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Media and Politics of Representation: A Critical Decolonial Analysis of the Protests Against Addis Ababa's Integrated Master Plan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores both the coloniality of knowledge and politics of representation and the dominant political ideologies manifested within the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). It also deepens media coverage of protests by interrogating how the media in Ethiopia construct knowledge and negotiate politics of representation in every aspect of the political scene. The study employed an exploratory case study research design through the lens of decolonial epistemic theory to scrutinise the mass media coverage of protests deployed in the EBC. This study mainly discusses the colonial matrix of power, dominant discourses and their ideologies in EBC regarding protest representation against Addis Ababa's Integrated Master Plan (AAIMP). The study extends its argument to how decolonisation occurs in the struggle for economic control through the land-grabbing political system of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government of Ethiopia. The study's central argument regards AAIMP's goal to annex the neighbouring Oromia regions, proposed in 2014. Through this colonial matrix, as emphasised by the work of Tlostanova and Mignolo, the study elaborates on how the government imposes restrictions on the media representation of protests and how and why the media partially or fully ignore or distort the coverage of social movements.

KEYWORDS

Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan; colonial matrices of power; EBC; land grabbing; Oromo; protest movements

Introduction

The concept of colonial matrices of power, which was coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, is a representation of the geopolitical, ontological and epistemological expansion of Western dominance interconnected through four domains (economics, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge) (Mignolo 2007a, 2007b; Quijano 2007). The African media in general were introduced and established during the colonial era by the colonising states, and Ethiopia is no exception in this sense. For example, the Italian company Ansaldo, established radio broadcasting in 1933 (Reta 2013) and the British firm Thomson, established television transmission in 1964 (Bezabih 2018). Both of them were founded in Addis Ababa by the order of Emperor Haile Selassie initially

as Radio Addis Ababa and as Ethiopian Television (ETV) respectively with technological support from those colonial powers (Metaferia 2003). It is not simply the introduction of these technologies that brought new forms of communication and entertainment, but has also had a profound impact on the political and cultural landscape within the country.

The inquiry of decolonial researchers from the Global South mainly focuses on the pluriversity of the nation regardless of culture, social norms, political orientation and economic development, including broadcasting to advance the inquiries. In the frame of this argument, this study aims to explore how the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) speaks in the loci of plurality in promoting and advancing social protests that demand justice and equality among the citizens of Ethiopia in its broadcasting. When information in the mass media is controlled by the views and interests of the government and ignores the views of the public, it can be considered a subject of coloniality that promotes more of the ideology of its masters than the public interest. Tlostanova and Mignolo (2009) have argued that the colonial matrix of power can be comprehended as follows to better understand the theoretical and historical foundations of coloniality and how it still functions:

- (1) The struggle for the economic control (i.e. the appropriation of land, natural resources and exploitation of labor);
- (2) The struggle for the control of authority (setting up political organizations, different forms of governmental, financial and legal systems, or the installation of military bases, as it happens today);
- (3) The control of the public sphere—among other ways, through the nuclear family (Christian or bourgeois), and the enforcing of normative sexuality and the naturalization of gender roles in relation to the system of authority and principles regulating economic practices. It is based on sexual normativity and dual “natural” gender relations;
- (4) The control of knowledge and subjectivity through education and colonizing the existing knowledges, which is the key and fundamental sphere of control that makes domination possible. (Bautisa 2018, 59 quoting Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009, 135)

In each of these interconnected elements of colonial matrices of power above, there are struggles over various forms of domination and imposition. According to Tlostanova and Mignolo (2009), these concepts of colonial matrices of power are ways to struggle over economic domination, cultural destruction, marginalisation, epistemic violence and oppression that can be imposed by the dominant classes.

Social movements and protest organisers often aim to attract mass media coverage and representation to communicate to a wider public messages that vary from social to political, economic, and cultural circumstances, depending on the protesting communities (Smith et al. 2001). Protesters and protest organisers have different strategies, such as being involved in riots and street violence, to garner mass media attention (McLeod 2007) to spread their opinions and ideas among organisations, other political actors, or the media, and to try to sway the government (DellaPorta and Diani 2006). However, mass media coverage is often under the control of the government’s elites and used to shape the political discourses of the public and convince the masses of the legitimacy of their political agenda (Fedechko and Vandenberg 2011). As a result, politicians often

have worries dealing with protest movements, and media practitioners struggle to represent their efforts mainly because of unrecognised movement representatives (Della-Porta and Diani 2006; Lester and Hutchins 2009). According to Blanco (1997), if the media have the opportunity to cover social protests, the power of elites at both political and discursive levels will be limited and questioned. Blanco (1997) also argues that to control both politics and news, authorities limit the access of activists and/or the media to policymaking and freedom of expression during protests. Thus, realising the relationship between power, knowledge, and identities within media coverage that anchors the study of the representation of protests in Ethiopia is crucial. This study argues that addressing the media representation of protests of the politically marginalised can only be carried out by addressing the historic attempts at power relations in the state-building process in Ethiopia in the post-colonial periods. The colonial and post-colonial periods of the global matrices of power are linked to all nations of the world including Ethiopia, although the country has not experienced external colonialism (Tronvoll 2000). The initial point in this study's argument is how media represent issues of politically marginalised and oppressed ethnic groups; then, it seeks to explain the effect of representation, identities, and protest within the hegemonic power system and Eurocentric assumptions of epistemologies on the role of the Ethiopian public service media.

