

THE ETHNIC TURN IN ACADEMIA

Daniel Kassahun Waktola

Introduction

Imagine the world of scholarship as a vast, colorful map—one where borders are meant to be crossed, and every explorer is welcome to chart new territory. Traditionally, academia has thrived on this spirit of adventure, with researchers venturing beyond familiar landscapes in pursuit of truth. Lately, however, it seems that some are building fences instead of bridges, marking off intellectual territory in the name of identity. Are we in danger of turning the map of ideas into a patchwork of isolated enclaves?

It's not just the map that's changing—the library feels different, too. Where once there were hushed whispers and the gentle rustle of turning pages, now you might overhear heated debates in the corners, each group huddled around its own favorite shelf. The spirit of open inquiry sometimes feels overshadowed by a growing chorus of “us” and “them.”

Of course, a little friendly rivalry can be good for scholarship—some of the world's greatest discoveries began with a challenge or a debate. Yet as identity and ethnicity take center stage in academic life, we're left to wonder: Is the pursuit of knowledge still our guiding star, or are we drifting into intellectual echo chambers?

Ethnic Journals: Blessing or Burden?

On one hand, the emergence of ethnic-specific academic journals can be seen as a necessary response to historical marginalization, providing a platform for voices that have long been underrepresented. On the other, this trend risks reinforcing intellectual silos. If scholars primarily publish in journals tailored to their own ethnic group, the result may be more than just cultural recognition—it could signal a shift from the pursuit of

objective truth to the pursuit of political alignment. As highlighted by AlShebli et al. (2018), diverse research teams produce work with greater influence and visibility; conversely, intellectual insularity can impede the cross-pollination of ideas essential for scientific progress.

Case Study: Ethiopia's Academic Landscape

Ethiopia, with its more than 80 ethnic groups, offers a compelling case study. The *Journal of Oromo Studies (JOS)*, established in 1993 during the early years of ethnolinguistic federalism, and the *Journal of Amhara Studies (JAS)*, launched in 2023 amid the rise of the FANO movement, both emerged as reactive rather than visionary initiatives. While these journals have provided important spaces for advocacy and cultural preservation, their proliferation risks encouraging others to follow suit, potentially deepening social divisions and eroding the shared academic space vital for national cohesion.

Surprisingly, Tigrayan scholars—despite representing a much smaller demographic than their Amhara or Oromo counterparts, and despite the TPLF's pivotal role in shaping Ethiopia's ethnic federalism—have predominantly opted to publish in national and international journals, frequently collaborating with scholars from abroad. This strategy has enabled them to exert influence and share their perspectives without resorting to overtly ethnocentric branding, which can often constrain both reach and impact. Whether this approach is the result of deliberate planning or evolving circumstances, it has arguably facilitated broader engagement and enhanced academic credibility for Tigrayan scholarship.

Diaspora Ties: Double-Edged Gift

Many ethnic journals emphasize the inclusion of international scholars on their editorial boards as evidence of neutrality. However, the participation of diaspora academics does not automatically guarantee impartiality. Scholars living abroad often retain strong emotional and intellectual connections to their ancestral communities, and may sometimes amplify, rather than moderate, ethnocentric narratives. This tendency can be especially pronounced among foreign-born scholars who, for historical or political reasons, strongly identify with a particular Ethiopian identity group; their voices may even overshadow those of local academics, further complicating claims of neutrality. While diaspora involvement can unquestionably enrich scholarship by bringing valuable

transnational perspectives and networks, it can also, if not carefully managed, serve as a form of academic camouflage—offering a veneer of legitimacy while advancing particularistic or partisan agendas.

Structural Risks: From Peer Review to Peer Reassurance

When editors, reviewers, and authors predominantly hail from the same ethnic community, the peer review process risks devolving into peer reassurance. Groupthink can take hold, discouraging contradictory perspectives and reducing the journal to an echo chamber rather than a forum for critical inquiry. Empirical studies on academic publishing (e.g., Lee et al., 2013) warn that such homogeneity undermines the rigor and robustness of scholarly debate.

Social Fragmentation Beyond the Page

In Ethiopia, the days when university dormitories and campuses served as vibrant spaces for inter-ethnic dialogue are fading. Increasingly, whether by design or default, student housing now reflects ethnic homogeneity, with students clustering along communal lines. This trend, documented in studies of campus polarization (e.g., Duru-Bellat & Kieffer, 2019), fosters insularity and, at times, open conflict. Unfortunately, this social fragmentation is now echoed in the intellectual sphere, as scholars follow suit. The divisions visible in academic journals—especially those leaning toward ethnically exclusive publication—risk reinforcing these social boundaries, rather than providing platforms for integration and mutual understanding.

Advocacy and Scholarship: Drawing the Line

Proponents of ethnic-oriented journals contend that focusing on specific group concerns helps address historical injustices. While advocacy has its place, the core mission of academia is to pursue truth, foster critical thinking, and encourage inclusive dialogue. As John Stuart Mill observed in *On Liberty* (1859), “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that,” highlighting the need to engage diverse perspectives for genuine understanding. Thus, academia must carefully distinguish between advocacy and scholarship, ensuring that intellectual integrity is not compromised by parochial interests.

Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from India and Nigeria

Other multi-ethnic societies offer alternative models. In India, journals such as *Nationalities Papers* engage with the country's diversity by integrating studies of ethnic autonomy, caste, and regional nationalism within a pluralistic scholarly tradition. In Nigeria, ethnic-focused research is typically incorporated into broader African or Nigerian studies, avoiding the pitfalls of scholarly isolationism. These approaches demonstrate that it is possible to address local and ethnic concerns without retreating into intellectual silos.

Confirmation Bias and the Integrity of Science

A key risk of ethnic-specific journals is the entrenchment of confirmation bias—where research begins with a conclusion and seeks data to support it. This undermines the integrity of academic inquiry, turning scholarship into advocacy in disguise. As academic content increasingly trains artificial intelligence and shapes public discourse, the dangers of epistemic echo chambers become even more pronounced.

The Value of Local Voices—Within Global Conversations

Local and ethnic-specific journals play important roles in preserving cultural heritage and providing opportunities for early-career scholars. However, impactful research should ultimately engage with broader debates and undergo rigorous, diverse peer review. As Bhambra and Tilley (2019) argue, universality and locality are not rivalling but complements: context enriches reach, and reach amplifies context.

Toward Inclusive and Impactful Scholarship

To avoid turning academic disciplines into ethnic battlegrounds, scholars should strive to publish in national and international journals, collaborating across ethnic lines and subjecting their work to broader scrutiny. Institutions should incentivize interdisciplinary research, promote editorial diversity, and foster mentorship programs that bridge cultural divides. As AlShebli et al. (2018) demonstrate, ethnically diverse research teams produce work with greater impact—a lesson academia cannot afford to ignore.

Conclusion

So, the next time you see an academic journal with an ethnic label on the cover, ask yourself: is this a passport to deeper understanding, or just another visa stamp in the land of echo chambers? If our brightest minds can't resist building scholarly silos, we might as well swap out our libraries for a collection of private clubhouses—each with its own secret handshake and matching book jackets.

In the end, academia should be less about drawing lines in the sand and more about building bridges over them. After all, the world of ideas is a lot more fun—and a lot more enlightening—when everyone's invited to the party.

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*Daniel Kassahun Waktola,
Associate Professor of Geography,
Austin, Texas*

