Česká verze amharských těžkostí

## Living Amidst Instability: Everyday Realities in Amhara

The Amhara region of Ethiopia represents one of the principal epicentres of contemporary political violence, where the federal government and the FANO militia are in ongoing conflict. This confrontation not only destabilises the region but also profoundly shapes the lived experiences of local residents, who navigate an environment of heightened insecurity and shifting power dynamics. While existing research often focuses on the macro-political dimensions of this conflict (Abbink, 2021; Tronvoll, 2022), there remains a notable gap in understanding how the inhabitants of Amhara themselves perceive and experience these events.

This article examines the narratives and practices that individuals in Amhara develop in response to political violence and social polarisation, as well as the ways in which these adaptations influence their perceptions of legitimacy and moral decision-making. Our analysis draws on concepts from political anthropology and the micro-sociology of conflict, incorporating Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) to explore how local populations perceive the authority and legitimacy of competing actors. Furthermore, we employ Turner's theory of social drama (Turner, 1974) to understand the unfolding dynamics of conflict in everyday life, alongside Scott's concept of hidden forms of resistance (Scott, 1985) to identify the survival strategies and adaptive practices that emerge in violent and precarious conditions.

Methodologically, our study is based on ethnographic research conducted in 2025 across multiple communities in the Amhara region, integrating in-depth interviews, participant observation, and an analysis of local narratives. This approach allows us to present the perspectives of those directly affected, perspectives that are often overlooked in dominant political discourses. Unlike studies primarily concerned with military strategies or the geopolitical consequences of the conflict—such as those by Abbink (2021) and Tronvoll (2022)—this article focuses on the everyday realities of life under conditions of instability. In doing so, we build on the work of Veena Das (2007) and Carolyn Nordstrom (2004), both of whom emphasise the significance of micro-social aspects of conflict.

Our analysis identifies several interlinked dimensions that illustrate how Amhara's residents respond to shifting security conditions and political uncertainty. We examine survival strategies, including reliance on social networks, religious institutions, and local resources to secure basic necessities such as safety, food, and healthcare. We also investigate evolving perceptions of legitimacy, exploring how residents view both the federal government and the FANO militia, and how these perceptions shape their daily decision-making. Equally significant is the question of moral dilemmas: many individuals face difficult choices in determining their allegiance, frequently oscillating between the imperative of self-preservation and broader collective values.

This article challenges conventional narratives that portray the inhabitants of conflict zones as passive victims. Instead, we demonstrate that Amhara's residents are active agents who adapt to changing circumstances through creative strategies and social resilience. Moreover, our findings problematise common assumptions about the destructive effects of violence on social cohesion, showing that even amidst instability, people maintain and reinforce communal networks that are crucial for their survival and everyday functioning (Das, 2007; Nordstrom, 2004).

## **Historical Context: Amhara and Ethiopia - From Empire to the Present**

The Amhara region, a historical and cultural centre of Ethiopia, has played a crucial role in shaping the Ethiopian state. During the Ethiopian Empire (1270–1974), Amharic was the official language, and Amhara culture, religion (particularly the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), and political elites dominated the country (Levine, 1974). The Amhara were perceived as the "state-building nation," leading to tensions with other ethnic groups, particularly the Oromo and Tigrayans, who felt marginalised (Markakis, 2011). However, the political elite of the empire was not homogeneously Amhara but was intricately linked with other regions, especially Tigray (Tronvoll, 2009).

## Derg and the Transformation of Power Relations (1974-1991)

The fall of the empire in 1974 and the rise of the Derg – a military Marxist-Leninist regime led by Mengistu Haile Mariam – marked a fundamental transformation of Ethiopia's political structure. The Derg presented itself as a movement against feudalism and an advocate of equality, which in practice led to extensive land expropriation and the elimination of traditional elites (Donham, 1986). The Amhara, historically associated with the imperial court and the upper bureaucracy, found themselves in a paradoxical situation: while the Derg rejected ethnic identity as a basis of power, its centralising policies further weakened Amhara influence, particularly in rural areas (Markakis, 2011).

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was not only a religious institution but also the largest landowner, lost its assets, disrupting the traditional power structures in Amhara (Henze, 2000). Simultaneously, widespread repression targeted former imperial officials and intellectuals, leading to waves of emigration among the Amhara elite (Kaplan, 1987).