This research extends the term "representation" both as a political notion and as a form of voice and expression for dominant ethnic groups (see Smith 1999). Representation as a form of political notion spans the concept of coloniality, the existing form of colonialism after the end of colonial administration that excludes any form of decision-making. Representation as a voice for the people is extended to how the media gives attention to the protesters and frames their issues in bringing changes in development to the wider communities. In communication and media studies, the representation of protest occupies a central position, which must be informed by historical, cultural and ideological frameworks (Bhabha 1994).

Within this study, the representation project aims to question problems of identity politics hidden in the media coverage of protests in Ethiopia. Hence, it explores the power structure rooted in the media to use the media as an instrument for marginalising some ethnic groups in the practice of coloniality. The relationship between power and media coverage of the protest, which shares the idea of power, knowledge and identity, is all about representation. The concept of representation is crucial as it impresses the "reality" (Smith 1999). Henhawk (2013) also argues that the concept of representation is essential in decolonisation as it exposes the truth behind the hidden script. According to Smith (1999), the concept of representation that has the power to give an impression of the truth is important in decolonisation. Hence, representation is about the ideas, knowledge, and perspectives to be shared, and questions that ask what is shared and on what terms (Smith 1999).

Media representations of incidents are frequently influenced by news organisations' political roles, and so the same protest may appear differently in different news media depending on the ideological context in which the media organisations operate (Al Fajri 2018). It can be called "media representation of protests" because representations are selective simply in the sense that very little is portrayed by the media out of a vast amount of knowledge (Bernstein 2002). For example, in the much-studied cases of television news, only a few stories are chosen to become part of the news show and even

then reports are cut down to a few minutes from many hours of footage (Bernstein 2002; Smith 1999). According to Dutta and Basu (2018, 81), decolonisation also involves interrogating postcolonial spaces in terms of the interplays of class formations, elite control and subjugation, as well as colonial knowledge production structures (Dutta and Basu 2018). According to Quijano, “Coloniality is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (Quijano 2007, 172). In this study, the idea of coloniality that was conceived with the social category of race as a social classification of colonised and colonisers is more important than the idea of colonialism (see Quijano 2007).

Following the announcement of Addis Ababa’s Integrated Master Plan (AAIMP), a plan to annex large areas of Oromia cities and rural areas into Finfinne/Addis Ababa to double the size of the capital city, small-scale protests took place (Dugo 2017; Samuel, Zeleke, and Benedek 2022). In response to the master plan announcement on 20 April 2014, university students organised protest rallies in various Oromia towns (Samuel, Zeleke, and Benedek 2022).

Research questions

This exploratory case study attempts to address the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do the EBC represent the Oromo protests against Addis Ababa’s Master Plan as public service broadcasting (PSB) media?

RQ 2: How are the colonial matrices of power, dominant discourses, and their ideologies embedded in the EBC?

Literature review

Decolonial theoretical framework

The decolonial epistemic theory is appropriate—indeed, indispensable—for examining and scrutinising the power structure concealed behind the media messages and affecting the media representation of protests within the EBC. This theoretical perspective aims to understand how inter- and intra-coloniality are manifested in the Ethiopian media system through formal structural power. Focusing on the three conceptual pillars of coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being in this study is crucial if one wants to properly comprehend the decolonial epistemic theoretical framework. Although these constituents “do not represent the decolonial theories, they are used as organising principles of critique” (Chiumbu 2016, 420) that must be extended to the media representation of protests and political ideologies in Ethiopia.

The decolonial Epistemic theory has a long history. It carries the concept of decoloniality. “Decoloniality originated among Third World countries after the Bandung Conference in 1955, and also dispersed all over the world” (Mignolo 2011, xi). Since then, decolonial theories have been rapidly gaining ground in critical social theory. They are normally associated with a group of radical Latin American scholars who foreground issues of geopolitics and body politics to expose the persistence of modern/colonial structures in the contemporary postmodern/postcolonial period. Using the term “coloniality”,

decolonial theories attempt to understand the “continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administration” (Grosfoguel 2007, 219).

The decolonial theory of Latin America, which has been propagated by scholars such as Ramón Grosfoguel (2013), Walter Dignolo (2011), Anibal Quijano (2007), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) among others, is gaining popularity both within and beyond that region (Chambers 2020). This theory indicates that the ideology of coloniality, as a result of colonialism, can be overcome by implementing the decolonial epistemic theory. The decolonial epistemic perspective offers analysis and revelation of hidden power structures and articulations that will help us better understand the impacts of coloniality on African living realities (Sithole 2014). According to Chawla and Atay (Chawla and Atay 2018, 5), the focus of the decolonial theoretical frameworks is on decolonisation, which is based on “hybrid experiences, practices, and identities, as well as on the ideologies, performances, and practices that actively question, critique, and challenge colonisation”. It is one of the critical theories used to suggest alternative ways of thinking and theorising the relationship between media and society “as a response to the e historical crises resulting from the project of Western modernity in the Global South” (Chiumbu 2015, 37).

Decolonial epistemic perspectives have their roots in historical understandings of coloniality, which are the enduring patterns of power that resulted from colonialism and shape social, economic and cultural conditions in the absence of colonial rule (Maldonado-Torres 2008). Thus, coloniality is the outcome of subjection’s persistence, transformation, continuity and preservation. So, in order to achieve its goal of separating from coloniality that ratifies subjugation, the decolonial epistemic viewpoint must be anchored in histories and lived experiences that were produced by colonialism and nourished by coloniality (Sithole 2014).

