**Greater Ethiopia Reconsidered***

In *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (1974), I looked at the totality of Ethiopia’s historical experience in a way that emphasized the deeply-rooted connectedness of the many peoples of this great culture area. I propose now to consider how some features of that argument relate to critical challenges Ethiopia faces today.

Those challenges are threefold—at once economic, political, and cultural. First off, the country faces a legacy of two decades of severe economic attrition. Collectivization policies long proven economically harmful were pursued unremittingly, at the same time that 50% of the recurrent national budget went for military expenses. In 1987, Ethiopia’s per capita income of US $130 made it the poorest country in the world for which World Bank figures were available. Conditions have worsened since, as an economic growth rate of 1.9% failed to keep pace with a population growth rate of 2.7%. Recurrent famines threaten to make Ethiopia chronically dependent on external emergency relief. Yet wholesale action towards economic development, in what now must be an environmentally attentive perspective, gets impeded by problems on two other fronts.

The political problem is the need to provide reliable national, regional, and local administrations during a time filled with tensions and distrust left from the Derg years without the benefit of a constitution or a fully-legitimated national regime. The problem is compounded by a policy of experimenting both with a complicated new scheme of electoral politics and a hastily-created system of decentralized governance, carried out by leaders and publics with little experience of democratic self-government.

Daunting as these political problems may be, the cultural dilemmas are no less formidable. They include the need to diffuse ideas and symbols that can provide a collective identity suitable for Ethiopia during this post-Marxist period—the topic I shall address in these pages.

This cultural dilemma resembles that of France in the 1820s, when Auguste Comte diagnosed French society as suffering from acute moral anarchy. The condition arose because beliefs associated with the monarchical regime and the Catholic Church had been effectively attacked by a revolutionary ideology, which nonetheless failed to offer positive beliefs suitable for reorganizing society in the post-revolutionary epoch. Comte held that the only way to secure such beliefs was to get a group of scientific

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sociologists to fashion them. Since Comte’s day, sociologists have fortunately become more modest, so I shall not venture to suggest what positive beliefs Ethiopians today should embrace. What I can do is point to problematic features of the situation and suggest resources that may help to cope with it.

A condition of cultural identity crisis produces anxiety, which can impede the search for constructive solutions. It is likely to produce a certain amount of magical thinking, including a search for salvationary figures. It is also likely to produce much dualistic thinking, in which some people are identified as the “good guys” and others are vilified. In an effort to bring a constructive frame of mind to bear on this situation, I shall first provide some historic perspective, by reviewing earlier attempts to produce constitutive symbolism for Ethiopia, and then consider what resources Greater Ethiopia might contribute to the process today.

As Greater Ethiopia suggests, much symbolism that provided identity for Ethiopia up to the time of Menilek II was embodied in the Kibre Negest. That ethic celebrated the special character of the Ethiopian polity as a multiethnic community governed by a monarch whose legitimacy rested on legendary descent from King Solomon and a historic mission to champion the Christian faith. This symbolism served well for a thousand years, and energized the great effort toward nation-building of the 19th century. It was coupled with a belief in Ethiopia’s superiority and self-sufficiency. The threat of European penetration, however, challenged the belief in Ethiopia’s self-sufficiency and made a number of Ethiopian leaders eager to incorporate features of European civilization. Later generations would question whether that symbolism still fit for the millions of Ethiopians who remained outside the Christian orbit.

The first efforts towards revising Ethiopia’s national script thus concentrated on bringing Ethiopia abreast of modern technologies, out of fear that Ethiopia’s very survival as an independent nation depended on adopting those features of European civilization. Many Ethiopian intellectuals viewed Japan as an exemplar for modernizing, since Japan shared many historical and cultural features with Ethiopia, and was the only other non-white nation to have defeated European forces around the turn of the century. For nearly four decades, Japan figured as the preeminent model in terms of which Ethiopia could energize its modernizing process. Expressions of the ideal of Japanization, recently assembled by Dr. Bahru Zewde, range from writings by Gabre Hywot Baikedagn in 1912 to statements by educators like Hakim Workeneh and Fitaurari Deresse in the 1920s and pronouncements by foreign minister Blatengetta Heruy Wolde-Selassie in the early 1930s. Emperor Haile Selassie reportedly dreamed of Ethiopia as the Japan of Africa. The most dramatic manifestation of this outlook appeared in the Ethiopian Constitution of 1931, which proved to be a faithful copy of the Meiji Constitution of 1889. The dream was even revived in the postwar years by Education Minister Kebede Mikael, who published Japan Endamen Salatanach (How Japan Modernized) in 1953.

