

Emperor Menelik and Meles Zenawi both “killed Ethiopia” says Ginbot 7 Official Ato Ephrem Madebo

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“Emperor Menelik and Meles Zenawi both used language to unify Ethiopia, they both killed people in the process and they both failed to create a unified country. Menelik made a strategic mistake, a mistake that emanates from false sense of superiority and arrogance. Meles, the most educated of all Ethiopian leaders, repeated the same mistake that he vowed to correct. Menelik and Meles have different goals but the same ending.” taken from an article written by Ephrem Madebo of Ginbot 7



Ephrem Madebo of Ginbot 7

Read Ephrem Madebo’s article below

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Negotiation, nation building, and the naysayers By Ephrem Madebo

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I’d rather spend my life with an optimist who is sometimes wrong than spending a night with a pessimist who is always right!

“Moses! Moses!” called God. And Moses said, “Here I am.” The Biblical Moses, the only human being to have seen portion of the back of God and the only person to have talked directly to God was married to an Ethiopian woman. The name Ethiopia and the Ethiopian state are as old as the earth itself. In fact, the Ethiopian state is one of the most continuous states in history. We Ethiopians have our own alphabet and a civilization that built the wonders of Axum, Lalibela, and Gondar. The name Ethiopia was mentioned in the Bible [New & Old Testament] before Rome knew what the Bible was and Ethiopians were worshiping God before Great Briton was put together as a nation. The Roman Empire ruled the world for more than one millennium, and for almost two centuries, the Brits were nicknamed as the Empire on which the sun never sets. Today, Rome [Italy] and Great Briton are nations of wealth, stability, unity and remarkable international accolade. What happened to Ethiopia?

The short answer to the above question is – Great Briton and Italy went through a successful nation building process where we Ethiopians failed repeatedly. Like many countries of

Europe, the mechanical aspect of nation building in Ethiopia was swiftly completed by Emperor Menelik. But, unlike the Europeans, the different pieces, or building blocks that put modern Ethiopia together were not cemented by a shared power and common values. Hence, the unity of Ethiopia has never been satisfactorily stable, especially after the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie. Ethiopia's poverty and backwardness can be attributed to numerous social and political factors, but in my opinion, the incomplete nation building process that lacked a national unifying factor is the major contributor to the lack of peace and stability in Ethiopia. And peace and stability are the two indispensable ingredients for sustained economic development.

Our individual interpretation of Ethiopian history may differ, but I'm sure we all agree that our history of the last 120 years was greatly shaped by Emperor Menelik, Emperor Haile Selassie, Colonel Mengistu and PM Meles Zenawi. Well, my intention today is not to praise or curse these leaders, but to have a brief and critical look at three of these leaders who went through the process of constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state, a process referred as Nation Building. These three leaders are Emperor Menelik who saved us from colonialism, Colonel Mengistu who gave us socialism, and PM Meles Zenawi who divided us with ethnic federalism.

More than a century ago, Emperor Menelik used culture and language to unify and create the ninth largest country in Africa, but half a century later, Ethiopia was a deeply divided country. Next to Menelik, the other person who went through his own version of nation building is Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. Colonel Mengistu used socialism and a heavy military build up to create a highly centralized country. However, his military solution to the ethnic problems pushed the country to the brink of disintegration.

Meles Zenawi, a man born on the very land where Emperor Menelik made us proud in 1896, is the last person in Ethiopia's never ending nation building process is. Today, after 20 years of Zenawi's rule, Ethiopia is still a deeply divided country even by African standard. Meles Zenawi, a man who fought for 17 years to undo Melelik's mistakes, repeats the exact same mistake Menelik committed 120 years ago.

Emperor Menelik and Meles Zenawi are two different personalities. Menelik's dream was a larger Ethiopia at any cost, including human cost. Meles left Haile Selassie I University to realize his dream of "Greater Tigray" at the cost of Ethiopia. Menelik who himself was a son of a king, was a prisoner in the palace of another king. His concern was hardly anything of the past, but he sure had a sharp eye on the future of Ethiopia. Menelik measured his prosperity on the prosperity of a larger nation he created. On the other hand, Meles was everything that Menelik wasn't. Stubborn and uncompromising like the mountains that surround his birth place, Meles is a prisoner of the past; a dreamer who measured his success on the prosperity of "greater Tigray". Meles perceives his entire political career in relation to his own region, and to this date, he is adamantly loyal to his birth place.