Anibal Quijano presents the concept as a colonial matrix of power that involves four interrelated domains: control of the economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labour, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education) and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012; Quijano 2008). The colonial matrices of power which reproduce supremacies over the social, political, historical and economic conditions of a nation create orders and expose a way for segregation and domination to be determined by the control of power and authority (Dube 2002; Grosfoguel 2007). Through these colonial matrices of power, the coloniality of power becomes entangled to provide durable and stable power concerning its colonial characters (Saldívar 2007). This form of the presupposition of the component of power coloniality is concealed “in everyday forms of life making subjection invisible, and as a result, legitimate” (Sithole 2014, 63).

Hence, the rights of the colonised subjects such as identities, beliefs and self-determination can be best addressed through a decolonial epistemic perspective. Incorporating the principles within the decolonial epistemic theory is necessary because they are about redressing the acts of violence that have been, and continue to be, perpetrated against marginalised, colonised and minoritised peoples’ epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies (Hesse-Biber and Johnson 2015). The philosophical assumption of decolonisation centres on indigenous methods, communities and territories that recognise local colonial histories and engage in ongoing discussions about sovereignty, location and power (Sium, Chandni, and Ritskes 2012). Hence, decolonisation plays the role of commitment

to social justice and ensures the elimination of inequalities among citizens. It aims to redefine the existing supremacies of the dominant society and the location of power in a way that can be fair and equal to distribution (Held 2019).

Decolonisation does not begin with the rejection of colonialism. Rather, it seeks to reconceptualise power, change and knowledge by incorporating diverse epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies without completely rejecting them. Ngwenya (2021) also articulates that the coloniality of power (modernity) of the West specifically includes dominations, exploitation, conquest and subjugation that cannot be disentangled since it hides in the darker side of modernity. According to Sium, Chandni, and Ritskes (2012), without contestation, decolonisation is not possible. It needs the involvement of resistance against colonial systems and enhancing local knowledge by regaining impartial means of intermingling “new possibilities, and transforming political and personal histories” (Ritenburg 2014, 72).

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 485), “decoloniality is not a long-standing political and epistemological movement aimed at the liberation of (ex-)colonised peoples from global coloniality but also a way of thinking, knowing, and doing”. The theory of decolonial epistemics involves a responsibility to create fundamental and alternative knowledge (Grosfoguel 2007) “outside the bounds of Eurocentrism” (Chiumbu 2015, 35). The decolonial epistemic perspective is one of the socio-political theories that mobilises to allow the quiet and epistemological crisis caused by the globalisation of the knowledge of the developed countries to displace other knowledge (Sithole 2014). It is used to defend the epistemologies and ideologies, as well as the projects, of social and political culture of Euro-North America imposed upon the Third World (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016).

Media and protest movements in the African context

Bernstein (2002) states that gender, racism, class and ethnicity can be the key themes covered in media representation. According to Al Fajri (2018), the media’s ideological frameworks typically shape how they report stories, which leads to disparities in how protests are portrayed depending on the political stance of the media.

The African political landscape has frequently been typified by a few small elites holding onto power for extended periods without being able to guarantee equality in all spheres of social norms. Protests and social movements against the corrupted few elites in power in Africa, including Ethiopia, were mostly sparked by these characteristics of inequality, marginalisation, domination and expropriation. Therefore, African governments are frequently cited as instances of persistent totalitarianism in the contemporary period that monopolises social, political and economic forces based on their altruism (Tufekci and Wilson 2012). In these totalitarian regimes, information access is severely restricted. Public news consumption is frequently suppressed and shadowed, enforced solely on what serves the objectives of governments, and media messages and contents are filtered by editors in positions of authority. According to Tufekci and Wilson (2012), this is a system in which African regimes extend their authority through the assistance of the media, in addition to the extent to which the government controls and dominates mainstream media attention. Posey (2014) argues that mass media dominance serves as a tool for hegemony, cultural oppression and what looks to be a response to partisanship and economic inequality.

In Ethiopia, the media has been ruled by authoritarian governments to satisfy their sole interests (Diribsa 2016; Meshesha 2014b; Tura 2008). As a result, the citizens of the country could not access protest information from state media; it was only available from a few private media sources (Záhořík 2017). This historical and contemporary restriction strategy of accessing protests and social movements resulted in directing citizens to the huge consumption of social media. However, it is common for media organisations to ignore protests that they think are unconventional, unnoticeable and less newsworthy (Dalton 1996), and power holders can also influence the portrayal of protests in mass media (Papaionnou 2015). Researchers are prompted to inquire about the connection between the media, political engagement, and democracy as a result of this ignorance of protest in media in Africa (Wasserman 2018). To gain media attention, protestors thus frequently resort to violent behaviour. Such strategies for obtaining media attention are typical in African nations, such as Mozambique (Wasserman 2018), Ethiopia's Oromia region (Adem 2019; Davison 2016; Shoa and Gizaw 2021; Wayessa 2019) and Guinea's anti-government demonstrations (SAPA 2013). The general economic crisis in Tunisia and the poor handling of COVID-19 that led the mass protests and anti-government protests in Senegal, Chad and Ghana; the demand of Malian protests against their government to challenge the EU and France's security forces in 2021; and the protest by students in the Democratic Republic of Congo demanding that their government negotiate with their teachers (who were on strike) so their classes could resume (African News 2021) are other examples of protest movements that were able to attract media attention.

