Is plagiarism on the rise in Ethiopian politics?

The case of three Master's theses at Addis Ababa University

by

Gebrekirstos Gebremeskel and Jan Nyssen

Gebrekirstos Gebremeskel is an Amsterdam-based researcher who runs mermru.com, a website dedicated to developing Natural Language Processing resources for Ethiopian languages. He is interested in science communication, the history of ideas and the politics of the Horn. He manages tghat.com, which is dedicated to chronicling the war on Tigray. He tracked and exposed the wide evidence of plagiarism in the three theses since early 2021.

Jan Nyssen is emeritus Professor of Geography at Ghent University (Belgium). He was lecturer at Mekelle University (Ethiopia) from 2002 to 2006 and promoter of around 30 Master's theses at Mekelle University and Bahir Dar University. Jan Nyssen conducted a qualitative examination of the three AAU theses as well as a rigorous plagiarism check.

After an inquiry for plagiarism, the University of Düsseldorf in Germany revoked Annette Schavan's doctorate degree in 2013. Schavan (CDU) served as Germany's Federal Minister of Education from 2005 to 2013, and resigned after her PhD was revoked. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CDU), Germany's defense minister, resigned in 2011 when plagiarism was discovered in his PhD dissertation. As a result, the VroniPlag Wiki was established, where the level of plagiarism in German doctorate theses is investigated and documented via crowdsourcing. As a consequence, dozens of politicians were deprived of their degrees, voluntarily abandoned them, or fled politics. Franziska Giffey (SPD) and Martin Huber (CSU) are the most recent additions in 2023.

The prestige of having an advanced degree is quite high in Ethiopia, as it is in Germany, and as a result, the temptation for shortcuts may be quite strong. We documented three instances of possible MSc thesis plagiarism at Addis Abeba University (AAU): Abraham Belay (2007), Takele Uma (2014), and Dagmawit Moges (2019), all of whom are (or were until recently) ministers in the Ethiopian government.

The MSc theses were formally analysed for similarity with earlier works using Turnitin anti-plagiarism software. The automated output was then further analysed. Similarities with works produced after or concurrently with the publishing date of the MSc theses were omitted from the similarity report; this pertains to a few instances of theses and articles in predatory journals that plagiarized passages from those theses. Also short similarities (eight words or less) were removed from the report. After that, the similarity scores remain high for the three MSc theses, with numerous fully copied paragraphs and sections.

Abraham Belay published an MSc thesis on "DSP based vector control of induction motor" at AAU's Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering in 2007. In 2020, Abraham Belay (Prosperity Party) became minister of Innovation and Technology and in 2021 Minister of Defence. His MSc thesis presents 62% similarities with earlier work by other authors. See **Annex A**.

Takele Uma published an MSc thesis on "Environmental and Economic Benefits of Bioslurry from Coffee Husk Relative to Chemical Fertilizer" at AAU's School of Chemical and Bio-Engineering in 2014. Takele Uma (PP) was mayor of Addis Ababa from 2018 to 2020 and minister of Mines and Petroleum of Ethiopia from 2020 to 2023. His MSc thesis presents 38% similarities with earlier work. See **Annex B**.

Dagmawit Moges (PP) published an MSc thesis on "The Challenges and Prospects of Dynamic Electronic Service in Strengthening Demand-Responsive Transportation System in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia" at AAU's Department of Public Administration and Development Management in 2019. Dagmawit was minister of Transport and Communications of Ethiopia from 2018 to 2023. In March 2023, she became director at the Peace Fund Secretariat of the African Union Commission. She chairs also the boards of Woldiya University, the Ethiopian Post, and the Ethiopian Roads Authority. Her MSc thesis presents 33% similarities with earlier work. **See Annex C**.

We encourage readers to review the entire Turnitin reports for the three theses. It is not impossible that further paragraphs extracted from grey literature were missed by the Turnitin algorithms.

On 28 February 2020, Addis Ababa University sent a message in Amharic on its Telegram channel, stating in substance that AAU has an anti-plagiarism policy, since plagiarism has been a significant hindrance to the University's efforts to provide excellent education. AAU further states that, earlier on, it has revoked a master's degree it had issued to a student due to plagiarism. It is only logical, then, that the three MSc theses annexed be formally scrutinized for plagiarism and the degrees possibly rescinded.

Last but not least, examining the legitimacy of the country's politicians' academic degrees would necessitate a collaborative effort, and we urge concerned academics, students, and alumni of Ethiopian universities to initiate a crowdsourcing effort to detect plagiarism in theses, as is done in Germany with VroniPlag Wiki and in Russia with Dissernet.

Annexes
Annex A. Turnitin similarity report of the MSc thesis by Abraham Belay (2007).
Annex B. Turnitin similarity report of the MSc thesis by Takele Uma (2014).
Annex C. Turnitin similarity report of the MSc thesis by Dagmawit Moges (2019).