

# The Implications of Rural-Urban Migration to the Development of the Languages of National Minorities: the Case of the Language of the Wolaita Ethnic Group

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## Abstract

*The current government of Ethiopia believes that the unity of the various 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of the country fundamentally depends on the protection of both the individual and group rights of its citizens. As part of the protection of group rights, the government has enshrined in its constitution the rights of nations to self-determination, including and up to secession. As part of this right it has included what is known as language rights. Every ethnic group has now the right to use and develop its language. For this purpose, over 25 languages out of the more than 80 languages of the country have become the language of schooling. The question is: in spite of the non-existence of clear discriminatory policy against national minorities today, can we say that language equality has been guaranteed? The central contention made is since the de facto requirement to get job in Addis Ababa is Amharic, and since the rural-urban migration of school age children (especially from the Wolaita) is increasing at an alarming rate, the development of the languages of national minorities will seriously be constrained unless minorities are provided with positive support to be engaged in the same process of nation building as the national majority in their own historical places. Due to the assimilative pressures that emanate from the mainstream society, the languages of minorities will be endangered for two main reasons: (1) If the new arrivals continue to live in the city for life, then they will most likely transmit to their children not their languages but the language of the national majority; (2) Because of the economic significance of Amharic as the lingua franca and the privileged status that it has continued to hold, it has a competitive advantage over other languages. I argue thus that more "enabling conditions" need to be there to ensure genuine language equality. The work is based on the reading of books, journal articles, interviews (formal and informal) and personal observation.*

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**Key words:** *national minority, national majority, 'choice-enabling conditions', 'endangered language'.*

## **Introduction**

This article tries to examine if language equality has been guaranteed under the present government of Ethiopia. It also gives a historical account about the treatments of the Ethiopian languages under different regimes of the recent history. By doing so, it shows the major change undertaken by the current government to ensure the survival of the various languages of the country together with further measures that need to be taken to guarantee language equality.

The work is the result of some years of personal observations, informal discussions, interviews, and the reading of relevant materials written on the issue of language equality. I have paid a special attention to the Wolaita language partly because I speak it as my second language and partly because the Wolaita, my observation shows, is one of the largest contributors to rural-urban migration in Ethiopia especially in Addis Ababa. I focus on Addis Ababa because this is where I was working in for the last 9 years or so and this is where I was able to observe the influx of the Wolaita to the city in the last 5 years or so. I have focused on the implication of the city life to the development (underdevelopment) of the language.

What necessitated this research is the fact that many members of the Wolaita ethnic group whom I was able to interview regarding the development of their language do not believe that their language may die sometime in the future. Because of this and other two main factors, namely the economic significance of Amharic as the lingua franca of the country and the status attached to it, many such members who have migrated to the city do not encourage their children to speak their language. Instead, they want their children to speak Amharic very well at the cost of their local language.

This work tries to challenge this distorted views and underscore the importance of language to one's own identity. It also supports the claim that the absence of clear discriminatory policies against the national minorities does not necessarily mean that equality of languages has been guaranteed. It also poses a dilemma for national minorities between staying in local places (to preserve their languages) and migrating to the city in search of better

economic opportunities (at the cost of their local languages). I will make some suggestions as solutions to this dilemma but do not attempt to solve it in this work. It will be the question I could take in the future.

### **Concepts and Objectives of the Study**

Here I will begin by defining the concepts employed in this article. The term ‘endangered language’ is used to refer to a language community that is under the threat of extinction. Linguists associate language endangerment to the diminished numerical strength of speakers (Zelalem, 2015: 2), and to the cessation of the transmission of the language to the next generation. ‘National majority’ is used to mean a group whose language has become the lingua franca of a multi-ethnic society. So, since Amharic is the lingua franca of Ethiopia, the Amhara could be taken as a national majority. On the other hand, ‘national minority’ is very often used to refer to numerically inferior groups, whose languages, cultures and traditions are under influence from the economically, culturally and politically dominant group of a particular country. The definition of minority provided by the United Nations Special Rapporteur, Francesco Capotori, is worth noting. According to him:

*A ‘group’, numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members being nationals of a state possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religions or language (1979:384).*

Numerical inferiority may not make a group ‘minority’. A group “that is disempowered may be classified as minority” (Cited in Beza, 2013:820). According to this view what makes a group ‘minority’ has not so much to do with numerical inferiority as the non-dominant character of the group. I will appropriate Will Kymlicka’s term, ‘national minority to refer to groups

that had their own historic homeland prior to their incorporation into the larger state (2002: 3490. Viewed from this angle all other ethnic groups in Ethiopia with the exception of the Amhara and presumably the Tigray could be called 'national minorities' because all the other ethnic groups were incorporated into the larger political community during the time of Emperor Minilk II.<sup>2</sup>

I will use the term 'Amharic speaking people' to refer to all citizens who speak Amharic either as their first language or second language. In this sense, non-Amharas could be called 'Amharic speaking' if they speak the language either as their first language or second language.

