ACADEMIC NEWS

Conference "Cultures of Democracy" (April 7 and 8, 2017)

On April 7 and 8, 2017 the research conference on "Cultures of Democracy," organized and convened by the department of Civics and Ethical Studies, was held at the College of Social Sciences and the Humanities (CSSH) of the University of Gondar (UoG). The department head, Mr. Yared Debebe, welcomed all attendees, especially Mr. Aysheshim Terefe, Vice-Dean of the CSSH, Dr. Yenges Amsalu in his official function as Delegate of the President of UoG, and Mr. Constantin Grund, the Director of the Addis Abeba office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. This German foundation funded the conference as it is its goal to foster social democracy in Germany and the world. All of the four inaugural speeches stressed the importance of communication, open debate and open minds for developing democratic mindsets, institutions and strong universities. On each of the two days, four 90-minute sessions were held and on each day the last session was reserved for discussions only.

In the first session Fasil Merawi from the Philosophy department at Addis Ababa University, in his presentation on the "Philosophy of intercultural dialogue and its implication for democratization in Ethiopia," argued that a philosophical analysis of democracy in the Ethiopian context renders a great understanding of ethnocentric ideals that prohibit genuine participation of individuals, cultures and identities in the affairs of one's community, helps to realize a dialogical encounter amongst different cultures, world views and ways of life and also instills a culture of mutual learning and enlightenment. In return, the development of intercultural dialogue helps to affirm the intrinsic value of all cultures and ways of being, as well as the possibility of a discourse on analogous structural patterns and pluralism which serve as a foundation of democracy. Fasil Merawi's presentation raised questions regarding the difference between intercultural dialogue and the current real political practice in Ethiopia, pre-existent cultures of democracy before Ethiopian "modernity" and characterizations of current democratization processes in Africa. The audience also discussed the real features and the possibility of a real future for democratization, whether the 1960s student movement can be taken as an indicator of modernity in Ethiopia, the difference between intercultural politics and multi-cultural politics and, when evaluating globalization and intercultural philosophy, how the two can be compromised. Responding to these points, Fasil Merawi said that individual freedom is the best solution for the existing ethno-cultural problems, instead of applying federalism or multi-cultural politics as a key solution. He further argued that it is better to emphasize dialogue and public reasoning to solve political problems in the country instead of trying to use ethnic federalism. Commenting on the remarks that democracy is in a state of transitioning globalization or western values to the world, and, hence, that current ideas of democracy can hardly be characterized as a real democracy when the western idea of

modernity and democracy are important in Africa, the moderator Dr. Dagnachew Assefa, explained that when we talk about "modernity" there is no way to escape from the idea of western "modernity." He further argued that we need to identify, analyze and theorize differing versions of valuable modernity in other parts of the world to oppose the uncritical adaptation of the dominant European understanding of "modernity" which does not fit in the Ethiopian context. Before we do this, he stated, we cannot emanate ourselves from the European idea of "modernity."

The presentation by Teguada Alebachew ("Mounting Democracy from Below: Intra-party Democracy in Ethiopia - Towards a Regulatory Regime") opened the panel on "Institutions: Federalism, Justice and Rule of Law". Her speech focused on the roles of political parties to build a more democratic political system. Teguada Alebachew from the School of Law at Mekelle University argued that intra-party democracy shall be valued in terms of its contribution to democracy at the state level. She argued that political parties which maintain democratic values and procedures in their internal party affairs are more likely to present viable political choices to the electorate, appoint capable and alluring leaders, and win elections. Intra-party democracy is considered essential in legitimatizing the political and government power in general. More importantly, it has the advantage of promoting democratic culture in the wider political realm of the state and of the people. Her presentation promted the following questions from the audience: Does your research finding indicate that the House of Federation and electoral board and judiciaries are not from EPRDF? How can democracy be achieved at party level when there is no democracy at state level? Should historical variables be taken as one variable for intra-party democracy?

Abebe Alemu ("The Cost of Reforming Electoral Laws in Ethiopia, 1991-2017") made a call for the democratization of the Ethiopian electoral system. The presenter tried to explain how democracy is important to fight maladministration and corruption. In this presentation restrictive laws were addressed as challenges for the development of democracy in Ethiopia. For instance, the civil society organizations are restricted only to participate on social issues. In addition, their source and usage of budget is also restricted. The legitimacy of the constitution and also the process of election of House of Federation were questioned as they can be hurdles for a democracy. He also questioned the impartiality of the electoral board. The discussion on Abebe Alemu's presentation by the audience tackled the question whether democracy can effectively be used as an instrument against corruption or not.

