

## Unity: Give Thought And Strategy A Chance

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We never tire of groping after unity, often generating political heat within a culture of contentious sectarian and ethnic opposition to Woyane tyranny, a political culture that is also perennially preoccupied with aggregating dissident parties, factions, and tribal groups. But can we let ourselves cast the light of thought and strategic reason on our project of *andinnet* in resistance?

Unity – virtually every Ethiopian patriot, politician, intellectual, journalist, activist, and citizen talks about it, often with a sense of urgency and “practical” concern bordering on naïve realism. But no one, it seems, thinks and acts strategically toward its realization. Hardly anyone pauses to reflect broadly and deeply on the possibilities and challenges of Ethiopian national solidarity today other than in terms of “adding together” all manner of partisan and organizational entities.

Nothing in the recent history of our resistance to the hostile tribal take-over and dismemberment of the Ethiopian nation-state by the TPLF has been talked about and sorely wished for more than unity. Yet, ironically, no subject has received less critical and systematic attention *in thought*, either conceptually or in strategic terms, than unity. All the talk about the matter, even among “learned” strata among us, essentially boils down to highlighting the necessity of *andinnet* and exhorting political parties and ethnic organizations to struggle together against TPLF dictatorship. The unreflective, strategically innocent, exhortation comes from all quarters and it is non-stop.

A most recent symptom of this overall oppositional-intellectual malaise is what Professor Messay Kebede has written seeking to show how “[unity overrides everything](#)” and addressing in a [rejoinder](#) the apparently questioning responses of his “unhappy readers”. What he says is worth dwelling on for a moment, if only to draw some negative lessons, namely, how *not* to approach or frame the central issue of Ethiopian *andinnet* in the struggle against tribally divisive Woyane dictatorship. As part of a broader discussion of the theme of unity, I here offer probing comments focused on Messay’s claims. I do so not by way of partisan or personal polemic but to call into question the substance of his views as I have done in the past with some of his writings.

### ***Andinnet: Challenges Unmatched by Mindfulness***

Every Ethiopian who is concerned about the state of his or her country is entitled to discuss the nation’s vital issues without necessarily being expected to approach the issues using learned conceptual thought or analytical methods, though the average citizen, if asked to break down a complex national matter, would be modest enough to beg off. It is unremarkable that ordinary Ethiopian citizens, ill served by the nation’s learned stratum and political class and ever preoccupied with meeting their basic needs for food, shelter, health and security, live under adverse conditions that do not afford them the luxury of high-mindedness. They can be excused if they do not traffic in represented ideas when expressing their views and sentiments on national unity and other related matters.

But can we say the same thing about our *mihuran*? I don’t believe so. Intellectuals *do* traffic in represented ideas and values more or less skillfully. So we can ask: do they produce thoughts or analyses that match the complexity of problems of Ethiopian unity today under conditions of domination by *both* ruling and oppositional tribal politics? Do they have clarity of ideas and firmness of patriotic conviction? For example, what does Messay think about Ethiopian *andinnet* beyond simply stressing, following popular opinion, the imperative of unity in the struggle against Woyane divide-and-dominate ethnic politics? Do Ethiopian *literati* engage in fruitful intellectual commerce among themselves, in sustained exchange of ideas and views on vital Ethiopian affairs? At minimum, do they offer reasoned arguments beyond making mere assertions, or do their views even have coherence at all?

I raise the last question with Messay’s most recent writing fresh on my mind. Consider some of the claims Professor Messay made in a rejoinder, responding to “critics” who had, in emails sent to him, apparently taken

issue with what he had said about unity in an earlier writing, urging “the Amhara to join Oromo protesters.” Take, first, his statement that he found his critics’ “demand that Oromo protesters turn their issues to a national or Ethiopian cause...startling... a retreat...to past experience [of] marginaliz[ing]” Oromos.