There is no consensus among writers on the definition of a 'nation'. According to David Miller, the concept of nation involves both subjective and objective criteria. I share his view that a nation cannot be understood independently of the beliefs people have about them (1995:18). If people's own belief about their nationhood determines the concept of a nation, this can be understood as a subjective criterion because not every member of a group that shares the same physical characteristics, language and culture may have a common belief about their nationhood. If we take as criteria for being a nation what Miller calls 'characteristics of the relevant kind' (Ibid) such as shared language, culture, religion and territorial concentration, very few ethnic groups such as the Ethiopian Somali people could fulfill the requirement for being a nation. The majority of the ethnic groups of the country do not have a homogeneous identity. The Oromos, for example, are predominantly Muslims and Christians (both Orthodox and Protestant). But we cannot deny the fact that ethnic identity can become a possible source of national identities for various peoples in the world today (Ibid). A nation in most cases emerges from an ethnic community that furnishes it with its distinct identity (Ibid). Ethnic consciousness may give rise to nationalist aspirations when an ethnic group finds its identity being threatened or its legitimate political aspirations being denied. When this happens, the ethnic group may start to think of itself as a nation. Ethnic groups who express their demand in terms of nationalist claim can then be taken as a nation. Many ethnic groups in Ethiopia such as the Oromo, the Amhara, the Tigre,

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<sup>2</sup> Almost all well-known Ethiopian historians agree with this claim.

the Somali, the Afar, the Sidama, the Wolaita, etc., can then be taken as nations in their own rights because an ethnic consciousness has already developed among these and other ethnic groups of Ethiopia. Therefore, Ethiopia can legitimately be taken as a multi-national country. For the purpose of this work, I will use the terms ‘multinational’, ‘multiethnic’ and ‘multicultural’ interchangeably.

Though the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia uses the terms ‘nations, nationalities, and peoples’ to refer to the people of Ethiopia as a whole, it does not define them. Without denying the existence of many language groups who fall short of the ‘standard’ to be a nation, I will take all the language communities of the country as nations. I do not intend in this work to discuss the conditions that enable a language group to become a nation.

I have appropriated the term “societal culture” from Will Kymlicka. By “societal culture” he meant “a culture which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across a full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres.”(2002:76).

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the study is to examine factors that hamper the growth of the languages of national minorities and suggest ways of making them ‘living and developing’ languages. It seeks to show that enough has not been done even under the current government to ensure the survival of various languages to the future generation. More specifically I seek to examine the impact of urbanization and economic growth on the growth of local languages. The study also explores the impact of rural-urban migration to the development of the languages of national minorities.

## **Methodology**

The main sources of this study are various books, internet sources, formal and informal interviews (see Appendix one), and personal observation. Oral information has been collected over five years period.

## **Ethiopia's Break with the Past**

*Ethiopia is a multinational state in which* nearly 80 languages are spoken. Afaan Oromo and Amharic are the languages with the largest number of speakers, each having more than 20 million speakers. Other major Ethiopian languages with a good number of speakers include Tigrinya, Somali, Sidama and Wolaitta. Language groups with one million speakers include Afar, Gamo and Hadiya (see the 2007 Census). Gedio, Silte'e and Kaffinono are each spoken by more than eight hundred thousand people. Eighteen and thirty-two languages are spoken by hundreds of thousands and tens of thousands respectively. The rest are language groups with few thousand speakers. Ethiopia's current government has shown a clear break with the past by adopting a federal state structure that has partially devolved power to regions.

It has provided a constitutional guarantee to protect all the languages of the country. Article 39 of the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia grants 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of the country an "unconditional right to self-determination, including and up to secession." The article also encourages the nations and nationalities to use their language in schools as well as in local courts and to promote their languages and customs. In accordance with the rights enshrined in the constitution, the government promoted the use of the languages of national minorities for official, administrative and judiciary purposes (Getachew 2006; Derib 2006:49).

The language policy of the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (henceforth FDRE constitution) is based on this underlying

assumption that: all nations seek to gain equal state recognition. Article 5 of the constitution says:

1. All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition.
2. Amharic shall be the working language of the federal government.
3. Members of the federation may by law determine their respective working languages.

