

Beyond Ethnocentric Ideology and Paradigm Shift for a Greater Ethiopian Unity

Ghelawdewos Araia, PhD

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This essay intends to address the current Ethiopian affairs in the context of ethnocentric politics and Ethiopian unity, twin themes that I have discussed numerous times in my previous works, but it will also respond to some critics pertaining to my VOA interview on Wolkait-Tsegede district of Ethiopia. The latter, though it unnecessarily stirred controversy especially among the disgruntled and misinformed Ethiopian groupings, it is very much relevant to the kernel of this paper.

As indicated above, I have addressed the issue surrounding ethnic politics and Ethiopian unity several times in the past, and my first article entitled “Nation Building Beyond Ethnic Nationalism” was published in *The Ethiopian Mirror* in 1992.¹ The central thesis of this article was straight forward and clear: Ethiopians to transcend ethnic nationalism and embrace rather a pan-Ethiopian agenda. My recommendation then had resonated among the Ethiopian Diaspora because, unlike today, Ethiopians were not inoculated with the virus of narrow and sectarian ethnic nationalism.

I also had endorsed the self-determination of Ethiopian nationalities with some caveat in my debut book, *Ethiopia: The Political Economy of Transition*, and this is how I put it then:-

*The TGE's policy of Kilil and self-determination is commendable, but the consequence of fragmentation as a result of new wave of ethnic political consciousness, and the inability of some minority nationalities to become economically and politically viable, would ultimately preoccupy Ethiopians to otherwise unforeseen problem.*²

However, to my chagrin and dissatisfaction, twenty one years after I predicted the new wave of ethnic political consciousness, a fragmented Ethiopian society has been brewing for some time now. It is apparently clear that Ethiopians in the Diaspora especially have created respective ethnic enclaves on their own volition, and what is paradoxical is that they seem to enjoy the primordial clan-cum-tribal affinity in contradistinction to an Ethiopian unity in diversity. This, of course, is dangerous to Ethiopia and we may need to revise the principle of self-determination and regional politics and seriously consider an overarching pan-Ethiopian agenda.

I personally endorsed the right of self-determination of Ethiopian nationalities, not in response to the EPRDF proclamation but because I supported it in principle during the heyday of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) when I was a political science major at Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University), and continued to uphold

the same principle when I was with Ehapa, a prominent Ethiopian political organization, that also endorsed self-determination in the context of question of nationalities, a legacy of the ESM. Incidentally, Ehapa was the only party in Ethiopia that had members from virtually all Ethiopian nationalities. In terms of number, the party had an overwhelming Amhara and Tigrayan nationalities but other nationalities also sought membership in the organization because they were enlightened during recruitment periods that the Party's program was designed on purpose to be an inclusive all-Ethiopia political program, and that the Party also promoted an international world outlook while at the same time underscored the right of nationalities to self-determination. Ehapa, in brief, was microcosm Ethiopia.

With the above background, thus, I continued to write on both ethnocentrism and Ethiopian unity, but with emphasis on the latter. In 2001, I contributed an article entitled "The Historical Significance of Ethiopian Unity" and, by and large, the content of this article is reflected in the following extract:

Ethiopia, like other Third World countries, did not create a uniform national culture, but the pan-Ethiopian agenda can be attained if the various ethnic groups that make up Ethiopia transcend their "nationality" boundaries and think in terms of Ethiopia first.³

Three years after the above article, I wrote another article titled "Ethnocentric Politics and Reinforcing Psychology in the Ethiopian Context" and I like to share the basic tenet of this article with my readers. As I have discussed in this article, 'group identification based on a shared emotional tie' exhibited by a given tribe or nationality is quite natural, but when ethnocentric values are manifested in the form of bias, prejudice, and hatred toward other people, they could have a hostile edge and subsequently destroy the very fabric of Ethiopia. In point of fact, when I wrote this article, I tried to critically examine the possible negative scenario that Ethiopia could encounter as a result of the extremities of ethnic politics and therefore pleaded then to all Ethiopians to revive Ethiopian nationalism and play a positive role in salvaging Ethiopia:

