colony came to be defined as an ethnic homeland, where an ethnic authority enforced an ethnically defined customary law that conferred privileges on those deemed indigenous at the expense of non-indigenous minorities.”

This analysis fails to stop itself there, which would have been bad enough.

“The move,” continues the Professor, “was a response to a perennial colonial problem: racial privilege for whites mobilized those excluded as a racialized non-white majority. By creating an additional layer of privilege, this time ethnic, indirect rule fragmented the racially conscious majority into so many ethnic minorities, in every part of the country setting ethnic majorities against ethnic minorities.”

Describing native homelands as a “fiction”, the Professor goes on to say that while such ethnic labelling and selective privileging may have served the colonial purpose, it had the effect of first, “dividing a racially conscious African population” and second, turning them into people who saw themselves as “tribes” first and foremost.

Thus, he concludes, “Wherever this system continued after independence, national belonging gave way to tribal identity

as the real meaning of citizenship.”

Having thus problematized the “ethnic” thing, Mamdani goes on to imply that there may be no peace to come in Ethiopia unless the issue is excised from the Ethiopian body politic in particular, and Africa in general.

These words have many meanings, none of them good for Africans, at least.

First, this is the same thing as saying that before European arrived in Africa, “ethnic” identities were not politicized, and neither were they units of administration. Taken to its logical conclusion, this is to say that there were no ‘politics’ in precolonial Africa, and neither were there forms of administration.

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Africans seem to have been roaming the continent as a cohort of an undefined but also homogenous mass, with wholly insignificant identities, which were only solemnised, formalized, and bestowed with political meaning with the arrival of a European power amongst them.

Second, it also implies that only the European had the skill to animate these identities, without them tearing the (therefore necessary) European-planted state apart.

Third, that the tragedy of modern Africa began when the European withdrew his controlling hand. Left to their own devices, the identities he had created, mutated into a Frankenstein’s monster of tribal strife.

Fourth, that there is such a thing as ‘national identity’ that sprung to life fully formed at independence, a good by-product

of the European-planted state, and that it is African 'tribalism' that destroys it. In other words, European-invented African tribalism spoils the one good thing (nationalism) that Europe brought to Africa.

Finally, that belonging to the European-planted nation in Africa is the only viable means of an African citizenship. But if the British were pre-occupied with "ethnicizing", and the resultant people's feelings and loyalties were exclusively ethnic, where then does "national belonging" come from at independence?

The entire analysis of the crisis is a crisis in itself: of naming, histories, theories and practice. It is intellectually disingenuous and patronising, and goes beyond the usual linguistic demotion and belittling one usually encounters from many an expert on Africa.

Naming

Why are 34 million Oromo in Ethiopia an 'ethnicity', and 5.77 million Danes a 'nation'?

Why are the three great wars that shaped modern Europe (Franco-Prussian, the 1914-18 and 1939-1945 great wars), not conceptualized as ethnic conflicts?

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Why are there only a handful of contemporary states in Africa whose names bear a relation to the identity of people actually living there. Everyplace else is a reference to a commodity, or an explorer's navigational landmarks.

This frankly malevolent labelling offers the space for the

linguistic demotion of entire peoples. To wit: 34 million Oromo, seven million Baganda, 43 million Igbo, 10 million Zulu will always remain 'ethnicities' and 'tribes' to be chaperoned by 'whiteness'. 5.77 million Danes, 5.5 million Finns, and just 300,000 Icelanders can be called 'nations', complete with their own states with seats at the UN.

Some of these states were only formed less than two centuries ago (Italy: 1861, Germany: 1815, Belgium: 1830), while some of those 'tribes', and most critically for the argument, [their governing institutions](#) had already been created.

Why has the ethno-federalization of Great Britain itself, not been seen as such, and as a recipe for conflict?

This, in fact, is the real 'fiction', and it has led to decades of instability. But just because Westphalia does not see them, does not mean the African nations don't exist. The denial of their existence is in fact, an act of violence.

This is what led a thus exiled Buganda's Kabaka Edward Muteesa II to write: "I have never been able to pin down precisely the difference between a tribe and a nation and see why one is thought to be so despicable and the other so admired."

Many modern Africans, especially those whose identity is a product of the European imposition of contemporary African states, have a vested interest in making a bogeyman out of native African identity. The starting point of this enterprise is to invite the African to agree [to see our own identities as a liability](#) to African progress, by labelling them "ethnic".

