

Why I am Hopeful for Ethiopia and Ethiopians

Aklog Birara Dr.

April 17, 2018

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

— Martin Luther King Jr....A Testament of Hope

Part I of II

The purpose of this two-part commentary is to underscore the honor as well as the dignity embedded in Ethiopia's remarkable and continuous history; and the non-negotiability of **Ethiopia as a country and Ethiopian national identity** as a definer of who we are as people. These fundamental principles have guided Ethiopians through the worst of times; and the best of times for thousands of years. However imperfect the journey, my generation believed in these core values and principles; and tried its best to advance the transformation of the country and the well-being of its together. I believe we saw possibilities ahead rather than a world of "darkness" that diminishes growth and development.

I believe that it is these core values and principles that will **enable and empower us together** to transform this historic and ancient country and its 110 million people to be free from the current dictatorship and to enjoy sustainable and equitable development.

In the latter half of the 1960s, when I was in the tenth grade at the only high school in Gondar, my English teacher urged me to write an essay and compete for an Ethiopia-wide contest. The program was sponsored by the International Herald Tribune; and the contest was administered by the United States Information Services (USIS) and the Ethiopian Ministry of Education.

This was, I was told by my teacher, the first time that a student from a high school in a rural town would enter the contest. The contest was both a challenge and an opportunity. It was a challenge for numerous reasons, among them going to the United States for the first time. As the only child for my parents, I knew that my mother would revolt against the idea. Further, I have never even been to Addis Ababa! Let alone New York!

Against these odds, the opportunity was considerable, among these winning the contest; and perhaps landing a scholarship during the 3-month visit.

The first challenge was to choose a topic on which I had ample knowledge. There was no mentor to guide me on the process or on the essay. It was a solo adventure. It is not uncommon to learn that the unknown tests one's determination and resolve. I chose the subject matter on my own. I gave it the title **"My Country's Challenge in Today's World."**

The title appealed to me for one fundamental reason. Ethiopia had, in 1963, hosted the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Ethiopians were jubilant about the event and the ceremonies. The **heads of state and government of thirty-two mostly newly**

independent nations formed this pioneering organization. This was largely due to the foresight of leaders such as Emperor Haile Selassie, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere and Gamal Nasser. As the only independent nation in Africa, a founding member of the United Nations; and its well-deserved capacity as an avid advocate for the independence of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, including the riddance of Apartheid South Africa, Ethiopia was anointed as the seat of the OAU. It continues to serve as the Headquarters of the African Union (AU).

Of all these pioneering African leaders, I believe **Emperor Haile Selassie deserves to be recognized as the founding father of the OAU and its successor, the AU. This remembrance should be in the form of an imposing statue or other prominent symbol!**

The choice of Addis Ababa as the seat of the OAU was fought for behind the scenes and thus earned. It was not granted by any foreign nation or group of nations. I give tribute to Ethiopian officials and the Ethiopian people who contributed to this historical event. Hosting the formation of the OAU raised Ethiopia's stature not only in Africa; but also in the rest of the world.

Ethiopia's active **engagement during the Korean War and the Congolese crisis** had broadened and enhanced the country's reputation as a key partner in collective security throughout the globe.

In the process, it was not uncommon for my peers and me to learn about emerging

Africa's political and intellectual leaders; and about the struggle for **influence between the Soviet Union and the United States**. Mind you that we had more grasp of external events and geography before acquiring adequate knowledge of Ethiopia's diverse population, its primary natural resources, the names and locations of its major rivers, the country's borders, its population centers etc. etc. Ben Bella of Algeria, Cabral of Guinea Bissau, Lumumba of the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Mboya of Kenya were progressive leaders in Africa that connected with African youth of the time, including Ethiopians.

The tools available to me and to my peers at the time were scant. There were no newspapers; no magazines or books or radio or television. Access to radio broadcasts both foreign and domestic was cherished by those who were fortunate enough to possess or access a radio.

Despite this limitation in media, my peers and I had enormous curiosity and appetite for information. Our cultural and social capital was substantial and supportive of our efforts. But the efforts had to come from us.

I recall that, aside from searching for global news and information, my peers in high school in Gondar possessed **admirable social skills and qualities**. These attributes showed commitment to the indigenous while absorbing the "**modernizing alien culture**" from Western societies as a practical need and tool for advancement.

- They studied hard
- They attended places of worship regularly
- They welcomed foreigners and treated them as equals and not as "superiors"

- They never expressed hatred for anyone
- None of them wanted to live in a world of "darkness"
- They showed no jealousy for success; in fact, they admired academic and other success
- They loved their country and their national heroes

- Their appetite for education was infectious
- They were always suspicious of the motives of ፈረንጅቶች (foreigners) and kept these “aliens” at a distance
- They respected their elders
- They were generous to one another and to others
- They rejected the notion that poverty defined their identity
- “The poorest of the poor” never rejected their villages and roots, etc. For me, the cultural, social and learning environment was healthy and supportive.