Emperor Menelik implemented a nation building strategy in which he forced the assimilation of the conquered people to the dominant culture and language of the conquerors. Meles reconstructed Ethiopia around ethnic identity with the intent of killing the sentiment of Ethiopian nationality. Menelik is the architect of modern Ethiopia while Meles Zenawi is the architect of ethnic federalism. They both used language to unify Ethiopia, they both killed people in the process and they both failed to create a unified country. Menelik made a

strategic mistake, a mistake that emanates from false sense of superiority and arrogance. Meles, the most educated of all Ethiopian leaders, repeated the same mistake that he vowed to correct. Menelik and Meles have different goals but the same ending. Menelik started with the goal of unity, but his unity ended up with division. Meles started with division and ended up with what he wanted – which is division.

What should current generation of Ethiopians do to correct the mistake of the past 120 years and create a united, just, and equal Ethiopia? What is the optimum unifying force that brings all Ethiopians together? Can Ethiopia restore its glorious past? Can it be what it once was, but with a progressive social, economic, and political setting? All in all, can this generation of Ethiopians abort the dangers of breakup and build a country where its citizens are judged by the content of their character?

When I was working on the draft of this article, I read the preamble of more than 75 constitutions of different countries. The preamble of almost all of the constitutions starts with the following three very important words: “We”, “The People” of <>. For example, the preamble of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria reads: We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria... Mind you, Nigeria has three times as many ‘nations and nationalities’ as Ethiopia. The preamble of the Ethiopian constitution reads: We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia. According to the architects of the Ethiopian constitution, Ethiopians have no sense of indivisibility and as a result they have no feeling of belonging and oneness that emanates from centuries and centuries of living together as a society. The constitution does not consider Ethiopians as people first and then drill down to the elements that constitute its people. In fact, according to the constitution, the nation of Ethiopia and its people as the inhabitant of a country called Ethiopia is not that important. The most important thing to those who authored the constitution is the ethno-linguistic groups who at any time of their choosing can breakup and form a sovereign country. According to these morons, Ethiopia is not a country of its people; it is a coalition of the willing. Oh what a mess!

Conceptually everywhere and organizationally on the negotiation tables and tele-conferences, contemporary Ethiopia is passing through numerous efforts of nation building process. Some of the actors in this nation building process are right wing ultra conservatives, some lean far to the left, some are at the center, and yet millions are everyday people who just want to see a better Ethiopia. Ethiopia belongs to all of these and the process of nation building in Ethiopia must include all of these. Ethiopians from all walks of life and from every corner of the country should start the nation building process by writing a social contract that starts with – We the people of Ethiopia. That and only that is the best guarantee to complete the nation-building process that eluded us for centuries.

After the 2010 one-party and one-man election, many Ethiopians inside and outside the country believed that an all-inclusive political alliance is crucially necessary to either force the regime to change its behavior, or to change the regime itself. More than anything else, Ethiopians believed that the country badly needs a transformational leader who has negotiation skills, wisdom, determination, and charisma to bring people together. The past three nation building attempts were all ineffective because they were imposed on the people, they did not have a common unifying theme, they ignored the existence of cultural and ethnic pluralism, and they did not regard the people as the only source of political power.

In the past two years, especially in 2011, Ethiopians around the world have witnessed a major shift taking place in their political affair of the future. The shift that presupposes strategic alliance or some sort of trust and unity between the unionist and nationalist forces has earned applaud from the center and boos and obscenities from the right wing extremists of both sides. Internal squabbles within the opposition forces and the political divide between the nationalist and the unionist forces has deflected the punch off the common enemy and delayed our quest for democracy. Everybody preaches the necessity of a unified opposition against a resourceful enemy, and everybody knows that a unified opposition must include all the stakeholders of Ethiopia. But, the paradox is that, when someone talks the talk and walks the walk; he/she is hammered and called the enemy of Ethiopia.

I remember recent misguided articles and hasty paltalk discussions that argued the OLF deserves no attention at all because it is a weak organization that has few or less supporters in Ethiopia. I strongly argue that this is a very dangerous move that erases the gains of the past few years and takes us back to square one. Ethiopia is a plural society; therefore, negotiations, decisions, and actions that affect the future of Ethiopia must reflect the plurality of the nation. We have a nation that suffers from its past and a lesson of history from the past. We must open our mind to learn from our past and we must also be sensitive for those who suffer from the pain of the past. It is not the fault of this generation that it suffers from its past, but avoiding the mistakes of the past and building a bridge to a harmonious future is the historical responsibility of this generation. We have seen time and again that none of us are that strong individually, our strength comes from working together. Besides, we don't negotiate with OLF because it is strong, or we don't ignore the OLF because it is weak. We negotiate with OLF because the Oromo people are part and parcel of the entity that we call "We". We can't ignore the major part of "We" when we solve our problem.