### **Ethnic Federalism and the Conflict with Tigray**

Following the fall of the Derg in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came to power and introduced an ethnically based federal system (Abbink, 1998). The Amhara region became one of Ethiopia's federal states; however, its position changed significantly. Whereas the Amhara had previously been central to state administration, they now faced a new political order that granted greater autonomy to other ethnic groups (Aalen, 2021).

Tensions between Amhara and the Tigray region were primarily concentrated on territorial disputes, particularly over the Welkait area, which the Amhara consider part of their historical territory, while the Tigrayans claim it as theirs (International Crisis Group, 2020). These conflicts culminated in the 2020 war between the federal government and the TPLF, in which Amhara militias, including FANO, supported the federal army (de Waal, 2021).

## The Emergence and Evolution of FANO

FANO, an informal militia rooted in the Amhara community, emerged in 2016 in response to a growing perception of threats to Amhara identity and territory (Gebremariam, 2020). Initially, it presented itself as a defensive force aimed at protecting Amhara communities from attacks by the TPLF and other groups. Over time, however, FANO evolved into a significant political and military actor, openly criticising the federal government for its failure to ensure security and defend Amhara interests (International Crisis Group, 2022).

While some Amhara residents support FANO as a protector of Amhara interests, others criticise it for escalating violence and destabilising the region (Gebremariam, 2020). This division of opinion reflects broader polarisation within Amhara society, where part of the population seeks peace and rejects violence, while others view FANO as the only force capable of defending their interests (Tronvoll, 2022).

### **Current Situation: Instability and International Influences**

Following the end of the war with Tigray in 2022, the situation in Amhara has not stabilised but has instead become even more complex. FANO, which has garnered support from segments of the Amhara population as well as certain foreign actors (including Eritrea, which has an interest in weakening Ethiopia's federal government), has become a key destabilising force (Reuters, 2023). The federal government is attempting to maintain control over the region, yet its authority is increasingly undermined by local distrust and growing demands for greater autonomy.

The international community, including the United Nations and the African Union, has expressed concerns over escalating violence and the humanitarian crisis in the region (UN News, 2023). However, a unified approach to resolving the conflict remains lacking, allowing violence and polarisation to persist.

# **Current Reality: Everyday Life in Amhara Amidst Conflict and Adaptation**

#### **Economic Impact and Survival Strategies**

The conflict between the federal government and the FANO militia, alongside the aftermath of armed clashes in Ethiopia's northern regions, has had a significant negative impact on the economy of the Amhara region. According to World Bank estimates (2022), Ethiopia's economic growth has slowed, with northern regions being particularly affected. Agriculture, which employs approximately 70–80% of the population, has been severely disrupted—local farmers have been forced to scale down their activities due to frequent armed clashes and pervasive insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2020). The disruption of agricultural production has led to food insecurity and a sharp rise in the prices of staple foods. A report by FAO (2021) notes that in some areas, the prices of essential commodities such as wheat and maize have surged by significant margins, exacerbating food security challenges

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for the region's inhabitants.

Local populations have adapted to these harsh conditions through various means. Many rely on traditional social networks—families and local communities supporting each other with food and other essential resources. Additional strategies include participation in the informal economy, such as selling homemade goods or engaging in small-scale trade, though in most cases, these efforts are insufficient to overcome long-term poverty and instability (UNDP, 2020). According to a UNICEF (2022) report, a significant proportion of the population in certain parts of Amhara lives below the poverty line, with a high prevalence of malnutrition among children.

#### **Security and Everyday Fear**

One of the most pressing concerns remains the lack of security. Violence between government forces, the FANO militia, and other armed groups has unfortunately become an everyday reality. Amnesty International (2023) reports that numerous attacks on civilians have been recorded in recent years in conflict-affected areas, including gunfights, abductions, and other forms of violence. In response to these threats, many villages have organised their own security initiatives or local patrols, tasked with monitoring the movements of armed groups and warning residents of impending danger (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Women and children are particularly vulnerable. According to UN Women (2022), a significant percentage of women fear leaving their homes due to the risk of sexual violence, while many children are forced to limit their education as travelling to school poses a significant safety risk. This situation has long-term consequences for mental health and social cohesion within communities.

