

Kemant (ness): The Quest for Identity and Autonomy in Ethiopian Federal Polity

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Abstract

In the post 1991 context of 'politics of ethnic identity' along with 'politics of equal dignity', this article examines Kemant's quest for self-determination that the federalist system provides for 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia, whilst struggling for the recognition of their ethnic identity over the past two decades. By exploring their de facto existence, and precedence, in the federalist state, the article tracks the political history of Kemant nationality's struggle. It aims to contribute to the lively political debate on the authenticity of Kemant's political quest and provides fascinating insights for further inquiries. Drawing on qualitative exploratory research, the article argues that Kemant people's political struggle, which has grown- out of conditions of alienation and discontent in Ethiopian federal experiment that denied their very distinct existence, is mainly entrenched in identity reclaims before it entirely melts down in the federal arrangement. It is not only a socio-political act of recovering fractured Kemant identity, but also an instrumentalist act for demanding autonomous political administration that can provide a sense of security and autonomy to promote, maintain and reconstruct their identity. Thus, identity and autonomy are intimately linked, and simultaneously demanded by the Kemant people.

Keywords: Kemant; Identity; Autonomy; Ethiopia; Federalism

1. Introduction

In the early 1990s Ethiopia, one of the most populated (over 85 million) and the most pluralist (more than 80 ethno-linguistic groups) country in Africa (Central Statistics Agency, 2008), has witnessed a major politico-legal departure from the previous regimes in providing startling way of 'nation building'. Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), who came to power in May 1991 following the downfall of the *Dergue*ⁱ regime, introduced the ethnic based federal system, adopted a constitutional framework (in 1995) and installed the discourse of multinational politics of 'nation-building' (Merera, 2002; Yakob, 2010:35), and ultimately, in due course, engaged in 'a politics of ethnic identity' alongside 'a politics of equal dignity' for national unity, social justice and democracy to prevail in Ethiopia.

By making ethnicity as valid categories of the federal arrangement and territorial governance and a basis for political organization (Mengie, 2010:10), the regime has increased the political salience of ethnic identities. Ethnic groups are not only political objectives but also indispensable for building the federal polity (Beken, 2012:3); nothing like the previous regimes who had spotted ethnic politics as impediment to 'nation- building' (Baharu Zewude, 2008). Ethnic sentiment has gradually crept in to find a place in the political restructuring.

At present, seventy five 'nations, nationalities and peoples'ⁱⁱ have a representation in the federal government, particularly in the House of Federation (HF), and regional councils that emanated from their acceptance and recognition as distinct ethnic groups by the stateⁱⁱⁱ; among others the *Awii*, *Himra* and *Argoba* in Amhara regional state, *Erob* and *Kunama* in Tigray regional state and *Alba* and *Silte Gurage* in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) have a political place. They are also self-governing 'nationalities' within their respective territories. Very small populated groups of *Qewama* (298), *She* (320) and *Dime* (981) in SNNPRS were recognized as distinct 'nationalities' in 2007. The *Koyego*, *Karo*, *Murle* and *Gedicho* were officially recognized in 2007 for the first time (CSA, 2008).

Despite such kinds of post 1991 political developments, the Kemant 'nationality' remains unrecognized as the constituents of the federal polity, and henceforth denied the opportunity for self- determination that the federalist system has granted for 'nations, nationalities and people', while their claim has been vocal. So crucial is their dependence on state recognition that, their very distinct existence depends, parity of participation and representation in the political and governance structures is severely undermined. And yet, the question of Kemant distinct 'nationality' has been debated throughout the last two decades albeit large numbers of self-declared individuals have been struggling for since the configuration of the federal system.

This article examines Kemant's simultaneous quest for recognition, and reconstruction, of their ethnic identity and political autonomy for administering themselves. It contributes to the lively political debate on their quest and provides insights for further inquiries. In this regard, the first part of this article examines the political and

legal framework in post 1991 within which the quest operates. The second part outlines the research sites and the methodology utilized. The third part presents the origin, geographic settlement and self- defined identity of Kemant-ness to illustrate Kemant's de facto existence. The fourth part explores the political history of Kemant struggle in post 1991. The fifth part examines Kemant's aspirations for identity and autonomy. Finally, the conclusion part sums up the arguments of the article.

2. The Setting: Politico- legal Frameworks in post 1991 Ethiopia

In post 1991, Ethiopian has witnessed a major politico-legal departure from the previous regimes. The new regime (EPRDF) has configured federalism grounded upon ethnic lines, and recognition of socio-cultural and political pluralism. The very notion of ethnicity gained currency and ethnic identities accepted as valid categories of the federal experiment that have, of course, prompted a debate around its divisive effects. Soon, individuals and groups actively participated in ethnic politics. This section explores the federalist state discourses and constitutional framework, which are presumably quite relevant in understanding and examining the context within which claims of ethnic groups operate.

