

## TRANSCRIPTION DU PODCAST ZONES CONTRAINTES : L'ÉTHIOPIE VUE PAR ABHRAM MEAREG

The foundation Maison des sciences de l'homme supports intellectual communities in countries marked by various obstacles to academic freedom. To this end, it accompanies researchers who can no longer carry out their activities with the necessary serenity and security. Stressful situations, surveillance, administrative blockades, racism or gender discrimination, and sometimes war, are all factors that affect their ability to carry out their work. This diversity of obstacle calls for various strategies of protection.

This collection of podcast ZONES CONTRAINTES brings you their stories. Today we listen to Abrham Meareg coming from Ethiopia and hosted by the Themis program of the FMSH. This program offers shelters and peaceful conditions of research, but also helps to obtain visas, to find accommodations or share a workspace.

For this episode, we interviewed Abrham Meareg, a young Ethiopian researcher in political science. He left Ethiopia for France after the assassination of his father. Meareg Amare, professor of chemistry at the university. Abrham recounts the circumstances of this tragic event, goes back to his family history, and provides his testimony and analysis of the war in Tigray. Abrham is now in the United States, where he has rejoined family members and is pursuing his PhD. He has filed a lawsuit against Facebook, which he accuses of having failed in its duty to moderate content, allowing hatred against Tigrayans to focus on its father and thus contribute to his death.

Well, thank you for having me. My name is Abrham Meareg. I was born in 1990, in Baher Dar in Ethiopia. My father was born and raised in Tigray, in March 21st, 1961, in a small town of Leto, ten kilometers away from Axum in Tigray. And my mother was born in Gondar, Amhara region, so she has a descendance from Tigray. They just completely considered themselves as part of amharan community. They just met in town of Dabat, a small town in Gondar. My father was assigned to teach there for secondary school in the Department of Chemistry. After three years, he just got into prison. For political affiliation by the Derg regime. But after three years tortured to death and after losing five of his friends due to the excessive torture by sharp things, that is the time when my grandmother met him and promised him to give my mother to him if he survived from that prison. After such tragedy, they just got married after four months, in April 1985. They went together and they just founded a family and brought four children. And regarding the tortures, I would be happy to show you a picture of him. You see, you can see his leg was bended. My mother told the romantic theory. He just borrowed this suit from his friend, this cloth. Because they just started their love from the scratch. And it was after four months from his release from prison. And he lost five of his friends in jail and just end up bended. But later on, he recovered well. This is his ID card. College. So where is it...? Is it just his name or is there an information here that says that he's Tigran? No. It's just his name.

Name yes.

This one is a letter given from the Derf region three years after he was released. They just thought he was dead and put him in a gravesite. My aunts told me after the tragedy. So he left five of his friends. They just lost their life during the torture. But at night he managed to wake up and walk to the fence of the prison. So one of the assigned to cook for the prisoners saw him struggle to walk and she shouted loud. "I have seen one of the dead person walking" and they just give him a treatment. Honestly speaking, there was people in Amhara who were not such radical in each city. I never heard my parents told me such things. So they just treated him. They gave medicine and they just brought him again to the prison but never tortured him. And he started to teach chemistry for those in prison, chemistry, mathematics and English. This is how he goes through his way of life. His life. The good thing is he was a proud Tigran and not showing his pride, but he was happy to share with us his story, the legend, the myth, and how his strong attachment to his family. I just sometimes blame him, at least if he was in

position to tell us what really happened to him. His story. At least will enforce him to at least we'll push him to leave the city earlier than the war. He was hiding his pain inside of him.

- You're talking about what happened in a in 1985,

- 1985 yes!