#### **Education and Healthcare: Systems Under Strain**

The conflict has also profoundly affected access to education and healthcare. UNICEF (2022) reports that in certain areas, many schools have been temporarily closed, affecting hundreds of thousands of children. A shortage of teachers, many of whom have either fled from affected areas or fear returning to work due to ongoing violence, has further exacerbated the situation. Similarly, the healthcare system is under severe strain—a World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) report highlights that many hospitals and clinics in the region are overwhelmed and often lack essential medicines and medical equipment.

Community-led initiatives, such as volunteer teaching programmes and improvised healthcare facilities, represent grassroots efforts to address these challenges. However, these local solutions frequently struggle with resource shortages and limited support from the state (UNDP, 2020).

#### **Moral Dilemmas and Social Polarisation**

The conflict in Amhara presents local residents with complex moral dilemmas. Many find themselves forced to choose between supporting the federal government, which is widely perceived as incapable of ensuring security, and the FANO militia, which some regard as a defender of local interests, while others see it as a source of further violence and instability. This choice has deepened polarisation not only between different communities but often within families as well. For instance, there have been

cases where farmers are compelled to pay informal "taxes" to both sides of the conflict in order to secure protection and retain access to their land (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

#### **Hopes and Fears for the Future**

Despite the challenging conditions, many residents of Amhara remain hopeful for a better future. Studies by UNDP (2020) indicate that young people in affected areas are determined to pursue education and seek opportunities that would enable them to leave the region and establish more stable livelihoods. However, there is also widespread concern that the conflict will persist, forcing future generations to grow up in an environment of continuous violence and uncertainty.

Local leaders and religious authorities play a key role in maintaining social cohesion. For instance, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church actively organises prayer gatherings and provides humanitarian aid, helping to mitigate the effects of the conflict on affected communities (Hovland, 2017).

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## 1. Topic and Objectives of the Article

Preliminary Title: Living Amidst Instability: How Amhara Residents Navigate Everyday Existence Amidst Conflict and Polarisation

Main Objective: To explore how people in the Amhara region perceive and manage their daily lives in an environment of instability caused by the conflict between government forces and the FANO militia. The focus will be on their survival strategies, their methods of negotiation with both sides of the conflict, and how they perceive legitimacy and moral dilemmas in this context.

Key Question: What narratives, values, and practices do people in Amhara develop to adapt to political violence and social polarisation?

## 2. Methodological Framework

#### Anthropological Approach:

Ethno-narrative analysis: Collecting stories and testimonies from local residents about how conflicts impact their daily lives, social networks, and perceptions of justice. Political anthropology: Examining how people perceive concepts of power, legitimacy, and authority in the context of the government and FANO. Microanalysis of everyday life: Documenting survival strategies such as access to food, security, education, and healthcare. Data Collection Methods:

Qualitative semi-structured interviews with different social groups: Farmers and traders: How does the conflict affect their livelihoods? Young people and students: How do they perceive their future and the role of FANO? Women and the elderly: What survival strategies do they employ, and how do they evaluate the moral dilemmas associated with the conflict? Participant observation: If feasible, documenting interactions between different social groups. Contextual interviews with local leaders and religious authorities.

## 3. Key Interview Questions

#### Everyday Life in Conflict:

What practical strategies do local people use to ensure their safety? Which social networks (family, friends, religious leaders) are crucial in times of crisis? How do they cope with the economic impact of the conflict, such as shortages or high prices? Perceptions of Legitimacy and Polarisation:

What opinions do they hold about FANO? Do they perceive it as a protector, a threat, or something in between? How do they view the role of the government and its ability to ensure security? Are there generational or social differences in how people perceive the conflict? Moral Dilemmas and Values:

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How do locals decide whom to support (the government, FANO, or neither)? How has the conflict affected their religious or ethical values? How do they interpret moral dilemmas, such as the necessity of negotiating with both sides? Hopes for the Future:

What would they consider a just resolution to the current situation? What are their fears and aspirations for the future? Do they see a possibility for themselves and their children to live outside the conflict?