2.1 State (Political-) Discourses: Multi-nationality and Unity in Diversity

Multi-nationality, a key terminology in Ethiopian society and politics, is virtually a recent vintage, emerged since 1990s, of political expression of accepting and celebrating the plurality of Ethiopian societies in which each group assumed to have equal political status. The EPRDF, the rhetorical fount of this discourse, deems as a panacea for the long standing 'nationality question,' for identity and autonomy. It has the effect of legitimizing ethnic based federal arrangements. This discourse has been echoed by political elites. The former President Girma Wolde Goiorgies said that 'Ethiopia is a mosaic of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' who either are free to practice and uphold their own linguistic, religious and cultural identity that had not been the case during the past regimes (*Hibre Bihir*, 2011:3). The former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Melse Zenawi, added that they are 'sources of our strength and beauty' (Ibid: 9). This political rhetoric certainly increases the sense of ethno-nationalist and cultural sentiments.

To portray and promote the diversity of the state, the government celebrates 'Nation, Nationalities and People's Day' annually in November marked by decorated national and regional flags, cultural festivities and extensively live televised coverage of events depicting the importance of the day for members of the federal polity, in terms of granting equal status and dignity. The national day publicizes the constituents of the federal polity and their distinctive customs and traditions of different groups that could generate self-esteem and strong identification to their 'nationality'. It, thus, provides a venue for a politicized festivity to reinforce ethno-nationalist politics of the state. Indeed, it is a de facto recognition of ethnic identities, at least, and a legitimate basis for maneuvering further demands.

Unity in Diversity, a multiculturalist approach of 'nation-building', is increasingly become another governing discourse of post 1991 Ethiopian politics. It is partly a continuation of the earlier imagining of 'national unity' dated back to the 19th century, to the early 20th century, but with a different strategy of 'nation building,' in which 'nationalities' able to maintain and celebrate their distinct identities while at the same time constituting the bigger family of Ethiopians (Nini Abino, 2012:2). It is a statist perspective pronounced in terms of recognizing the plurality of the Ethiopian societies, but with a common and shard element of 'national identity', i.e., *Ethiopianism*. This can't only underpin the prevailing role of multi-nationality, but also believed to provide a common sense of unity. It promises to challenge the centrifugal tendencies of ethnic politics in the country. However, it remains politically and academically debated issue whether the post 1991 system has strengthened 'national unity' or ethno-national sentiments instead.

2.2 Constitutional Setting

The 1995 Constitution is a multicultural document that explicitly recognizes Ethiopia's plurality in its preamble by stating 'We Nations, Nationalities and Peoples'. Yet, it doesn't explicate any precise definitions of these terminologies. Thus, it provides the opportunity for ethnic groups to frame their status on their own interest. Despite this terminological ambiguity, the basic principles set under the Constitution affirm the protection of 'nations, nationalities and peoples' by offering vigorous rights for the expression and development of ethno-linguistic and cultural identities. The Constitution recognizes ethnic groups' inalienable right to enjoy and develop their languages (art. 5(1)); provides equal protection regardless of any criteria such as language, religion etc. (art. 25); and offers freedom of religion, belief and opinion (art.27). The right to self-determination and parity of participation are also constitutionally granted. Article 39 provides the right to self-determination up to secession. Article 61 (2) provides representation rights to all nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia in the House of Federation (FDRE, 1995). These rights are the legal basis for identity and autonomy claims, and also

basics in governing the polity. Reinforced by the political discourse, the constitutional framework enables groups to use the notion of ethnicity and to anticipate that the framework would address ethnic demands and aspirations.

3. Research Sites and Methodology

Selection of Study Sites: Two urban centers, *Gonder* and *Aykel* towns, in Amhara regional state of Ethiopia were purposively selected. *Gonder* is the capital of North *Gonder* Administration Zone, an administrative level below the regional administration. The town is located at 419 Kms North West of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Based on the 2007 national census, *Gondar* has a total population of 206,987, of whom 98,085 are men and 108,902 women. It is the epicenter of the political movement and a place where the Interim Coordinating Committee for Kemant people's quest for Identity and Self-rule is located. *Aykel*, on the other hand, is the administrative center of *Chilga woreda*, local administration lower than Zone and higher than *kebele*. It is located at a distance of 61 Kms to the West of Gondar town. Based on figures from the Central Statistical Agency in 2007, *Chilga woreda* has an estimated total population of 270,994 of whom 111, 997 are men and 109, 364 are women. It is one of the historic Kemant land and a place where the traditional religion is still maintained and practiced. In addition, it has the largest *Kemantney* speakers and the large number of self-identified Kemant people.

Methods of Data Collection: The field-based research on which this article is based utilized a combination of qualitative methods: semi-structured key informant interviews with five purposively selected Kemant political elites, in *Gonder* and *Aykel*, and the House of Federation Directorate in Addis Ababa; in-depth interview with the Deputy Chairperson of the Interim Coordinating Committee for Kemant Nationality Quest for Identity and Self- rule in *Gonder* and with the Chairperson of *Chilga Wereda* Council and member of the Central executive committee in *Aykel*; and four focus group discussions each consisted of six participants were conducted in *Gonder* and *Aykel* towns. Discussants were purposively selected, who revealed themselves as Kemant, and consisted of retired government officials, civil servants and self-employed men and women ranges from 25- 65 years of old. Most of them had a formal education of different levels. Ensuring the willingness of participants had been given priority. Legal documents and reports were also used for analysis. The data collection took place from July 9 to August 23, 2013.

