



## Research article

## Regionalisation or marginalisation? The case of the Oromo living in Amhara region of Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

Since Ethiopia adopted a multinational federation in 1991, Amhara and Oromiya have evolved into nationalist regional states that serve the political interests of the ethnic Amhara and Oromo, respectively. Drawing borders does not conform to ethno-territoriality, leaving some outside their home regions. In this article, we shed light on the marginalisation currently faced by the Oromo people living in areas stretching on the regional Amhara side of the border with the Oromiya region. The data used combined interviews, focus group discussions, observations, audiovisual archives, and documentary reviews. We found Oromos in areas severely marginalised by dominant political narratives that have attempted to promote homogeneous ethno-states. They experience an institutional marginalisation that limits their social and political opportunities. The study points to the need to address the repressive structures that lead to the structural marginalisation of people. Above all, the demarcations in the study area are revised.

## 1. Introduction

After the fall of the socialist regime in 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) adopted multinational (ethnic) federalism. The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), Article 47(1), divides Ethiopia into nine national regional states. The aim of the federation is to tackle political, economic and social inequalities, especially for groups that have long been politically marginalised in Ethiopian politics. It had; however, its influence on groups forcibly reconstituted into newly established regional states lived outside of their homeland or national regional states. A good illustration is an Oromo community living in and around the town of Cheki in the North Shewa Zone, which stretches on the Amhara regional side of the border with Oromiya National Regional State. These people continue to experience marginalisation. A closer examination of the kind of marginalisation they face is needed. We will go into this in detail later in Section 4, but now turn to the conceptual and empirical examination of the issue of marginalisation (see Figures 1-3).

The notion of marginalisation has remained somewhat unspecific and is the subject of ongoing debate (Bernt and Colin 2013). This is partly because of how marginalisation is used across disciplines: sociology, geography, and urban studies. In the sociological field, Robert Park

constructed the concept of marginality in his essay 'The Marginal Man', which focused on migration and immigrants (Park 1928). Others, such as Janet Mancini Billson (2005), focus on structural marginality, which she characterises as "the political, social, and economic powerlessness of certain disenfranchised and/or disadvantaged segments within societies" (Billson 1988:2). In geographic studies, marginality means the state of being shelved from mainstream processes both in society and economy as well as in relation to the natural environment and geographical remoteness (Leimgruber 2018). In Urban Studies, marginality is defined as a group of people who lack access to the city's economic and formal infrastructure (Cahyani and Widaningsih 2019). Here marginalisation refers to the left-wing Latin-American debates of the 1960s and 1970s (Caldeira 2009) and how urbanisation brought about the one-sidedness and exclusion of immigrants from established urban societies, economies and political structures. Marginal or marginalisation has become arguably one of the most widely used concepts in urban studies over the past decade. This is largely due to the work of Loïc Wacquant who developed his "advanced marginality" concept, which was crucial to his studies of deprived neighbourhoods in Chicago and Paris (Wacquant 2008).

Marginalisation is a global problem that adversely affecting millions of people around the world (Mowat 2015). It is also one of the relevant

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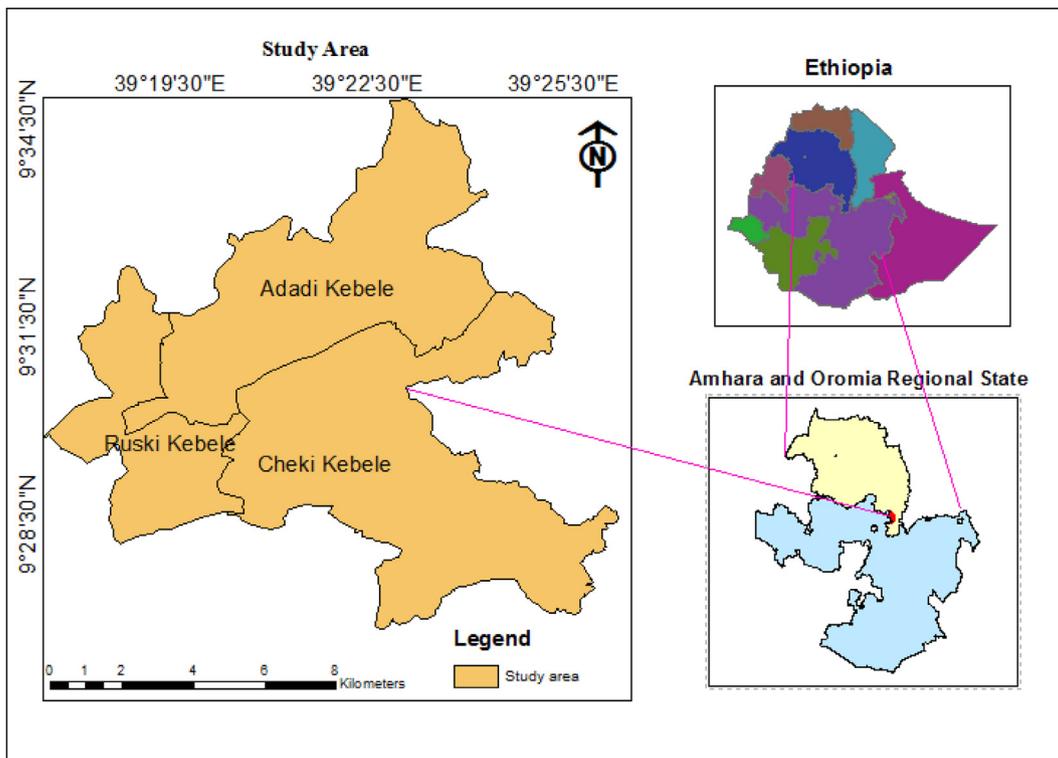


Figure 1. The location of the study area was extracted from Ethiopian GIS (Map made by Kumssa Dekeba).