As far as the change in education policy is concerned, the government has taken some measures to promote multilingual education. Section 3.5.1 of the Education and Training Policy (1994) says:

*Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages.*

The same document mentions three reasons for opting for respecting the rights of children to education (at least at the primary level) in their own mother tongue.

- a) Language is the basis of identity.
- b) Pedagogically it is more advantageous.
- c) It gives people psychological satisfaction and helps them develop positive self-esteem.

Accordingly, the government has made 22 of the more than 80 languages of the country the language of schooling at primary school level (Yigezu, 2010:1). In addition to Amharic, Tigregna Afaan Oromo, Awigni, Xahmta, Somali, Afar, Aderi, Agnwak, Nuer, Majangir, Sidama, Gedio, Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa, Dawro, Kambata, Tilte, Kafa, Konta and Hadiya are made the language of education.

So, unlike the previous Ethiopian governments that followed an assimilationist policy, the current government has been attempting to promote multiculturalism and respect the right to self-government of the various nations of the country. But without denying the important steps taken by the current government to promote multiculturalism, I argue that

enough has not been done to ensure the continued existence of the languages and cultures of the national minorities of the state.

### **Nations and the Right to Self-Determination**

Many writers would agree that a nation (if it fulfills the basic requirements to be a nation) has almost by definition the right to self-determination which goes as far as an outright secession (Kymlicka, 1998:169). If this claim is unproblematic, the next issue is whether there are such 'nations' in Ethiopia.

According to historians, there were pre-existing independent kingdoms before the formation of modern Ethiopia. Since at least some of the incorporated kingdoms were institutionally complete I would rather refer to them as nations. Bahru Zewde, one of the well-known Ethiopian historians, said that Ethiopia, as that of the Bismark's Germany, was built by blood and Iron. This meant that there were pre-existing independent nations before the modern Ethiopian state was built. One of the most powerful kingdoms in the South, the Wolaita, for example was incorporated in 1894 after one of the bloodiest battles had taken place between the conqueror and the conquered people (Zewde, 2002:64). The Kafa kingdom in the South West of the country was incorporated into the northern government in 1897 after one of the fiercest resistance which ended after a heavy human cost (Ibid, 65).

These are just two of the many kingdoms which had formed their own institutionally complete systems before their incorporation into what is known as the "Abyssinian State". They were institutionally complete in the sense that they had their own political structure, court system and the like. And being institutionally complete is one of the conditions required for qualifying as a nation. They were also territorially concentrated in their historical homeland with their own languages, traditions and religions before they were overrun by the conquerors. Many writers would agree that the conquest of these people by Minilik's army had significantly changed at least their traditions and religions. In an informal interview that I conducted with the Wolaita elders ten years ago, I learnt that the Wolaita people had their own religion and tradition before they were incorporated to the central government. Having their own language, tradition, historical place and

religion are some of the major “characteristics of the relevant kind”, to use Miller’s expression, for being a nation. In addition to this, becoming a nation also requires a subjective criterion-the belief that the people in question have about themselves. If they conceive themselves as distinct people, separate from the rest of the population, this should also be added to “characteristics of the relevant kind.” The conquered people do conceive themselves as distinct people with their own peculiar identity.

Since the the Wolaita fulfills all the subjective and objective criteria mentioned above it can be called a nation. This is also true of several other ethnic groups which include the Oromo - the single largest ethnic group. In spite of the existence of various nations, all the previous Ethiopian governments did not attempt to form a genuine common national identity for all citizens based on the principle of equality (Kinfe, 2001:222). On the contrary, they imposed the Amharic language and culture and Orthodox religion upon all the people of the state. All of us were required to identify ourselves as Ethiopian no matter what our ethnic groups and religions were. As a matter of fact, being an Ethiopian was defined in terms of Amharic speakers, Orthodox religion followers, and being light-skinned people. The effect of this is still lingering. I hear some light-skinned Ethiopians suspecting their fellow dark-skinned Ethiopians as belonging to other African nations. So, generally most non-Absinians were being considered as the “others” by the past regimes and yet, paradoxically, they were required to identify themselves as Ethiopians.

All the people of Ethiopia were required to identify themselves as “Ethiopians” by the previous regimes. Unlike the current system, no one was allowed to refer to himself (herself) as belonging to this or that ethnic groups (Balsvik, 2005:279). The assumption was that being an Ethiopian is superior to being an Oromo or a Wolaita or what have you. It was required to leave your ethnic identity aside and become an Ethiopian (Baxter, 1994:172). But this was actually a disguise to strengthen the Amhara-Tigre domination over the other nations of the country. Waleign Makonnen, a university student during the time of Haile Selassie, argued that Ethiopia was “an Amhara-ruled collection of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial

entity”(1969:9). No wonder, why most of the people who are identifying themselves as Ethiopians today are Amharas.