When "ethnic" conflicts do flare up, those natives who have refused to jump on to this bandwagon are subjected to a big "I told you so", as Mamdani's essay now seeks to do.

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This was the position of the OAU member states, and many African political parties, including those in opposition to their increasingly repressive post-Independence governments.

But Ethiopia presents a huge problem for Professor Mamdani's theory of the colonial roots of "ethnicity", since its history falls outside the usual African pattern of a direct experience of European colonialism.

Since his initial assertion when introducing the issue of 'ethnicity', was that it was a result of European labelling leading to a "divide and rule" situation, Mamdani is then faced with the difficulty of explaining where those particular Ethiopian 'ethnicities' spring from if there were no Europeans creating them. Unless, to develop his assertion of homelands being a 'fiction', he thinks Ethiopia's various nationalities are fictional too?

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He covers up this logical gap by pre-empting a proper discussion of that history. Then changing tack, he suggests that the presence of "ethnic" problems in Ethiopia, despite the country's lack of a European colonial history actually shows that "ethnicity" is somehow a congenital defect in the body politic of all Africa.

"The country today resembles a quintessential African system marked by ethnic mobilization for ethnic gains."

Of course the correct answer to all the above questions is that Africa's Africans had their 'ethnic' identities well known and in place long before the arrival of any European

explorer or conqueror. And these were not anodyne proto-identities, but actual political institutions and methods of organization and governance. But this is an inconvenient truth, because then it forces the proper naming of these alleged 'ethnicities': nations.

All told, deploying notions of "ethnicity" and "tribe" is a tactic to corral Africans into primordial nomenclatures, thereby avoiding a recognition of their pre-colonial formations as nations. It serves to fetishize the colonial project as the godsend device to rescue the African ethnic strife and predestined mayhem.

But if the 34 million Oromo are an ethnicity, then so are the 5.77 million Danes. More so for our situation so are the English, Scots and Welsh who field national teams during the World Cup and the Commonwealth games. We need consistency, people must be spoken of as they are.

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Naturally, the emergent Independence-era African middle class was more than happy to go along with this erasure, in what Basil Davidson called an attempt at "the complete flattening of the ethnic landscape", and even fine-tuned it. Where some concessions had been made to the existence of the old nations, these were quickly, often violently, dispensed with.

In British Africa, the politics of trying to dispense with this reality is what dominated virtually all the politics of pre-independence constitutional negotiations. The question informed even the political alliances that emerged at independence.

In Zambia it required a special constitutional pact between

the new head of state, Kenneth Kaunda and the ruling council of the Barotse people – they have recently sought to repudiate it and return to their pre-colonial status.

Ghana's Asante kings were against the British handing power to Nkrumah's government. They argued that since they had ceded power to the British via treaty, then the departure of the British meant a termination of those treaties. Logically, therefore, that power should be re-invested in the ones it had been taken from under treaty.

In Kenya, the Maasai and the Coastal peoples used the same argument during the decolonisation conferences at Lancaster House. Significantly, the Somali rejected inclusion in the independence Kenyan state, insisting that they wanted to be integrated into independent Somalia. Unable to resolve the 'Three Questions' the Foreign and Colonial Office cynically kicked them into the not-very-long grass for the incoming leadership to deal with. The Mombasa Republican Council of today draws its political legitimacy from the updated colonial-era Witu Agreement of 1906, signed between their ancestors and the independence government.

Histories

To understand the current situation in Ethiopia, one must face up to the challenge of properly understanding any part of Africa, a continent so taxonomised and anthropologised by white thinking that it is barely recognizable on paper to its indigenous inhabitants.

It is a two-stage challenge. First: to understand Ethiopia's history. To do that, one must first recognise and accept the possibilities of an African history not shaped, defined and animated by European imperatives. Africans, like all people, have been making their own history. And like people elsewhere, this has as much narration of the good as it does the bad.

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face up to the challenge of properly understanding any part of Africa, a continent so taxonomised and anthropologised by white thinking that it is barely recognizable on paper to its indigenous inhabitants.

Ethiopia's crisis is a consequence of a century-old unravelling of the empire built by Emperor Menelik II (1889-1904).

As his title implies, this was not a nation, but an Empire: a territory consisting of many nations, brought into his ambit by one means or another.