Figure 2. Hall meeting that Qeerroo representative committee held with community members (Taken from photograph kept by youths of the area September 2019).

and studied topics in the country of Ethiopia (Barata 2012; Braukämper 2018; Braukmann 2012; Freeman 2003; Hailu 2016; Mengesha 2014; Yoshida 2013). Common to all studies are occupational groups and clan-based marginalisation. The geographic focus is in the southwestern part of Ethiopia. The present study fills the existing gap in these previous studies and the starting point of this article lies in the following two points: First, we do not take the existing analytical categories of marginalisation-clan/individual experiences of social segregation and exclusion from engagement in the social life of their community. Second, we explicitly focus on ethnic groups living outside their “home” region. As such, one’s separation from home region has deeper implications for marginalised populations, who may experience more exclusion because of their ethnic background as compared to those ethnic groups living in their home region. This focus allows us to uncover the ethnic and regional nature of these groups’ marginalisation, rather than using clan,



Figure 3. Youths organising demonstration (Taken from audio visual records of the movement kept by qeerroo/youths of the area September 2019).

occupational status, or other elements as explanatory variables. By focusing on ethnic identification, we emphasise how the exercise of ethnonational federalism has formed ‘minority groups’ within a regional state and how the social and political structure of the ‘dominant group’ within the region subjects these groups to institutional marginalisation. This is because regional administrative institutions serve the interests of the dominant group (Amhara) at the expense of marginalising ‘other’ ethnic groups.

Based on the structural marginality of Janet Mancini Billson’s (2005), this paper seeks to approach the social and political marginalisation that ethnic groups face because they live outside their home region in the perspective of Ethiopia’s ethnic federal system. The article aims to contribute to the literature on the structural aspect of marginalisation, which has received the most attention in sociological studies in recent decades. This article is also the first of its kind to explore the structural marginalisation of communities in Ethiopia that are separate from their country and integrated with other regional states with different histories, languages, psychological makeups, and political cultures. Such problems

exist along Ethiopia's regional states boundaries and conflict spots. This research article will be used by others studying similar structurally marginalised communities in Ethiopia and elsewhere in the world.

## 2. Methodology

Methodologically, the article is the result of fieldwork conducted between January 19, 2019 and October 22, 2020. The fieldwork was carried out as part of a research project (first author's thesis) and aimed to understand the Oromo's' experiences of marginalisation in the regional state of Amhara after the restructuring of Ethiopia by the ruling EPRDF party in the early 1990s. The case study area, which will be described in [Subsection 3.1](#), was selected based on the first author's experience with the Oromo people in the area and the subject under consideration. As someone, who was born in the area, the researcher has rich information about the general situation of the area, particularly of the marginalisation of the Oromo people, which finally culminated in a youth-based movement against such marginalisation in 2018.

The study was approved by the Department Graduate Committee (DGC), which is accountable to The Research and Graduate Studies Co-ordination Office of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Jimma University. Our study was conducted according to established ethical guidelines, and informed verbal consent was obtained from the participants.

The methods used combined interviews, informal conversions, focus group discussions, observation, document review and content analysis of audiovisual materials and pictures. Participants for this study were selected from community members and officials using a purposive sampling technique: males and females of different ages, genders, educational levels, and economic activities. Study participants were using purposive sample for their wealth of information about the area. The data saturation point determined the number of participants. Conversations and face-to-face interviews were conducted in the natural environment as much as possible.

As part of this fieldwork, we interviewed a total of 24 individuals, 17 in-depth interviews with local people (elderly men and youth) and 7 key-informant interviews with political actors working in local administration and Woreda council members. A total of 7 FGDs were conducted with males and females (each FGD consisted of participants 6–9, corresponding to 52 participants). In total, primary data were generated from 76 participants, 55 men and 21 women.

The remaining article is organised as follows. The next section provides a brief description of the research area and brief history of the Oromo of the area. The second section discusses the incorporation of the Oromo people into the Amhara regional state and its influences on the practice of multinational federalism in Ethiopia. In the third section, the article then turns to the broader structural effects of federalism on people along the intra-federal border and how it manifests itself in structural marginalisation. The article further examines people's reactions to marginalisation to describe further public protests sparked by the start of the Oromo protest<sup>1</sup>. The concluding section elaborates on the main points of the article and outlines their potential impact for people living along intra-regional borders in Ethiopia's endeavour.

## 3. The setting

### 3.1. The study area

The study area (Adadi, Cheki and Ruski) is located in the north-central part of Ethiopia and is one of the areas predominantly inhabited by the Oromo people of present-day Amhara Regional State. The study area consists of three kebeles<sup>2</sup> spanning the intra-federal border of

the regional states of Amhara and Oromiya. As is well known, the borders of the states of the Ethiopian Federation were drawn by a border commission in 1991/92. The new administrative structure organised a unified Ethiopia into ethnationally based federation states. The creation of the new administrative map integrated the study area into the Amhara region. However, the incorporation seemed to ignore the principles of the current constitution, such as ethnolinguistic identification peoples and settlement patterns, which should play a key role in determining administrative boundaries. We will discuss later how and why this is the case in the study area.

### 3.2. The people

The Oromo are Cushitic speaking people. They inhabit a land stretching from north-east Ethiopia to east-central Kenya and from Sudan in the west to Somali-inhabited land in the east. Most Oromo live in Oromiya, Ethiopia. Official data shows that the Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia (Central Statistical Authority [CSA] 2007). The Oromo include many groups that branch off from the two main confederations or moieties: the Barentu and the Borana (Hassen 1994; Jalata 2010, 2021). All Oromo subgroups can and do trace their genealogies to these moieties. The descendants of these Oromo moieties historically occupied territorial areas in present-day Oromiya and Ethiopia (Jalata 2012).