## 4. Analytical Approach

#### Theoretical Foundations:

Gramsci's concept of hegemony: How do people perceive the authority and legitimacy of both conflicting sides? Victor Turner – Social Drama: How do different phases of conflict manifest in their daily lives? James Scott – The Art of Resistance: Are there hidden forms of resistance against the government or FANO evident in the interviews? Thematic Analysis:

Identifying key themes such as survival strategies, moral dilemmas, societal divisions, and religious interpretations. Comparing official narratives with personal accounts. Comparative Dimensions:

Comparing the situation in Amhara with other conflict-affected regions in Ethiopia or Africa (e.g., Tigray, Somalia).

### 5. How to Structure the Article?

Introduction: Context of the conflict in Amhara. Amhara, one of Ethiopia's most significant regions, has recently become the epicentre of political and social instability. Conflicts in the region are often rooted in historical territorial claims, ethnic tensions, and power struggles between the federal government and regional actors. The situation escalated following the war in neighbouring Tigray, which had a devastating impact on the entire country. Although a peace agreement was signed in November 2022 between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), many issues remained unresolved, further destabilising other regions, including Amhara.

One of the key actors in the region is FANO, an informal militia with deep roots in the Amhara ethnic community. Originally established as a defensive group to protect Amhara communities from armed attacks, FANO has recently been accused of terrorist activities and open resistance to the federal government. While some residents support FANO as defenders of Amhara identity, others criticise it for its role in violence and the polarisation of the region. The federal government, in turn, faces accusations of failing to ensure security, contributing to growing distrust among the population.

In this situation, local residents must negotiate with both sides of the conflict to sustain their daily lives. They face dilemmas in choosing whether to support FANO, cooperate with the government, or remain neutral—an option that is often impossible.

The Importance of an Anthropological Approach

The conflict in Amhara is often analysed from a macro-perspective—military strategies, political

relations, and economic consequences. However, these perspectives overlook a crucial element: how the region's inhabitants experience this reality in their daily lives. An anthropological approach provides a unique insight into the human dimension of conflict, focusing on the experiences of individuals and communities, their values, dilemmas, and survival strategies.

Listening to the voices of local people reveals:

How the conflict shapes daily life – from access to food, education, and healthcare to security concerns. What narratives and values people construct to make sense of their position in the conflict. How they negotiate with the state, militias, and other actors to ensure their survival. Through these in-depth insights, we can better understand the dynamics of the conflict and possible pathways to resolution. The anthropological approach also highlights that residents are not merely passive victims but active agents striving for survival and stability in challenging conditions. In a deeply divided society, it is essential to listen not only to the voices of those who lead the conflict but also to those who live within it.

#### Methodology:

Description of the research approach and data collection methods. Main Findings:

Discussion of themes such as survival, perceptions of legitimacy, moral dilemmas, and hopes for the future. Discussion:

Interpretation of results within the theoretical framework. Comparative analysis with other regions or conflicts. Conclusion:

Key insights. Implications for further research or policy recommendations.

## 6. How to Make the Article Unique?

Giving voice to local residents: Ensuring that personal stories and opinions form the core of the article. Practical implications: Offering recommendations that may be useful for humanitarian organisations or policymakers.

## **Data Collection (for Rediet):**

The main goal is to conduct 20–25 interviews with respondents from a variety of backgrounds (city, village, men, women, poor, wealthy) to understand what they see as the biggest problems, the role FANO or the government plays in those issues, what they would like to change, and what their social connections are like (who helps them in times of need – family, neighbors, or institutions).

Explain to respondents that their stories can help raise awareness about their situation, and emphasize that everything will remain anonymous. You could ask about basic aspects of their lives, such as how many children they have or what work they do. Be patient and focus on building trust.

During the interviews, adapt to the flow of conversation but have simple and concrete questions prepared. Listen actively, nod occasionally, and encourage them with phrases like, "Can you tell me

more about that?" If they hesitate, give examples, such as, "Has there been a time when you didn't go to the field because you were afraid?"

#### **How to Conduct Interviews**

- 1. Prepare key questions but adjust to the flow of the conversation.
- 2. Ask in a way that encourages detailed answers.
- 3. Listen actively, nod occasionally, or use neutral phrases like "I see."
- 4. Encourage respondents if they hesitate ("That's interesting, can you tell me more about it?").