Is it so inconceivable to the good professor that localized issues of land rights which triggered the Oromo protests could be better framed and more effectively and sustainably fought for, *locally* as well as nationally, in a united, trans-ethnic Ethiopian struggle? Does he take into account that such class struggle has the potential to resonate, under present conditions, the broad progressive demand of “land to the tiller” that marked the revolutionary era, and that in pressing this demand intellectuals and political activists in the country did so generally *as Ethiopians*, not as members of particular tribes or speakers of particular languages or residents of particular localities?

According to what political logic, then, is urging Oromo protesters to affirm their rights to land as Ethiopian citizens, as human beings, and as social groups *in solidarity with non-Oromo citizens and communities of Ethiopia* equated with “marginalizing” their identity and interests? Or, is what we have here a case of Messay simply maximizing his political correctness with an eye toward those who favor a “new and improved” regime of identity in Ethiopia, an oppositional, mainly OLF, ethnonationalism which is as old and tired as the ruling Woyane variant of political tribalism? If so, the professor is behind the political curve, for leaders of spin-off factions of the OLF have moved on to a less insular, arguably more moderate identity politics than what *he* is defending, even if they generally remain recessive or hesitant about affirming their *Ethiopiawinnet*.

Second, note Messay’s outrageous assertion that the “request to append the label ‘Ethiopia’ to the [Oromo] protests is an invitation to commit historical robbery...” Who exactly would be “robbing” whom and of what? And how is the implied criminal act whose commission is allegedly invited by the request “historical,” since Professor Messay is referring to *current events*? The professor’s assertion is flawed in several respects.

(1) The “request” he attributes to his critics does not concern simply “appending” a national “label” on the protests; it concerns seeking to help make an uprising localized by ethnicity and geography substantially an integral part of a broader nation-wide Ethiopian struggle. It is deeply mistaken to construe the asking as being about turning the country nominally into an appendage of local protests within it.

(2) Ethiopia, of which the Oromo community makes up an integral part, far from being a mere label to be affixed from the outside on this or that uprising, constitutes definite socio-economic, cultural and political relations of a shared nationality that underlies citizen and community protests, that imparts from within dynamic content and context to popular uprisings.

(3) Assignable communities in Ethiopia do have autonomy and a right to raise issues and to express grievances specific to their particular conditions and certainly deserve our support in doing so. But no Ethiopian locality or community can be said to have exclusive proprietary rights over issues and their framing that also affect other regions of the country or the nation as a whole. To argue otherwise is to contravene national solidarity both as a matter of principle and a strategic imperative in the resistance. Yet Professor Messay’s claim that making a plea for the enlargement of the recent Oromo protests into a broader Ethiopian struggle invites the commission of an act of “historical robbery” departs from such an assumption of sole or primary Oromo *ownership* of the land issue.

According to this logic, to “request” the broadening of Oromo resistance across the bounds of ethnic *kilils* is to “rob” Oromos of “their” protest, along with the land issue that sparked the protest, which is also apparently “theirs” alone, not anyone else’s. Both the land issue itself and the uprising around it are thus seen to be tied up nearly exclusively with Oromo subjectivity or “identity;” and the request for widening them nationally is regarded as an encouragement to take someone else’s property, to commit larceny. This view is absurd, a melodramatic representation of insular identity politics bereft of credible reason or even common sense! Does Messay seriously believe what he is saying? Did he really put any thought into his view here, either as *amihur* or a concerned Ethiopian?

His view is problematic not merely as a discursive construct but also in terms of the construct’s social referent, namely, protesting Oromos. For it is a perspective that, *in effect* though not in intent, belittles a great people, whose centrality to Ethiopia and *potential* contribution not only to the unity of the Ethiopian resistance against Woyane tyranny but also to the political leadership of the resistance are undeniable. This is so because Messay’s reasoning, if one can call it that, suggests that Oromo identity is so precarious, so in need of protection in and for itself, that even the courageous initiative Oromos took recently in rising up against the

TPLF regime has to be shielded in its ethnic identity from overtures or reservations by unity-seeking other Ethiopian communities. I wonder if Professor Messay would be as defensive on behalf of Amharas in the Welkait region of Gondar who also rose up recently against being force-fed Tigre identity by the Woyane dictatorship, not that Amharas need the kind of unity-retarding defense of identity politics the professor offers any more than Oromos do.