According to our informants, the inhabitants of the study area historically belong to the Tulama people, one of the Borana branches of the Oromo moiety. The Tulama is divided into subgroups. The Abichu Oromo are one of the subgroups that settle in and around the study sites. The people of the area thus explicitly trace their genealogy back to the Tulama Oromo and then to the Abichu. The ethnolinguistic feature of the area speaks volumes about the Oromo than about the other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Afaan Oromo is widely spoken and used as a medium of interaction in their daily lives. They claim that it is Afaan Oromo that symbolises their identity and shapes their identification. It is worth noting that since Amharic is the working language in the Amhara regional state, the people of the region are only required to use it for official purposes.

## 4. Results and discussion

In the following, we describe and discuss the trajectory of the demarcation of the Oromo to the Amhara region, the marginalisation they face in the region, and the staged counter-resistance to the structural factors of marginalisation. Given that more than two decades have passed since the boundary was drawn, the Oromo people in Cheki and the surrounding area have taken a fresh look and now believe that the area they inhabit should be part of the Oromiya region.

### 4.1. The adadi, Cheki and Ruski incorporation into Amhara Regional state

How did the Oromo of these areas join the Amhara Regional State? Why violate the constitution; the Oromo communities of this area were included under the Amhara State jurisdiction, not the State of Oromiya. How was the process of that demarcation? How do these Oromo feel as they leave their Oromo nation and are incorporated into the Amhara State, who are completely different in terms of language, history and political culture? What are the disadvantages of being part of the state of another nation - Amhara? These questions have now become the subject of the stories told by the Oromo who live in the three localities mentioned in [Subsection 3.1](#).

When the National Ethno-Federation was adopted in 1991, the Oromo in the study area were incorporated into the Amhara region. The data from the fieldwork make it clear that in the villages/small towns we interviewed and conducted, the decision to incorporate the areas into the Amhara region was made without the consent of those affected. We attribute this to a lack of respect for the 1995 FDRE Constitution. Article

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014%E2%80%932016\\_Oromo\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014%E2%80%932016_Oromo_protests).

<sup>2</sup> The smallest administrative unit in Amhara region.

46 of the Constitution stipulated, among other things, that the consent of the people must be taken into account when forming the federal states. The initial process of delineating the borders between the states of the federation, participants said, saw the dominance of officials from both regions and at times a few Amhara and Oromo elders. However, Oromo elders of the area were brainwashed by the Amhara political elite before the actual demarcation took place.

Amhara political elites used various tactics to dissuade Oromo elders from joining the Oromiya region. One thing the elites took advantage of was the convenience of administration. If people in the study area want to receive public services at will, the elites told the elders, they had better join the cities of Chacha and Debre Berhan. The two cities are the administrative centers of Angolela and *Tera woreda* and the North Shewa Zone of the Amhara Region respectively. In terms of physical location, the Oromo in and around Cheki could indeed gain convenient access to public services, such as the Woreda Court and the zonal correctional center in the towns of Chacha and Debre Berhan, respectively. [Before the state reorganisation, the people of the region received such services from Sheno, the administrative center for the current Kimbibi district and the city of Fiche, the administrative center for the current North Shewa Zone in the Oromiya region]. In terms of physical proximity, Chacha and Debre Berhan were found closer to the study area than Sheno and Fiche. The Amhara officials then used this pretext to tell people how difficult it might be for them to go to Sheno regularly when they have matters like district court cases and to visit the town of Fiche when one day their family members or relatives to be imprisoned in the correctional center in the town.

The medium of school instruction is another issue that Amhara officials used to persuade the Oromo elders to side with them. The 1990s were an important moment in the history of primary education in Ethiopia. During this time, mother-tongue instruction was introduced in elementary schools. Matching this was the change in the country's language policy. (We will address the issue of language policy later in Subsection 4.3.2.2.) These changes marked the use of Qubee (Afaan Oromo alphabet) in the elementary schools that operated in the Oromiya region, let alone the other regions. In the Amhara region, Amharic continued to be used as the language of instruction at the elementary school level. It was believed that the Amhara elites commonly asserted how difficult it would be for students at Qubee Afaan Oromo elementary school to better understand the curriculum and succeed in their education. The elite then manipulated the Oromo elders into believing that the curriculum was likely to affect their children's education. The elders eventually became convinced that it was to join the Amhara region so that their children would receive an education in Amharic.

Meanwhile, officials decided to hold a community-level meeting. At the meeting, officials first asked Oromo elders to express their preference as to which regional state they would like to join. It is believed that the elders chose to join the Amhara region. The Amhara politicians used the opinion of the elders as a follower that temporarily changed public opinion. Eventually, the parishioners did nothing but accept what the elders agreed.

Officials from the Oromiya side did little to counter the manipulation from the Amhara side. These elders, who were believed to represent the Oromo of the area and whose interests they allegedly represented, did not valiantly resist this claim. Amhara officials maneuvered Oromo elders, including officials from the Oromiya region to betray those around them into accepting their incorporation into the Amhara region. After all, the Oromo in the area were not at all convinced that it would be desirable to include Adadi, Cheki and Ruski in the Amhara region. Eventually these areas went to the Amhara Regional State instead of Oromiya. Why? There are contextual and more important reasons.

First, as mentioned earlier, community members have no choice; expect accepting the choice made by the elders. This is because in Oromo culture, members of the community are expected to be respectful of their elders. Second, it was a time of political transition and confusion. There was a change from a centralised system of the Amhara-dominated

Ethiopian state to a federal one. According to Mekuria Bulcha, "the Ethiopian state was dominated by the Amhara until June 1991" (Bulcha 1997:348). The people on the borders found themselves in a dilemma when making their choice. Third, there was a shift from monolingual (Amharic) education to mother tongue education system. Suffice it to say that "in 1943 Amharic was declared the official language of Ethiopia and the medium[ language] of instruction in all elementary schools throughout the empire" (Bulcha 1997:335).