If we want to save Ethiopia from the dynamism of disintegration (the negative implication of ethnic politics), as a matter of historical necessity, we must diagnose the larger picture of ethno-nationalism without limiting ourselves to the standard repertoire of accusations leveled against the regime in Addis Ababa. While there is so much talk about ethnic politics EPRDF-style, there is almost no analysis and reflection made on the history, psychology, and current practices by the broad masses, including the elite and the opposition ...On top of transcending the psychology of ethnocentrism, the Ethiopian opposition forces have an obligation to undertake a massive campaign and/or informal education pertaining to a pan-Ethiopian program directed toward all Ethiopians. In a nutshell, well-meaning Ethiopians and political groups must advocate, with some intensity, the accommodation of cultural diversity as foundation for national political integraton.⁴

The main themes of the above paper were again presented to an Ethiopian audience at Harvard University when the Ethiopian Students Association at Harvard (ESAH) sponsored a panel on "Ethnicity and National Identity in Ethiopia" on November 12, 2006. I was with the afternoon session that also included Asefa Jelata and Sarah Vaughan. The latter presented a paper that was more or less an anthropological study

on the plethora of Ethiopian ethnic groups, ranging from big to tiny, but she was too emphatic on the differences among Ethiopian nationalities; Asefa argued for the secession of Oromia from Ethiopia Eritrean style and I confronted him by saying that his recommendation is a dream that will never be realized, although I reassured the audience that I support the cause of Oromo and their right to self-determination.⁵

So that the reader can get a gist of my presentation at Harvard, instead of offering my own summary, I like to present an objective report made by the Debteraw Blog. Here below is the report:

“In comparison to Asefa Jalata, Ghelawdewos looks to the audience as an Ethiopian patriot. His main points are:

- Ethno-nationalism and Ethiopian nationalism Highlight the history of Ethiopia from antiquity to the present
- Ethnic groups in Ethiopia have common grounds to stay together than their differences to force them to disintegrate
- Battle of Adwa and the participation of various ethnic groups of Ethiopia

His concluding remarks are:

- The need to broader common ground to save the country
- Eritrean model of independence is not acceptable to the Oromo
- Bringing religion to politics is more dangerous than ethnic politics.⁶

From the above report and my own analysis in this essay, one can easily fathom what my political stance looks like, and it is abundantly clear that I have been promoting the pan-Ethiopian agenda through and through for decades, but, like any concerned Ethiopian, I always had worries with respect to the ever increasing ethnocentric ideology among Ethiopian circles, and in an effort to yet urge Ethiopians to unite, in 2011, I came up with another brief paper entitled “Wollo: Microcosm Ethiopia and Exemplar of Ethiopian Unity”. I argued that Ethiopians should emulate the Wollo idiosyncratic phenomenon and this is how I reasoned then:

The microcosm Ethiopia...must be replicated in all Ethiopia, and the precondition for the realization of the Wollo experiment [in] all over Ethiopia, it seems to me, is a package that includes peace, stability, democracy, tolerance, visionary and patriotic leadership, and above all unity of the Ethiopian people. If the precondition is met, Ethiopians could perform miracles.⁷

Now, let me clarify the essence and intent of my VOA Tigrigna interview on Wolkait-Tsegede on March 24, 2016. Some people have opposed what I offered to the interviewer with respect to the history of Wolkait and its relations to Tigray proper. Some of the reactions cited in some blogs were brought to my attention by some friends and quite frankly I did not know of the existence of these blogs like Welkait.com, and some that I am familiar with but that I don't frequent visiting are like the Ethiopian Review.

I have no problem with the above mentioned blogs, and contrary to their defamation extended against me, I would welcome their reactions and opposition to my interview, because in the final analysis, my interview and the subsequent responses had created some sort of forum that could potentially be educational. However, it is also equally important that I underscore the style, method, and approach of these blogs. They range from a low-level stature imbued with scatology (In fact street-level downright insult)

like the one authored by Achamyeleh Tamiru on the Ethiopian Review to a relatively ethnocentric but modest, that appeared on Welkai.com. From all the opposing statements, the one that I like most and I appreciated for its contents is the one that was authored by Ze Addis and posted on Ethiomedia.com. I salute Ze Addis for his well balanced and thorough presentation on the controversy of Wolkait-Tesegede and the credentials he provided.

Nevertheless, there are missing links on most of the blog-produced reactions to my interview, for most of them have cited the Manoel Barradas book only that I have made reference to during the interview but none of them have dealt with the bulk of the interview. There were many other supporting evidences that I have cited but let me begin with the book of Barradas for the sake of clarification.