(4) To round out this series of observations on Professor Messay's rejoinder to his critics, let me note a basic problem of incoherence in his claims. On the one hand, he remarks that the "fragmentation" of Ethiopia is an "inescapable reality," an outcome of "two decades of unrestricted ethnicization." So much so that "most... young Oromo protesters... see Ethiopia as a collection of different nations," not in the Stalinist sense of "nations" and "nationalities," but in the sense Nigeria and Uganda are nations. He then leaps to the odd inference that "[j]ust as Kenyans are not expected to fight for Ethiopians, so too it is not surprising if the Oromos present their demands in terms of Oromo concerns." On the other hand, Messay wonders why the Oromos, having risen "for their own cause," are urged "to transfer their heroic deeds to the larger Ethiopian entity," which he accuses of "remain[ing] aloof" from their cause.

Here, the professor appears to be in a fog about what Ethiopian oneness means or about what its existential status is today. To help clarify matters, we can put some basic questions to him: first of all, is Ethiopia so fragmented that it is now, as you claim, a collection of different independent nations, or is it, as you *also* say, one large national "entity" which has "remained aloof" from Oromo concerns and protests? It can be one or the other, but not both at once. If it has been so broken up into disparate tribal fragments, it cannot have remained aloof *as a larger national entity* from the recent Oromo uprisings. Also, why, as you claim, does the "transfer" of Oromo "heroic deeds to the larger Ethiopian entity" even arise as an issue at all since Oromos are already objectively constitutive of the Ethiopian national whole? Aren't their heroic protests by definition Ethiopian protests even if their localized uprisings are not immediately or directly those of other Ethiopian communities? Second, what, pray tell, has Kenyans "not [being] expected to fight for Ethiopians" got to do with Oromos present[ing] their demands in terms of Oromo concerns"? Does the fact of Oromos presenting their issues and expressing their grievances "in Oromo terms" necessarily mean that they are foreign to us, their fellow Ethiopians, like Kenyans are foreign to us? Do you really think that Oromos are citizens of a different country? If you don't, then what is the point of the Kenya analogy in your reference to Oromos pressing their demands "in Oromo terms"? Again, have you given what you are saying adequate thought?

Putting the mixed up analogy aside and looking at the Ethiopian struggle for freedom from Woyane tribal tyranny, do you see the fundamental challenge we face having to do with one insular ethnic community "fighting for" another or others as your analogy seems to suggest, or do you see it in terms of developing a dynamic unity of diverse communities by *building on* our rich national experience as Ethiopians? You say "the Oromo struggle gives us the unique opportunity both to defeat the TPLF and forge a new unity," but *how* is the opportunity "unique," and *how* do we take the opportunity and turn it into reality? Also, in what sense would our national unity be "new"?

More fundamentally, given *Ethiopiawinnet* as a long-lived integral national experience on the one hand, and the centrality of the values of diversity and equality in our contemporary democratic vision of national solidarity, on the other, what does Ethiopian oneness mean today? Does it signify *either* solely historic identity and tradition *or* contemporary ideas and values alone? Or, is such simple, reductive *either/or* proposition a non-starter, incapable of reflecting the actual depth, richness and complexity of the Ethiopian experience *as a whole* even in the context of the present difficult struggle for freedom from tribally divisive TPLF dictatorship? The challenge of forging Ethiopian *andinnet* today goes beyond getting over partisan quarrels or reconciling naked tribal differences. It also involves overcoming two needlessly antagonistic *modes of national concern*. As aspiring moderns, we understand national solidarity as a correspondence of progressive ideas, values, and institutions with representations of social interests. As inheritors of an evolving ancient tradition, we experience trans-ethnic nationality as an order of historical events, deeds and shared accomplishments, our victory over an invading European power in the Battle of Adwa being an exemplary national achievement.