It continued to serve as "the sole medium of instruction in primary schools, followed by the use of English in secondary and higher education" (Ramachandran 2012:4) until 1991. Under these conditions, it is not surprising if people living on the border between two regional states could be faced with the dilemma of choosing between different education systems, which are adopted by the regional states.

Even under normal circumstances, as Kay (2005) noted in his analysis of identity and marginalisation, a group often faces complicated choices in defining and implementing its own identity. They can choose or feel compelled to conform to the norms and values of the dominant group. In other words, abandoning one's own alternative identities, or at least judging them by the standards of the dominant group. As he also noted, "dominant groups' grip on power to define and their ability to subordinate alternative identities, values and insights of either the past or the present realities is not limitless" (Kay 2005:2).

As one informant said: "*They [the elders] betrayed us.*" Study participants denied that the elders they were supposed to represent and speak on behalf of the Oromo in the region did nothing other than accept what the Amhara political elites said or were supposed to tell them during the region's demarcation. In retrospect, the elders realised that demarcating of their territories into the Amhara region was therefore a conspiracy. It neither renounced the fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution, nor was it based on a series of discussions involving all interested stakeholders, so that the final decision would have been taken by the free will of the people. The Oromo elders now reiterated that the areas they occupied simply became part of the Amhara regional state, and denying that the decision to work against peoples' preferences stood. For them, what happened was a simple political move that overlooked identity in the regional demarcation process. The elders have now claimed the Amhara elites wanted the part of the Amhara regional state because they wanted the land, not the people. One elder said, "*If they wanted us more than our country, why do we have to endure exclusion?*"

#### 4.2. The social and political marginalisation of the Oromo in Amhara

Let us be very clear about one thing. Although the Oromo live in different parts of the Amhara region, our concern here is for the people of the Adadi, Cheki and Ruski areas. It has become difficult for the Oromo in these areas to maintain their identity, participate in politics and access basic services without discrimination. And for their children access to native language education had not become easier. At this point it should be noted that structural marginalisation is one of the problems that the Oromo people continue to face in the Ethiopian state. When we conducted field research in 2019, the country was in a state of political upheaval following the widespread Oromo protests, culminating in a political turning point in 2018. The protests were triggered by Addis Ababa's master plan in 2014, which was later dropped, but the protests continued, emphasising issues such as exclusion and human rights abuses. Under such persistent circumstances, structural marginalisation has become a more important social issue for the Oromo people living in the Amhara region. How does structural marginalisation manifest itself?

In the following we want to examine the manifestations of structural marginalisation and discrimination of the Oromo in the study area. . The interpretation is organised around the themes of (a) ethnic identification, (b) deprivation of public services and political rights, (c) hostility and its impact on exclusion. The first two themes involve interrelated principles of ethnic federalism, which favours ethnic dissolution of political power, mother-tongue education, and the attainment of public services free from

favouritism and discrimination. The third issue concerns hostility towards the Oromo in and around Cheki.

#### 4.2.1. Identified nowhere considered minority

We start with identity and continue with minority. In Ethiopia, as in many countries, the issue of identity is widely debated. Ethnic identity is believed to have been the most organising principle in Ethiopian politics and administrative structures. This is implied in Article 46 of the FDRE Constitution, where ethnic-national identity could be used as one of the criteria that help to name (or identify with) people in a particular regional state. A regional state has a titular ethnicity and a non-titular ethnicity. In the Amhara region, Amhara is considered the dominant title. It is worth noting that the revised Amhara Constitution contains specific group rights for the Himra, Awi and Oromo in its Article 39(6) (2001 proclamation). It suggests that these groups have the same national rights as those considered indigenous in the region, the right to preserve their own national identity, including language and history, and self-government.

In reality, however, the official structure is being created by the Amhara regional government to shape the identity of the other groups in the region. The region simply cannot celebrate and practically recognise Oromo identity but wanted them to build their identity around speaking Amharic. Similar findings were found in a study of diverse European cities, suggesting that belonging and non-belonging to the city is mediated through state structures and discourses about nation, citizenship and belonging (Crul and Schneider 2010). However, pressure from officials has not pushed the Oromo of the area to reject their identity in favour of adopting the Amhara identity. It goes without saying that the political discourses tend to exclude the Oromo identity entirely from the Amhara regional state, pushing them into an ambiguous space of belonging. In this context, the marginalisation that the Oromo face in this area can be interpreted as both institutional marginalisation and self-marginalisation. One informant emphasises that people around him are able to resist assimilation and maintain their Oromo identity because of their self-marginalisation.

Needless to say, the Oromo live in a marginalised position in the area. They are also treated as a minority in the Amhara region, while in the neighbouring villages in Oromiya, the same people have been considered a majority since 1991. (This happened due to their isolation from their historical relatives.) They are not entitled to the rights their Oromo neighbours have in the Oromiya region. Therefore, they are treated neither as Amhara nor as Oromo. They cannot easily identify with the Amhara region due to the state administrative structure, which is built around Amhara interests and identity and sees others as outsiders. They are also not officially referred to as residents of Oromiya due to their Oromo identity. A participant of an FGD said:

We, the people who live on the borders of regional states, when someone asks us, "What is your ethnicity? Codes of the Oromiya and Amhara. We then divide them by two, which is  $(4 + 3) / 2 = 3.5$ . This means that three point five (3.5) is neither closer to three, the Amhara region code, nor far from four, the Oromiya region code. We are marginalised amidst regional borders, belonging to neither identity, but claiming to be Oromo. (FGD07, male discussant, place – Cheki town, Date – May 04, 2019.)