Menelik's motives and method can, and should be debated, but the fact is that Europe [met its match](#) in the Ethiopian Highlands, and were forced to leave Menelik to it.

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Yes. Africans also produce momentous historical events. It is not an exclusive trait of white people.

We must get into the habit of discussing our own non-European driven history as a real thing with real meanings. Just as we may talk about the continuing long-term effects of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the European Balkan region, so can we talk about how the demise of Menelik's empire continues to impact on the greater Horn region.

If that sounds far-fetched, bear in mind that since Menelik's passing 120 years ago, Ethiopia has had only six substantive rulers: Zewditu/Selassie, Mengistu, Zenawi, Dessalegn and now Abiy.

On his passing, Menelik left a region covering more than three times the area he inherited. Prince Tafari, upon eventually

inheriting the throne as Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930 simply sought to consolidate it.

In his 2002 biography: Notes from the Hyena's Belly: An Ethiopian Boyhood, the Ethiopian author [Nega Mezlekia](#) tells the story of him and his family, as one of many Amhara families that migrate to Jijiiga, a region in the far east of Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Selassie. This was part of a government programme of Amhara settlement to many parts of the Ethiopian countryside. Jijiiga is home to ethnic Somalis. Amhara expansion, one of several factors, eventually provokes an armed revolt. Ironically, the author in his youth joined the insurgents.

Emperor Selassie can be said to have made some errors, but the context is critical: his reign spanned a period that saw immense changes in global politics, and social ideas.

Consider his life and times:

He witnessed the two great inter-European wars, the fall of its empires (Italian, German, Ottoman, Japanese) and the end of direct European occupation of Africa. He suffered two European invasions of his realm, and lived in exile. He was a regent during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and saw the emergence of the Soviet Union as a world superpower and the Cold War that followed. He may have been one of only a handful of world leaders to have been a member of both the United Nations, and the League of Nations that preceded it.

This sweep of history also had its impact on the Ethiopian peoples. One response was a growing demand for social, economic and political reform, including loosening the bonds of Selassie's empire.

By the time of the 1975 coup against him, the world was a fundamentally different one than the one he had met when he took the throne. He was, in fact, so "old school" that his captors were taken aback when he calmly informed them that he

had no personal income or savings to look after himself.

He took a hard line on Eritrea, which had settled into an uneasy federation, provoking a war of secession; continued Amhara settler expansion into Oromo and elsewhere; and he failed to manage Tigrayan nationalism, rooted partly in their dynastic loss of the imperial throne to that of Menelik's Shewa kingdom. Critically, he did not effectively address agrarian land reform, one of the roots of the country's political and agricultural crises.

So, to sum up Emperor Selassie: ultimately, he neither succeeds to fully consolidate his empire, nor does he re-order the empire's boundaries and strictures, which he had inherited in a fundamentally different era. He found himself fighting the more conservative elements of his aristocracy opposed to his reforms; the modernist republicans concerned that he was not reforming fast enough; and the increasingly radical nationalists in the regions demanding self-determination.

Enter Colonel Mengistu, something of a zealot, but who, for all his violent tendencies, was more of the "social reform" persuasion, and sympathetic to the "land to the tiller" demands of the early radical youth movements. Having overthrown a monarch, he saw himself in the image of the Soviet Union's Communist party in Russia which had deposed the Russian King Tsar Nicholas II. His task, as he saw it, was to create a socialist state.

However, Mengistu had basically taken over the same state that Selassie inherited *and* he was still wedded to it. His modernist concept of history and the world prevented him from understanding that he was dealing with a home-grown imperial history, and that he was in effect therefore, running an empire.

This blinds him to the "nationalities question", and only intensifies the agitations among the various indigenous

nations trapped in his now secular empire.

So, [he basically tries to kill everybody](#) opposed to him.

This is the reality Mamdani fails to see, and mistakenly calls Mengistu's state a 'unified republic'; interestingly, he does not offer any of the gruesome details of how Mengistu 'instituted' this so-called unification. The only places where Ethiopia was unified and a republic was in Mengistu's mind (and in his armory). What the various territories wanted was recognition of their separate identities, and an unchallenged say over the land of their ancestors.

Mengistu's response was to raise even higher the levels of violence needed to keep these rebellions in check, simultaneously fighting Tigrayan, Eritrean, Somali and Oromo insurgencies.

