

Die-Hard Unitarists Will Not Derail The Oromo Quest For Freedom And Justice

By Gabisso Halaale
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I recently read an article by Teshome M. Borago written as a response to Prof Ezekiel Gebissa's letter to the editor of Ethiomedia.com. Professor Gebissa's letter was a response to an earlier piece which laments about absence of the Ethiopian flag in Oromo solidarity marches. While the issue of the flag is a grotesque move to divert attention from the ongoing barbaric massacre of peacefully protesting Oromo high school and university students and civilians by the EPRDF regime, Professor Gebissa's objective historical accounts of the Oromo and Ethiopian flags in his letter reflects his stature as a well-versed scholar on the subject.

On the other hand, I find Teshome Borago's reaction to the Professor's letter impulsive, inaccurate, provocative and divisive. First, Teshome's bizarre accusation of irrational self-glorification of the Oromo history is a brazen diatribe devoid of any grain of truth. The Oromo and other Cushitic nations of northeast Africa are never known for irrational self-glorification of their history and culture. To the contrary, in spite of being the indigenous inhabitants of northeast Africa for at least the past ten millennia, they remain modest and humble societies, who often allowed themselves to be short sold by the politically dominant late comers. If Teshome Borago's history memory serves him well, it the Ethiopia's elites, who invented an official mythology of self-glorification: the kebra nagast (the glory of kings), to obliterate the history of the indigenous Cushites and particularly that of the Agew people who emerged as formidable political rivals between the tenth and thirteenth century AD, not the Oromos. The myth of self-glorification, kebra nagast, has engendered a false image of superiority among Teshome's tribe so much so that he was unable to differentiate between self-glorification and the quest for basic human freedom and justice by the oppressed peoples.

Second, Teshome's audacity to ridicule the Oromo flag as not being ancient or native to Oromos conforms to the narratives of his predecessors, in particular, Bahrey and Alaqa Taye who preposterously projected the Oromo people as "immigrants from Asia and Madagascar" between 15th and 16th centuries. The fact of the matter is that the Oromo people and the other Cushites are ancient and indigenous inhabitants of northeast Africa. In the same article, in an apparent contradiction to his compatriots before him, Teshome hoodwinks Professor Gebissa with statements such as, "Many scholars have already written about how Oromos have been part & parcel of Ethiopia for many centuries before Emperor Menelik was even born. So Oromos were involved in all sides of conflicts in that era." The contradiction in Teshome's statement here is so glaring that it is not clear if he is critical of his compatriots, Alaqa Taye and Bahrey or the good Professor. It is impossible to be consistent when attempting to distort facts and obliterate history. The truth is that the Oromo flag is an ancient flag of indigenous Cushitic inhabitants of northeast Africa who were one homogeneous group of people before dispersing into a wider geographic area in the region and consequently developing separate but closely related ethno-linguistic identities. As the Professor succinctly puts it, the Oromo flag is an ancient flag of indigenous Cushites which symbolizes identity, hope and prosperity. To the contrary, the Ethiopian flag is a constant reminder of painful memories of defeat, humiliation and subjugation by the annexed peoples

of the south, east and west.

Die-hard unitarists such as Teshome Borago wittingly or unwittingly continue to inflict more wounds on the oppressed peoples by their insensitive tirades about our history and culture. In doing so, they undermine the very ideal they stand for, "unity". Unity will never be achieved without reconciliation among the oppressors (present or past) and the oppressed. Reconciliation in turn can only happen if the oppressors are brave enough to admit the past injustices inflicted on the annexed peoples and offer unequivocal apology.

Apart from this, Teshome's attempt to justify the pain and suffering of the annexed peoples on the basis of the voluntary participation of a couple of assimilated Oromos in Minelik's campaign of expansion sets a dangerous historic precedent for today and tomorrow. The EPRDF government has hundreds, if not thousands of political players from the various ethnic groups among its ranks today. According to Teshome's proposition, because hundreds of Oromo, Amhara, Sidama, Somali, and so on have taken part in the EPRDF administration, the regimes tyranny on these peoples is justified. There is no worse cherry-picking of history than Teshome's attempt to endorse tyranny on the basis of voluntary participation of few rent seekers from among ones country men and women.

Perhaps, the most audacious harangue by Teshome is his views on the history of the Cushitic peoples. He asserts that the term Cushitic speaking people was invented by "westerners like Joseph Greenberg who have been criticized for poor and "unrigorous" research on African languages. There is no evidence suggesting the various tribes bunched up under the "cushitic" label (like oromo, somalis & sidamas) ever had one common flag; nor common history." I am a Sidama and would like to provide Teshome (who apparently misuses a Cushitic name "Borago" as his sur name), the Sidama perspective of the Cushitic history in this short piece. Again, in full conformity with the traditions of Bahrey and Alaqa Taye, Teshome reinvents the Cushitic history. He unashamedly state that the term Cushites was invented by Joseph Greenberg in 1963; and that "the Oromo, Sidama and Somalis do not have common history". It is abundantly clear from these incoherent propositions that Teshome and his earlier compatriots were driven by hate and are hell bent to obliterate the history of these indigenous nations at any cost. The term Cushites is an ancient term mentioned in both biblical and historical records. The authors of the Hebrew Bible, as well as ancient Egyptians referred to indigenous inhabitants of northeast Africa, including parts of Palestine as Cushites (refer to Martin Noth and Rodney Sadler). For the people of Kemet, the ancient Nubians were Cushites. For ancient Greeks, the Cushites were Aithiopians, the term Ezana borrowed in the 4th century AD following his conquest of Meroe. Joseph Greenberg's classification of African languages in 1963 was based on existing genetic and linguistic evidence not on tautology, unlike kebra nagast. Thanks to advances in DNA studies today, the common genetic origin of the Cushitic language speaking peoples in northeast Africa has been proven. The most recent DNA studies have indicated that the Cushitic and Berber language speaking populations have up to 81 and 91 percent frequency of E1b1b haplogroup respectively. The DNA evidence proves the deep common origin of the Oromo, Sidama, Somali, Afar, Agew, Beja and many other Cushitic language speaking groups. It is the common genetic origin of the Cushites, which is the basis of their common languages, cultures and history.

In conclusion, I advise the die-hard unitarists like Teshome Borago to desist from adding insults to injury on the oppressed peoples of the south. Impulsive tirades never unite peoples. The creation of the Ethiopia Empire in 1880s and early 1900s was one of the most humiliating moments in the history of the hitherto independent majority Cushitic peoples, as well as Omotic and Nilotic nations in central, south, east and western parts of the country. It

was not the voluntary union of the willing. It was a union forced by the victors on the vanquished. The victors may forget the pain inflicted up on the losers, but the latter will never forget.

True, oppressed nations in the country support the EPRDF ethnic federation, and rightly so. The ethnic federation is flawed not because it orchestrates the disintegration of the country, as you want us to believe, but because it is disingenuous and halfhearted. Ethiopia is a multinational country which cannot be governed optimally under a unitary system. The current semi-federal system of administration is equally incomprehensible. The only system of governance that will ensure enduring peace, stability, and economic and social progress in the country is a genuine federal system of administration where all nations are able to fully decide on their affairs under the banner of one country, Ethiopia.

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