Media and power in the context of Ethiopia

Since 1992, Ethiopian media has claimed to serve the public interest, diversity and democracy despite several drawbacks and complaints (Diribsa 2016). However, even if a story fails to pique the public's curiosity, reporters and journalists in government-monitored media systems lack confidence in exposing the wrongdoings of powerful people (Meshesha 2014a). The political ties that existed between the Ethiopian press and the ruling party had a crucial role in limiting press freedom and the ability of the press to deliver messages to the public that they desired. Thus, decolonisation is crucial to liberalise speech rights. African governments have been closely monitoring the media because they do not trust it to be accountable for upholding their authority (Meshesha 2014b). Blanco (1997) argues that the authority of elites at the political and discursive levels will be challenged and constrained if the media is given the chance to cover social protests. Likewise, the media, particularly state-owned media in Ethiopia, tend to marginalise any protest that questions their hegemonies. The central claim of the study is that this is how the media in Ethiopia covers protests against AAMP.

Methods

Design of the research

This research project aimed to employ an exploratory case study research design through the lens of decolonial epistemic theory to scrutinise the mass media coverage of protests and power coloniality, knowledge coloniality and existence coloniality possibly deployed by the EBC. The decolonial epistemic model was adopted in reconstructing the messages

behind the protest events in the EBC. This study solely applied a case study method to the case of the EBC to explore the representation of Oromo protests, focusing on protest events against AAIMP from 2014 to 2016 as a project of decolonial perspective in the media. The researcher purposely selected EBC and protest events to conduct qualitative content analysis through a decolonial perspective. The rationale behind the choice of EBC is that it is the most extensive platform (including television, radio, and internet) in the country and the largest public service media in Ethiopia (EBC 2014). It is the responsibility of the public service media to report on and cover all social issues that are of interest to the public, in a trustworthy manner.¹ According to the Broadcasting Regulatory Authority, Ethiopians have diverse languages, political views and cultures that must be represented in the mainstream media (Mukundu and Rasmussen 2018, 10).

Furthermore, a decolonial approach seeks to understand how colonialism exploited unfranchised groups, nations and cultures through subjugation, commodification and other forms of exploitation (Agboka 2014). This method is predicated on the idea that there are various realities or interpretations of human experience, as well as diverse power structures that might affect how protests are portrayed in the media. Through an exploratory case study, the study sought to address the multifaceted interpretation and explanation of the built meaning, beyond a simple description of the event. Most scholars have placed focus on the case study research design in order to comprehend how the “actual” world relates to the subject being studied (Yin 2018). Thus, the case study research design is intended to enable researchers working in the Global South to contextualise their research and to understand the nuances of the multi-world approach, which takes a plurality of worlds into account. Hence the necessity to comprehend how the EBC represented Oromo protests against AAIMP that took place from 2014 to 2016 served as the driving force for using a case study research methodology.

Participants and data collection

The present study adopted interviews and document analysis as the constituents of qualitative methodologies and data collection instruments. This involved both semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 participants, that ranged in length from half an hour to one hour and took place between 5 March 2023 and 5 April 2023, and document analysis using decolonised critical analysis. The interviewees were journalists, reporters, editors and managers who were chosen purposefully (based on their experiences, expertise and interest in reporting on protests, conflicts and political issues); this method is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select cases with information related to the phenomenon of interest. These participants were important in teasing out how power influenced the media coverage of social injustices, and how the media marginalised, delegitimised and ignored the claims of protest movements as the particular focus area of the study. It was inevitable that the focus would be on how journalists/reporters covered protest movement-related issues, what they covered/did not cover, what aspects they paid attention to, how they handled protest news coverage and presentation, and how they portrayed protesters during the interview session. In this technique, reporters, editors and managers at protest events were asked about their practices, their experiences and their thoughts about media operations, new processes and reporting, as well as any changes they perceive in the general media representations of protest.

In addition to gathering interview data, the researcher consulted various documents and archival data related to the topic under study. Documents are secondary data that were collected to compare the data obtained from primary data (interviews). Moreover, secondary data were collected using qualitative content analyses to focus on the message behind the protest issues. Many of the news protest contents broadcasted were obtained from the EBC's web pages in consultation with EBC's managers. Documents such as policy documents, proclamations, guidelines, and organisations' website² contents related to protest stories were also carefully consulted. The attempts to obtain copies of recorded and videotaped protest-related news events were unsuccessful due to the strict internal bureaucracy of the organisation. Document analysis is focused on the process that passes through "exploration, reading, looking, reflecting, and note taking" (Altheide et al. 2008, 135). According to Altheide et al. (2008, 135), the first step in document analysis is exploration, which should be "followed by the identification of key terms, images, themes, and associated frames". Thus, document analysis was another important instrument of data collection to explore and verify the information obtained from interviews in achieving the objectives of this study.