Theory and practice.

Ideologically, the leaderships of the Ethiopian insurgencies were taken over by persons claiming to be as Marxist as Lenin was. Eventually, all the belligerents, including the regime, claimed to be Marxist organisations, yet they were in conflict with each other. What intensified the crisis was the conflicting understandings of what Marxist practice should therefore be, in their context. It was at this point that a number of left-ideological debates came into play, and where a lot of left-ideologues lost their way.

Marxist theory, which mobilized millions of people worldwide, and its practical implications, should be examined with some care. History on this point is necessary.

These nationalist struggles based their arguments on the Leninist principle of "The Right of Small Nations to Self-Determination", which had been partially applied in the Soviet Union from its formation in 1917. After Lenin's death in 1924, his successor, Josef Stalin, found less time for it, and, in

the face of sustained Western European aggression seemed to see it as a liability to the security of the revolution.

The 1975 coup that brought Mengistu to power (or, more accurately, the coup that [Mengistu then subsequently violently hijacked](#)) was a response to widespread unrest, particularly among youth and student movements. This led to a number of practical problems on the ground, in relation to ideology.

At the heart of both the Dergue and the later Tigrayan movements was the issue of land reform. Mamdani does note that the initial upheavals of the 1970s were driven by this, but then fails to make the correct links.

For the vast majority of Africans, especially back then, land is not just a place to live, but also a place of work. To be without land is to be without a secure job. Subsistence peasant agriculture is back-breaking, often precarious, and not financially lucrative. It is also – and many progressives fail to recognize this – autonomous. To a very great extent, the subsistence peasant is not dependent on the state or the global economy. If anything, those entities depend on the farmer whose austere lifestyle acts as a hidden subsidy in providing the market with cheaply-grown food at no investment risk to the consumer or the state. Clearly, one thing that can transform and undergird this existence is sensible reforms to the way the farmer secures tenure of the land they work.

But what happens when land rights encounter cultural rights based on land? A “homeland” is certainly not the “fiction” of Mamdani’s assertion. It hosts the identity and worldview of the people that occupy it. It holds their sacred sites, and places marking their cultural consciousness. More so, that culture underpins their ability to keep producing autonomously. To suggest that it does not exist or does not matter, actually shows a complete failure to grasp who black African people are and how they live, and think. It is a fundamentally anti-African statement implying, as it does,

that black Africans do not have an internal intellectual and spiritual logic, developed indigenously, and augmented by physical spaces and objects within them, that informs a worldview. Africans, the suggestion is, are inherently transposable, as they are not tied to any thing or any place.

The captains of the old transatlantic slave ships could not have theorized it better.

Coming from someone who lives in Africa, this is a bit surprising. Coming from a professor heading an institute within one of Africa's new universities, designed to bolster the colonial state's mission of deracinating the African, perhaps less so.

However, the current crisis in Ethiopia is very real, and failure to finally resolve it holds huge implications for the entire region. That is precisely why a correct analysis is needed. Not a comfortable one rooted in essentially racist tropes.

The allegedly 'ethnic demands' were demands for a different type of guarantee to land rights than those being promoted by Mengistu. For example, would an Amhara family like Nega Mezlekia's, originally settled by Emperor Selassie in Jijiiga, have a legally equal claim to land against the ethnic Somali communities native to the area, just because they now happen to be the 'tillers' there? Would there be a hierarchy of claims? In any event, who should decide? A central authority in Addis Ababa, or a federated unit representing the historic native community?

There are no easy answers. But the regime's (and other 'progressives') complete refusal to even consider the issue, is what led to the conclusion that for there to be justice in Ethiopia, the issue of native nationalities, and their land-based cultural rights, would have to be physically resolved first. In short, it became clear that the land reform question

could not be effectively addressed without also addressing the underlying question of productive cultural identities and the historical land claims that arise from that.

This was particularly sharp in those areas of the country –such as Oromo and Tigray- that are dominated by pastoralist communities. Historically, much of Africa's land grabs have taken place against pastoralist communities, the great city of Nairobi being a prime example.

This is the basis of the 'ethnic' movements that have so perturbed Professor Mamdani. It was, in fact, a debate of the Left, and not some right-wing atavist distraction.