He was not such good in telling his political thoughts, even though we didn't know what happened to him in prison until recent time. My aunt managed to tell us his story because when I think now he was not ready to tell us, probably either that makes him choke or not to just pass the hit or grievance for his children. So when he was alive, he just motivated me to do the research. Any research about peace and stability, unless I just fail to join his department. So he told me to do any research which is valuable for society. My father was in academia. He was a full professor in Barda University. He was teaching there for the last 16 years. He was in my back, especially to continue my studies. Even though he was not happy to join social science, he was pushing us to join natural science. Since my childhood, I was much more interested to study about society. That's why I joined social studies and my mother, even though she was in business making industries, I just chose to stay in academia professionally. My academic background is from Developmental studies from Barda University, and I have been lecturing in Assosa university for eight consecutive years and in my state university I have been involved in research works and community service activities. And I also founded the first peace forum in European higher education institutions. So it was very good in settling disputes, conflicts and reaching out to communities about peace building, conflict resolution and others. Since 2020, I joined Amhara university to continue my third degree in Department of Peace and Developmental Studies. My PhD dissertation is about nature and dynamics of cooperation and conflict between Amhara and Tigray regional states in Ethiopia. I just grow up in peace loving family members. My father was from Tigray and my mother is from Amhara region. So I just believe that I have good reasons to join the department, at least to see and to research the untouched research areas like the top north of Ethiopia. That's why I am motivated to study that particular area. Regarding the political situation, you know, the politics in the Great Horn, particularly in Ethiopia, it's characterized by fragility. So unless the state and non-state actors and the regional politics, no one was conscious about what was coming to Ethiopia. The government of the EPDRF was not conscious. The people were not ready to see what is happening now. And honestly speaking, even though I didn't predict in such a large scale, I was curious about that of the conflict. So I was motivated to put my own effort to built the peace building process. Now it shifted to conflict settlement, let alone to talk about peace. I personally knew that of the state structure was collapsing. Especially I went to the peripheral areas of Ethiopia, in {???) and Oromia in 2018 when the Oromo protests started to begin. So I knew that something was wrong and the way the government was managing the problem was not good, was not good at all, and the bureaucracy was failing. And even there was a deep state within a state. There was a state within the state. So that's what happened later on in in in that reform. So I knew that something went wrong. And later on, after joining Amhara University for my PhD, I thought I have a lifetime goal at least to put something meaningful to those regional states and at large to the country. So that's why I was motivated to do.

The conflict has directly affected my family recently, and when the war broke out during 2020, I was in Tigray for a family visit. So I have witnessed what was going on in Mekele and south of Tigray. I just managed to go to Addis after 17 days of war, Abiy's troops (Abiy Ahmed), the Prime Minister of Ethiopia managed to control Tigray, that of Mekele. After 4 or 5 days I just managed to go out of by using ambulance. Sometimes I just believe that I am lucky. It's war. But I'm lucky to see the true picture of war and conflict and how the state medias and the public can be manipulated by the government. So I have seen the dead bodies, especially on the side of the road. I have seen some used ammunitions and used kind of weapons in their boxes. So it was not cleared until one month. So anyone can see the dead bodies with the flag, with the flag and that of the ammunitions here and there. So one good experience. There were nearly 16 or 17 checkpoints from Mekele to Alamata, the end of Tigray. So Alamata was under control of the Amharan government. So whenever we went to take a break in our way to Alamata, I managed to talk with Ethiopian army that controls the whole road highways. So he told us, I have one child from the tigrayan woman, but those politicians fail to solve the problem that can be

managed by using a pen. This is a total of one Ethiopian soldier. I think he had some regrets about what was happening in Tigray. And but I didn't comment anything because it was not safe to comment on such things, but he just gave me a lesson that there are soldiers who are not convinced about the war. On my way, I have seen the brutality of soldiers, some soldiers. In every checkpoints, those soldiers have different behavior. Attachment with the society and those with the those specially who speak tigrayan. They were very suspicious. So I have got a lifetime lesson. And after I was back home to Addis, the public opinion was so shocking for me. People were justifying the war on Tigray whenever I told them that people, especially girls, were forced to shave their heads hairs, not to get raped. They said, "Oh, this is what happened. It's normal." This kind of normalization of crime against the innocent people shocked me to my heart. And regarding the bombardments of the cities, people were in favor of the government. They don't care. They don't care about the consequences of the war, which will highly affect the state building. And initial formation of Ethiopia for Everlast. But, honestly speaking, people were blind in supporting the government. So it has given me also something on the role of media, the role of hate speech and in galvanizing the war that can just change people from something to nothing. So it's just switched the our level of thinking. So it has given me a hard lesson and soft lessons, especially in seeing it.