At the same time, I recall that my peers and I did not **demonstrate a steady taste for and determination to work hard; create and produce. No was there a commitment to provide public services**, for example, cleaning the school yard or the street or helping the needy in the street. In fact, there was a slight bias in favor of entitlements. Menial jobs were shunned as if there was a virus attached to them.

Except for general reference, I did not want to write an essay about the pluses and minuses of my youth environment.

My essay centered on the **centrality of Ethiopia as a nation and being Ethiopian as a defining national** identity. Here there was no ambiguity what so ever.

Ethiopia as a country and being Ethiopian as a distinctive national identity were sources of immense pride and joy not only for me; but for all those I encountered throughout the late 1960s.

We all identified ourselves as Ethiopians and not as members of ethnic groups.

At the time I wrote my essay with full confidence and hope that Ethiopia will triumph and emerge as a modern and prosperous nation, **I never anticipated that, instead, it will slide down the slippery road of ethnic violence, polarization and disintegration.**

The common view I recall was that technological and economic backwardness was a phenomenon the Ethiopian people together could resolve on their own. This confidence in the potential of Ethiopia and Ethiopians to overcome policy and structural hurdles while maintaining national identity helped me in representing my country at a formative age.

What did I leverage in my essay?

The assassination of **President John F. Kennedy was a monumental event**. Emperor Haile Selassie stood out as a compelling and imposing world leader at Kennedy’s burial ceremony. American society was fixated not only by the death of their young President; but also by the presence of the distinctive Ethiopian Emperor. American households, including young people

who watched the ceremony on TV came to know about Ethiopia and Ethiopians through him. Ethiopia’s status among Americans and world leaders was elevated dramatically and consequentially. Hence, it was **natural for me to leverage this asset** both in my essay and in my tours and lectures in the USA.

Consequently, speaking about Ethiopia to American audiences, primarily to elementary and secondary school students was **tantalizing and energizing**. I had a comparative advantage among my peers. I knew I was talking about a country that was known; and was in charge of its destiny. At the same time, I was careful not to oversell Ethiopia. **I couldn’t put Ethiopia on a pedestal** because it was awfully poor and technologically backward.

In a couple of instances, I was asked why a country with such a long and distinguished history that **built rock-hewn churches, Obelisks**, castles and other marvels remained backward. I did not have a ready answer except the constant “foreign aggression” Ethiopia faced.

I recall suggesting that Ethiopia had huge problems to tackle. These **fundamental structural and policy** problems on the ground—low incomes, poor education, poor health services, sanitation and drinking water and underdeveloped physical infrastructure—were enormously difficult to reconcile with my repetitive narrative that “Ethiopia is an ancient and independent country that defeated the Italians at the Battle of Adwa.”

My narrative in the essay and during the tours was that poverty and low level of modernization do not define Ethiopia and Ethiopians. I knew then and now of no country that was created modern and prosperous. At one time, the U.S.A was backward and poor; so was China. In the 1800s, more than 80 percent of the U.S. population depended on farming. One of the factors that drove the Chinese revolution was abject poverty, including recurring famine. In all their trials and tribulations, the Chinese people never forgot their history; their roots. They knew that China was the center of one the world’s civilizations. It built the Great Wall, a marvel to see. It could someday become modern and prosperous again. It became one in my life time. Sadly, my country never caught up. But it can!!!!

Societies such as China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and others that embraced their past—the good, the bad and the ugly—**had together determined that the future is far important than the past**. This does not mean you forget the past. You learn from the past; but focus on the future. These countries have demonstrated the will, ability, capability and capacity in modernizing their societies; and in making their countries stronger and prosperous.

Those that accept their past and focus on the future grow faster than those that are burdened with their histories and fight one another ad-infinitum.

This leads me to the core of my thesis. Ethiopia as country and its people are far more important in shaping their destinies than the simple import of material progress without a soul. Material progress is not an end by itself. It is a means of improving life and strengthening national identity. It is achievable if **people enjoy freedom and work together with**

determination and zest in overcoming immense challenges. Having learned a little bit about Japan and Japanese small consumer goods I observed in Debre Tabor and Gondar, I felt confident that Ethiopia will catch-up and transform itself for the better. This hope and confidence in the determination and capabilities of the Ethiopian people to succeed was **embedded and has guided my life ever since**.

I calculated early that it is best to be truthful and honest about the dire nature of Ethiopia’s political economy. I posited that Ethiopia had a long way to go in terms of material modernization. Its **spiritual underpinnings were so strong that success** to me was inevitable. However, I was especially concerned that emerging Africa would modernize faster and sooner than Ethiopia. These emerging nations, especially those under British rule were far ahead in the social sector and in infrastructure.