The point shows how the practice of ethno-territorial political organisation has made several ethnic groups a minority outside their designated ethno-territorial settings. Fessha (2017) has also argued that demarcating federal state territorial boundaries denotes affiliation with a particular ethnic group leaving the rest with a sense of outsidership. The living conditions of the Oromo in the study area reflect this reality. Thus, the Oromo, living along intra-regional borders are marginalised as a minority. This scenario of marginalisation is well described by Sen (1999) as a kind of trap against humanistic and free expression of feelings and the expansion of one's choices. Denying people the opportunity to

express their feelings in the language they understand; hinders their human aspects of development and contradicts their identity.

#### 4.2.2. Deprivation of public services and right

Adadi, Cheki and Ruski are areas in the Amhara region where the Oromo are deprived of basic social services. There are several factors why the deprivation occurs. First, their position on the periphery of state administration explains the deprivations. Adadi, Cheki and Ruski are not only outskirts but also combat corridors between the Amhara and Oromiya regional states. This has far-reaching implications for people's access to public services such as health care and secondary education. This has to do with the general assumption that people in the area do not need additional public services such as health care facilities and secondary schools. This stems from the belief that those residing in the border area between the two states would benefit from the existing services already established near the two states. Given the limited infrastructure coverage in the country, this assumption seems logical and compelling at face value.

Second, another possible barrier could arise from the language barrier. For a century, the Oromo were denied the use of their language in healthcare, school, court, and business. In general, this problem has changed since 1991 with the introduction of ethnic federalism. Despite this change, the situation of the Oromo in Adadi, Cheki and Ruski has not changed. This has to do with the political practice of the regional administrations. Regional states have their own specific policies, which in turn govern the administration and delivery of social services. For example, working in public institutions reporting to a specific region requires a specific language. Related to the Amhara region and specific to the study area, Amharic is the working language. Services, including health, are provided by the mainstream Amharic-speaking staff.

**4.2.2.1. Primary health care.** The major gap in primary health care is closely related to the multicultural and linguistic competence of health care providers. According to the study participants, the Oromo in Adadi, Cheki and Ruski recognise that health services provided by Amharic-speaking health workers are indifferent to their needs. The language barrier therefore prevents the Oromo-speaking population from attending the health facilities in the cities of the Amhara region. This prompts them to seek these services in Oromiya, Sheno town of Qimbit Woreda.

Most of the people in the area then tried to visit the health facilities in Oromiya. Although they do not have communication barriers, getting health services in Oromiya is not without problems. They are afraid of administrative procedures. This concern is not necessarily attributed to an unfamiliarity with the health facilities in Oromiya, but rather to the administrative problems in procuring primary health services from the Oromiya region. [Basically, they are not entitled to primary health care in Oromiya region.] Therefore, counting residents of Amhara region in the primary health care of Oromiya would cause resentment among those who administer and deliver those services. "We will be forgotten in everything because we are on the border of two regions," said a key informant. This quotation shows that in both cases the Oromo of Adadi, Cheki and Ruski could be marginalised.

**4.2.2.2. Primary education without mother tongue.** In Ethiopia, mother tongue education (MTE) emerged as part of language legal protection and recognition of language groups. It is contained in Article 39(2) of the FDRE Constitution of 1994, which states that nation and nationalities in Ethiopia have the right to speak, write, develop their own language in order to express and promote their own culture and to preserve their history. This has become a framework for a new educational policy governing the use of languages in education. This implies the recognition of cultural diversity, the consideration of national minorities and the promotion of social cohesion. Regarding the use of languages in education, the new education policy formulated a general principle that

primary education in Ethiopia should be in the language of nationality (Ministry of Education [MOE] 1994). The right to one's own language development and MTE are promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 1953) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article (30) of 1989.

Although the policy clarifies that mother tongue primary education is considered part of the official fabric of the Ethiopian state, the practice of such a policy is controversial. In the Amhara region, in accordance with the mother tongue education policy, the regional government has introduced language instruction guidelines aimed at non-Amharic speaking students. As a result, the region opened elementary schools aimed at educating students in their native language. Despite these advances, the schools offering instruction in their mother tongue to Oromo students in the study region have not yet opened.

Oromo children in the study area are deprived of their basic rights of learning in their mother tongue. According to the study participants, the school system in their area has limited their students' potential to better understand the content elementary school courses and to be successfully in the classroom. Study participants also found that the Afaan Oromo speaking pupils of Adadi, Cheki and Ruski areas spent their time in schools without understanding what a teacher is teaching and without meaningfully participating in class. To clarify this issue, a key informant who is a school principal stated the following:

I always accept complaints from teachers teaching First Cycle, grades 1–4, who complain about their inability to communicate with their students. An amazing scenario that I vividly remember was a time when we just reported to the Woreda Education Office as if the students were learning better. But, 153 children in Adadai School who are assessed by teachers on the final academic year are found totally unable to hear, speak and write in Amharigna. We just passed them on to the next class. All these students speak Afaan Oromo are in the first grade. The Woreda Education Office knows this problem. We and the community itself are brought to the responsible authority with the problem for a solution. However, nothing was done. And in my experience, children in this area have been learning this way for many years. (KII 05 Sex- Male, Age - 34, Place –Cheki town, Date - March 26, 2019.)

Studies, for example by Shapson and D'Oyley (1984) have shown that schools should not only be a place where language is taught, but rather a place where instruction through language takes place and where most of the learning takes place depends on the ability of the students. Students understand what the teacher is saying. However, the educational structure in the case of the Oromo in the city of Cheki and adjacent areas is non-native in nature and children of the region have experienced learning disabilities and cultural assimilation.