Wuhibegezer Ferede ("Re-Assessing the questions of nationality in Ethiopia: focus on secessionist and liberationist politics") from the department of Political Science and International Studies, Bahir Dar University, addressed the twin processes of globalization and localization, territorial reconfiguration and the need for transnational forms of association that challenge the state system from internal forces aspiring for dissociation. He argued that Ethiopia is not colonized by foreign states but that it was ideologically intoxicated and colonized by external powers. He also argued

that the legacy of colonization created intellectual dependency in the country. His presentation raised the following questions: Is the legacy of colonization really affecting Ethiopia's state formation? Is Ethiopia ideologically colonized? How do the effects of colonial boundary become a cause for Ethiopia's secessionist forces?

Figure 1: *Teguada Alebachew during her presentation*

Dr. Sonja John's paper ("Participation and refusal–For an investigation of the reach of public reasoning as democratic foundation") opened the panel on "Indigenous Concepts of Democracy". Her talk focused on institutions. She argued that we should redirect our attention to the idea of public reasoning and public dialogue as the basis of democratic culture. Dr. Sonja from the Civics and Ethical Studies department at UoG further argued, by drawing on Amartya Sen, that democracy should not be judged only by institutions that exist but by the reach of public reasoning: who is being heard. She urged that availability and feasibility of interactive discussion is most important these days. To analyze and address the current crisis of democracy worldwide, Dr. Sonja John argued for a more intensive investigation of Indigenous concepts, cultures, and traditions of democratic concepts since confining attention almost exclusively to Western definitions of democracy has been limiting and parochial. Understanding the history of democratic practice globally involves taking interest in peoples' public reasoning in different parts of the world. Investigating the connection between the reach of public discussion and the accepted mode of democratic government might offer suggestions on how to develop federal

systems that are in line with local democratic traditions and practices.

These deliberations provoked questions by conference participants regarding the applicability of western ways of public reasoning in Ethiopia. Dr. Sonja stressed that open discussion and democratic decision-making processes have been practiced in non-Western societies long before democratic states formed in Europe or the U.S. She stressed that without public open debate and without the willingness of community members to talk to each other there is no democracy.

Bamlaku Tadesse ("The Gumma customary institution in conflict resolution among the Oromo Pastoralists of Meiso district, eastern Ethiopia"), social anthropologist of the Gender and Development department at Haramaya University compared the Gumma customary institutions with the modern institution for its ability to solve conflicts. The main objective was to examine the roles of the Gumma customary mechanisms of peace-making with a prime focus on informal indigenous structures. He assessed the Gumma customary institution in addressing the political and socioeconomic arena by analyzing the organizational governance and judicial structures of the Gumma system, in particular their procedures in conflict resolution processes. Mr. Bamlaku Tadesse argued that the Gumma customary institution is more effective and efficient for inter-/intra-clan conflicts than inter-ethnic conflicts. The processes of Gumma in addressing conflicts involve a series of ritual practices that aim to reintegrate the unity of the community which was broken down and fractured due to past atrocities. People are obedient to this customary system.

The following questions were raised: How does the customary conflict resolution mechanism help to resolve conflict once and for all? Are the customary conflict resolution mechanisms fair and just? What is the difference between the Gumma and the Gada system?

Next, Ebrahim Damtew ("Aspects of the history of "Queens of peace" and co-existence: The Dubartii and their Qotti in Jämmä, South Wallo"), from UoG's department of History and Heritage Management acknowledged women's active participation in the area of conflict resolution in Ethiopia. He challenged the perception of people in Ethiopia, as elsewhere in Africa, as patriarchal, in which male dominate the entire society. Women are widely ascribed as the least participant, subordinate victims and dependent on home grown institutions. This general assumption is misleading in a way that it overshadows the immense contribution and role modeling activities made by women. Ebrahim Damtew clarified his point by exploring the role of Dubartii women, who are called "queens of peace and coexistence" in the study area where they were honored, respected and venerated.