Most of the bloggers, for instance, cited the area or size of Tigray reported by Barradas which states that Tigray is bounded by the Tacasse [Tekezze], but they did not include what even Barradas implies as controversial: [Tigray]...the kingdom has near circular shape; unless we wish to extend, as some maintain should be done, as far as the Lamalmon mountain range..."

Barradas' mention of 'Lamalmon' [Limalimo] as the border of Tigray is subject to interpretation and it could be controversial, but in my interview I have not depended solely on the book by Barradas. I have additionally stated that just beneath the Limalimo, there is a place called Mai Liham, and east of Mai Liham on the main road there is Ade Arqai and below Ade Arqai on the same road there is Mai Tsebri, all Tigrigna names; the capital of Wolkait, deep in the interior of the district, itself is Addi Remets, another Tigrigna name and I argued that these names could not be mere coincidences unless they were part of Tigray, and even if we ignore the names of these places, how could it be possible to dismiss an entire Tigrigna-speaking people as non-Tigrayan? I am not implying here that a Tigrigna-speaking Wolkait should necessarily be part of Tigray; on the contrary, I have always maintained that any given linguistic group should determine its fate (if necessary via referendum) and if the majority of Wolkotot want to rejoin Gondar (now under Amhara Regional State), their wish should be respected.

All I have argued was that Wolkait, a Tigrigna entity, by all measure, would not be surprising if it becomes part of Tigray. On top of this, some activists may have plans to take advantage of the secession clause of Article 39 of the Ethiopian constitution, but they may not be aware of the preconditions for secession incorporated in the Article. Secession will take place only if two-thirds of the members of a region demand secession; when the federal government has organized a referendum which will take three years to effectuate; when the secession is supported by a majority vote; when the Federal Government will have transferred its powers to the council of the seceding region; and when the division of assets is effected in a manner prescribed by law.

On top of this language-based historical analysis that I mentioned in the interview, I have also mentioned that Degezmati (Dejazmach) Gelawdewos of Shire ruled over Wolkait and Seraye (now in Eritrea) during the early 17th century. What this shows is that territorial polities sometimes could expand and sometimes could shrink, and yet even when Ethiopia was divided among the regional lords during the Era of Princes

(1769-1855), one powerful prince by the name Ras Michael-Suhul, a Tigrayan, ruled over Tigray and Gondar from his court at Gondar and not from Tigray. Almost at the end of the Era of Princes, when Dejach Wubie ruled of Tigray, Tedla Hailu was appointed as governor of Wolkait-Tsegede, and some local historians (depending on oral tradition/history), stretch back to the reign of Emperor Iyasu I (1682-1706), and tell us that Degezmati (Dejazmach) Naizghi was governing over Wolkait from Addi Remets until he was defeated in an ensuing skirmish by Dejazmach Mammo. Whence did Naizghi come from?

The bloggers also failed to mention and show to their readers the map of Tigray produced by the editor of Manoel Barradas' book. The subtitle in the map reads: 'Map of early seventeenth [century] Tigray showing the places mentioned by Barradas' and it clearly includes Semen in the west, Danakli in the west, Hamssien in the north, and Doba (present-day Alamata-Woldia area) in the south. The map does not indicate the Tekeze River as the boundary between Tigray and Gondar.

Some supporting evidences that corroborate the Barradas map are accounts of Almeida and Ludolf on 17th century Tigray and it is suffice to cite one footnote from the Barradas book:

*Tigray, the most northerly province of Ethiopia; Almeida, who described it as in ancient times 'the foundation and head' of the entire Ethiopian monarchy, considered it still the 'best part' of the country, while Ludolf later described it as 'the best and most fertile' part of it. The province began, Almeida says, at the twin Red Sea ports of Massawa and Hergigo, and extended south-eastwards along the coast as the tiny harbor of Defalo. Inland the province was bordered, from east to west, by the Dankali 'Kingdom', Angot, Doba, Begemdir and Semen. Beckingham and Huntingford, Some Records of Ethiopia, pp. 14-15; J. Ludolf, A New History of Ethiopia, London, 1682, p. 13.*⁸ Both Beckingham and Ludolf do not say that Tekeze is the Western frontier of Tigray, and Ludolf especially, who had made extensive studies on Ethiopia, and who is credited as the founder of Ethiopian Studies, put Wag as one of the 27 prefectures (districts or regions) of Tigray.