I have a good advice for the wishful thinkers and the naysayers who say the OLF is weak- There is a possibility that the OLF or other Oromo organizations may become extinct overnight, but make no mistake that, the question raised by the Oromo people will not go anywhere unless it is answered. To collectively answer the Oromo question, we must have a partner that utterly articulates the Oromo question, and in the last forty years; nationally or internationally, no organization has articulated the Oromo question like the OLF. We had EPRP in the 1970s and CUD in 2005, and countless parties in between. Today, EPRP is paralyzed from within [divided] and CUD is gone for good, but our struggle has continued with other parties of the day because the question of freedom and democracy has yet to be answered in Ethiopia. Likewise, any internal or external anomaly may kick the OLF out of the picture, but as long as the Oromo question is up on the air, another organization will grab it and take it to the next level. Therefore, it is not the strength of the OLF that takes us to the negotiating table; it is our passionate desire, willingness, and resolve that the questions of democracy and freedom raised not just by our Oromo brothers, but by the entire people of Ethiopia are answered.

We must never forget that many of the Nationalist forces like OLF, ONLF, SLF and whatever "F" believe that their views are right as strongly as we the unionist forces believe ours is. For example, there are many of us who have the habit of pointing at the faults of the ethnic organizations and appreciate only the merits of our case. Surprisingly, this is exactly what the ethnic organizations do; they stress on our faults and see only the merit of their case. We both believe that we are right and the other side is wrong. How one sees the world depends on where he/she is. Therefore, both the unionist and the nationalist forces must put themselves

in each other's shoe. Each side must have the wisdom and the patience to see the problems as the other side sees it. Each side must have a strategy to influence the other and enough room to be influenced. Hence, both the nationalist and unionist forces must understand the power of each other's argument and feel the emotional force with which they believe in it. Specially, to us to the unionist forces, it is not enough to see the ethnic forces as a mere ethnic entity; we must do everything to know what it feels like to be an ethnic organization. All in all, we must deal not only with the problems of the ethnic organizations, but with our own problems too.

It's bizarre and it's really unfortunate that most of the recent naysayers and scribblers read what is not written and try to tell us their faith than what they think. For example, they are all over OLF, but they don't even know what the acronym OLF/ አነግ stands for – they try to be more catholic than the pope by giving the OLF a new name. OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) is not የኦሮሞ ነጻ አውጪ ግምባር – it is (የኦሮሞ ነጻነት ግምባር). The difference between the two is as opposed as black and white (I'm talking color, not people). Please don't tell us what you believe in, tell us what you think that and only that is what we can share and grow with.

Sometimes Ethiopian politics is depressing because our political setting is overwhelmed by hope and dream crashing personalities. Lately, I have seen the much awaited progress in alliance building flooded by harsh words and stoned by a word of doubt not just by fanatical weekend politicians, but also by those who are close to the struggle. Trust me, these 'do nothing' and "talk much' hope crashers are strong only to the weak and wise only to the fool. If we look deep into their thought and listen to what they say; they sound cynical when we feel hesitant, and they totally shrink when we feel resolved. These naysayers, no matter how close we are to the promise land, they will always find something negative to say. I have lived long enough to know that naysayers criticize me not to make me a better person, but to force me do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing. My revenge to them is to realize my goals that they say I cannot achieve. If they are looking for a tit-for-tat, oh No! I'm too busy. Period!

From my political experience of the last 20 years, I've seen and felt real and perceived fear hovering over the shoulders of both the unionist and the nationalist forces. For example, as good and as desirable change is, the nationalist forces have some fear and reservation towards the last two regime changes in Ethiopia. For the most part their reservation on change comes from fear of the unknown. Two regimes have changed in 36 years, but ethnic problems are still major problems in Ethiopia. Therefore, the question who comes next and how will it be different from the past is a question that worries ethnic nationalists. Don't take me wrong, ethnic nationalists do not resist change. They want change and they are fighting for change, but this time, they want the change to come in their own terms. And this is exactly what worries the unionist forces because they don't know the terms of the nationalist forces – another fear of the unknown.

Ethiopian politics is dominated by two major forces and is swamped by two different types of fears. The nationalist forces that trust nobody but themselves terribly fear any possibility of the return of the past. On the other side, the slightest possibility that Ethiopia might disintegrate is the worst nightmare of the unionist forces. I think these are valid and legitimate fears, but both sides must come to their senses and realize that fear by itself will not avoid what is feared. Do the nationalist and unionist forces have anything in common? Yes, indeed they have much more in common. They have a common country and they both fight for justice and equality. They both want to build a common house whose pillars are freedom, democracy, justice, and equality. So what is keeping them from realizing these common

objectives? The answer is easy. It is fear! Like the Polish-French physicist Maria Curie once said, “Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood”- To build and live in a common house, the two competing sides must trust each other, and to earn each other’s trust, I think they must first recognize and understand each other’s fear and work candidly to avoid not only their fear, but the fear of the other side too.

