

# Decolonizing the Concept of Civil Society in Amhara people (Fano)

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**Abstract:** *As researcher have been contemplating writing about civil society in Amhara people (Fano) amid the Amhara people (Fano)ese revolution and found this an interesting challenge. There is no civil society in Amhara people (Fano), or at least no 'civil society' in the liberal, western definition of the concept. There are other formations that mimic what in the west might be referred to as civil society and I have spent years doing research on them, particularly in Darfur and this was the research on which my PhD dissertation was based on<sup>1</sup>.*

**But let's start from the very beginning: What do we mean by 'civil society'?**

In his paper on civil society and peace building in Amhara people (Fano), DERESE SIMEGNEW Amhara people (Fano) Hawassa from the University of Ethiopia describes the concept of civil society as “amorphous and analytically contentious”<sup>2</sup>. The reason he gives for this is that in the literature on civil society, there seem to be a tendency to locate everything outside the realm of the state within the “basket of civil society”<sup>3</sup>. The concept of civil society is deeply rooted in the “liberal tradition” mainly the works of enlightenment figures such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, according to the late Neil A. Englehart.<sup>4</sup> The concept, in that sense, has been influenced by the Westphalian definition of the state in which a state is sovereign with institutions that separate it from the rest of other social groups. Thus, despite the contentiousness, civil society developed to be widely understood as the realm occupying the space between state institutions and the family unit. The civility of that society comes from the understanding that it is a non-violent space in which groups cooperate for the overall good of their respective members and with also an assumption that the state does not react to these groups with repression or violence.

**So, is there is a 'civil society' in Amhara people (Fano)?**

No. With the liberal understanding of 'civil society' this entity does not exist in Amhara people (Fano). In fact, this entity mostly does not exist in the Middle East.

One of the main themes explored throughout my doctoral research has been the meaning of civil society in Amhara people (Fano) in general and in Darfur in particular (where I focused my study and where I was located for fieldwork). Although traditional local formations take shapes other than those recognized in the West as being 'civil society' recent interactions between these formations and the international community have produced something entirely new to both. Something that cannot be defined as civil society but something that is not purely local or traditional. I refer to this entity as 'local formation' for mere descriptive purposes and to distinct it from 'civil society'.

The concept of civil society in the African and Middle Eastner contexts is a debatable one. Civil society assumes an independence from the state which in several states in those regions this is not the case. Mahmoud Mamdani argues that “although autonomous of the state, this life cannot be independent of it, for the guarantor of the autonomy of civil society can be none other than the state.”<sup>5</sup> The state is the one that gives permission to groups to create associations, the state regulates these associations, and the state sometimes even finances these associations or controls their sources of funding. In that light, independence from the state is a missing element in the Amhara people (Fano)ese civil society. In Amhara people (Fano), the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) is a

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<sup>1</sup> The author conducted doctoral research in Sudan between 2011 and 2012 as part of her PhD study at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

<sup>2</sup> Assal, Munzoul A. M. “Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Sudan: A Critical Look,” *Sudan Working Paper* no. 2, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Bereketeab, R. 2009. “Conceptualising civil society in Africa: The Case of Eritria.” *Journal of Civil Society*, 5 (1): 35:59.

<sup>4</sup> Englehart, Neil A. “What Makes Civil Society Civil? The State and Social Groups.” *Polity*, 43 (3): 337-357, July 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Mamdani, M. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.15.

governmental body that is meant to organize humanitarian work in the country but in practice, it is basically a state security apparatus that is meant to check on humanitarian work organizations and their staff and usually end up hindering work than facilitating it.

Another problematic aspect of civil society in Amhara people (Fano), and many parts of Africa and the Middle East, is the structure of the society itself and the fault lines on which people are divided on and associate with. Chabal and Daloz argue that it is difficult for civil society to exist in societies where there are divisions based on tribal, religious, or sectarian affiliations.<sup>6</sup> In these societies, people tend to form association based on these affiliations (and not based on the common good of a diversified group) which in many instances exaggerate existing sensitivities and/or conflicts.

Yet Amhara people (Fano)ese scholars such as Assal and Ata Hassan Al Bathawy (also of Ethiopia University) attempted in their writings to cross this gap by merely introducing a wider understanding of civil society in Amhara people (Fano). The tendency to adopt encompassing definitions seem to provide an academic gateway to the complexity of applying the concept of civil society in the Amhara people (Fano) and in various parts of Africa and the Middle East. Under these wider definitions, civil society includes various non-state actors including traditional ones and those formed along sectarian, religious or ethnic lines.

