
Democracy as Heritage: Visual Rhetorics of Leadership in Assembly Decisions (Oromo/Ethiopia)

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Abstract

Visual (and other) rhetorics, the "art of convincing" by way of arrangements, visual impression-making, and the use of symbolic references, plays an important role in Oromo political life. In Ethiopia, among this ethnic group, every eight years a new generation attains power. The members of this generation then meet in large assemblies in the open air, to proclaim the laws of the country, and to council about political decisions. Contemporary activists describe it as the heritage of a specific "African democracy", which is older (and better) than "Western democracy", that guarantees power transitions in regular intervals, and that puts emphasis on egalitarian, democratic values among its members. Nevertheless, the "traditional" leaders of this system of government are lineage seniors; their accoutrements and the holy objects they carry serve to display their rights of descent. At the same time, new forms of leadership have emerged. Political actors, mainly members of the ruling party of Ethiopia, exercise leading positions in the generational assemblies. Both forms of leadership are introduced to assembled generation members by means of visual rhetorics that are very much akin, and both are affirmed in their position by an extraordinary media attention. Photographers, film teams, news reporters and academic analysts produce an visual image of persuasiveness that play part in the construction of leadership. Based on the analysis of a series of photographs from Ethiopia, taken at the assemblies of 2017, the paper shall analyze different visual strategies of political actors and examine their "recension" (either accepting or critiquing) among the gathered audience. It shall further go into the question, how a division into "leaders" and general "audience" altogether comes about, when actually all participants are entitled speakers with equal rights to debate. The issue shall be addressed, what influence the *mise-en-scène*, or staging, of leadership has on the course of the assemblies and the outcome of decision-making. With other words: what impact has visual rhetorics on the political process? Is visual rhetorics mainly a way of affirmatively presenting to the public the *results* of political decision-making? Or is it also an effective means of influencing the *making of decisions*?

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