National minorities who have been forcibly assimilated throughout the world share one thing in common. This is the desire to “maintain or regain their own self-governing institutions, often operating in their own national language, so as to be able to live and work in their own culture” (Kymlicka, 2002:350). As observed by Baxter, most Oromo in exile wanted to establish Oromo autonomy so as to guarantee the equality of Oromo language and custom with that of the North (1994:170). As Kymlicka correctly observed national minorities usually resist the majority’s nation building process by “seeking greater autonomy which they use in their own competing nation building, so as to protect and diffuse their societal cultures throughout their traditional territory” (Ibid). To put it differently, they seek to be engaged in the same process of nation building as the one the majority is engaged in. This requires, among other things, that they have control over the language and curriculum of schooling in their historical territory.

Furthermore, the fact that there were (still are) ethnic groups in Ethiopia who developed ethnic consciousness shows that these groups seek to regain their ‘distinct’ identity which have significantly changed through time. And as Miller observed when an ethnic group’s legitimate political aspiration is denied by the dominant group, the former naturally starts to develop an ethnic consciousness and to consider itself as a distinct nation (1995:14). That different ethnic groups especially the Oromo developed “ethnic sentiments” (Bahru, 2008:87) during the previous regimes shows that their legitimate political demand had been denied. The government of Haile Selassie is just one case in point that showed intolerance to “the slightest expressions of regional or ethnic sentiments”, by dissolving the federal arrangement with Eritrea and banning “a relatively pacific expression of Oromo identity as the Mecha and Tulama Self-Help Association.” (Bahru, 2006: 87).

The rulers misjudged the durability of the ethnic consciousness. They thought that when suppressed ruthlessly minorities would gradually lose their sense of having a distinct identity. But that did not work because centuries of oppression caused armed struggle by various ethnic-based rebel groups (Nikodimos, 2004:50). The empirical evidence throughout the world shows that “pressuring national minorities to integrate into the dominant national group will not work” (Kymlicka, 2002:351).

The points I discussed above lead to the conclusion that Ethiopia is a multination state and thus respecting the right of nations to self-determination, which in its extreme case, includes an outright secession is the only viable option to ensure the continued existence of this state.

### **Endangered Language**

The previous Ethiopian governments showed intolerance to cultural and linguistic differences. All writers would see this claim as unproblematic. Today, unlike the past, some measures have been taken to respect the rights of nations and to promote multiculturalism. But has sufficient “enabling condition” been put in place to ensure the continued existence of the language? I hold that though the current government has taken important steps to promote multiculturalism, we have a long way to go to be certain about the continued existence of the languages and cultures of national minorities. That there are languages under the threat of extinction after years of decentralization shows that more has to be done to promote multiculturalism.

Currently, in addition to the languages that are extinct<sup>3</sup>, there are many “endangered languages” that are at the brink of extinction (Zelalem, 2015:4). According to linguists, a language will be considered ‘dead’ or ‘extinct’ when its transmission to the next generation stops and when the number of its native speakers significantly decreases and ultimately disappears (Zelalem, 2003:2). A language is considered to be “endangered” if its continued existence is not certain because of its not being transmitted to the next generation (Zelalem, 2015:2). Such a language, according to linguists, is akin to an “endangered species” that is no longer reproducing itself. Much as such species would cease to exist as a result of the inability to reproduce itself, an “endangered” language may also disappear unless some drastic measures are taken by various stakeholders to preserve the language. The endangerment of such a language arises from the fact that it

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<sup>3</sup> Five languages are known to be extinct in Ethiopia. These are Gafat, Ge’ez, Mesmes, Adona and Weyto. Birale, Ganza, Argoba, Bayso and Gasame are nearly extinct.

is a language no longer learned by children (Ibid). One of the languages whose rate of being transmitted to the next generation is declining is wolaita.

### **Is the “Wolaita” an Endangered Language?**

Though the *Wolaita* speakers are 2 million (See the 2007 census), their *language can be considered as threatened, if not endangered at least for the time being*. Given its relatively large size of speakers, it may not die anytime soon. But its growth is threatened by the development of Amharic which is the most developed and fastest growing language of Ethiopia. Currently there is no clear discriminatory policy against any language group unlike the past. Various writers have different stands on the question of whether Amharic was imposed on the non-Amhara by the past governments. Bahru argues that Amharic generally developed spontaneously as a lingua franca of Ethiopia (2008:86). It “spread mainly through its association with the dominant political power”(Ibid, 85). I do not intend to discuss this issue here. Suffice here to say that Amharic is the most dominant language and its development has an implication to the development of other languages.