Participants expressed concern about the introduction of primary education in the Amhara region, seeing it as a tool to detach the Oromo from their own identity. The school system essentially required the Oromo student to learn Amhara culture and then ultimately aimed at Amharization. Our key informants also mentioned that the Amhara region uses the school system as an aspect of institutional assemblies for the acculturation of other identities, including the Oromo. However, the Oromo of the area clearly rejected this assimilation system. This ended them with exclusion. But here, too, people did not sit idly by and saw that their marginalisation continued. Rather, they have begun to fight against it. One farmer in the study stated that:

The lack of awareness meant our elders did not realise how Oromo segregation in the Amhara region would benefit the Oromo people. It [the demarcation] has brought no good to our lives; it has rather exposed us to marginalisation. At this moment we are self-aware, wanting to become who we are, wanting to reclaim our identity and be incorporated into the Oromiya regional state. (II 06, Gender - Male, Age -52, Place - Cheki city, Date - March 20, 2019.)

**4.2.2.3. The language barriers in the courtroom.** For the past two decades and more, the current constitution of Ethiopia has included language as one of its key features, with Article 5 providing for both equality of languages and their practical application in government. Stipulating Amharic language as the working language of the FDRE; the constitution provides that all states of the federation may by law designate their own working language on their territory. In all of these states, ethnolinguistic groups have the freedom to choose their own language in state institutions such as courts. The judiciary is one of the government bodies to which the language policy applies. Access to justice is widely recognised as a human right in itself and as a process for attaining human rights, i.e. as an end of a means. This could be achieved if people have barrier-free access to courts, lawyers and law enforcement agencies. People are prevented from entering the court or discriminated against in the courtroom if they cannot communicate with the court staff. Language differences and the specific discrimination they create in the courtroom are issues that receive much attention in the study.

From the accounts of court hearings, study participants have observed or experienced the courtrooms in the Amhara region, which are often assumed to be a monolingual space. The courtrooms failed to notice the existence of many non-Amharic speaking defendants and witnesses. The judges and lawyers of a court use Amharic because it is the working language of the court there. The Oromo in Adadi, Cheki and Ruski have limited knowledge of Amharic, meaning they cannot defend their rights in court without the help of an interpreter. Although courts do allow Afaan Oromo speaking defendants or plaintiffs to seek interpretation services, doing so has done little to ensure they receive the services they need as they should. The study participants cited the rising cost of services as the reason. Even when interpreters attend hearings, the quality of their work can vary. For study participants, many interpreters may not be able to translate word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence. This has led the Oromo to believe that their cases are not being presented in their best interest.

The use of interpreters often creates a sense of discrimination among those who use them. This feeling is more pronounced when one of these categories - a witness or a defendant, a plaintiff - speaks Amharic and therefore does not need an interpreter. In such cases, according to the study participants mentioned above, the Oromo perceive that the court cases fall in favour of their Amharic-speaking colleagues. Because the better someone can express their feelings in court without an interpreter, the better they can do it justice. Therefore, the court proceeding in this case alienates Oromo litigants from Cheki town and adjacent areas from their true feeling, essence, passion and emotion to express their concerns about the court proceeding if the court is not tailored to their language skills (Afaan Oromo).

#### 4.3. Hostility towards the Oromo

An experience of Oromo people in Adadi, Cheki, and Ruski shows how hostile they were to those in leadership positions. Above all, hostility towards the Oromo people is expressed in many ways. The study participants accused state authorities of not hearing their questions and concerns raised at several local or county-level meetings. People who complain publicly about administrative problems or other matters important to them would be offended. According to our informants, many Oromo opinion leaders felt labelled as troublemakers in the Amhara region. Authorities even warned leaders about what could happen if they continue to speak on behalf of their people, expressing their interests and exposing situations in which they live. They would face prison terms or other consequences, such as being denied basic social and political opportunities for their hostility to the Oromo.

In similar vein Belay (2014) conducted his study of the identity and aspirations for representation of a Kimant minority group in the Amhara Regional State, showing how they face intimidation from officials in the lower administrative hierarchies. The study revealed that the officials

become aggressive towards the members of the Kimant when they seek their identities, acting as gatekeepers abstracting their quest to attract the attention of these officials at the top government hierarchy.

As in Kimant, officials at the lowest hierarchical levels of administration in Cheki and the surrounding area work every day to protect the self-interest of the dominant group – the Amhara – in the region. This sense of a dominant group reinforces hostility toward minority groups. For example, officials do not want the Oromo to effectively participate in politics and assert their identity. According to Sen (1999), people who lack genuine freedoms such as political and civil rights and the freedom to participate in public debate would face systematic social disadvantage and exclusion.

There are even instances where individuals are allegedly accused of participating in certain political parties simply because they have become voices for their people to have their rights respected. The officials, for example, accused the Oromo in the area of being sympathetic to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), because only people are Oromo. There is no question that the OLF has strong support from the Oromo people and has attracted many supporters in the region and this study agrees with Terje Ostebo and Kjetil Tronvoll (2020:10), “the OLF was for decades seen as the only legitimate political representative of the Oromo, which means that “all” Oromo by default supported the party; and the OLF thus became the vehicle for the “Oromo mythos.”. OLF is believed as a political party that struggles for Oromo rights and identities. In this regard, a key informant in the study stated that:

The worst things about living on such a border are not the labels against an individual's level. Rather, because of our identity as Oromo, there are accusations that are unique to our realm. Our area is profiled as a threat area within Angolela and Tera Woreda in connection with a political organisation called the OLF, among others. That is because; whenever an individual raises questions of identity, the individuals are automatically associated with that political organisation. Woreda authorities openly speak of our territory as if it were the stronghold of the OLF, for we are simply Oromo in our identity. (KII 03, Gender Male, Age 35, Location City Cheki, Date: March 27, 2019.)