4. The Kemant People: Who are they?

Although the Kemant was mentioned in the 18th century^{iv}, the question of 'who are the Kemant people?' has been one of the contentious issues since 1991. Their early history is more obscured and hence it becomes a puzzle for scholars interested to study this people. Prior to the analysis of their quest, it is, therefore, important and desirable to know 'who are the Kemant?' This section looks myths of Kemant origin, their settlement and conception of *Kemant-ness*.

4.1 Myths of Origin

According to the myth of origin, when the Canaan land in Middle East had faced with drought and hunger, *Aynar* (the father of the Kemant) and his families came to Ethiopian passed by today's Egypt. The exact period, however, remains unknown. *Aynar* (also known as *Yaner*) has been identified as the great grandson of Canaan, grandson of Ham, son of Noah (Tourny, 2009: 1226). It is believed that he used to live in the forest area of *Karkar* in *Chilga*^v, but further data is unavailable (Gamst, 1969:58). On the basis of this mythology, the majority of informants traced their origin to the mythical ancestors *Canana* and *Ayner*. In contrary, some others identified themselves as descendants of *Keberu/Keberua* who is the son of *Adarayke*, whom they believe as the founding father of Kemant (Dawit, 2010: 60). Despite these different views, there is a common account that Kemant's roots traced to the land of Israel. Of course, some scholars have found that the Kemant have close ethnic and historical linkage with Ethiopian Jewish (*Bete Israel*) (Quirin, 1998; Tourny, 2009). It also evident that some 'out-group' individuals identified the Kemant as emigrants from Egypt (Tinbitu, 2005EC^{vi}: 25; Tourny, 2009: 1226) due to the mythical attachment to the land as a passage to Ethiopia.

Etymologically speaking, the word 'Kemant' seemingly derived from the terminology '*Kemā-ent*', literally which means 'You *Kam* or *Kamatic*' implying the people of '*Kam*' descents^{vii} which reinforces Kemant's ethno-geographic self- identification as descendent of ancient Israelites. In essence, the word 'Kemant' denotes more than a description of the people having a common ancestor or origin. It strongly affirms that they have a collective name which symbolizes their uniqueness and distinguishes them from other groups. It has also a potential for political usage.

4.2 People and Land

The Kemant are the original inhabitants of the north central Ethiopia (Gamst, 1969:1). Their historical land stretched from north of Lake *Tana*, the origin of *Abya* River (Blue Nile), to North West rural areas around Gonder town (The Interim Committee, 2004EC: 6). *Chilga*, *Metema* and *Lay Armachiho* were the historic places. Since the mid-1950s, they have been immigrated to the areas inhabited by Amharas and established their settlements.^{viii} Nowadays, the Kemant reside around the highlands of northern and north western parts of Gonder town (Tinbitu, 2005EC: 34). The deputy chairperson of the Interim Committee revealed that the Kemant inhabited eight woredas in North Gonder Zone contiguously, including *Quara*, *Chilga*, *Lay Armachiho*, *Denbia* and *Metema* and portions of *Wogra*, partially in Gondar and *Gonder Zuria Woreda*. These areas are also inhabited by a large Amhara population.

According to the 1984 and 1994 Ethiopian Housing and Population Census the total population of the Kemant was 169,169 and 172,327, and the 17th and 10th populated groups respectively. Without doubt, the census reports were less likely to reflect the exact population size of the time, and any conceivable demographic transition. This would be partly due to many were unenthusiastic to disclose their Kemant identity as it was not convenient time for them. The people might have preferred to hide their identity due to fear of discrimination and exclusion, as we shall see it later^{ix}.

At the moment, precise population figures have difficult to determine because the Kemant were not counted in the latest national census of 2007. Unofficial estimates have ranged from 300,000^x, to 600,000^{xi}, to 1 million^{xii}. It is important to look these numbers critically because political elites might overestimate to get more public attention. Thus, the population size remains a major political and academic spot light. However, it would be safe to say that the figure is increasing due to the politico-legal changes in the past two decades. In the country where ethnic 'nationality' has been promoted and respected many might not fear to reveal their identity. The growing political activism is also a key factor in increasing individuals' self- identification.

4.3 Language, Religion and Ethnicity

Language and religion are essential elements in the formation of ethnicity, i.e. a 'collective identity', along with common culture and history. They are sources and forms of social, cultural and political identification (Brubaker, 2012:3). Kemant's language and traditional religion has been uncovered in more details since F. Gamst's (1960) anthropological study of the people sixty years ago. He found the Kemant as self-evidently distinct ethnic group.