In renewing Ethiopian solidarity today, then, we should do so recognizing that the two modes of national concern are neither mutually exclusive nor simply reducible to each other. Dynamically integrated together, they constitute a better, more inclusive and democratic Ethiopia than either of them separately. But such integration demands a broader and deeper level of political mindfulness in diagnosing and reckoning with the

challenges of national unity than our *mihuran* have reached so far.

As a teacher and student of philosophy, Professor Messay would have been expected to try and tackle problems of Ethiopian solidarity with thoughtfulness instead of limiting his observations to recycling overly familiar assertions about the necessity of unity. He would have noted that the realization of the value of national *andinnet* is not as simple and straightforward as one ethnic group, particularly Amharas as he points out, “joining” Oromos in their current uprising. What does “joining” signify in long-term conceptual or practical terms? Is this saying anything meaningful in any political or strategic sense?

What is crucial with respect to forging unity is how issues that animate local grievances and rebellions are articulated and strategically framed; this is where battles for Ethiopian solidarity are won or lost, and where intellectual engagement can make a significant difference. Yet Messay would have us believe that there is a simple and ready answer to our disunity in the struggle against the TPLF regime. The remedy is “for the peoples of Ethiopia to grasp each other’s hands and the rest will follow.” Really? Is it all that simple?

Apparently, no questions about framing or reframing issues and ideas in broad Ethiopian context need be raised, and no strategic challenges of building unity need be faced and overcome after “two decades of unrestricted ethnicization” under TPLF tyranny!

Dr. Messay here hardly says anything by way of offering thought for Ethiopian solidarity other than reproducing the TPLF notion of national unity as the simple additive aggregation of disparate ethnic groups – “nationalities” and “peoples” of Ethiopia joining “hands” in a spirit of *kumbaya*! The good “doctor” is breathtakingly overconfident in his prescription for our political and national ills. He thinks he knows more than he actually does. And this explains the lack of probing questions and the shortage of conceptual and strategic analysis in his discourse on unity.

The truth is that the problems of Ethiopian solidarity today are not as easily tractable or soluble as Messay makes them out to be. We face fairly complex issues and conditions. Modes of political concern about unity and the way in which it is valued or sought differ with varying interests, parties, and regimes arrayed in and around Ethiopia today, notably, the TPLF, the OLF (or what is left of it), Shabiya, and Patriotic-Ginbot Sebat. A particular form of state, say, an authoritarian one-party regime, shapes national *andinnet* differently from an actually democratic state. For example, the possibilities for meaningful unity in Eritrea are severely constrained by partisan-cum-personal dictatorship which has insinuated itself into Eritrean “national” consciousness. Single party domination is simply and exclusively equated with national unity. Under these conditions, legitimate Eritrean dissent from the Shabiya regime can easily be construed as disloyalty to the “nation,” so immediate and total is the conflation of ruling party and country.

The situation in our own country is not a whole lot different though the historic Ethiopian nation, inclusive of Kebessa Eritreans, has deep-rooted national being and culture that are not merely products of contemporary partisan-tribal nationalism. Our *political* situation is not much different from Eritrea even if the TPLF regime, unlike the dictatorship of Isaias Afwerki, has gone to some lengths to project a democratic self-image, a bold-faced pretense really, that has absolutely no basis in fact. The Woyanes have their own self-serving exclusively partisan sense and understanding of Ethiopian “unity”, as do some of their opponents, like the OLF and Ginbot Sebat, whose backer Professor Messay is.

G-7 may have a *declared position* favorable toward our national interest but its struggle against the Woyane regime *in effect* represents, at least in part, the dubious regional agenda of its “ally,” the Shabiya regime, an agenda which has ever been unfriendly toward Ethiopian interests. This supposed alliance is all the more worrisome given that G-7 has declined to take positions on vital Ethiopian issues, even in principle, including on the matter of Ethiopia’s access to the Red Sea, basically asserting that all national matters will be decided democratically after the Woyanes are removed from power.