With regard to the morally problematic nature of wealth inequality, I argued in another work that “once gross inequality has been created through unjust ways, it tends to create further inequality” (Getahun, 2011:30). Similarly, though two languages (advantaged and disadvantaged) start off from the same positions, they will end up being unequals because of their existing unequal stage of development. The more advantaged language tends to dominate the less advantaged. Historically the various languages of the country did not have the same enabling conditions for their development. While some languages such as Amharic and Tigregna received support to develop as living and developing languages most other languages were ignored from the very outset. Currently, though there are better conditions to help the less advantaged languages develop; they are far from being enough to ensure their continued existence.

The reason is this: one of the conditions required to ensure the continuation of a language to the next generation is the making of that language the language of schooling and the language of communication in

its various institutions (Kymlicka, 2002: 111). Why these conditions are vital to ensure the survival of a language is partly because the Ethiopian experience shows that people do not tend to develop positive self-esteem about their language and culture if it is not made a public language. Though the previous governments banned public expression of ethnicity, it did not (actually cannot) ban the private use of the languages of the national minorities. They were tolerated as, to use Addis Adeno's terminology, as the "strange other" (1997:120). Because of this marginalization, most members of the national minorities who lived (and still live) in the cities and towns of Ethiopia did not encourage their children to speak their local language.

But when their language is made the language of schooling and the medium of communication in the various governmental institutions of their locality, as observed after "power decentralization" started to take root in Ethiopia, some people in the places I studied tend to encourage their children to speak their local language in addition to Amharic.<sup>4</sup> Part of the reason for this, I think, is the various awareness raising programs transmitted through various Media that stressed that minorities be proud of their languages and identities. But the level of transmission of this language is such that it is not enough to ensure its continued existence to the next generation. My studies in Sodo woreda and Awassa city shows that it is almost impossible for children of national minorities to speak their local language as their mother tongue.

It is only in the rural part of Wolaita that the members of this group are able to transmit their language in its purity to their children. It is only there that the children are able to speak it as their mother tongue. But when they come to the city, it is a different story. The reason is that one of the *de facto* requirements for getting descent jobs in most cities and towns is being able to speak Amharic and this has a serious implication to the languages of national minorities.

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<sup>4</sup> In Hwassa members of the Wolaita ethnic group that I spoke to said they started, although not to a sufficient level, to encourage their children to learn their language.

### **The De Facto Requirement for Getting Job**

One of the de facto requirements to get job in Addis Ababa is being able to speak Amharic. It is through the proficiency in Amharic that one can have access to Federal government services and employment opportunities (Milkessa, 2014:19). The making of a language the language of all the institutions at the federal level has the unintended consequence of marginalizing minorities from major economic, academic and political institutions (Kymlicka, 2002: 346). This is due to the fact that minorities cannot easily meet the requirements of the main stream society. The reason, as Kymlicka persuasively put it, is this: “The modern world with its vibrant economy demands high level of literacy in work and fluency in the language of the dominant group in order to function well” (Ibid, 76-77).

Ethiopia’s current economy, which is one of the fastest growing in the world, requires literacy and fluency in Amharic - the *lingua franca* of the country. This is not to mean that those who are illiterate and influent in Amharic do not get employed. They can be employed or can be self-employed in various ways. But as far as the mainstream society (think of Addis Ababa, for instance) is concerned they will not be engaged in one of the highest paying jobs, be it governmental or otherwise. The meaning of ‘fluent’ that I am referring to includes all who speak Amharic not only as their first language but also as their second language. Both of these groups meet one of the requirements of the mainstream society-language proficiency. But both are not equally fit for the requirement. Those who speak Amharic as their mother tongue are more fit than the others. Thus one of the de facto requirements is this: if you do not already speak Amharic and if you want to get work in the mainstream society, you should at least try to speak it; if you speak it as your second language and have some difficulty communicating with the larger section of the society, you should improve. In both ways, those who speak the language as their first language carry lighter burden than those who speak as their second language and those who do not speak it at all. As Abraham (1990:71) comments:

*As soon as you designate one language the official/national language, you thereby give a major competitive advantage...to the native speaker of that language. You also, at the same time and by the very same act, disenfranchise the speakers of all other languages in the nation. You*

*eliminate or heavily constrain their access to education, to employment, to information in general and to power and prestige in many forms.*

As far as the literacy requirement is concerned, I maintain that with the exception of low paying jobs (which includes but not limited to laborious works, cleaning works, shoe-shinning jobs, lottery ticket selling) all other jobs in the mainstream society require literacy. Again the Amharic speaking population stands in a privileged position to meet this requirement. This is partly because of the language policies of the previous regimes. Since the right of citizens to be educated in their mother tongues is guaranteed in recent times, and since Amharic was the language of schooling ever since modern education had taken root in Ethiopia, the Amharic speaking population<sup>5</sup> is more likely to be literate than the non-Amharic speaking populations. So, both requirements systematically marginalize those people who do not meet them.