Examples of specific questions to ask (you don't have to ask every respondent all of them):

- 1. What was the worst and best period in your life?
- 2. Has there ever been an armed conflict in your village? When? What changed for you and your family at that time? Do you ever feel afraid that someone might harm you?
- 3. What do you do to get food or ensure your family's safety?
- 4. Have you ever stayed home or avoided the fields because of fear?
- 5. What has your experience been with accessing healthcare or education?
- 6. Who helps you the most during these times (family, neighbors, friends)?
- 7. What do you think about FANO's role in this conflict? Are they protectors, a problem, or something in between?
- 8. How do you see the government? Do you think it helps you or not?
- 9. Are there people from FANO in your area? What do they do? Or, has the government ever sent people here? What did they say or do?
- 10. Do you feel that opinions about the conflict differ based on age or profession?
- 11. Have you ever been forced to make a tough decision, such as whom to support?
- 12. What do you see for yourself and your family in the future?
- 13. Are you living a peaceful life? If not, what would need to change to make that possible?
- 14. Do you think the younger generation has a better chance for a peaceful life?
- 15. Small details that could reveal more about their daily lives (e.g., what they see as the biggest challenge of the day, how they spend their free time).
- 16. During the interviews, try to find out how respondents view the future. Questions could include, "What would you like to see change in your village?" or "If your children could leave here, would you want them to? Why?"

It's better to write down details later at home, as taking notes during the interview might disrupt the flow.

#### Tips:

- Be patient some respondents might need more time.
- Encourage them to share stories: "Can you tell me more about that?" or "How did you feel at that moment?"
- Don't dismiss any stories, even if they seem unimportant. Even small details can be crucial.

#### For Each Interview:

- 1. Identify the respondent with a pseudonym (names are not important, but describe them age, gender, marital status, family connections, education, occupation, whether they live in a city or village, and whether they see themselves as poor or wealthy based on your impression).
- 2. Note where the interview was conducted.
- 3. I've had experiences in other areas where interviewers were surprised by certain things (for

example, when I did research in Afghanistan and asked about politics, most people didn't know the president's name, the capital city, or even their exact age because they didn't know their date of birth... Something similar might come up with your respondents). Add notes about your personal impressions and reflections immediately after the interviews – what surprised you, what feelings you had about the respondents, and what stood out to you.



Amharic is no guarantee, but I wanted to make you happy

## የመረጃ ስብሰባ (ለሬድዬት):

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#### እንዴት ቃለመልልስ ማካተት እንደሚቻል

- 1. ዋና ጥያቄዎችን አዘጋጅ፣ ነገር ግን ምክንያት በምን እንደሚሆን ማስተካከልን አስተካክል።
- 2. ዝርዝር መልስ እንዲሆን ለመከላከል እንደምን ተይዟቸው።
- 4. እንዲሆን ተነሳሽነትን አስፋ፣ "እወርድልኝ። ይህ አስደናቂ ነው።" እንደምን ተይዟቸው።

#### **ምሳሌዎች እንደምን ጥያቄ ጣቅረብ** (ሁሉንም ሰዎች ለጣዳረስ አስፈላጊ አይደለም።):

- 1. "በሕይወትህ እንደሆነ ዝቅተኛ እና ከፍተኛ ጊዜ ምን ነበር?"
- 2. "በአካባቢዎት ውስተ እንደሆነ የተደ*ጋጋሚ ግጭት ነ*በር? *መቼ*? ምን ለእርስዎና ለቤተሰብ ተቀየረ?*"*
- 3. "ምን እንደምን እንደሆነ የምግብና የቤተሰብ ደህንነትን ለማስተካከል ምን ነገር እንደምን ታደር*ጋ*ላችሁ?*"*
- 4. "በምን እንደሆነ በፍርሃት ወደ ቤት መቀመጥ አልሆነም?"
- 5. "በደኅንነት እና በትምህርት ላይ ምን እንደሆነ ተሞክሮ?"
- 6. "በአሁኑ ጊዜ እንደምን ተሞክሮ፣ ቤተሰብ፣ ንረቤት፣ ወይም ወዳጆች?"
- 7. "ፋኖ በዚህ ግጭት ላይ እንዴት እንደሚሰሩ ምን ይመስልሃል? መከላከያ፣ ችግር፣ ወይም ጣንኛውም ነገር ይሆን ነበር?"
- 8. "እንደምን የፌዴራል መንግስትን እንዴት ትቀበላላችሁ? የምን ይረዳችሁ ወይም አይረዳችሁ?"
- 9. "ፋኖ በአካባቢዎት ሰዎች እንዳሉ ይመስላል? ምን ይሰራሉ?"