Let us put aside for the moment the fancy of Shabiya dictators helping G-7 preside over democratic change in Ethiopia after the overthrow of the TPLF regime. What prevents *Ginbotoch* from being forthcoming with alternative policy ideas and positions *now* as any political party or movement attempting to lead a national struggle would? After all, they are not being asked to “decide” major national issues presently, only to take considered positions on them by way of appealing to, and gaining the support of, the Ethiopian people in their (armed) struggle against TPLF tyranny. Unless, of course, they don’t see broad popular support or even actual, protracted, armed struggle as essential to their success in capturing power. So G-7’s entire political project remains puzzling.

Even if we grant that the party has honest intention to be a force for Ethiopian unity and democracy, what matters is not the organization's intention so much as its present and projected *capability* as it operates under Shabiya's wing. The choice of armed struggle Shabiya's support has lent G-7 is more apparent than real, at least so far, because the option remains in a weird state of suspended animation, not having been exercised for years in actually engaging the enemy on the battlefield. With little or no military force of their own, Dr. Birhanu Nega and company formally "preside" over a collection of ethnic armies, the largest of which is Tigrean, supported by and ultimately answerable to the Isaias regime. Whatever the future holds for this strange configuration of anti-Woyane forces, the arrangement as such is hardly reassuring concerning what post-Woyane Ethiopian national order might look like in the event of the overthrow TPLF dictatorship, never mind regarding prospects for democratic transformation of Ethiopian politics and government.

But, here is the main point: in making the option of armed struggle, such as it is, available to G-7 against the TPLF, its erstwhile protégé and collaborator, Shabiya does so using essentially the same ethnic political calculus as does the TPLF, intending to neutralize Ethiopian national power from within. More generally, as purveyors of political ethnicism in Ethiopia in one form or another, these various parties and regimes may have tactical differences and even major rivalries, but competitively or cooperatively, they often reproduce the logic of identity politics within their discourses of Ethiopian affairs, including their talk of the nation's unity. Insofar, that is, they have all acknowledged, if only pragmatically, the realities of the Ethiopian nation. For Shabiya, the TPLF, and the OLF in particular, it has ever been thus.

So out of both renewed, more thoughtful, *progressive commitment* to ideas-based politics and *patriotic concern*, Ethiopian literati today should, I believe, exert concerted intellectual effort to make these inauthentic discursive and political gestures of "unity" clear to themselves and to the Ethiopian people. I stress two essential points here: First, it remains a major interest of political ethnicism in all its variants that Ethiopian solidarity beyond a coalition of insular tribal "selves" must ever be weakened and deferred. Real Ethiopian unity that is more than the sum of disparate "nationalities" and "peoples" is essentially impracticable through the ethnonationalisms of the TPLF and the OLF because it would threaten the very logic of identity politics constitutive of these ethnic parties. Second, truly integral Ethiopian national experience needs to be defended not only from interests and forces that are clearly hostile toward it, but also from parties, groups and regimes that appear to befriend it while actually pursuing interests, goals, and proxy identity battles that undermine our shared national life.

### **Thought for Unity**

Can we ask, pausing for a moment from our unending but demonstrably unproductive attempts at "uniting" everything in sight – every political party, ethnic outfit, coalition, and civic organization – why the landscape of Ethiopian opposition to Woyane dictatorship at home and abroad is so overflowing with disparate entities in the first place? How may we understand the multiplicity of dissident parties, fronts, groups, and forums among Ethiopians, many of which are knowingly or unwittingly geared toward expanding the currency of identity politics?

It may appear that the valorization of partisan and tribal collectives over the last quarter century of Woyane dictatorship means that distinct ethnic, cultural, and political entities in the country have fundamental differences with (or about) Ethiopian *andinnet*, and that they take their *national* differences seriously and face them squarely. But the truth is that partisan and ethnic divisions, self-identifications, and groupings have proliferated among us mainly because we have often *avoided* facing the challenges of difference and diversity in our shared national life. For all our talk about unity, we have too often distanced ourselves from dynamic national wholeness hospitable to complexity and productive of truly progressive movement and change.