The time and the conditions that forced me to leave Ethiopia. Honestly speaking, I never imagined myself in Europe or outside of my country. Because I was working with my research, I managed to collect data and I was planning to graduate in 2023. So there was no any reason to live Ethiopia until what happened to my father. Let me say something about it. As I said before, my father, Professor Meareg Amhara, was a full professor of analytical chemistry and he had 28 publications before 2012 and 40 publications after 2012. Three publications are published after his death. He was a humble religious person. He was devoting his full time to his laboratory laptop and to his wife at home to Alma. He was living in Amhara region for 40 years. As a teacher. He was the one who published great ten textbooks he was (???) especially in his profession. There is there was not any reason for him to leave the city in the region because he was confident enough to stay there. After November 2nd, the state of emergency, especially when the Tigrayan forces managed to capture the cities like Desse, the public opinion was so much frightening. The hate speech by city and state media, including by the well known medias and journalists, including that of the Amhara nationalist parties. They were writing a lot of things on Facebook, just targeting Tigrayans. I can remember the phrase "any Tigrayans not only member of a TPLF or a member of the Tigrayans forces, all descendants of Tigrayans must be jailed." So I knew that such sentiments are directly against my family and I told it to my father using WhatsApp. Please try to manage to get out of Barda. So I advised him several times, but he declined my request. He was not good in politics, I think. But he he was a victim of politics. I remember one day he just said, No, Abraham, you don't have to say such things. I am a teacher. I am innocent. So how my students can do such kind of things. The scenario was to get him in jail. They never imagined such kind of brutality. But I knew that the Amharan (???) and the government of Abiy were trying to just talk to the public to stand against the Tigrayans to become suspicious on the Tigrayan ethnicities, ethnic groups, even though for those who didn't define themselves as Tigrayans. The problem is that the way we define ourselves and how others defend us is quite different. It's polarised. So on the morning of November 3rd, I was trying to call my father, just a random hello message, but they didn't responded including my mother. At once my mother she picked up her phone and told me I think Abrham..., just... I think the last time to see each other and she just switch off her phone. I told them get in prison. Because we were observing such masses arrests on the Tigrayans and the next November 4th, my uncle came to our home in Addis Ababa and told us the bad news. So it was shocking for all of us, not only for our families, but also those who knew my father. It's beyond what we can tell. And my mother was imprisoned and she get released after three days and went to Addis Ababa. With some kind of blood in her clothes. And she was trying to punch her hair. And anyways, it's beyond what we can tell. So we have learned that his body. He was killed by perpetrators who are ultranationalists. Ultra nationalist, who claimed themselves as protectors of Amhara. The that of informal. I think you are familiar with it. So. One cover his face and the others too. They just managed to fire ten bullets because our father was on his way back from university for his retirement to his home. So he was managing to open the door. The two doors of the main gate. So. The

one get managed by a woman who just who my families gave some some assistance for her to stay in one of our room. She is displaced from the war in (???) nearby Wolo. So they just managed to give her some clothes and bed. And she has two children and her husband. So they never told us this thing. But we have learned later on because they just hide everything from us because of, I think, religious thing. So they don't know to tell us what they have done for good things. So my father was trying to open the one gate to the left and that woman to the right. But those perpetrators, they just start to fire some bullets to the sky as lighting weapons. So then they just start to randomly shoot the fence. And later on, that one was covered, face fired, two bullets here, first in right leg and later on in his right shoulder. So that's the thing happened. Then they refused to pick the body for seven hours. He was like on the ground. On the ground in. And nearly two or some people told me more than 2000 people were witnessing the whole thing. The whole city were in shock. Then the municipal, even the police were around. But they were afraid of those two groups because those groups are armed, hit plus army or that of weapon. They can do whatever they like. And the other thing is, my close relative went through a center George church I am from a Christian family background. So they went there, we have a godfather there and she told him to at least bury him. And by steering his finger to the television. He told her "No, no, no, I can't. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The word (Stefanos) is the best baptist name. I'm sorry to Professor, but I can't because don't you see the television? So I can't." So my father was taken to hospital after seven hours. The good thing is he just lost his life immediately. He never screamed. He never begged for help. That's a good thing. And they brought him to a hospital, which is 150 or 200m away from our home. And we have been told that he is buried at the after his death. We never know the exact place. I am trying to investigate where he buried, at least to get a proper funeral, but it's still in unmarked grave. So after that, I knew that if this country is not quite good, at least,... for my father, there is no reason to stay in Ethiopia. Because let alone my father, who never speaks anything, comment upon politics. How it is possible to stay there ? for me, the one who is studying about conflict. So I just quit dreaming to be an Ethiopian. And I just decided to leave.

How I just managed to survive and stay for from November 3rd to February in Addis Ababa. I had a program to visit Baher Dar, Debre Marqos and other cities in Amhara region to collect data. This thing happened in wednesday. I was planning to travel to Baher Dar in thursday. When my mother cries by just holding the dead bodies of my father. One of the ??? approached her and : What's your ethnicity? He asked. I'm Amharan but my families are from Tigray. Imagine 70 years ago. My grandmother was born in Tigray. So and my whole my mother's family defined themselves as their they used to live in Amhara region. They just pursue ethnicity is all about how you are socialized. Not by the preference of the blood. They were even happy to just do the same thing, then to my father. Of course, she is lucky. Even she speaks them to just pull the trigger for her. They told her, No, no, just cry. You will cry your rest of your life. And those juntas, junta is the name given to the Tigrayans, so they are killing junta, not human. This is how they just manage Tigrayans. So you juntas, you have to exterminate or vanish from the earth.