We can go to great lengths on the history and geography of the regions that make up Ethiopia, but we would not be able to solve the quandary and/or conundrum pertaining to the self-determination of Ethiopian nationalities, and as I have indicated at the beginning of this essay, it is about time to make a paradigm shift and save Ethiopia from the risk of disintegration. Ethiopia is a great country with a remarkable civilization of antiquity; medieval innovations; symbol of independence, and the seat of the African Union. We Ethiopians should be proud of our wonderful country and it should be our solemn duty and historical mission to preserve the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ethiopia.

Instead of being sentimental with respect to Ethiopia as a country, however, we must acknowledge that Ethiopia without the plethora of its nationalities would be a meaningless political entity. The self-determination of all Ethiopians should be respected indeed; and this includes the people of Wolkait, Oromo, and Kemant that recently have come forward to challenge the current federal structure of Ethiopia. But, I personally will adamantly oppose any concealed motive, including agendas under the guise of self-determination that would undermine the unity of the Ethiopian people.

I strongly believe that the current federal system in Ethiopia should continue as a stepping stone for a united Ethiopia, but since language alone should not be the yardstick for a viable regional state or even a given district, it is about time to make paradigm shift toward a more inclusive and multi-ethnic and multicultural regional states. Ethiopia should make a gradual transition toward the latter regional state formations by following the example of Nigeria. I have discussed this model in the context of devolution of power in my latest book and it is important that Ethiopian intellectuals and statesmen seriously consider the Nigerian experiment. Here is how Nigeria solved the nightmare of disintegration and preserved the unity of the nation-state:

*Despite Nigeria's checkered transition from dictatorial military regimes to relatively progressive civilian rules, its 'real political achievements since the civil war [the Biafra war of 1968/69] has been the innovation of institutional techniques for managing ethnic conflict: the multi-state federal system, the devolution of resources, and power (at least in statute, if not in reality) down to the local level; the requirements for the nationality based, trans-ethnic political parties; the generation in the presidency of pan-ethnic leader required to fashion broad national support to be elected; the mandate to 'reflect the federal character' in national cabinet and other appointments; and the elaborate 'zoning' provisions fashioned by political parties to ensure a fair and ethnic distribution of key offices and nominations.*⁹

I strongly believe that my recommendation of a transition from a mono-ethnic regional states to multi-ethnic and multicultural regional states without disturbing the idea and practice of the federal system is not only viable and a guarantee to Ethiopian unity, but it could also forge a higher form of national consciousness that would altogether transcend the current sectarian clannish and/or ethnocentric ideology. The paradigm shift will also serve as a vehicle to emancipate the Ethiopian psychology from the shackles of ethnic politics in general and liberate (or systematically emasculate) the relatively obdurate, immutable, and invidious Ethiopian elements from their toxic activity, inherent bias and subjectivity, as well as existential absurdity.

Notes

1. *The Ethiopian Mirror* was published in Los Angeles, California, but I am not sure whether it is still in existence or has become defunct.
2. Ghelawdewos Araia, *Ethiopia: The Political Economy of Transition*, University Press of America, 1995, p. 166; TGE stands for Transitional Government of Ethiopia
3. *East African Forum*, March 22, 2001; the web magazine is now defunct
4. Ghelawdewos Araia, "Ethnocentric Politics and Reinforcing Psychology in the Ethiopian Context", Ethiomedia.com, February 25, 2004
5. Ethiopian Students Union at Harvard (ESAH), www.hcs.harvard.edu/ethiohs/events.php
6. Debteraw Associate Reporter, "Report on A Harvard Forum", Debteraw Blog, <https://debteraw.wordpress.com/2006/11/16/report-on-harvard-forum/>
7. Ghelawdewos Araia, "Wollo: Microcosm Ethiopia and Exemplar of Ethiopian Unity", www.africanidea.org/wollo.pdf
8. Manoel Barradas, *Tractatus Tres Historico-Geographici (1634): A Seventeenth Century Historical and Geographical Account of Tigray, Ethiopia*, Harrassowitz Verlag.

Weisbaden, 1996, Footnote 1, p. 1

9. Ghelawdewos Araia, *Ethiopia: Democracy, Devolution of Power, and The Developmental State*, Institute of Development and Education for Africa (IDEA), 2013. The Nigerian experiment was first discussed by Larry Diamond in his “Nigeria: The Uncivic Society and the Descent into Praetorianism,” a chapter contributed to a book entitled *Politics in Developing Countries*

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