In this avoidance, which is also evident in our intellectual engagement or lack thereof, the insular tribal attitude can at times be commensurate with a naïve, artless ideal of unity: the former, like the latter, often originates in impatience with, or intolerance of the complexities of dissimilarity and pluralism *within* our national oneness. Obsessing about over-politicized, narrow, ethnic identity (often construed in vacuous formulaic terms as "national self-determination") can be the other side of the coin of insisting defensively on unity pure simple. We need to leave these fixations behind and fully embrace our shared nationality in all its historical depth, diversity and development potential. I believe we can do this.

In order to develop fundamental Ethiopian solidarity in the resistance against TPLF dictatorship and to project a post-Woyane vision of democratic-national order, it is essential that we establish a broadly inclusive yet definite framework of thought and action. We need an alternative, actually functioning, structure of terms,

concepts, and norms through which national unity may be commonly understood and embraced by the Ethiopian people today regardless of their ethnicity. The new system of ideas and values should be capable of *integrally* handling political pluralism and dissent.

I contend in this connection that harping on about “national reconciliation” ahead of developing such a frame of reference is really not facing our fundamental challenge, namely, firming up and revitalizing the very national ground we stand on as we seek not only to “reconcile” but also bring about systemic political change. If national reconciliation is to be meaningful and effective in bringing diverse constituents and parties together, it has first to take place in the domains of feeling and thinking; primarily, it has to be a reconciliation of sense contents, like belief, attitude, hope and passion, and of intellectualized political notions, like individual rights, nationality, democracy and federalism.

We cannot expect reconciliation to be simply and straightaway mutual accommodation among existing, incorrigibly exclusive, partisan and tribal groups, say, the TPLF and some faction or spinoff of the OLF, or between the Woyane regime and its patriotic and democratic opponents. While such an outcome may not be ruled out absolutely, anticipating it is not being reasonably hopeful; it is being merely wishful. What is worse, the anticipation does not even acknowledge foundational issues and problems in Ethiopian unity today, most importantly the lack of consensus on organizing and operative ideas and principles of national and political life, like individual rights, democracy, local self-government and federalism.

Setting out from this initial understanding and from the questions raised above, I propose the following theses on the *fundamentals* of Ethiopian unity. The theses constitute a thought experiment as it were intended for further discussion among Ethiopian patriots, political groups, concerned intellectuals, journalists, activists and professional strata of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

(1) In post-revolutionary Ethiopia, the constituent elements of national unity (localities, communities) that make up the Ethiopian whole, have been imposed upon *in their very subjectivity or agency* by politically self-serving authoritarian groups and regimes, thereby being forced to carry exclusively partisan forms of “identity” and “difference”. Such an imposition is a fundamental flaw, a non-starter in terms of building true national unity; it should not be allowed to pass itself off as constitutive of “facts on the ground,” an absolute necessity.

Instead, it should be seen as what it really is, a limited, contestable and changeable partisan and bureaucratic construct. Consequently, a critical first step to be taken by trans-ethnic forces of national unity today is to recognize (a) that exclusive identity partisanship in Ethiopia is largely a legacy of Leninist-Stalinist revolutionary politics whose origins go back to the Student Movement, and (b) the need to develop an alternative, more democratic, approach to the *shared* as well as distinct, interests, concerns, and self-identifications of diverse Ethiopian communities in a new spirit of openness, receptivity, and solidarity.

How may we do this? We do it, I believe, by deconstructing the ideological “superstructure” of the regime of identity in all its variants and political fabrications, by wresting the issues that actually matter to the Ethiopian people from the grip of exclusive partisan-tribal construction in both its ruling and oppositional forms. We do it by taking objective account of the felt needs and lived experiences of local communities in the country as they have never been taken account of before the Revolution or since. We may also be able to do it by restraining sectarian and dogmatic habits of thought, instead employing ideas as cognitive instruments, as analytical and critical tools of Ethiopian enlightenment in the broad sense. And this means overcoming a major limitation of our troubled revolutionary legacy, namely, the use of progressive thought, or what passes for such thought, exclusively as a means of over-politicizing and “nationalizing” ethnicity, as a narrow, restricted mechanism of “self-determination” or self-definition and self-assertion.