Data analysis and interpretations

To address the research question of this project study, in analysing the data obtained from the archived documents and interviews, decolonial critical analysis was employed. The decolonial critical analysis is important to address the influence of power over the media in representing protests and related issues in reality. A critical investigation of the power structures in which we are situated and the vantage points from which we speak is a necessary step in the decolonial critical analysis process. Tsang (2021) states that acting, reflecting and learning are the three main guiding activities of the decolonisation endeavour. The whole Oromia regional state saw public demonstrations against tyranny by security forces after the declaration of AAIMP in May 2024. Due to these demonstrations, which eventually developed into the #Oromoprotest or *Qeerroo* movement, we now need to speak out against the unfair and discriminatory treatment we receive in society. Social class and mobility, gender and sexuality, language and culture, and ethnicity are all areas where disparities exist since these concerns are interconnected and require action or voice (Tsang 2021). Ethiopia's capital has witnessed an unprecedented rise in political protest and inter- and intra-ethnic tensions since 2015, and it is an epicentre of economic and political activity for the Oromo people, which they constantly reflect upon. In recent years, the Oromo struggle has been fought in and around Addis Ababa or Finfinne. This demonstrates how thoughtful consideration of our own pasts and present-day positions can result in positive behaviours that more effectively reflect our dedication to ideals that we hold dear, such as social justice, equality, diversity and inclusivity. Although some Addis Abababans agree that "Ethiopian culture is Amhara culture", the majority of Amhara people do not like to acknowledge their historical domination in Ethiopia and its ongoing impacts (Pellerin and Elfversson 2023). Furthermore, there is racial discrimination in Ethiopia, which has occasionally been called "Oromophobia", involving negative stereotypes of Oromo people in which they are considered backwards and uncultured; thus, a decolonial critical analysis of this topic is required (Pellerin and Elfversson 2023). To understand the power relation in conflict and protest manner with

the media, and to elucidate the hidden script behind the media reports, decolonial critical analysis is a crucial method (Sithole 2014).

The data obtained through interviews and audio-visual contents were first transcribed and translated into the target language (English) and then categorised, thematised, and coded for further analysis. The transcripts were double-checked and reviewed for accuracy. During the coding and categorisation process, the following steps recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for theme categorisation were used. These are: (a) open coding, which involves carefully reading every interview transcript to find themes or meanings that emerge from the data; (b) axial coding, which involves determining the connections and similarities between themes based on their contexts and contents; and (c) integration, which entails organising the findings into the main themes and incorporating participant experiences and researcher interpretations through narrative citations (Shekedi 2005). Using data from several sources, the researcher compares and contrasts the information before repeating the process until they are certain that no new issues are developing. In the course of the research, transcripts, memos, notes and study material are routinely analysed through comparative and thematic analyses. Consequently, basic discourse patterns typical of the coverage and representation by EBC of the #Oromoprotests against AAIMP were examined through qualitative content analysis.

Results and discussion

The struggle for economic control through land-grabbing

The issue of land has been the major question and the source of conflicts, resistance and protests in Ethiopia since the middle of the twentieth century. Emperors and elites used to control the land to maintain economic, political and social supremacy over the public. Hence, it can be argued that land appropriation and monopolisation of natural resources by successive power holders in Ethiopia are among the subjects of coloniality that this study attempted to address. According to Gerbi (2019), there was no land commercialisation in Oromia (Oromo country) before the 1890s, but it was introduced to the Oromia after the Abyssinian colonial settlers occupied a vast area of Oromo land. Gerbi expands his argument that land price inflation was propagated and finally left several Oromos without land to call their own. This historical background and the philosophical concept held by the Oromo regarding their land, which they considered to be like their bones and blood and which they cannot live without, was finally triggered by the AAIMP into the popular protest that began in 2014. However, the mass media in Ethiopia including the EBC rarely recognise this as a triggering factor for the popular protest. For example, the BBC's report on 9 December 2015 through televised news, taken from the statement of the chairman of Oromo regional state Muktar Kedir, indicates that there was no alignment between the protests in Oromia and the AAIMP (EBC 9 December 2015).

According to the report, behind the unrest and violence in Oromia were conspiracies with a hidden agenda, not protests against the AAIMP. However, according to Kelecha (2021), the waves of popular struggles that finally rocked Ethiopia were ignited when the AAIMP—aiming to expand the city into the neighbouring Oromia region by nearly 1.5 million hectares—was announced (Samuel, Zeleke, and Benedek 2022). Interviewed individuals noted that several reasons can be identified for popular protests and social movements

in both of the two largest regions. These include social, political, and economic injustice, unequal representation, marginalisation, repression and expropriation, to name a few, beyond the master plan and/or the Wolkite-Tegede's land administration issues (Respondents 14; 09; 08). These injustices later spawned the *Qeerroo* movement in rural areas of the Oromia region and gradually spread throughout the country involving consistent protests by young Ethiopians from 2014 to 2018 (Abebe 2020). One of the interview participants grapples with how the government, through its key agents in the EBC, represses, marginalises and distorts protest reports to obscure the realities on the ground:

... six to seven people died in Borana, Yabello during the protest. The protesters were shot dead in the demonstration against the government for systematic land grabbing. While the protesters were against the wrongdoing of the government, our media reported as if it happened as a result of violence against security forces and an attempt to take off guns from the police. When 50 people were shot dead in Bahr Dar on 5 July 2018, our media kept silent. The assumption was that broadcasting on EBC on such cases would aggravate the mass protests in the other regions. (Respondent 03)