What does it mean?

Junta means that of the political group holds military wing who just holds power in academics in European way of definition. But for their way of definition Junta is the one who is the Tigrayan. They just misquoted, they misused the word and no one was asking. The difference between human and junta even it was not the right word. But this is how they just dehumanize the public. After hearing the news, as far as sudden, I couldn't remember how weeks passed. Honestly speaking, I didn't remember. The only thing I remember is my little sister, after hearing the news, she managed to escape. And I remember her last kiss only. But after two weeks, I have to just put myself as a family man. Start to investigate what happened to my father. At least I have to hide my grief for betterment of my mother, who just witnessed the whole thing. So I wasn't allowed to go outside of our house, in Addis because the Tigrayans honestly speaking all Tigrayans, all Tigrayans were hunted like a dog. By patrolling the military, even people with yellow jackets, civilians. They didn't get any training, But if they read any any Tigrayan name. They will get into jail. So I just stayed in my house in Addis. That's how I just try to escape from further stress because they know that I will come after them. Not only me, but as the one who just love his father. And all of us will not keep silent. At least we will speak out. We will try to find

out what really happened to our family member. They were trying to put some wrong flag shift to blame to my father as a member of TPLF, as the one who helps his household. Sometimes it just puts me smile in my face whenever they just try to lie, try to put a wrong flag upon my father because anyone who knew him can tell you who was my father. It was really shocking. And people were even sending message to my mother that they are looking after your son Abrham. So they thought I was in Amhara university because they do have a long hand. They can do whatever they like in the name of junta. So people were looking after me. I know that. But thanks to God and fortunately I managed to escape out of their trap.

Their marriage is full of adventures. They were struggling from the scratch to have a better family. Fortunately, even though they just end up in broken hearts, they were a typical ideal family, parents for their children. You know, we we have kind of patriarchal societies in Ethiopia, but I never see such kind of things from my father. He gave her full respect and love. They were struggling. They were working together.

Do you have a picture?

Yes. And this is the last video we had in last year in Easter as a gift. A rocky sofa for our father. We just brought him a new sofa.

... we hear the video

To protect him from bending. Because he works day and night.

...

And he's thanking his children. So it's a wonderful memory.

And so what language are you talking there? Amharan.

So how many languages do you speak?

Even though I'm not very good in Tigrinya, I can hear and I can speak. But my parents laughed at me because I am not good in Tigrinya. But I can speak. I can speak Tigrinya.

Regarding my research it's obvious that it's highly affected by what happened. And I was managed to collect almost 50% of data. I was interviewing with politicians. I made a field observation. And I have also living experience. I have seen the real motive and that of the historical factors and the triggering factors which consequence of the war from both sides. And I can tell more about the Tigrayan and Amhara conflict. By the way, one of my evaluators were commenting, why are you come up with Tigray and Amhara and conflict because there is no any conflict. It's a comment before the war and I knew that it's all about the civil war is all about how it's orchestrated in Gondar. I can tell a lot of informations about how it's orchestrated, how it's planned by the Eritrean Ethiopian forces and backed by that of United Arab Emirates and others. And in Somalia that's a very formal. So there is an Actors Network, both from state and non-state actors, even looking for revenge, for historical revenge, grievance, greed and other human needs things. So I managed to draw at least a skeleton of my final research. But it's it's hard for me to continue in the red lights.

Because, yeah, I'm kind of weak because I cannot tolerate to see torture to justify the act of the farmers who killed my father by the help of some groups in the government and try to justify their acts. So...

You're not in danger here. Yes. You are here?

No, no, no.

And your mother stayed?

In Addis Ababa? Yes. They just built a house for their retirement in Addis Ababa. And she stayed there. At least she is not happy to go outside of Ethiopia until she finds the gravesite of our father after having a proper funeral. At least, yeah, she has a good reason to stay there. And thanks to them, we have a strong family attachment horizontally. So she's okay with her sisters.

And on the behalf of my family first I'm glad to be here. Thank you for a FMSH and other good people. As I said before, who think that people will turn their backs against you. And the one who don't know you in person will have kind of courage to help me out of the blue.

So I'm glad to be here. There are thousands of people who are looking for help in Tigray. Millions in Tigray and all over the country. Thousands of people in and in Ethiopia. So I'm lucky to get this lifetime experience and chance.

So I would like to say thank you for having me.