During my fieldwork, many informants define themselves as a group belongs to *Agew Cush* family^{xiii} who speak or couldn't speak and/or whose ancestors spoke *Kemantney* language and who have common history and culture different from the Amharas^{xiv}. Implicit is a loose attachment to the language for self- identification criterion. *Kemantney* is not written language. It belongs to the central Cushitic *Agew* languages^{xv} (Appleyard, 1974:3160) and hence a sister language of the *Agew-Awi* (in *Gojjam*) and the *Xamta* (in Wollo) of Ethiopia and the *Bil* of Eritrea (Zelalem, 2002: 11).

In the 1994 population census, 4831 people were *Kemantney* speakers. The recent Interim Committee's survey (2004EC) reveals more than 6000 speakers in 54 sample *kebeles*^{xvi} mainly elderly people (on average those of above 50) in *Chilga*, *Lay Armachiho* and *Wogera woredas*. But, they are bilingual in *Kemantney* and Amharic.^{xvii} Therefore *Kemantney* seems in no way endangered or 'on the verge of extinct,' as stated by Dawit (2010) and Zelalem (2003). It is an important marker of identity in multilingual Ethiopian society. This research, however, found that many people identified themselves as Kemant though unable to speak the language.

Historically, the role of Kemant religion, *Hege-Lebona*^{xviii} (literally which means believe in heart), was another essential element in providing a sense of Kemant-ness among the people. Fredric Gamst (1969:29) stating that:

"the religion of the Kemant is the focal point of this closely knit ethnic group, providing its members with a sense of group identity, reinforcing their basic values, and rigidly defining the social boundaries between them and their neighbor (Gamst, 1969:29)

Today, the majority of Kemant belong to the Orthodox Christian, while some others are Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, because of the historic process of massive Christianization policies (Gamst, 1969: 1; Worku, 2010: 2). A very few individuals who identified themselves, even by other Kemant people, as '*awura/wana Kemant*' (original Kemant) (Dawite, 2010: 7), estimated as 0.01% of the total population (Tinbitu, 2005EC: 48) in rural areas of *Aykel* have still maintain their old religious tradition^{xix}. Their geographic remoteness might have helped them to escape from the historic Christianization and assimilation policies since 14th century. The religion is still considered as a constitutive element for the collective identity of this group of Kemant people. Religious

affiliation amongst other Kemant remains. Some Orthodox Christians have been participated in religious ceremonies, contributed money for religious performance of the Kemant priests and respect Saturdays as their main Sabbath day.^{xx}

In sum, the majority who identify themselves as Kemant don't speak *Kemantney* language nor follow *Hege-Lebona* religion^{xxi}, which implicates that language and religion are, important, but not the necessarily accounts for ethnic belongingness, while they have historically been fundamental identity markers (Gamist 1960). Nonconformity doesn't necessary affect identification to the group. Kemant-ness is, thus, characterized by re-defining identity in more inclusive terms. Indeed, self-identification grounded on the belief in common ancestor, which has a prime importance, culture and history have constituted Kemant identity.

5. Kemant People's Political Movement in post 1991

Kemant political movement has largely been a post 1991 phenomenon. Beside their shared experience of marginalization and exclusion, and the new politico-legal environment emerged for mobilizing ethnic identities, their struggle has mainly grown- out of the wider conditions of discontent in the federal arrangement that denied and marginalized their existence as a distinct 'nationality'. Since then, it is possible to identify at least two phases of their political struggles.

5.1 Elite based movements in 1990s

In 1991, like other ethnic groups, individuals around Gonder town began organizing themselves to take part in the federal democratic polity that would be organized on the principle of political equality, participation and representation of 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia. Their political network was composed of patriarchal self-appointed middle income urban, educated and politically interested, and who had no any connection with political parties or militant groups of the time. Most of them, i.e., political elites, were civil servants.^{xxii}

Despite their anticipations, the transitional government (1991-1995) and the subsequently established federalist state (in 1995) denied the existence of Kemant while accepting more than 60 ethnic groups as the constituents of the federal arrangement. In the early 1990s, political elites, who claim to represent the people, with strong Kemant identity had grown-up. But, organized mass movement to challenge the transitional government had not been emerged albeit marginalization and discrimination by the federalist state created public grievance (Tinbitu, 2005EC: 60). Political elites demonstrated little sign of overt action to mobilize the people.^{xxiii}

Nevertheless, sporadic political movements had continued to challenge attempts of obliterating Kemant from the new political map especially after the then Prime minister, Tamrat Layna, speech who pronounced that the Kemant, who 'had lived around *Gonder*', were for the most part thoroughly assimilated and 'they became ordinary *Gonderianess*' and thus, their claim of identity was inauthentic and inconsistent^{xxiv}. One of the earliest political elites said that they were questioning about what the prime minster meant by 'ordinary *Gonderianess*.' He said that 'we are Kemant nationality live in Gonder'. Soon, they re-organized themselves for demanding recognition of their identity and the protection of their constitutional rights. In 1993 their movement began to incorporate socio-economic and environmental issue by establishing Kemant Development association (KDA), that bear a resemblance to western style of civil society organizations, to contribute towards alleviating socio-economic problems of the people. The then Chairperson of the association, Nega Geta, revealed that they had a 'plan to change the association to political party', named as Kemant People Democratic Movement (KPDM). The association was seen as the financial basis for the establishment of the party. Latter, being suspicious of their engagement with the public and political activities beside the inconvenient early periods for the regime, the state urged elites to withdraw their activities which resulted in the closure of the association.