The right of the members of the minority groups who are making their way to the mainstream society to make meaningful choice is seriously constrained. Once they get their feet in Addis Ababa they will have lesser chance of making their respective “societal culture” a living and developing culture, because the societal cultures that are embedded in social institutions such as schools and courts in Addis Ababa is not theirs. If the state however provides them with a positive support and ensures the development of their ‘societal culture’ in their respective locality, they will have more options. They can either choose between staying in their own ‘societal cultures’ and going to the mainstream society where they cannot help integrating into the mainstream society, say for instance, by learning Amharic. Where there are no group-specific rights, their language will not survive as a living and developing language (Tan, 1996:73-74). Cultures are valuable not in and of themselves. They are valuable as means to some greater goal because it is

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<sup>5</sup> I used the word ‘population’ here to indicate all the Amharic speaking people, not just the ethnic Amhara. The requirement of proficiency in Amharic to get job suits not only the ethnic Amhara but also the members of other ethnic groups who speak the language.

through having access to societal cultures that people have a range of meaningful options (Ibid).

In order to provide a choice-enabling background conditions for national minorities the state thus must provide more funding so as to help them build a competing economy in their localities. Self-government rights are necessary but not sufficient to ensure the flourishing of the cultures of the national minorities. This is because though these rights are constitutionally guaranteed it did not prevent the languages of minorities from becoming “endangered”.

### **The Current Status of Amharic**

Amharic, when made the working language of the federal government, has already received the most important form of support to develop as a living and developing language. It is also the language of schooling in the main cities and towns of several regions. As Kymlicka observed, the making of a language the language of schooling and the medium of communication for the various institutions of the state ensures “the passing on of the language and its associated traditions and conventions to the next generation” (2002:111).

The question then is this: should not the state lend the same support to the national minorities that it lends to the national majority? Intuitively we can take as unproblematic the claim that the state should provide the same support that it is providing for the national majority for the national minorities. It should thus make the languages of the latter the languages of schooling and the languages of various institutions in their own localities. In other words, the rights of national minorities to govern themselves should be respected. To put it differently, national minorities should be engaged in the same process of nation building as the national majority. This goal cannot however be realized without building competing vibrant economies at regional, *zonal* and *woreda* levels to contain the ever-increasing rural-urban migration. If the same economic opportunity that is available in the mega cities such as Addis Ababa is not created at the localities of the national minorities, they will continue to make their way into the cities in search of better economic opportunities. At this point, one may legitimately ask: what has the development and preservation of local languages got to do

with rural-urban migration? My answer is, they have much to do with one another especially given the immature age of the migrants.

When we look at the city of Addis Ababa today, it is receiving many teenage children from rural areas of Wolaita who seek better economic opportunities. The oral information I gathered by interviewing teenagers who arrived in the last two years shows that school age children quit their education and make it to Addis Ababa hoping that they would make a good living here by working, among other things, as shoe shiners and lottery ticket sellers. For example, one informant said: "I decided to come here when a friend of mine who lived in Addis Ababa for few years brought with him a radio set, a mobile phone and good clothes."<sup>6</sup> He said he is here in search of better economic opportunities. Another informant said he decided to come to Addis Ababa because he could not continue his education because of poverty<sup>7</sup>. Many of the children that I talked to informally said that they cannot realistically hope to inherit any plot of land from their parents owing to the diminishing carrying capacity of land and poverty in rural areas. The available data also shows that the growing population pressure within the diminishing farmlands and the resulting loss in agricultural productivity are among the major factors pushing the rural-urban migration in Ethiopia (Zemen, 2015:34-35). When we look at the jobs they are engaged in after starting city life, they are the lowest paying and 'low status'<sup>8</sup> ones.

### **The Attitudes of some Selected Members of the Wolaita to their own Language**

Most of the members of the *Wolaita* ethnic group that have migrated to cities do not show any attempt to transmit their language to their children. Though I am a *Wolaita*, being born from a father and mother of the same group, I am not a good speaker of the language mainly because my parents

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<sup>6</sup> (Inf. Moges Durcho).