- 10. "በባጭት ላይ የሰዎች አስተያየት በእድሜ ወይም በሙያ መሰረት እንደሚለዋወጥ ይተምራሉ?"
- 11. "እንደምን እንደሆነ አስቸ*ጋሪ* ውሳኔ አልሆነም?"
- 12. "እንደምን ለእርስዎና ለቤተሰቦት ትክክል ታይታላችሁ?"
- 13. "የህይወት ሰላምነትን እንዴት ትረዳላችሁ? አንደኛ ነገር ይሆናል የሚያደርገው ምን ነበር?"
- 14. "እንደምን ተነሳሽነትን እንደሚያገኙ ያስተምራሉ? እንዴት ልንቀር?"
- 15. በዕለታቸው ላይ የምን እንደሆነ ዝርዝሮችን ለጣግኘት ምን ነገር እንደምን ይታያል (ለምሳሌ፣ በእለታቸው ውስጥ እንዴት ይዋረዳሉ?).
- 16. በቃለመልልሶች ዘመን እንደምን ተገኝቷቸው ተሞክሮ ይያዛል። ተስፋ ያላቸው ይናገሩ፣ "ምን እንደሆነ አስታውቆህ ስጣ።"

ይሻላል ዝርዝሮችን በቤት ላይ በኋላ ማንበብ፣ ምክንያት በቃለመልልስ ወቅት ነገርን መመልከት ሊያበላሽ ስለሚችል።

#### ምክሮች:

- ትሪግሥት ይኖርዎት አንዳንድ መላእክት የተጨነቁ ጊዜ ሊያስፈል*ጋ*ችሁ ይችላል።
- በታሪኮች ላይ ምን እንደሆነ አነስተው፣ "በዚህ ላይ ተናገርልኝ።" ወይም "በዚያ ጊዜ ምን አስተምሯቸው?"
- ዝርዝሮችን አታቆም፣ ተስማሚ ያልሆኑ ነገሮችን እንኳን። እንደነበር አነስተው፣ አስፈላጊ እንደሆኑ ምንም እንደሆነ ማደስ።

#### ለእያንዳንዱ ቃለመልልስ:

- 1. እንደምን ምላሽ በምን እንደሚኖር (ስም አስፈላጊ አይደለም፣ ነገር ግን እድሜ፣ ፆታ፣ የትዳር ሁኔታ፣ ቤተሰብ ግንኙነት፣ ትምህርት፣ ሥራ፣ በከተማ ወይም በገጠር እንደምን ተግባር እንደሆኑ እና እንደሚያዩ አስተምር።)
- 2. ቃለመልልሱ የተካሄደበትን አካባቢ እንደምን ተይዟቸው።
- 3. እኔ እንደምን ተሳናቸው እንዳልኩት በሌሎች አካባቢዎች ተሞክሮአለሁ (ለምሳሌ፣ በአፍጋኒስታን በምርምር ላይ ሳለሁ፣ እንደምን አነስተው፣ ብዙም ሰዎች የፕሬዝዳንቱን ስም፣ የከተማውን ስም፣ እንዲሁም እድሜያቸውን ሙሉ አልምረውም፤ እንዲሁም የልደታቸውን ቀን አሳውቁም ነበር። እንዲሁ በእርስዎ ተገኝቷቸው ምን እንደሆነ ምንም ነገር እንደሆነ እንደሚያገኙ።) በቃለመልልስ በኋላ ላይ የምን እንደሆነ ምላሽን እንደሚኖር አስተምሩ፤ እኔን እንደምን ተገኝቷቸው፣ እኔን እንደምን ምንም እንደሆነ አስታውቁ።

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