The third panel was dedicated to the topic "Media, Communication, Internet, Social Media". In the first paper Tezera Tazbew ("The internet and democratization in Ethiopia: Challenges and opportunities"), a PhD candidate at Addis Abeba University, Department of Political Science and

International Relations, addressed the question: Does the internet have a role in democratization, and if yes, how? Tezera critically examined the role of the internet on the democratization of the Ethiopian state and society, and its prospects. He assessed the opportunities and challenges that the internet creates for the democratization of Ethiopian state and society. Also, he pointed out the prospects for genuine success in lifting Ethiopia out of the prism of authoritarianism. Tezera concluded that the prospects of successful use of the internet will be determined by efficient access, genuine freedom of expression, responsive and capable political leadership and the building a national consensus.

Mohammed Seid Ali ("Challenges and prospects of freedom of expression in a liberal political tradition: Some personal reflections"), from the Political Science and International Studies department at Bahir Dar University, critically explored the existential challenges to freedom of expression in countries that draw on liberal traditions. Arguing rather normatively, he argued against unjustifiable restrictions and censorship by the governments that spy on their citizens. They need to educate their people on how could they responsibly exercise their rights and could exploit digital as well as other communication technologies, and pointed to the problems of only state-owned printing houses. Governments should work to make the internet more democratic, bottom-up, easily accessible and affordable so that diverse ideas can be heard. After him, Asmamaw Addis ("Perplexity of scholars – Media relationships in Ethiopia: Exploring the implications of democratization of the nation"), from UoG's Journalism department, examined the intricate relationship that exists between scholars and media in Ethiopia. The presenter argued that journalists possess limited knowledge about scholars and that the media in general is not using scholars to cultivate a democratic culture.

The concluding panel was dedicated to "Democracy, Development, Gender Equality". Dr. Magdalena Freudenschuss ("Democracy and its subjects - Rational, autonomous, stable"), from Berlin, Germany, explained that since the Enlightenment Period, Europeans consider the rational and autonomous subject as the prototype of the political subject. Freudenschuss argued that European democracies build on that tradition and highlighted that this tradition is undeniably linked to colonialism and the Othering of People of Colour and Indigenous People as well as of women. These processes of Othering consolidate the male, bourgeois subject as norm. Drawing on recent, empirical examples from media and activism, she argued that political subjectivity in practice systematically opposes the idea of the autonomous and rational subject. She put forth an alternative understanding of the political subject using affect theory and postcolonial theory as a critical theoretical framework. By underlining relationality both as an affective as much as a historical and social matter, her paper focused on current dynamics of constructing the political subject in Germany, especially with regard to debates on refugee and migration politics.

Tewelde Gebremariam ("The 'Democratic developmental state' in Ethiopia: Origin, challenges and prospects"), from UoG's department of Gender and

Development Studies, investigated the questions whether Ethiopia qualifies as a democratic developmental state. He found growing pessimism about Ethiopia in consolidating democracy due to leadership incompetency; inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy; skewed emphasis on quantative economic growth than qualitative development; poor human rights records; and repressive measures on media, civil society, and political parties. Thus, the government of Ethiopia should take lessons and revise its 'democratic developmental state' to make the country more democratic, inclusive and participatory. Tewelde Gebremariam suggests that the Ethiopian government should revise its 'authoritarian developmental state' by making it more democratic, inclusive and participatory. A national dialogue would assure legitimate power which is a key factor for a successful democratic developmental state.

Solomon Girma ("Music and democracy in Ethiopia: A content analysis of two Amharic songs"), from UoG's department of English Language and Literature, examined the role of music in the Ethiopian democratic tradition, the basics of freedom of speech in democracy and compared and contrasted the content of the songs produced in Ethiopia since the last general election in 2015. For the purpose of contrast, 'ኢህአዴግን ይምረጡ' (Vote for EPRDF), anonymously written, has been selected to demonstrate praise songs, and Yihune Belay's 'ሰከን በል' (Calm Down) has been selected to show the other side of the coin. The presenter argued that art and democracy have a reciprocal relationship. Music also represents serious as well as routine matters. The presenter argued that music has had a vital role for democracy and that it can serve as instruments of protest or praise. Solomon Girma indicated through the two selected songs that music plays important roles in propagating government agendas and also in criticizing governments' imperfections. He pointed out that a certain government uses the praise for itself but criminalizes the critical voices expressed in songs. He argues to let both patriotic and protest songs be sung and be used to change people's lives for the better.