<sup>77</sup> (Inf:Dejene Bassa).

<sup>8</sup> Jobs such as shoe-shining, lottery ticket selling and laborious works (carrying luggage to others) are considered as 'low status' jobs.

did not teach me our language. One of the main reasons for choosing not to transmit their language to their children was the cultural and ethnic marginalization promoted by the previous regimes. When my parents migrated to the city of Awassa during the last days of Emperor Haile Selassie, they must have been considered as the “other”. They were marginalized because they were Wolaita speaking couple who were not able to speak Amharic. Since Emperor Haile Selassie promoted an assimilation policy, and since the Derg which came to power by overthrowing the Emperor followed the same policy, my parents must have given in to the political and social pressures of those times and decided not only to learn Amharic but to transmit it to their children, making sure that we do not face the cultural marginalization that they faced. As a boy born during the time of the Derg, I did not have the option to learn the language of my parents. But after the current government took over power by defeating the military government and started to promote the rights of nationalities, national minorities who migrate to cities gradually started to speak their language gradually. This coupled with my parents’ communication (in Wolaita) with each other at home gave me the opportunity to learn to speak the language. But it was already too late for me to speak it fluently because of, among other things, age factor.

One non-Wolaita informant who was a young University student during the days of the Derg has a different opinion to the one mentioned above. He said: “The Wolaita, the Oromo and other members of various ethnic groups who felt marginalized by the previous governments were afraid of speaking their languages during the times of Haile Selassie and the Derg publicly not because they were told by the then governments not to speak their languages, but owing to their own problems”<sup>99</sup>. But there are evidences that speak otherwise, i.e., non-Amhara students of Addis Ababa University who showed ethnic consciousness (by speaking their language) were “discouraged from speaking their own language, even outside the classroom when within the school compound” (Balsvik, 2005:280). What is more, the ‘fear of speaking’ in one’s own mother tongue does not come out of the blue. It cannot happen just in its own without being caused by some external factors. So, the point that the members of the oppressed ethnic groups lacked confidence for speaking in their languages in the previous

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<sup>99</sup> (Inf: Dagmawi Tadesse)<sup>9</sup>.

two governments owing to their own personal problems does not hold water.

A *Wolaita* informant when asked if he is going to teach his future children *Wolaitatua* recently, said: “*Wolaitatua* does not bring any economic benefit.”<sup>10</sup> He would not teach his children his language because it is not the language of wider communication. I by accident heard one *Wolaita* woman discouraging her three years old son (who has just arrived from *Wolaita*) from speaking *Wolaita*. She said: “You fool! Speak *Amharic*.”<sup>11</sup> *Amharic* is generally considered as a prestigious language among the *Wolaita* owing partly to the cultural marginalization promoted by the previous governments. The *Wolaita* were given a “low status” by the previous regimes and speaking *Amharic* was considered as a sign of being civilized. The effects of those measures are still lingering among the *Wolaita*. Some eight years ago my uncle was contemplating sending his two little daughters to *Wolaita* so that they stay there for few years until he tackles the economic problems he faced at the time. His economic problem reached to the point where he can no longer support his wife and two daughters. He then decided not to send them. When I asked his reasons for deciding not to send them to *Wolaita*, he said: “They will learn *Wolaita* and easily forget *Amharic*”<sup>12</sup>. Perplexed, I asked: “What is wrong with learning *Wolaita*? It is after all your own language.” His answer perplexed me even more. He said: “Yes. But when they come back to city without knowing *Amharic*, their chance of success in economic life will significantly decrease owing to its importance as a language of wider communication.” But I was not convinced. I suspected that he told me just half of the reason for deciding that way. The other reason that I thought he did not tell me for opting for *Amharic* at the cost of *Wolaita* was the high prestige attached to *Amharic* by the *Wolaita*. I know many more *Wolaita* people who after giving birth to their children in rural areas send them to *Hawassa* to make sure that they do not learn *Wolaita* and instead learn *Amharic*. Suffice here to say that the *Wolaita* give very little value to their language after starting

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<sup>10</sup>(Meskele Ganebo).

<sup>11</sup>(Amarech Bergene).

<sup>12</sup>(Info: Feleke Daka).

new lives in cities by not transmitting the language to their children owing to various reasons. So the members of this ethnic group are partly to blame should our language disappear in the future.