The key to everything said above is negotiation. As a federalist thinker, I strongly believe that it is the responsibility of the unionist forces to reach to the other side of the aisle and initiate negotiations and start building trust. This and only this guarantees the past from coming back and Ethiopia form disintegrating – not fear, not name calling, and of course; not character assassination!

My advice to both sides is: be courageous to avoid fear. Mind you, avoiding fear is not denying the existence of danger; it is simply putting it in perspective that can be mitigated. Trusting the other side unconditionally is the most dangerous proposition. The only avenue to escape this dangerous proposition is negotiation because negotiation is the most basic means of getting what you want from the other side. Remember, no one ever wants to be dictated in a negotiation, therefore, don’t forget to compromise. Yes, compromise... give and take and take and give! In a give and take process, how much one is willing to give determines how much he/she gets. Therefore, if you want respect, respect others. If you want freedom, let others be free. If you want equality, treat others equally.

Finally, I want to go back to the essence of this article and share you my thinking of nation building. What is the theme that unifies Ethiopia? This is a 64 thousand dollar question hard to answer and even harder to not answer. One must answer this question correctly because the wrong answer erases the cumulative gains whereas the correct answer allows us to progress. We have already seen that culture, language, ideology, and ethnic districts have failed to unify us ... so what is the effective unifying force that unites our country? Let me provoke your thought by asking you – What do you like? A ‘Melting pot’ or ‘Salad bowl’ view of Ethiopia? Obviously, my preferred choice is the ‘Salad bowl’ view, not that the ‘Melting pot’ view has already been tried and failed, but simply I believe that ‘Salad bowl’ is the perfect fit to my mother land. In a ‘Salad bowl’ view, Ethiopia’s different ethnic groups can retain their own taste and quality while contributing to the rich flavor of the aggregate salad.

Those of us who live in the US, Germany, France, or England often take the hard work of the founding fathers of these nations for granted. Imagine, France & Burgundy and Florence & Sienna were arch rival enemies until nation building knitted the citizens of these four localities into today’s nations of France and Italy. Back in the Dark Ages, during the era of enlightenment, or even today, nation building is an enormously hard and bloody undertaking. However, regardless of how hard and bloody’ it is, in countries like Ethiopia; nation building is an indispensable process that requires a positive vision and a transformational leader. Why do people from around the world want to come to the United States? Well, I don’t think this is the right question, may be the right question is – Who would not come to a nation that begun with a positive promise and a nation that secures the blessings of liberty to everyone that sets foot on its borders?

The promise of positive vision that secures liberty to all must be the outcome of the compromise between the nationalist and unionist forces of Ethiopia. Otherwise, no one would keenly surrender regional, ethnic, or religious identities in exchange for anything other than

freedom, justice and equality? The status quo in Ethiopia is rejected by everyone, but there is still a lot of political wrangling with and within the different opposition forces. Nation building cannot succeed with this kind of negativity. Today, the international community with a handshake or elite separatist forces out of hate to others may succeed in creating a new nation. But, a nation that does not believe in its sense of belonging to a single distinct unit is a danger to its citizens and to its neighbors. It is here where the whole idea of a unifying factor and nation building become very important. We Ethiopians can still arise as a unified powerful nation if we are capable of sharing a common geographical area, vision, values, and traditions.

There are Muslim Ethiopians and Christian Ethiopians. There are also Oromo and Amhara or the Somalis and Sidama Ethiopians- the list goes on. None of these identities can unite us. One can be a Muslim, an Oromo and an Ethiopian, or a Christian, an Amhara and an Ethiopian, or yet one can also be a follower of an indigenous religion, a Daasanach, and an Ethiopian. If there is a very important factor that we can abstract from the different identities mentioned above, one can be an Ethiopian and many other things, or many other things and an Ethiopian. So what unites Ethiopians? Well, now the answer is clear. The most preferred theme that can effectively unite the people of Ethiopia is Composite Nationalism. All religions, ethnic groups, and languages would have an equal status in Ethiopia; and none would individually be allowed to dominate the functioning of the Ethiopian state. Speaking the Amharic language, being a Christian, or belonging to any of the ethnic groups should not determine citizenship and the rights that come with it. If one is born in Ethiopia, he/she must be an Ethiopian. Can I be an animist, nomadic Mursi and yet an Ethiopian? Yes! Can I be a Muslim and still be an Ethiopian? Yes! Can I be an atheist and an Ethiopian at the same time? Yes! Can I be a lawyer, a Somali from the Ogden region, a part time Imam in a local Mosque and still an Ethiopian? Why not! This is the wonder of Composite Nationalism!

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