Overall the presenters addressed a variety of topics relevant to democratic practice, traditions and cultures. Dr. Sonja John from the organizing team closed the conference by expressing gratitude to Mr. Aysheshim Terefe, Vice Dean of the College of Social Sciences and the Humanities at the University of Gondar, for his strong support in realizing this international and interdisciplinary conference. She also thanked the presenters and audience for the contributions, attendance and active participation. The amount of qualified and interested questions from the audience was remarkable. Hence, the conference was not only a theoretical exercise but a practical implementation of the basic foundation of democracy: open public debate.

Andargachew Tesfahun

University of Gondar

DAAD Informs about Scholarship Programs (June 19, 2017)

On 19 June 2017 the DAAD information center based in Addis Abeba visited the University of Gondar (UoG) in order to present its scholarship programs. The abbreviation DAAD stands for *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*, which means in English: German Academic Exchange Service. Daniela Auer, DAAD lecturer at Addis Abeba University, explained the ways in which the DAAD can contribute to a certain extent to a successful scholarship application but also stressed that the initiative and active pursuit has to come from the applicants themselves.

The scholarship application process involves several steps, as Daniela Auer pointed out: (1) identifying an adequate study program in Germany, (2) getting in touch with the relevant professor; (3) meeting the application requirements, (4) securing financial funding, (5) applying, (6) dealing with bureaucratic matters in order to enter Germany and arrange the stay, including the visa requirements, and (7) finding accommodation. Since the event intended to encourage UoG staff members to apply and to get the relevant information to do so, remarks highlighted the first four steps.

(1) The applicant has to identify which study program in Germany would benefit her/him best, depending on the degree to be pursued and the language options available. There are about 400 German higher education institutions offering more than 20,000 degree programs. While most programs are delivered in German, some international programs use English. Having German language certificates, which are pursuable at UoG, cannot guarantee acceptance but it does definitely not lower the prospects.

(2) The key for being accepted into a Ph.D. program is a strong proposal that clearly states the research question, identifies the gap in the literature this project will fill and dots out the theoretical and methodological approach. This proposal is expected to be neatly summarized when approaching a potential advisor. Professors are usually more inclined to respond positively when they are approached with clear and kind questions, proposals and thoughts. An invitation letter from an advising professor is a must for most applications.

(3) Different programs are designed differently, therefore application requirements might vary. Applicants should check carefully if they meet all requirements.

(4) The next step is securing financial resources with which the DAAD and other funding agencies can help (see links below). Most applicants who cannot provide satisfying bank statements from their parents are required to secure a scholarship. Most programs in Germany are fee-free (in contrast to programs in the USA or UK) but living expenses easily add up to 810 Euros and more per month.

These steps have first to be taken before preparing for the travel and stay in Germany. One participant compared going through this process with

climbing the Kilimanjaro and asked for shortcuts. Daniela Auer responded that taking one step at a time will help and that each step will be worth it in the end. What is required for a successful application is a convincing proposal and the hard work involved in writing it. More helpful than a shortcut will be the experience gained.

DAAD not only funds individuals to go to Germany but also hosts the underrated "In-Country/In-Region programme" which supports and trains university teachers and other professional staff in developing countries. Support is available for MA and doctorate programs within the country or the region. For example, Gondar scholars could turn to DAAD to finance their Ph.D. at other Ethiopian universities or in Kenya. More universities add their programs to the DAAD list.

In addition to individual benefits, Daniela Auer also pointed out the ways in which DAAD enhances partnerships between universities: thematic networks, international studies programs, strategic partnerships, as well as several programs for partnerships with universities in developing countries. If UoG departments want to establish or strengthen their cooperation or partnership with foreign universities, they can apply to DAAD to cover the necessary expenses. Hence the exchange is not only on an individual but on an institutional level. What can help link the individual to the institutional experiences is to establish a DAAD alumni organization at UoG which may be established by the next time when DAAD visits Gondar in the New Year.

For further Information:

office@daad-ethiopia.org
http://www.daad-ethiopia.org/am/
https://www.daad.de/deutschland/en/
http://www.studienwahl.de/
http://www.higher-education-compass.de/
http://www.funding-guide.de/
Report for the Ethiopian Renaissance Journal of Social Science and the Humanities

Sonja John

University of Gondar