(2) As parts of the Ethiopian national whole, assignable communities, say, Tigres, Amahars or Oromos, do not bring entirely pre-given, exclusive ethnic “selves” to social, economic, cultural, and political relations of Ethiopian unity; for their collective and individual subjectivities have already taken shape through such relations. This has not been simply an outcome of deliberate state policy of national assimilation, but a reflection of the historical fact that the identities of Ethiopia’s diverse communities are in part products of trans-regional movements, contacts, and inter-ethnic relations of populations, not simply outcomes of tribal localities or “self-determinations.”

So in advancing the cause of Ethiopian unity today, we jettison the traditional “radical” assumption that ethnic selves in Ethiopia are clearly bounded and self-enclosed wholes in a geographic, economic, social or cultural

sense, and that particular regions or localities in the country are, or will remain, coterminous with linguistically homogeneous populations. And this means that there is no question of an ethnic organization such as the TPLF or the OLF coming to a negotiation with other tribal groups about *andinnet* or reconciliation from “outside” *Ethiopiawinnet*. For any tribal group to attempt such self “externalization” would be like an individual trying to “jump out of his or her skin”. It constitutes failure to acknowledge the undeniable fact that, whatever local or regional issues we pursue, we do so as an integral part of Ethiopia, *a national whole already constituted by Tigres and Oromos no less than by other ethnic and cultural communities in the country*. This is not to deny or underestimate injustices state authorities and their local agents have inflicted on Ethiopian ethnic and cultural minorities in the past and continue to inflict in the present regardless of the minority or majority status of communities. The wrongs are real and need fundamental righting. But we should also note that the deeply flawed yet persistent convention of “progressive” discourse in Ethiopia, which took shape as a supposedly radical response to the injustices, needs major overhaul or correction of its own. Decades old, the convention has cumulatively become a fundamental obstacle to Ethiopian solidarity, assuming acute crisis proportions today under Woyane “revolutionary democracy.”

What I have in mind here is the leftist tradition of referring to distinct Ethiopian communities simply as victors and vanquished, oppressors and oppressed, thereby reducing the *totality* of the “identities” and “differences” of the populations involved simply to aggregates of their problems, not much more. Entire populations are marked or characterized nearly exclusively by the injustices they are said to have suffered or caused others to suffer. Within the leftist tradition of discourse in Ethiopia, it is as if a social group in the country can only acquire identity or subjectivity as a victim or victimizer of another community.

For example, the Oromo people, who for centuries have constituted an integral part of Ethiopia, have traditionally been spoken of by partisans of the OLF mainly in terms of their victimization by expanding and conquering Amharas, to the exclusion of Oromos’ own historical agency of conquest and expansion, their autonomous entry into the Ethiopian national scene. Essentially the same thing can be said about how Tigres have been spoken of by the TPLF, largely following an overbearing convention of “revolutionary” thought and discourse whose origins go back to the Student movement.

This tradition of abnegative self-labeling has taken a major psychological and political toll on some members of Oromo and Tigre intellectual and political elites who are ever smarting from wounded cultural pride. Many among these elites continue to cling to identity politics even as they moderate their separatist demands and acknowledge shared Ethiopian nationality. They have difficulty affirming their *Ethiopiawinnet* and committing to *one* national struggle against Woyane tyranny. This was evident even in the face of recent Oromo popular uprisings triggered by the so-called Addis Ababa Master Plan, which made the case for such struggle all the more convincing, indeed, obvious. Apparently, the psychology and politics of identity die hard.

(3) It is to be admitted that *Ethiopiawinnet*, which signifies our unity or shared nationality, is not only what we feel, value, and experience but also something we reflect back on in active and transformative consciousness. Conceptual thought enters into our national experience, particularly in times of crisis and change, to enable us perform tasks of evaluation and critique. But here too we remain Ethiopians and act as such. In questioning and seeking to transform our shared nationality, we do not (and need not) alienate ourselves, as the Woyanes have done, from our ancestral heritage by adopting an external, tribally resentful and vindictive political attitude toward it. Nor do we need to caricature our common national heritage as nothing but the sum of its limitations or problems, mischaracterizing it in a fit of self-alienating abstract radicalism as nothing but Amhara/Shoa domination or Abyssinian colonialism.