Despite the broad spectrum of the political movement, including struggles for identity, rights, development and environment issues, the movement had no clear organizational structure and had been separated from the public as well. The focus of their activities in urban areas perhaps gave little hope to the majority of rural people to support the movement. This was evident in 1995. When the federalist state was established and continued the marginalization of the Kemant from the new political map, although public anger against the state was prevailed, political elites couldn't attract the public to strength and legitimize their struggle. In 1990s up to mid-2000s elite dominated political movement had not been successful in challenging the federal experiment. However, the movement produced a political consciousness amongst the urban and educated Kemant people.

5.2 Organized Mass Movements in post 2007

The second phase of Kemant nationalist movement has emerged recently triggered by the 2007 population

census. When their previous distinct status was denied, and discriminatory privilege was given, political elites highly politicized the census by framing it as ‘silent identity genocide’. This gave rise to a strong nationalist sentiment and political awareness across urban and rural area, leading to mass mobilization and engagement. In the late 2000s, Kemant’s political movement has gained more prominence.^{xxv}

In May 2007, a committee consisted of seven members was established by political elites for challenging the state’s abrogation of their ethnicity from the census. Requests had been made to North Gonder Zone Statistics Office, Amhara National Regional State Population and Housing Census Commission and Central Statistics Agency (CSA) to include the Kemant ethnicity and language in the census questionnaire. In addition, the committee had took the case to the House of Federation (HF), but the census continued without any change^{xxvi} and finally the Kemant were believed to be counted under ‘Amhara ethnic group’ or ‘Other Ethiopian nationals’ category.^{xxvii}

In May 2009, Kemant Nationality Claim for Identity and self-rule Coordinating Committee also known as the Interim Committee was established signaling the new phase in the political movement. It is an ad hoc committee, and the sole political agent, for coordinating activities and presenting claims to the polity in a peaceful, non-violent and legal manner under the politico- legal framework provided in post 1991. With its political base in Gonder town the Committee claims to represent all Kemant people, which legitimizes and hence consolidates the quest. It has a Council consists of 120 members from all Kemant *woredas*. The Council established 12 Central Executive Committees of which three (3) were females. Its leadership, for the most part, is in the hands of male urban educated individuals. The organizational structure of the Interim Committee also includes Kemant Women Association (KWS) and Kemant Youth Association (KYA). In order to perform day to day activities, the coordinating committee has extended its organizational structure to *woreda* and *kebele* levels^{xxviii} that could bring the grassroots people closer to the Committee.

The Committee has managed to gain substantial public support. In July 2009, it protested, and presented to the House of Federations, through 18,584 public petitions and one *woreda* and 10 *kebele* administrations official letters supporting their political struggle. Undoubtedly, it signals a change from purely elite affairs to mass political movement. However, not all Kemant people support the movement especially those government officials of Kemant origin. Lack of the necessary economic basis and representation in the state, it become very difficult to robust the political struggles. Therefore, the Interim Committee should search for support from the mainstream political parties, the media, the scholarship and the general public.

6. Reclaiming and Reconstructing Kemant Identity

The Kemant, for a century, have been stigmatized and identified in demeaning terms, labelled as ‘wood’, ‘born of wood’ and ‘worshippers of wood’ associated with their supply of wood to Gonder town, worshippers in grove trees and women’s wooden earrings (Quirin, 1998: 217; Zelalem, 2003:46-51). It was partly this ‘dehumanization’, ‘impaired subjectivity’ and ‘damaged self-identity’ that led individuals’ self- denial and *Amharanazation* of themselves for many years (Worku, 2010:2; Zelalem, 2003:46) let alone a strong ethno-nationalist sentiments to emerge.

By the early 1990s, however, the people began to challenge the institutional denial of Kemant from constituting the new federalist political map of Ethiopia, while its de facto existence precedes the politico-legal dynamics of the federal state. With the onset of a new framework in post 1991 Ethiopia configured by ethnic federalism, some nationalists had been involved in political activism at local and regional levels demanding state’s acceptance of the hitherto marginalized and stigmatized identity and a transformative public attitude towards Kemant through public institutions. In this manner, socio-legal recognition and respect for Kemant identity had taken salient precedence in their political movement.^{xxix}

Identity aspirations surfaced with a renewed sprite in post 2007 whereupon consciousness of being part of, declaring, and promoting Kemant identity progressively appeared. However, by no means Kemant exists in the federal polity as the statist perspective holds. The Amhara regional government, in whose jurisdiction the claim is made, has continuously expressed that the Kemant have not a distinct socio-cultural tradition from the Amharas neither ‘mutually intelligible language among the majority’. This has fuelled public reaction in resisting attempts of assimilation, but also signaled to adopt a new path for Kemant identity aspirations. Consequently, since the late 2000s Kemant’s quest has been marked by identity reclaims and reconstruction efforts in order to challenge the statist view through solidifying their ethnic boundaries.