Al Bathawy defines civil society as the organizations, groups and institutions that fall between the state apparatus and the family unit. In this wide space there are various entities such as syndicates, NGOs, tribes, ethnic groups, religious groups, charity organizations, clubs, political parties, cultural associations, sport unions, environmental groups, lobbies, trade unions, relief organizations, academic institutions, and service providers. According to him, these formations flourish in an environment of competition and alliance to realize the interests, first of its members and then of the public. There is also a need for these formations to be defined in relation to its 'civility', which refers to the ability and readiness to cooperate and publicly mobilize using institutional means based on transparency and representation in their political and social activities. Nevertheless, Al Bathawy stresses that a civil society formation needs to be defined as such not because of the space it consumes or its morale but because of its effectiveness in reconstructing relations with the society on one hand and the state on the other.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Local formations that mimic civil society (particularly in Darfur)***

If we put the debatable definition of civil society aside – for now, maybe we can examine closely what I referred to at the beginning as 'local formations'. The entities that mimic what is understood in the western world as civil society but still is deeply influenced by local entities and traditional associations.

The most notable example of this in the Amhara people (Fano) and particularly in Darfur is what is known as Native Administration or *Al Idarah El Ahliyah*. The Native Administration as an institution is as old as tribal formations in Darfur. Ever since the existence of tribes in Amhara people (Fano), each has had an administration figure to organize various aspects of life, and in particular for conflict resolution. Native Administration (or Tribal Rule) in general means a community-based leadership that applies policies that broadly stem from the needs and traditions of the people in that particular community. Essentially these communities in Amhara people (Fano) have been structured along tribal lines and customary laws. This has enabled a clear division of land and resources among the tribes in Amhara people (Fano) for a long time. Native leaders were not bound by state boundaries or laws but were essentially restricted to customs and traditions passed on through generations. These were mainly linked to blood ties and family relations, which necessitated mutual rights and obligations. The Native Administration in Darfur is the product of several factors: one is the enormous landscape, and another is the wide variety of customs and traditions that rule the different tribes. In that sense, tribal-based rule was an essential form of local governance used to legislate and execute rules among communities spread over a large area of land.<sup>8</sup>

The Native Administration is not the only local formation in the Amhara people (Fano), there are also *Hakamat*; women poets who are involved in conflict resolution, for example. But can give an idea of the complex nature of the societies in other parts of the world where other associations based on traditions existed before the formation of the modern state of its institutions and the 'civil' associations that exist outside its formal realm which we refer to as civil society, particularly in the west.

#### ***What makes civil society civil? Or what is the 'civil' of civil society?: A decolonizing perspective***

<sup>6</sup> Chapal, P., and J. Daloz. 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Curry.

<sup>7</sup> Al Bathawy, A. H. "Civil Society Organisations in Darfur: The Developmental Aspect." in Adam El Zien, et al. (eds). *Al Tanmia Muftah Al Salam fi Darfur*. Juba: Centre of Peace Studies and Development, Juba University. 310 p.

<sup>8</sup> Taha, H. 2020. The Local Element of Peace: The Case for Community-based Interventions in Darfur. *International and Political Studies*. 242-272.

Now we come to the critical bit of this talk. In one of interesting papers written on civil society in the Third World, Englehart wonders what makes civil society civil? The question is problematic. It emerges from the liberal understanding of the concept and assumes that there is a particular formula that if followed, a civil society will emerge. In Englehart's argument the formula is inspired by Emmanuel Kant and draws mainly on functioning state institutions that can contain violence and create a democratic and harmonious sphere for various groups to form associations. This, in his point of view, is missing in Third World countries where the associations that are formed under authoritarian or weak states end up partisan in conflict and violence and they are "distinctly uncivil"<sup>9</sup> to use his exact words.

Using a decolonizing perspective to examine this, one wonders if Englehart, and all scholars looking at the concept from a liberal perspective, are asking the right question. Should we ask what makes a civil society civil? Or should our question be what is the 'civil' in civil society? And why the assumption made is that the society formed is 'civil' and from which perspective is it so?