In “**The Challenges My Country Faces**,” I identified what I saw around me in the towns and villages: lack of access to education, health, roads and other physical infrastructure. The dearth of these basic services was so visible everywhere that **foreign visitors and tourists** used to express horror through their faces. Peace Corps Volunteers in Gondar were much more sophisticated, sensitive and more nuanced in their expressions.

In the years that followed, Ethiopia’s poverty and backwardness prompted me to study political economy and comparative growth models.

I suggested in the essay that **Ethiopia’s ancient culture, its hard working people; and its long history** as an independent country **will serve as a bedrock for rapid modernization**. This is

because I know of no country that has become strong and prosperous that did not embrace its history, its diversity, its culture, its practices and norms.

Japan is one of the most sophisticated economies in the world. Their growth model is Japanese. So is South Korea's. I cited Japan at the time because I had some knowledge of Japan; but not of South Korea, except for Ethiopia's participation in the war. Ethiopia's growth model must be Ethiopian and not a carbon copy of someone or something else!

I believed then as I do now that Ethiopia's modernization would depend on the education of its people; all of them. **Education is a liberator, a democratizer and a catalyst.** I should know. Had I not left the village where I was born; and not attended elementary and secondary school in Ethiopia; the chance that I would escape poverty is zero. I learned at the time that those with education had no trouble finding jobs. At the time, the demand for talent was far greater than the supply. This was a motivating factor for learning. But, learning is a life time endeavor; so is unlearning.

My essay was selected; and I joined a group of 34 young high school students from 34 nations. Among them were bright-eyed and well informed "delegates" from Liberia, Malaysia and Yugoslavia. We all landed in New York City and gathered for orientation at Sara Lawrence College. The organizers took us to Harlem and exposed us to the **American tragedy of racism,**

inequities; marginalization; and poverty. We were in disbelief. No one spoke. We were all awed and shocked to see such stark division among America's races. The American Ghetto illustrated to us that the façade of American material progress did not match with the ideals of equitable distribution of incomes and wealth, with justice and democracy. Little did I know then that Ethiopia would suffer from the same ills under the **guise of the "equality of nations, nationalities and peoples?"**

The first task for the group was to interface in a model UN.

1. The Malaysian presented a convincing case that his country will develop His prediction was correct. Malaysia is a prosperous country.
2. The Yugoslav was "proud of her country" and felt strongly that Yugoslav society was much better-off materially than "Soviet " I was not sure about that! She was proud of her President, Tito and recalled that he and Emperor Haile Selassie were "friends." They belonged to the non-aligned group.
3. The Liberian was much more American and felt that her country is "Westernizing faster than the rest of " She and I agreed that Ethiopia and Liberia were, for long, the only "independent nations in Africa." I did not hesitate to mention that Liberia's case is different from Ethiopia's. Liberia is an American creation, I surmised.
4. I highlighted Ethiopia's distinctive features, its vital role in the African independence movement and its huge I made a convincing case that Ethiopia will rise-up and modernize!

Following the model UN we were assigned to different schools in the New England area to experience the American system. Our sponsors wanted us to experience the American "free market system" and its liberal democracy; and contrast it with the Soviet system. In the **background was the "Cold War"** with which we were all familiar. I had little or no interest in the contrasts.

My interest was fairly simple:

- To obtain a scholarship in the United States
- To use my education in advancing Ethiopia's modernization and; in the short term,
- To do what I can to promote Ethiopia's image and the images of the rest of independent Africa to American elementary and secondary school

The experience was transformative. Eddie Theo, my new friend from Malaysia and I were sent to attend the George School in Pennsylvania. To my utter surprise and delight, I was offered a scholarship to complete high school there. The interest in me was, I believe, motivated by my rudimentary presentations on Ethiopia that I extracted from my essay and my "enthusiasm to

learn." So, I owe this unexpected opportunity to Ethiopia, to its leaders at the time, especially to the Ethiopian people, and to American youth who mobilized funds under the **banner "Bring Aklog Back."** Who would ever forget this?

In mind's eye, Ethiopia is home to the **most gracious, generous, kindest, considerate, tolerant, proud and patriotic people** I have ever met in my travel for work and or pleasure that has so far taken me to more than 90 countries and territories around the globe—almost all of Latin America and the Caribbean, most countries in East Asia and the Pacific, all of Western Europe, most of the Middle East and North Africa, half of Sub-Saharan Africa, Australia and New Zealand; and of course, North America **as unique** a population **as Ethiopians.**

In large part, I owe this privilege of global travel and continuous learning of the development process to the World Bank. It sent me on numerous "missions." It empowered me to appreciate the diversity of nature and cultures that still push me to the see countries I never saw before.

I say continuous learning and unlearning because education does not stop with a terminal degree. It is a lifelong effort of learning and unlearning. If you don't unlearn you never progress in life. The same is true for countries.

Part II will focus on the challenges of the now and of tomorrow