Yet, considering their history of assimilation, political elites believe that they have any past to reclaim. In this

regard, they strongly expressed the discourse of ‘recapturing lost identity,’^{xxx} cognizing and reclaiming ‘who they are/were’ (ontological claim). As one informant described, ‘we have engaged to reclaim our identity with a strong nationalist feeling’. But, as we shall see later, the process of recapturing identity has essentially involved in reconstruction of ‘what they want to be’ under the federal system (political aspiration). Quite positive development in Kemant’s identity politics is that the discourse in itself has never produced competing understandings of Kemant-ness, so far, that could jeopardize common identity aspirations.

Like the majority of my informants understanding of Kemant-ness, *Agew Cushitic* people of *Kam* descendants, the Interim Committee, by making language and socio-cultural traditions more salient, has engaged in restoring Kemant identity markers and consciousness. It has been providing language teachings for children and adults, in *Gonder, Aykel* and *Lay Armachiho woredas*, outside state’s formal education system. In addition, it has been organizing cultural platforms to revive and articulate apparently long forgotten socio-cultural traditions for restoring people’s sense of Kemant-ness through the development of individual’s ‘self-confidence’, ‘self-respect’ and ‘self-esteem’. Thus, the discourse of ‘recapturing lost identity’ is a move to revitalize ethnic consciousness through recovering, reconstructing and mobilizing their distinct elements that could help to define Kemant-ness and to increase individual’s sense of identification to Kemant. Focus group discussants stated that they are proud of their identity and especially the young were enthusiastic to able to speak their language. Therefore, I would say that the emphasis on recapturing lost identity has been partly characterized by ‘*Kemantizing*’ the people.

Although Kemant people’s quest is not necessarily, or motivate by the desire, for recapturing the traditional *Hege-libona* religion because the majority of Kemant are Christians today, the Interim Committee has a strong linkage with the religious leader (*Wenber*). It observes religious ceremonies, mostly attended by the residents of *Chilga woreda*, which is important for maintaining social solidarity and preserving the religion, and for demarcating Kemant’s past. More importantly, it illustrates the inclusive character of Kemant-ness. The discourse of reclaiming identity moves beyond conceptions of self-recovering to a broader process of dialogue with the state. The Committee has put forward rigours demand for a favorable environment to be in placed to rehabilitate Kemant culture, tradition, language and to write and preserve their ‘true history’ (The Interim Committee, 2005EC:5)^{xxxi}, which of course embedded in state’s discourse of ‘Multi-nationality’. Implicitly, state has no a more active and constitute role in identity reconstruction, rather a supportive one.

Aspiration for identity is, therefore, self-conscious assertion increasingly pushed by elites that certainly has a crucial political utility in their overall quest that operates within which ethnic identity is a necessary precondition for autonomy and political representation in the federal polity. In essence, the recapturing Kemant identity is not an end state affair but instrumentalist act to demand ‘nationality’ status, along lines of common descent, history, tradition, and language since the federalist constitutional arrangement allows ethnic groups to gain a better sense of their identity and gives them the agency in determining ‘who they are’ and in maintaining and reconstructing their identities.

7. Struggling for Autonomy in the Federalist State

The late 2000s marked a significant development in Kemant people’s political movement. The 2007 national population census, and the subsequent public resentment, provided a crucial opportunity for elites to strength and ‘radicalize’ their demands by stirring it to the level of autonomy, which resonated with Cornell’s (2002:5) idea that ethnic mobilization among minorities in multiethnic states has often led to demands for autonomy under the state or to demands for outright secession, to overcome marginalization and exclusion of the Kemant in the federal polity. This development has generated a new political discourse, and ideological basis, for their quest that pointed to effective implementation of ethnically based federal system.

The Kemant enthusiastically proclaimed the demand for ‘self-rule,’ rather than calling ‘self-determination’ as the 1995 constitution stipulates in order to thwart attempts at branding them as ‘radicalized’ or ‘secessionist’ and to cultivate genuine public support. This demand took recourse to the state machinery; article 39 of the federalist constitution is fronted as the cardinal basis for their quest. Sub article 1, explicitly states that ethnic groups have ‘unconditional’ right to self-determination up to secession; the demand for secession from the state is, therefore, constitutionally protected.

With quite similar understanding of ‘self-rule’, amongst the informants, the Kemant are demanding a new Zone or Woreda administrative structure within the Amhara regional state that provides them with political autonomy to govern their affairs, what Mancini (2008:554-5) termed as ‘internal self-determination,’ ‘people’s quest for freedom and desire to determine their own political, economic, and social life within the framework of an existing state’. Certainly, with the implementation of self-determination, the Kemant will have ‘parity of

participation' and political representation in the regional and federal governments (article 39 (3)). Hence, their political aspiration inherently involves the struggle for political space with the federalist polity on the basis of their ethnicity towards equality with other 'nationalities'. By the very legal fact, 'self-rule' also extends to territory autonomy including resources available in the area, and redistribution of national resources, for example in the form of state budget that would be allocated to the new administrative structure.