So, the great irony is that Ethiopia, home to that great bastion of mis-applied Westphalian thinking, the Organisation of African Unity, becomes ground zero for the great unresolved National Question as it applies to Independent Africa: what is an African nation, and is it the same thing as a given African state (or, more accurately, a state located in Africa)?

The armed struggle began in Eritrea, after Selassie's unilateral abrogation of the federal arrangement. The original fighting group, called the Eritrean Liberation Front was soon violently displaced from the field by a more radical Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front of Isias Afwerki, espousing those aspects of Leninism and Maoism that enabled it to mobilise a broad front of all classes affected by the feeling of Occupation.

The rebels' demands were clear: a federation of Ethiopia or separation from it; control of their own lands, and an equal recognition of cultures.

For his part, Mengistu, now fighting five separate militant groups, including a very militant hard-line the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front based in urban Ethiopia, placed all his faith in military might. He ended up [building the largest armed force in Sub-Saharan Africa](#) (if not Africa as a

whole) of some half- a million soldiers, and being heavily dependent on the Soviet Union, which saw him as a vital foothold in Africa, for war materiel and other supplies. [He also received military support from Cuba](#). It again may not be widely known that at the height of the fighting, these different forces which had grown in to wholesale armies, were [fighting some of the largest engagements](#) (including tank battles) since the 1939-1945 European inter-ethnic conflict called the Second World War.

The fight progressively turned in favour of the rebels. With Mengistu's main arms supplier, the Soviet Union, finally capitulating against the US in the Superpower contest in 1989, his forces were routed and he was driven from the capital in 1991.

The Eritrean armed struggle started in 1961, the Tigrayan one in 1975 and Oromo's in 1973. All end with Mengistu's fall.

If Mamdani genuinely believes these nationalities are just "ethnicities", and that Ethiopia is now running the risk of hosting "Africa's next inter-ethnic conflict", then this history shows that Ethiopia has in fact already had the "next inter-ethnic" conflict. Mamdani's fears, this is to say, are 30 or 40 years late.

To sum up Mengistu: he seized power in response to a severe political crisis, and then, misreading his position, sought to impose his concept of "socialism" on the various peoples still caught in the net of Menelik's Empire state. This led to a situation of mounting violence, in which he saw just about everyone as an enemy to be physically crushed. His regime eventually succumbed to the overwhelming resistance.

Enter Meles Zenawi, who came out of that generation of student activists who took up the nationalities and land reform demands during the time of the Emperor. To many of them, Mengistu's high-handedness in dealing with the matter was a

disappointment. Tigrayans today do not easily recall that when Meles led the the youth to start the war, they sought refuge in Eritrea, and were nurtured and trained there by Isias Afwerki's EPLF forces already at war against the Ethiopian state.

The issue of identity does not therefore mean that Africans are perennially and illogically at each others throats in some kind of primordial frenzy. They do politics, and are fully capable of defining their interests and maintaining relations, or breaking them off, as needs may dictate.

Zenawi (to an extent like Daniel Ortega on the other side of the world, and even Yoweri Museveni, in his own way), found himself in charge of a state now encountering a new, neo-liberal global world order being enforced by the only super power left standing. Like Selassie, the circumstances around them had changed greatly from when they had begun their political journeys.

Far from simply "introducing" a federal constitution whose "ethnic" nature Mamdani is problematizing, Zenawi's regime was finally having the Ethiopian state recognise the long-standing historical realities that had emerged from decades of political and armed struggle.

To reduce the product of all that sweeping history to a notion of "fictions", is a dangerous over-simplification.

In this quest for erasure, Mamdani applies the same misleading thinking backwards by calling the 1994 Ethiopian constitution a "Sovietificaton" of Ethiopia. The Russian nationalities were no more an invention of Lenin than the Ethiopian ones are of Meles Zenawi's creation. The various units that made up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics were based on nationalities long in place before the 1917 communist revolution took place there. The responsible thing to do, as a starting point, was acknowledge that fact, which the

communists did (and Stalin to a greater extent than Lenin before him).

Yes, Meles was a dictator. And yes, the constitution is based on indigenous nations. That does not automatically suggest causality: Meles Zenawi did not “turn Ethiopia to ‘ethnic’ federalism”. Its long history did.

In fact, events show that Zenawi and the dominant faction he governed with, were no longer in support of the “rights of small nations” by the time they took power.