According to the participants, the responses of the government through its security forces were terrifying and resulted in the deaths of several protesters from the region. Respondent 03 verifies that the media (EBC) presented and framed the deaths of the protesters as a clash between them and the security forces when the protesters attempted to seize the security members' guns. The harsh responses and the reshaping and reframing of the protesters' agenda, however, seem to expand the protests to wider areas. For example, Kelecha (2021) argues that the harsh responses of the government to the Oromo protests inspired other regions to give media coverage and air grievances in the Oromia region from the start of 2016. The protests sparked in that year and which led ultimately to the declaration of a state emergency in October 2016 have roots in the long history of oppression, first by the Amhara and then by the Tigray-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Allo 2017). This historical oppression mainly revolved around land grabbing and annexation, which the Oromo had perceived as a major system for their oppression. As a result, the Oromo not only questioned the implementation of the master plan project as land-grabbing but also the political motivations behind it. Its purpose, as stated by the government, was to ensure the effective provision of basic social services to the capital city and Oromia through infrastructure projects (Chala 2016). As Ararsa (2014) pointed out in advocacy for Oromia, the framing of protest from the government's perspective is designed to conceal the government's unyielding focus on annexation. The Oromo believed that, if executed, the AAIMP would hasten the expulsion of Oromo peasants from their ancestral lands and, as a result, eradicate Oromo culture and identity in the region (Allo 2017).

It was the argument of this advocacy group for Oromia that led to the initiation of the protest movement in Ethiopia in 2014. Interviewed reporters who witnessed the 2014 popular protests in the greater Oromia that then expanded to Amhara regional states, which were born out of this historic question, stated they arose from inquiries of political representation in the central government and economic equality (Respondents 12; 10). Another respondent said that the AAIMP was at the centre of the economic grievance for Oromos (Respondent 07). The AAIMP has been portrayed in various news outlets in varying ways. According to both domestic and foreign media, the government is attempting to evict Oromo farmers from their fields against their will (Adem 2019).

Protests against AAIMP

The Oromo protest movement began on 25 April 2014 at Ginchi town, which is nearly 80 km from Addis Ababa, as a small-level demonstration against AAIMP. However, the demonstrations soon became large in scale, and were promoted on social media as “Oromo-Protests” or the *Qeerroo* movement (Dugo 2017; Wayessa 2019). It is crucial to keep in mind that the opposition to AAIMP is specifically linked to Ethiopia’s past, where its modernisation efforts marginalised Oromo peasants, leading to the Oromo uprisings that took place between 2014 and 2018 (Wayessa 2019, 2020). The protest is placed in a historical context by the founding of Addis Ababa city after the Oromo people were subjugated, as well as by the collective feelings of marginalisation and loss (Wayessa 2019). The government’s plan to extend the capital city into the Oromia National Regional State’s (ONRS’s) neighbouring districts under the guise of AAIMP rapidly sparked a backlash, with protests turning violent (Wayessa 2019). However, the participants said that they were carefully orientated to report the issue as a development project in their news production. “The EBC presented the master plan as a development initiative that would benefit both the Addis Ababa community and the nearby Oromia towns” (Respondent 13). As a result, the EBC did not characterise the protest situation, like international media did, as land grabbing, annexation or confiscation, as disclosed by Adem (2019). According to Adem (2019) and Allo (2017), international media outlets and private local media outlets explore AAIMP as a system of land grabbing and annexation in the views of the Oromo people. Instead, it was an attempt to convince the Oromo mass movement that it would primarily benefit the Oromo farmers dwelling around Finfinne. The real aim to integrate Addis Ababa into the nearby surrounding Oromia towns was mysterious to the people except for the Tgray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)-led EPRDF. The EBC’s report in this regard is inconsistent and contradictory. For example, the statement from Oromo People’s Democratic Organization’s (OPDO’s) Central Committee, reported by the EBC on 20 September 2016, contradicted the contents of the EBC’s report on 9 December 2015. The report says. “We will take a closer look at the issues raised by our organisation due to its partisanship, especially the farmers who have been evicted from their lands due to development projects” (EBC’s report on 20 September 2016).

On the popular protests that happened in Addis Ababa and regarding Oromia regional statements, the Addis Ababa City administration seems to verify that there was a lack of transparency in implementing the AAIMP towards neighbouring Oromia regions. The following report from EBC on 26 December 2015 indicates this reality:

Addis Ababa’s city administration has stated that it has no position other than the Oromia regional government. Although the questions of transparency and awareness raised by the people at various times in the Master Plan are considered to be the right questions of the society, only the developmental government that the people trust can answer the basic development, peace and good governance issues of the society. (EBC’s report on 26 December 2015)

The EBC’s presentation of the issues of the protests can be linked to the coloniality of power. The reality behind the media report and the words of the media’s source in the name of the development project seems unclear, and the protests and protesters’ issues are not presented directly. In this regard, the media’s representation of protests is a form of political notion that spans the concept of coloniality. Smith (1999) argues

that representation encompasses the notion of political decisions that exists in the form of coloniality after the end of colonial administration and excludes any form of decision making. Smith (1999) extends her argument that representation as a voice for the people is extended to how the media gives attention to the protesters and frames their issues in bringing changes in development to the wider communities.

It was this covert AAIMP that initiated the largest ever protest movements throughout the entirety of Oromia within a very short period that eventually led the OPDO to cancel the master plan (Respondent 01). The attempts to convince the Oromo people regarding the expansion of the said “development project” could not be accepted. Such practice could be translated into the political project that seems to hide in the development project that helped the TPLF elites to enlarge their economic benefits. The following news presented by EBC on 13 January 2016 indicates the decision of the OPDO central committee to cancel the implementation of the master plan:

The Oromia Special Zone Integrated Master Plan around Addis Ababa and Finfinne has sparked popular protests in the Oromia region, following months of protests, the OPDO Central Committee has decided to suspend its plans altogether.