Moreover, from the vantage point of most informants, 'self-rule' is a 'basic constitutional demand' that can provide a sense of security and autonomy to maintain, promote and reconstruct their ethnic identity (art.39 (2)^{xxxii} as well as a special status rights (article 61 (2)) and institutions that can be used for maneuvering further identity politics. Hence, it essentially enhances Kemant's identity, and Kemant's power to challenge specific state policies and programs that affect their ethnicity, language, cultural tradition etc. It provides more autonomy to freely practice and maintain socio-cultural practices and the opportunity to make *Kemantney* one of official languages in the state. This demonstrates that ethnic identity reconstruction is linked basically to the political process and is largely dependent on whether political autonomy is at hand to prevent oppression and to maintain and able to develop identities.

Like their aspirations for a recognized Kemant ethnicity, the quest for autonomy remains politically contentious. A statist view asserted that it is 'self-appointed individuals who claim to represent the 'Kemant people' rather a distinct group demanding political and territorial autonomy. In the late August 2013, the Amhara Regional State in whose jurisdiction the claim is made declared that there are very few individuals (aged 50 and above) who speak *Kemantney* language and live in non-contiguous *woredas*^{xxxiii}. Yet, it has not pronounced them to fall within the 'nationality' category. Therefore, neither the Kemant legally exists nor the claim for 'self-rule' is authentic.

Kemant elites took a dim view of statist's perspective, of looking 'Who constitute the Kemant people?' rather than 'Who are the Kemant people?' as unnecessary act of delaying or denying their aspirations. They have asserted that there is a great deal of prima facie evidences supporting Kemant's fulfillment of both objective and subjective criteria of 'nationality-hood' according to the federalist principles. They have pointed out that the Kemant have common culture, customs and tradition, language, belief in a common identity, common psychological make-up, and inhabited contiguous areas. They also emphasized that most academics and researchers (Gamst, 1964; Quirin, 1998; Dawite, 2010; Timbitu, 2010) have approached the Kemant from the perspective that they are self-evidently a distinct ethnic group. While the contention between the statist view and Kemant aspirations is sharpened and continued, simultaneously, the development of important identity markers such as language and socio-cultural traditions is highly prioritized by the Interim Committee in order to demarcate their distinctiveness.

Conclusion

Kemant people's political movement, grown out of conditions of alienation and discontent in Ethiopian federal experiment in 1990s, is entrenched in ethnic identity reclaims for autonomy. Identity assertion, and the subsequent legal acceptance of their 'nationality' status by the state, has taken precedence. Since 2007, Kemant nationalists have been engaged in active political struggle motivated by the desire for reclaiming Kemant's distinctiveness based on common descent, and language, history and cultural tradition that had been lost by the historic processes of '*Amharanization*' and Christianization policies since 14th century. They have been struggling to reconstruct identify markers to define and redefine Kemant-ness in a more inclusive manner and to solidify ethnic boundaries whilst resisting any practices of assimilation by the state. Thus, the crux of the political awakening and national sentiment has been revolved around ethnic identity reclaiming, rather than to be the victims of a superimposed identification as Amharas by the federal arrangement itself, in the context of multicultural politics in which they found themselves.

However, aspiration for identity is not just a socio-political act of recovering or reclaiming fractured Kemant identity, before it entirely melts in the existing federal structure, that partly shows the experience of assimilation and domination, but also an instrumentalist act of *Kemantizing* the people for demanding, and strengthening, the quest for decentralization and political autonomy. As a matter of the federal experiment, solidifying both subjective and objective ethnic markers for achieving a recognized 'nationality status' in the state, which is a necessary condition for demanding self-determination including secession that is granted for 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia, remains so important in their political struggle.

While Kemant 'nationality' lacks de jure recognition, since the late 2000s they have been demanding for political autonomy to administer themselves and for inclusion within institutional practices of the federalist polity that has endowed 'nations, nationalities and peoples' 'parity of participate' and representation. With

regard to this, they are basically emphasizing (1) effective application of ethnic based federal experiment; and (2) the principle of non-discrimination to be applied to their demand for internal self-determination that can contribute for a more secure environment for maintaining and developing Kemant identity.

One of the interesting finding of this research is that ethnic identity and autonomy are not end objectives or demands in themselves but part of a continuum in Kemant political quest. It is common to most scholarly works in making identity- autonomy nexus based on the idea that identity plays a crucial role in self-identification and claim for political and territorial autonomy. However, what is mostly missed is that strong link between the quests for autonomy in the search for ethnic identity. The Kemant case shows how aspirations for identity and autonomy are intimately connection and reinforced each other as the federal experiment provides the framework.