The situation is probably not that simple. While there may be support for the OLF, it is evident that the front has been branded a threat to the Ethiopian state for decades. As noted earlier, politicians in the study area are indifferent to the Oromo, who have shown themselves to be critical of lower-level or district-level administrative officials. Our informants believed that individual Oromo were labelled as instigators of conflict. These individuals were targeted by state officials and subjected to repression by kebele or woreda levels of administration. Officials also tried to embarrass them when they spoke broken Amharic at public gatherings to express Oromo living conditions. Our informants noted this shame is evident because officials not only use the word *atintebateb* (stop stumbling) to ridicule Oromo individuals that they would refrain from openly expressing their feelings. This has particularly affected Oromo farmers, who do not speak the Amharic language at all. Thus, living along regionally administered borders in the region with no ethno-linguistic basis of its own has led to the marginalisation, blaming and shaming of individuals, as well as the complete marking of the people's territory with OLF, as the Oromo pose a threat to the Woreda administration.

This culminated in the staging of counter-resistance in the form of a social movement to demanding social justice and political rights. Simon et al. (1998) found that marginalised groups involved in social movements are typically motivated by a shared perception of a problem among themselves to culminate and change their situation. Foster and Matheson (1995) have also described that when marginalised individuals and groups feel rejected, this feeling can foster sympathy about shared experiences of rejection and as a result, they organise to engage in social movements to address the causes of their marginalisation. We will discuss below in the context of the Oromo of Cheki in Amhara regional state.

#### 4.4. Counter resistance against marginalisation

As noted above, the Oromo in the area had begun to resist marginalisation. It took the form of a social movement. According to Margadant's (1998) Commentary on Charles Tilly's 'Social Movements', for social movements to emerge, there must be certain political, economic, or other problems that make a person dissatisfied enough to start and join a social movement. These problems can include a lack of political freedom, discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity, and a weak economy. These are considered structural strains, the essential prerequisite for collective behaviour that makes people around them angry and frustrated. Without such structural strains, people would have no reason to protest, and social movements would not spring up in a vacuum.

Counter-resistance by the Oromo community of Cheki increased due to institutional marginalisation that limits their access to social and political opportunities. Empirical work on the history of Abichu Oromo as part of the history of the Tulama clan has been documented since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Abebe 2015; Haile 2009; Haji 1995; Isenberg 1968; Wami 2015). Abebe (2015) narrated the history of Tulama in general and that of the Abichu Oromo in particular as they fought wars that the Christian nobility of Shewa waged against them and their counter resistances. He went on to detail how the Tulama Oromo had become tributaries of the Kingdom of Shewa during the time of Sahile Silassie from 1813 to 1847.

Participants expressed how successive Ethiopian regimes have worked against their socio-cultural values and economic well-being. Some of peoples' cultural values and practices have been lost. These conditions have persisted even after the introduction of multinational federalism, which supposedly promised respect for group rights. The participants related how the regional state of Amhara has recently exposed them to social and political exclusion, not to mention the economic sphere. The resistance took its true form in 2018 through the youth group often referred to as the *Qeerroo*. This group includes the youth living in the city of Cheki and the neighbouring areas, as well as those educated groups who have already left their places of birth and working in government offices. Those who worked as government employees had already begun meeting with the youth when they visited their hometowns. They often return to their places of birth during annual vacations. Government employees use these eventful moments to secretly contact youth in their respective districts and talk to them about the living conditions in their communities. The talks were intended to help the youth on the ground to organise resistance against the structural causes of the people's exclusion. The youth eventually began to set and shape an agenda and means of struggle to articulate that the oppression and marginalisation of their people was taking place.

The youth used resistance songs by Oromo musicians, mostly performed with megaphones in public places, which helped them shape the local anti-marginalisation protest. Shawn Michael Mollenhauer (2011) has shown in his dissertations “how music among the Oromo people of present-day Ethiopia functions as a system for the preservation and negotiation of a uniquely Oromo identity, as well as a vehicle for resistance against the hegemony long ago established by outside ethnic groups” (Mollenhauer 2011:vi). Besides using Oromo music to mobilise people the youth are also conducting door-to-door campaigns to raise awareness among people to understand their cause of marginalisation and to stand by them to resist and change their situations. The youth also managed organising community forums.

The full range of activities has gradually attracted the attention of many, especially farmers who have suffered from the marginalisation imposed on them by the Amhara government. One discussant in the study, a farmer who has joined the movement, gave the following reason for participating in the social movement:- The Amhara officials never listen to our questions when we ask them in Afaan Oromo. As a result, we are forced to express our problems in Amharigna. We have a deep sense of grievance, especially the farmers against the officials. At the moment, we do not receive any benefits from Amhara region. Our helper is only

God. The region has only developed Amaharigna-speaking areas within the woreda. We are treated like boots that are worn in summer and worn out on in winter. It is the oppression we faced in the woreda that forced us to join the social movement. (FGD 04, Sex- Male Discussant, Place - Mangudo, Date - March 27, 2019)

However, the activities of the youth did not go smoothly. The young informants recalled that they were often intimidated by local police and militias. The police and militias scared the people, especially the peasants that they should not support the youth. You were told that “if you (the people) would listen to the youth you could be imprisoned”. Police intimidation has stopped those with longstanding complaints from supporting the youth. The youth agenda was more suited to getting people to join the movement quickly. The long-lasting repression, complemented by a series of discussions, encouraged people to openly express their years of suppressed feelings.