Until the decision of the OPDO central committee passed, the EBC had neither recognised the protest movements as a regional issue nor as a larger Oromo people’s political grievance but it had been a subject of coloniality, in which the TPLF-led EPRDF government assumed the movement was anti-peace and development, and that its members were against the development of the country in general. Regarding AAIMP, the EBC speaks from the position of the EPRDF’s dominant ideology. One cannot deny that the initial objectives of the TPLF/EPRDF, as the ruling political party, were to maintain hegemonic power in the country and to maintain economic control through propaganda machinery tools that included media organisations, religious institutions, school curricula and various mass organisations (Vestal 1999). According to Vestal, the EPRDF, when it came to power in 1991, promised in its strategic document on “revolutionary democracy” that the public should be granted the right to move without restriction. Contrary to this promise, Vestal (1999) argues that the EPRDF in its strategic document drafted in 1993 that the mainstream media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, were stated to be under the control of the government. As a result, the EBC has been used as an instrument to marginalise the protesting groups by giving their voices different angles. For example, the Oromia regional government expressed its feeling that the protests were conspiracies of foreign forces that have the hidden agenda of destroying the development projects of the country. In the following statement, the regional government expressed its denial of the protesters’ voice and instead expressed that the unrest in Oromia was not related to the issue of AAIMP integrating the neighbouring Oromia towns:

The Oromia regional government has said that the recent violence in some educational institutions in the state is a conspiracy by those with hidden agendas. He called on the people of Oromia to work together for the peace and stability of the country bearing that there is no relationship between the unrest and the recent AAIMP endorsed by the regional government to expand the city into neighbouring Oromia towns with development infrastructures. (EBC, 9 December 2015)

The largest protest movements in the history of the Ethiopian state, that began in the Oromia region in 2014 and then expanded to the Amhara regions in 2015, were not

the first of their kind in questioning land grabbing, confiscation and annexation by the EPRDF ruling government. Peasants near Addis Ababa and other areas had been driven off their fertile and productive land without adequate compensation, and in response to this, they were protesting against the EPRDF military in 1997 too. Hence, it is not a surprise to see the TPLF/EPRDF government not permitting the coverage of protest movements. For example, the protests organised at Addis Ababa, Meskel Square, by three opposition parties to protest the EPRDF policies in 1997 were denied media coverage (Vestal 1999).

The recent (2014–2018) protest movements in Oromia regional state were mainly over the issue of land. The issue of land is the backbone of the economy in this country, which centred on the expansion of AAIMP. This was not the only thing behind the protest, however; it also involved the demand for fundamental reform. The long-running popular protest in this region, which finally brought about the 2018 reform initiated by the reformist leader Abiyi Ahmed, was blamed and condemned by the regional government through the EBC, subject to the emphasis of their violence. The excerpt presented below from the EBC's organisation archive can be taken as an example regarding the popular protest movements:

In the wake of the recent unrest in some parts of the Oromia region, the destructive forces sponsored by the Shabea government and other foreign powers are undermining the rights of nations and nationalities, and their goal is to create a weakened and fragmented Ethiopia. Hailemariam said the people should fight these forces. (EBC, 1 March 2016)

The evidence of the EBC reports on the protests merely represents the government's point of view and did not include the protesters' point of view. If the report of the media is a completely elite perspective that ignores the lived experiences of the public (the protesters), it will be subjected to the coloniality of power under the dominant ideology. In this case, rather than displaying the root causes of the protests, the organisation (EBC) presented selected parts of the protest movement to showcase the violence that damaged several development infrastructures without balancing these with the protesters' perspectives. Mcleod (2007) argues that mainstream media often favours power holders and ignores and misrepresents the protesters and their voices. The protesters and their issues were invisible and ignored, which can be seen as epistemological disenfranchisement (Moyo 2020) that advances the coloniality of knowledge as a result of power domination.

To delegitimise the social movement and depict them as violent, anti-peace and development forces, the EBC's representation of the protests took the position of condemning the protesters. Some of the following quotations of EBC televised headlines and text verify that the EBC was focused completely on the power holders' perspective and not the protesters' perspective:

- "Residents strongly condemned the illegal activities of anti-peace forces" (EBC's report headline on 21 December 2015).
- "Armed anti-peace and development forces are barbaric and have no public support" (EBC's report 18 December 2018).
- "Residents of West Arsi Zone call for necessary action against anti-peace forces destroying public and government property" (EBC's report 21 February 2016).

From the political power perspective, the EBC presents the protest news as indicating the protesters should be responsible for the destruction of both private and government property and the killing of civilians, revealing the EBC was acting as the mouthpiece of the regional governments. Rather than portraying protesters as full of virtue, the EBC described them as deviants who seek power unconstitutionally, are threats to national development, and create chaos in the country. The news broadcast shows us that the regional government's and the EPRDF coalition party's ideology rested on the characteristics of coloniality of power acting as hegemonic dominance that ignored the ideology of the oppressed. The following news story, broadcast on 3 December 2015 in the Amharic language and translated into English for this research, can be taken as evidence:

Oromia Regional State announces that actions will be taken against those who spread baseless gossip that states Oromia towns around Addis Ababa will be integrated into the Addis Ababa city administration. The State Government Communication Bureau said in a statement to EBC that the political crisis forces were arrested in an attempt to create unrest by focusing on the region collaborating with terrorist organisations and spreading false rumours through anti-peace media. (EBC 3 December 2015)