We now know that such radical conceit is actually anything but radical because it is itself nationally rootless to begin with. We may, of course, adopt a critical attitude toward the Ethiopian tradition. But in doing so we need not deny or suppress our very national being; instead, we could engage and question what has lain within us as the unique stuff of shared Ethiopian experience. In seeking national change and development, we seek Ethiopia’s *integral* transformation and betterment; we aim, that is, at the perfection of our union, not its division and undoing.

(4) While unity can be built or strengthened effectively on the basis of recognition of the diversity and equality of communities, by embracing and valuing differences, the recognition at the same time calls for a commensurate intensification in the values, institutions and practices of national integration. We need to acknowledge a dynamic reciprocity between diversity, on one side, and integral Ethiopian experience, on the

other. Minority cultures and local communities have gotten added national value in being part of our common historic national tradition, while, in supplying their distinct values, customs, forms of life and self-identifications, they have in turn enriched Ethiopian national culture. They have enriched it not simply through their multiplicity but also through trans-regional movements, contacts, intersections, and cultural exchanges that have created the foundation for Ethiopian national unity.

So to represent or portray Ethiopian unity would not be to depict a “consociation” of disparate cultural and social groups that are externally aggregated and coordinated, but an integrally ordered national society in which the human and citizenship rights of individuals are safeguarded and strengthened even as cultural autonomy and diversity are maintained. This vision of Ethiopian *andinnet* stands in sharp contrast to TPLF, OLF, and Shabiya constructs of the nation’s unity as a collection of self-contained, bureaucratically bounded and manipulated tribal communities, labeled according to Stalinist convention as “nations, nationalities, and peoples.” The vision contains a new conception of “locality” or local community whose definition transcends ethnicity.

(5) In rebuilding national solidarity today by overcoming the ravages of TPLF tribal dictatorship, we disabuse ourselves from the rationalist illusion of the revolutionary era that the Ethiopian people can maintain unity through abstract progressive ideas alone, without relying on a common national culture. Ethiopia and *Ethiopiawinnet* have undeniable historical depth; *Ethiopiawinnet* cannot be adequately represented and maintained *solely* in terms of modern political reason, for it makes itself felt in primary sense-forming patriotic sentiments, values, attitudes, and lived experience, in the immediacy of images, symbols, narratives or myths, and in the power of collective memory passed on from generation to generation.

It is understandable that for many Ethiopian progressive purists past and present who regard nationality mainly as contemporary political achievement based on representations of ideas like “democracy” and “equality” or social (class and ethnic) interests, Ethiopia’s long-established tradition of nationhood may not be as significant as its present value or justification. Much less agreeable is an extreme strain of thought, or alleged thought, within the Ethiopian leftist tradition which dismisses historic Ethiopian nationality as “fake,” a *mere* myth. This view is predicated on a shallow “scientific” misunderstanding of myth by the philistine as falsehood, a story lacking in factual content; the misunderstanding can be likened to seeing or approaching poetry as conventional journalistic prose.

Let me conclude here by suggesting a corrective to this lingering strain of “radical” thought, as it is out of gear with our national experience. As is the case with the founding stories of nations, religions, and civilizations elsewhere in the world, the Ethiopian narrative is not entirely a literal or “objective” description of national acts and events; it is in part “creative” of the Ethiopian experience. That is what national myths do. But the main point here is that our national narrative reflects and has as its condition of possibility *actual* past events and developments. So the structure of recorded historical events, deeds, and accomplishments that underlie the Ethiopian national story has objective intelligibility which Ethiopians of all ethnic backgrounds can value, or at least acknowledge, as constitutive of our shared national heritage.

In a following piece (Part II), I intend to focus on challenges of strategic thought and action in creating *andinnet* in the Ethiopian struggle for survival and freedom. An alternative to thinking about unity as the mere sum of parties and groups needs to be further developed within the resistance, and I think it can be developed most effectively around the theme of strategy, where vision, thought, and action converge.

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