The movement took a new turn in 2018 with the start of political reforms in the country sparked by the mass Oromo protests (2016–2018). At the moment, this change allowed both the public and the higher political figures to speak publicly about political reforms. What was then known as Team Lemma that consisted of Lemma Megersa and his OPDO (Oromo People Democratic Party) deputy Abiy Ahmed, who had vowed to address the legitimate concerns of youth? The Oromo people in and around the city of Cheki, Adadi and Ruski, especially the youth, used the reform issue to demand recognition of their identity, which would end years of marginalisation. This phenomenon is linked to the theory of political opportunity for studying social movements. The theory suggests that oppressed and marginalised sections of society often drew on the fertile ground of the political phenomenon of the time, particularly when it came to an emancipator character of group rights and, this is resulted in the marginalised being denied their rights. As one participant in the study said:

Our movement is primarily aimed at striving for the demarcation of our areas to the Oromiya region. We have to request this after the recent political reform in the county. Before the reform, we could not speak publicly about identity and recognition because we feared that the local and woreda-level administrations could lock us up at any time. We covered in fear when they [local Amhara state officials] allegedly called us OLF and could then kill us. This time we had the opportunity to express our feelings about our demarcation in the Oromiya region. (FGD 01, Gender - Male, Place –the town of Cheki, Date -April 04, 2019.)

Study participants believed that the Oromo of Cheki city and adjacent areas now expect to join Oromiya. For them, demarcation would help rectify the right they lost from demarcation under the Amhara government. As Patricia (2005) notes, marginalised groups in many Third World countries are looking for new sources of identity and loyalty that are not offered by a state that has abandoned them. The Cheki Oromo believe that belonging to the Oromiya region would mean greater freedom in developing their culture, receiving services through their language, passing their culture on to future generations, and ultimately combating all of the marginalisation that endured them under the Amhara administration. They compare their situation to the Oromo in Oromiya, who have at least got rid of the refusal to practise their culture.

The study found that the Qeerroo movement wanted the existing structure of government structure to be changed to reflect the interests of the people and the reality on the ground. The youth eventually organised a demonstration demanding justice and development. They were protesting against the Amhara state structure which was causing unnecessary suffering in the Amhara region. Some of the slogans chanted during the demonstration represented self-government and included ‘respect and determination for our identity rights’; ‘open the school for our children in Afan Oromo’; ‘solve the language problem in court’; ‘stop identity-based discrimination in the provision of social services’; ‘build a clinic in our area; and stop the land grab’ and ‘give land back to the

farmers’. Those questions would be answered by a referendum, according to informants, which will help people decide to be governed under the Oromiya’s administrative jurisdiction.

Accordingly, people expect either recognition within the Amhara government that they are Oromo, proper adjustments of structures along the representation of their identity, or re-delineation of borders to become part of the Oromiya regional state to allow people living in such situations are permanently get rid of the structural marginalisation.

## 5. Conclusion

This article aims to help shift the existing literature on “marginalised groups” in Ethiopia towards marginalisation studies. It shows that there is a clear need to problematise this category, which has been approached from a professional and cultural/ancestry-based group lineage. Our study uses the existing studies, but tries to go beyond them and to see marginalisation as a structural aspect. The study’s findings imply that structural marginalisation concerns issues of social justice and equity (Tikly and Barrett 2011) and has multiple dimensions. The study found that marginalisation and other aspects of inequality primarily have both an ethnic and a politico-structural dimension.

In Ethiopia today, marginalisation has become more of a structural area because there are instances where a group of people who are not considered minorities in relation to the ethnic groups to which they belong experienced systematic marginalisation by state structures that govern them. This is the case in Ethiopia, where the state structure follows an ethnolinguistic-based administrative configuration, but some members of ethnic groups are administratively demarcated in regional states, regardless of their declared identity. Some of these people live along the intra-federal borders of regional states, where they are simply administered under a region to which they neither belong nor identify with. In other words, they live in a region they do not want to belong to. This contradicts the principle of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, which is supposed to recognise self-government and governance based on ethnic identity. This is particularly reflected in Article 46 of the 1995 FDRE Constitution, which requires that state design take into account people’s settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent. But this fundamental right and its federal principles are endangered in many places and are not implemented locally.

This could be related to the demarcation of state boundaries if the practice neglects to identify people to their respective states. Such a failure may be related in part to the weakness of previous demarcation processes. The processes the time ignored ethnolinguistic foundations and have now subjected people living outside their home region to structural marginalisation. This is the case with the Oromo people who live in the Amhara region and in the areas along the intra-federal borders of the Amhara and Oromiya regional states. Against this background, the present study attempted to answer the broader question of why the Oromo from the Cheki areas were incorporated into the Amhara regional state in the first place and how they face structural marginalisation due to their ethnic identity.

The conditions of the Oromo in this area contradicted the general principle of ethnonational federalism in Ethiopia. Federalism, which should guarantee nations, nationalities and peoples in Ethiopia the right to organise an administrative structure that could promote their cultural identity and political participation through self-government and ultimately free them from any kind of inequality and exclusion.

Marginalisation is manifested in ethnic bias in the provision of welfare services, denial of mother-tongue language education, language barriers in the courtroom, muted political rights and hostilities. Although this is a general argument, its applicability to the Oromo people living in the Amhara regional state may seem obvious, since a regional state decides for itself and for its group (here Amhara) what policies it adopts and implements regarding the use of social services can, be it education, justice or health services. The marginalised people are excluded from the

existing protection and integration system. This limits their options and chances of survival. People affected by exclusion have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them. It is therefore important to address marginalisation, as it can directly or indirectly affect an environment in which people can lead productive, healthy and improved lives (Sen 1999).

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

Betemariam Alemayehu Tulu: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Ameyu Godesso Roro: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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### Data availability statement

The data that has been used is confidential.

### Declaration of interest's statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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