Yet, the question remains why the Kemant continue to demand ‘self-rule’ in a situation where recognition of its very ‘nationality’ status by the state, a necessary precondition for self-administration in the federalist state, is still a distant hope? The justification still lays on Ethiopian federal experiment. The mere recognition and acceptance as a distinct ethnic group does not guarantee the entitlement of autonomy for self-administration although the federalist system has configured to guarantee self-determination opportunities including secession from the state. This is evident that out of the total number of more than 80 ethnic groups in the state (CSA, 2007) seventy five (75) ethnic groups have political and territorial autonomy and representation in the federal government. This state practice raises a crucial question ‘why?’

For a state ruled by minority ethnic group, Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front /Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF/EPRDF), addressing the demand of other minorities of having a common history of marginalization and oppression seems promising. Politico-legal framework is in placed to protect and promote plurality of the state and to grant ethnic groups’ the opportunity to participate in the federal arrangement. Hence, there is no reason in principle that state under EPRDF would deny the demands of Kemant people. In this case, why Kemant’s quest for ethnic identity and autonomy is delayed, and perhaps denied, for the past two decades remains another important issue to be explored.

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END NOTES

ⁱ *Dergue*, literally mean 'committee'/Military Junta, refers to the Provisional Military Administrative Council that ruled Ethiopia from 1974-1991

ⁱⁱ For the purpose of my analysis, I took the three categories as ethnic groups.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with constitution interpretation and constitutional rights directorate, House of Federations, Addis Ababa

^{iv} As cited in Quirin (1998:203) the name 'Kemant' is found in 'Liberato da San Lorenzo, 28 May 1714', in Camillo Beccari (ed.), *Rerum Aethiopicarum: Scriptorum Occidentales inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX* (15 vols.)

^v Interview with Chilga wereda Council Chair Person, Aykel; see also Tinbitu, 2005 EC pp.24-25; Dawit, 2010 p.54

^{vi} EC means Ethiopian Calendar. It is Just 8 years behind the Gregorian calendar.

^{vii} Focus group discussions; See also Tinbitu (2005EC: 27-28)

^{viii} Interview with Chilga wereda Council Chair Person, Aykel

^{ix} Focus group discussion in Gonder and Aykel

^x Tinbitu, 2005EC:34

^{xi} Interview with political activist and former chairperson of Kemant Development association

^{xii} The Interim Committee, Research on Kemant Nationality Quest for identity and self-rule, July 2004EC

^{xiii} The Agew people ruled Ethiopia from undefined period to 1270

^{xiv} Focus group discussions, Gonder

^{xv} The four linguistic families in Ethiopia are Semitic, Omotic, Cushitic and Nilo-Saharan

^{xvi} Kebele is the smallest administrative unite in Ethiopia

^{xvii} Interview with Deputy Chair Person of the Interim Committee, Gonder

^{xviii} Hege Lebona has been described as 'pagan-Hebraic' consisted of traditional indigenous African religious practices with Old Testament influences. They have special outdoor places of worship, such as certain groves of trees, where prayers recited, sacrifices performed and offerings left. They have priesthood, though no written books. They venerated Saturday, observed memorial service for the dead, in common with Christians. Once a year, they assembled on a hill and performed sacrifices in a 'Day of Atonement'. see also Quirin (1998) pp.216-219

^{xix} Interview with Chilga wereda Council Chair Person, Aykel

^{xx} Focus group discussion, Aykel; Interview with Chilga wereda Council Chair Person, Aykel; Dawit, 2010 pp.80-83

^{xxi} Interview with Deputy Chair Person of the Interim Committee, Gonder

^{xxii} Interview with political activist and former chairperson of Kemant Development association in 1990s

^{xxiii} Former Chairperson of The Kemant quest for Recognition Coordinating Committee

^{xxiv} Interview with Deputy Chair Person of the Interim Committee; and Interview with political activist and

former chairperson of Kemant Development Association

^{xxv} Interview with Deputy Chair Person of the Interim Committee

^{xxvi} Ibid

^{xxvii} Others' category includes nationals who have no ethnic background which are recognized under Ethiopian polity or who are not identified themselves to any ethnic group.

^{xxviii} Interview with Deputy Chair Person of the Interim Committee

^{xxix} The struggle for Kemant identity has never been a new phenomenon of post 1991. Since 14th century, the Abyssinia (historic name of Ethiopia) incursion to Kemant, the people tried to protect their identity and integrity and maintained control of their land by incorporated peacefully and pay tribute to the state (see Quirin 1998 pp.218-220). In 20th century, *Womber* (leader of Kemant religion) wrote a letter to Emperor Hailselassie (1931-1974) to preserve their religion and their desire not to be Charistainized.

^{xxx} The Interim Committee, 2004, p.5

^{xxxi} The Interim Committee Letter to the House of Federations, January 14, 2005 EC

^{xxxii} Article 39 (2) states that ethnic groups have the right to use and develop their own languages; to express, to develop and promote its culture; and preserve its historical heritage

^{xxxiii} Office of the Speaker of the Amhara National Regional Council, Decision on Kemant Nationality Quest for Identity and Self-rule, August 2005 EC, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Translation mine