With the exception of holding the pre-agreed referendum on Eritrean independence (he may have had little choice in the matter: friends in Addis used to like to tell the story of how Meles’ own stepmother, who happens to be Eritrean, and who raised him, left him in his official Addis residence to go and vote for independence in Eritrea, then returned after), he fails to implement the spirit and the letter of the new arrangements that were based on principles forged in the course of the long war.

The best example is found in the very incident that sparked the current uprising: if the regime knew that – as Mamdani points out – the 1994 federal constitution guaranteed the nationalities concerned authority over their land, why then did it try to expand the boundaries of the Federal capital Addis further into Oromo territory over the objections of people there?

In other words, the problem in Ethiopia is the *exact opposite* of what Professor Mamdani sees. It is not the “ethnic” constitution at fault; it is the failure by the Zenawi regime to genuinely implement it, by negating the spirit of the idea in private, while pretending to uphold it in public.

In particular, Zenawi’s “Woyane” regime repeated Mengistu’s mistake of trying to hold on to Menelik’s state. Critically, he too failed to address the historic issue of land reform

that began the whole shake-up of Ethiopia with the student protests against the Emperor. In practice, land is still the property of the state, to be handed out for “developmental” purposes, upholding the Mengistu mentality, but now in the context of global neo-liberalism.

“Derg and [the TPLF] took a very similar approach to the land question. Which is why, three decades after TPLF comes to power, they have still been unable to do land reform, abandoned agrarian reform and ironically, put rural Ethiopian land on the international auction. Something like four million acres of rural farmland, mostly in southern Ethiopia has been leased out to foreign investors since the mid-2000s, ” observes journalist Parselelo Kantai, who frequents the country.

Power comes with its temptations, and a state machine comes with its own institutional imperatives. It would appear that once a group finds itself in control of the apparatus of an empire such as Menelik’s, they become very reluctant to abandon its workings. Perhaps it is only the armed forces in Portugal, having overthrown their autocratic Caetano regime in 1974, that ever went on to immediately [dismantle their empire](#) and allow the conquered to go free.

The politics of the armed coalition coming together and finally driving Mengistu out may well have been the moment for this change in attitude to begin, not least because the Meles’ TPLF was by far the militarily dominant faction of the alliance.

To sum up Meles Zenawi: he evolved into what many ‘revolutionaries” became after the Cold War era: a technocratic autocrat placing his hopes in a neo-liberal approach to solving the country’s deep economic problems through a “developmentalist” strategy. He quite literally burned himself out hoping that, by bringing rapid infrastructural development, he could perhaps outpace the

historical political claims, and thus render them redundant.

This essentially meant a new form of what Mengistu and Selassie had done before him: overlook people's ancestral claims to this or that, and simply see the whole landmass as a site for "development" projects, no matter who they may displace or inconvenience.

But "any notion of 'progress' or 'modernization' that does not start from a peoples' culture is tantamount to genocide." the late Professor Dan Nabudere warned us.

Meles Zenawi sought to hold on to the very imperial state he had once fought. His unwillingness to fully honour the terms of the broad alliance of all the fighting groups, and instead consolidated his armed group to take factional control of the whole state and set the course for new upheavals. His sudden death became the opening for these issues to spill out into the streets.

His immediate successor, Hailemariam Desalegn, soon found that the kind of extreme state violence that had served Zenawi, and Mengistu before him, and Selassie before them both, no longer worked, forcing Deslaegn to resign in failure.

Abiy Ahmed must finally deal with these realities. Ultimately, any attempt to do politics based on the imperatives of the Menelik-created state was, and is, going to come up against the fact that this state actually started life as an empire. If the history of Ethiopia has shown one thing, it is that this approach has always provoked rebellions.

Ethiopia, one could say, is back to the pre-war situation it was in just before Mengistu's coup.

The problem is conceptual; the same one that confronted Selassie and Mengistu: are we running a nation, or a homegrown empire made up of several?

Mr Abiy Ahmed would be wise not to go down that path.

His challenge is to dismantle the remnants of Meles' personal military apparatus, genuinely re-orient the country back to its federal constitutional ethos, begin to address the land tenure question, and quickly, before the political grievances – and the economic challenges underlying them – completely boil over.

As the world becomes less secure and with fewer overlords, there will be more and more examples of Africa's invisible nations asserting themselves to manage control of their resources.

Dismissing them as "ethnic" is simply laying a foundation to justify violence against them.