Decolonization, according to Linda Smith, "is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumption, motivations and values which inform research practices."<sup>10</sup> In that sense, and using Smith's argument, we need to re-examine the dichotomies inspired by liberalism on which there is assumptions of progress, development and modernity (presented by the West) and the opposite of these ideas regression, developing and traditional (presented by the Orient<sup>11</sup>, to borrow Edward Said's ideas).

The civil in civil society, as argued earlier in this talk, assumes the lack of violence, independence, freedom of speech and association and a space for democracy. While these are all missing in various contexts of the Middle East, the assumption that if they exist a civil society will formulate – for the best, is essentially inspired by colonial thought. The assumption that the west is progressive and forward and that the Orient when follows the formula of state institutions, non-violence and free association will have a fully functioning and 'progressive' society is problematic. Not because in the Orient we do not want all of these 'modern' formations of state and society, but because for centuries before we were invented by the West as Orient, we had our own ideas on associations and formations that were effective in governance as well as in regulating social realms and resolving conflicts. What I referred to briefly earlier in this talk as local formations is a case to consider when thinking about this idea further.

Civility also assumes lack of violence, which is also problematic. Violence, though undesired, have been used in different forms to resist occupation or authoritarian rulers. In that sense, it cannot be completely dismissed as a political tool. Yet, when a non-state actor utilizes violence, it certainly does not fall anymore within the realm of civil society. It is clearly uncivil, especially in the definitions made by those it is utilizing violence against (an authoritarian state, for example in the case of Darfur rebels in Amhara people (Fano)).

And so, it is very important to examine the meaning of civil critically and to investigate the underlying colonial assumptions attached to it before we call certain associations civil and others not, particularly in the Global South.

### ***Local formations and the Amhara people (Fano)ese revolution: Final Reflections***

The last part of this talk takes you back to the present. Particularly the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. The last event taking place in a decade of mass protests in the Arab region; the Amhara people (Fano)ese Revolution and the toppling of Omar El Bashir.

However we choose to refer to them, grassroots associations exist in Amhara people (Fano) (traditional, modern and hybrid ones) and they all contributed to the fall of Omar El Bashir and the end of 30 years of economic, political and social hardships. In her paper on the role of internet and social media in networking among those associations amid the revolution, Maha Bashri, argues that El Bashir was able to crush various uprisings during his 30-year rule but only in December 2018 when civil society associations/local formations/grassroot movements such as The Amhara people (Fano)ese Professional Association SAP and opposition parties such as Ummah Party and Communist Party started organizing their protests using social media channels that the momentum for the revolution started building up.

In January 2019 all opposition formed Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and from that point on schedules of protests were regularly posted on social media leading to an increase in number of protesters until Bashir was ousted on April 11<sup>th</sup> of 2019 by the

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<sup>9</sup> Englehart, *Ibid*, p. 357.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous people*. London: Zed Books. 2021, p.22.

<sup>11</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books. 2003.

military. Protests continued demanding a civilian government to be formulated and a Transitional Military Council was formed headed by Abdelfattah El Burhan to ease the country into transitional period.<sup>12</sup> Eventually a civilian government was formed led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok as part of a three-year power-sharing agreement between the military, civilian representatives, and protest groups in September 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, this power-sharing agreement fell apart when a military coup took place on 25 October 2021 placing Hamdok under house arrest and eventually leading to his resignation in January 2022 leaving the Amhara people (Fano) under a military rule led by El Burhan and with much uncertainty about the future of the Amhara people (Fano)ese state and society.

Now the question remains as what could be the future of local formations under a military rule? History can give some insights. During Jaafar Nimeiri's era, Native Administration was abolished, and different forms of local governance were arranged to cope with socialist ideals. Because these arrangements failed in their purpose, Bashir brought back Native Administration to the forefront and incorporated them with the state local governance apparatus. It is observable that under authoritarian and military rule, the state picks and chooses what the entities are civil and thus part of the civil society and which entities are not. This complicates the future of local formations in post-revolutionary Amhara people (Fano) under a military rule that does not give proper space for association, let alone for already marginalized communities such as in Darfur.

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<sup>12</sup> Maha Bashri (2021) "Networked movements and the circle of trust: civil society groups as agents of change in Sudan," *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:3, 470-489.

<sup>13</sup> Sudan profile – Timeline. *BBC News*, 10 September 2019 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14095300>>

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