Similarly, research findings show that other members of national minorities are not willing to encourage their children to learn in their mother tongue on the ground that “learning in local languages limits students’ social mobility and narrows the range of economic opportunities” (Cohen, 2000:124-125). In addition, they argue that since many local languages are inadequately developed for education (Moges, 2010:21), students who are taught using such languages are unlikely to compete on equal footing with students taught in languages sufficiently developed for education. But this need not lead us to the conclusion that education in mother tongue is not important because one of the most important ways of maintaining a language as a “living and developing language” is by making it the language of schooling.

Many members of the Wolaita ethnic group that I spoke to, do not think that their language may die sometimes in the future. But I do not agree with this assumption. If a language is not a living and developing language it may die in the future regardless of how large the speakers of the language are currently. And to be a living and developing language at least it has to be transmitted to the next generation uninterrupted. But the increasing rural-urban migration has posed a serious challenge to the preservation of such a language. What is more, the benefit of the preservation of the languages of minorities should not be thought only in terms of economic benefit. True, members of minority ethnic groups may be well-off economically when they opt for Amharic at the expense of their own language. But this is done at the cost of losing their ‘identity’ which cannot be measured in monetary value.

### **Impacts of Rural-Urban Migration to Language Development**

As I mentioned earlier on, most of the migrants coming to cities are school-age children. These children are at a suitable age to learn new languages often at the expense of losing their own language. Observation shows that when members of ethnic minorities arrive to cities in Ethiopia in their childhood, they not only learn Amharic but become fluent speakers, often

by losing their first language. So, given the current situation, to preserve the language from becoming a dying language, one of the measures that should be taken is help people stay in their own locality, though this has undesirable result. The problem here is on the one hand, if we have to build one common nation together, as Adeno suggests, we need to engage in shared deliberations which is impossible “without the dominant group coercively imposing a single language on all citizens”(1997: 134). But inevitably, this threatens linguistic diversity in a multiethnic country such as Ethiopia especially if the measure I suggested above is not implemented. I do not intend to solve this dilemma here.

Suffice here to say that to maintain linguistic diversity a competing economy has to be built in the historical places of national minorities. The state should therefore provide an additional means for the local governments to help them develop their economies so as to provide an equal economic opportunity as found in the city. It is if and only when this is done that these children can remain in their localities and thus can develop their languages.

One may object to this line of argumentation on the ground that the children may not lose, or do not have to lose their languages to learn new languages. The children may grow as bilingual, but if they continue to live in the city for lifelong the language that they are going to transmit for their children is not their own languages but the language of the national majority partly because of the economic importance of the latter and partly because of the pressure emanating from the majority of the city dwellers. So, it is a matter of time before the already endangered languages go extinct unless the measures I suggested above are implemented.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that to preserve language, one of the most important measures that needs to be taken is to help national minorities build or rebuild their own nations at their own historical places. Unless they stay in their locality, they cannot maintain their language as a living and developing language. This is partly because if they continue to flock to the city especially at their earlier ages, they cannot help assimilating into the

dominant group by adopting its language and associated traditions, often at the expense of their own language. I have argued that since the age of most of the migrants coming to Addis Ababa is such that they can easily learn new language and forget (though not completely) their own, if the rural-urban migration does not significantly decrease, *Wolaitatua* cannot be a living and developing language. The diminishing number of speakers is one of the major reasons causing the death of a language. Since those members of the Wolaita ethnic group who have started new lives in cities do not transmit their language to their children, and many more members are arriving at cities currently than ever before, the development of the language is in danger if a significant measure is not taken to curb the rural-urban migration. For this to happen, the government should provide more support to the national minorities in various forms such as extra funding to help them build a vibrant economy in their own places.

So, can we say then that the current government has created all that is needed to maintain multiculturalism? Can't we say, as things stand now, the current government though not through following clear discriminatory laws, is discriminating against the languages of the national minorities? Unlike the past regimes the current government has taken some measures ranging from giving a constitutional guarantee to protect the languages of the national minorities to making some of them the languages of schooling and some the language of both schooling and the media. Thus one of the things I mentioned was that there is no fair and equal treatment of the languages of the country. The constitution grants all the languages of the country equal state recognition. But the *de facto* law is this: 'all the languages of the country are equal but some languages are more equal than others.'

The more vulnerable language needs more support for survival. What makes a language more vulnerable is the limited number of speakers. Most languages of the country have populations of less than one million and these are more vulnerable than others. However, the languages that are getting support (though not to a sufficient degree) from the government currently are those that already stand at a privileged position to continue as a developing language. Do not get me wrong. I am not against the development of any language. My point is simply this: all the languages of the country are equal and should be treated as such. But this is not happening and it has to stop.

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