The control of land in Ethiopia was the basis of the imperial economic system, as it was the country's most important economic resource (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003). As a result, political powers knew that the issues related to land could not be defused simply because they closely impact the media coverage of such issues. Therefore, EBC's depictions of protesters were exaggerated to marginalise and delegitimise them, calling them "chauvinists, destructive forces, anti-peace and anti-development forces, political profiteers, unlawful demonstrators, and chaos-instigators" (Shenkute 2018, 40). By describing protests as irrelevant and unrepresentative, this approach sought to change audiences' perceptions towards the government, showing that it was restoring peace and security. A major colonial subject in Ethiopia's history was land grabbing, annexation, and confiscation (Allo 2017). This study revealed that the media in Ethiopia, especially state-owned media, often took a position of marginalising any form of protest that might call into question their hegemonic power appointments and funding. Policy document (EBC's Establishment Proclamation number 858/2014)³ analysis indicates that the higher-level management in the EBC (such as the Chief Executive Officer and the Deputy Chief Executive Officers) are appointed by the government. Consequently, the EPRDF appointment of the higher-level management did not allow the practitioners to engage freely and independently execute their professionalism, which contributed to influencing the entire media organisation in its representation of protest movements. For example, during the political turmoil and the uprising of social protest movements in Oromia and Amhara regional states in Ethiopia, the chief Director General of the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority was Mr Zeray Asegdom, whose political affiliation was TPLF.

One television reporter from EBC said:

They attempted, if they could, to induct reporters into the political party; however, some reporters find it difficult to break free from this affiliation. They could not provide a report without partisanship nevertheless, because they were not members of any political parties. For instance, I recall a discussion where a group of fifteen political party representatives were present, and harsh criticism was directed towards the EPRDF. The manager in position asked him about the forum reports when the reporter arrived at the studio. In response, they said that today's gathering was an outright critique of the EPRDF government. Subsequently,

the manager inquired about any favourable comments regarding the governing administration. The reporters responded, “No, there was no compliment”. Taking out a white paper, the manager started writing about large-scale government initiatives as though the political elites valued the government and gave the reporter instructions to read the news sources on TV. The reporter subsequently declined to comply. After that, a different reporter who had once belonged to the TPLF party and had obeyed all of the members’ orders read the fake story. (Respondent 04)

The above excerpt show how politically affiliated individuals can influence EBC’s coverage and representation of protests against the wrongdoings of the government for the purpose of circumventing the demands for justice and equalities of the protesters in areas of services and development denied by the regime.

Conclusions

This study has argued that the representations of protests in the Oromia regional state were influenced by the concepts of colonial matrices of power hidden in the EBC operations as well as the interference of the TPLF-led EPRDF government intending to maintain the political, economic, cultural and social supremacies of the coalition political party. The theory of colonial matrices of power that constitute coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being, as proposed by Anibal Quijano, was conceptually argued, and the article showed how it could be translated into the media representation of popular protest movements in Ethiopia from 2014 to 2018. Media professionals appear to be experiencing a decline in self-confidence, in reporting and covering protests independently, and they tend to be influenced by power holders through various appointments and funding. As a result of the convergence of these factors, from a democratic perspective, public broadcasting is unquestionably losing its role as watchers and critics of the political establishment. In this regard, the ideologies underpinning the legislative documents for the EBC⁴ and the practical roles played by the corporation are complex and vague and need further analysis.

The EBC is expected to serve the nation with a multi-ethnic culture and multi-linguistic diversity. However, the document analysis and the views of the interviewed respondents demonstrated that the EBC’s representation of Oromo protests against AAIMP was at odds with that. Nearly all the documentation ignored the constitutional rights such as cultural rights and linguistics rights, and natural rights such as freedom of expression,⁵ of the largest ethnic group in the country. It also exposed the multifaceted issues tangled in the protest newsgathering, editing, reporting, and dissemination. AAIMP, in terms of politics and procedure, represents the power dynamics within the ruling EPRDF party as well as between the people and the state. The repressive political climate and the closure of political space for opposition political parties characterise the context in which the protest erupted against AAIMP (Wayessa 2019).

The study advances the viewpoints of the decolonial epistemic theory which resulted from the long history of African resistance to colonial subjection. Hence, introducing the decolonial perspective into the practice of mass media in Africa in general, and in Ethiopia in particular, is essential in minimising the four interrelated colonial matrices of power: economic control, authority control, gender and sexuality control, and subjectivity and knowledge (Grosfoguel 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012; Quijano 2000).

The study addresses how the mass media in Ethiopia operates in a colonial matrix of power. Through the three conceptual pillars of decolonial epistemic perspectives (coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being), the study has explored how the hegemonic power influences protests in Ethiopia using controls over the mass media. The media in Africa operate in a colonial matrix of power by producing dominant discourses and ideologies that favour the interests of elites (Chiumbu 2015). As a result, this article investigated criticism, transformation and analysis of the media and power relations

Notes

1. EBC. 2014. Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation Editorial Policy. Addis Ababa: EBC. (A policy document that helps to guide the entire operation of EBC).
2. EBC's reports on protest movements in the Oromia region obtained from its organizational website (<https://www.facebook.com/EBCzena>).
3. EBC' Establishment proclamation (Proclamation No. 858/214. A proclamation to provide for the establishment of Ethiopian broadcasting corporation) found in Negarit Gazeta, 8 November 2014.
4. EBC. 2015. Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation Content Compiled News Room Manuals. Addis Ababa.
5. The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. 1995. Addis Ababa. Berhanna Selam Printing Press.

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