However, after World War II Japan largely got displaced by England, Sweden, and United States as models for Ethiopia’s development. The 1955 Constitution, for example, was modeled on that of
England. Thousands of Ethiopians went to Western Europe and the U.S. to study agriculture, business, engineering, law, medicine, and education in order to facilitate Ethiopian's transition into a modern society.

By the late 1960s, during the radicalization of studentry throughout the world, the Soviet Union came to displace the Western countries as the model for Ethiopian intellectuals. The Russian example seemed more compelling than either Japan or the Western democracies. Russian modernizers not only had to contend with an ostensibly conservative monarchy and aristocracy but, unlike Japan, also had an extensive Orthodox Christian church and an ethnically complex population. What is more, in identifying with its Marxist ideology Ethiopian intellectuals could safely repudiate their own traditions at the same time they affirmed Ethiopia's autonomy against so-called Western imperialist powers. The parallel with the Soviet Union continues, as both countries have repudiated their repressive Marxist regimes and opened the door toward what is styled an “emancipation” of indigenous nationalities from the grip of an encompassing imperial structure.

I need not belabor the point that the failure to pay due respect to Ethiopia’s own realities and traditions in the quest for modernization (as I advocated in Wax and Gold) and to engage in a wholesale onslaught against them on the Russian model was severely injurious to Ethiopian society. Continuing to follow the Soviet model, as the USSR breaks up into increasingly fractious and hostile ethnic polities, promises further harm. However, it is not too late for Ethiopian intellectuals to fashion a new collective identity based on their own traditional resources.

Perhaps Greater Ethiopia can offer some ideas for how to go about doing that. The book, after all, is all about ways to devise symbolic representations of multiethnic Ethiopia. After reviewing a number of historically common popular and scholarly images, it posed the following question, “Should the imperial expansion under Emperors Yohannes IV and Menilek II be viewed basically as a subjugation of alien peoples or an in-gathering of peoples with deep historical affinities?”

My guess is that the realities that underlie both images will somehow have to be taken into account as the current generation of Ethiopian intellectuals works to shape their collective self-understanding. Peoples outside the northern highlands need to have their traditions respected and their deprivations following the Menilek conquests acknowledged, at the same time that the sense in which the varied peoples of Ethiopia belong to a common culture area needs to be appreciated.

Ethiopia's peoples are enormously more similar and historically connected than the different nationalities that composed the Soviet Union; the evidence of their deep affinities and age-old connections is simply overwhelming. Greater Ethiopia presents only a fraction of that evidence. I'll mention three of the pan-Ethiopian culture traits it lists, and consider their relevance to contemporary issues.

For one thing, all the historic peoples of the larger Ethiopian culture area subscribed to a belief in a supreme heavenly deity, and use similar words to represent this deity--most commonly, cognates of waq
, which appear among the Afar, Saho, Somali, Oromo, Gurage, Hadiyya, Timbaro, Sidamo, Konso, Burji, Tsamako, Gamu, Dasenech, and Majangir; the root also appears in Amharic *wuqabi*, a person's divinely appointed guardian spirit. So one can view the peoples of Greater Ethiopia as monotheists, Semitic (Judaic, Christian, and Islamic) and local, who nevertheless share a number of other kinds of symbolism, like the special aura of respect for trees endowed with sacred significance. Certainly there has been, alongside of tensions, a great deal of intermixing of different Ethiopian religionists historically: Jews and Christians converted back and forth over the centuries, in ways unheard of elsewhere in the world; traditional Oromo rituals and Christian rituals were observed side by side at Zuquala; Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike made the annual pilgrimage to Kulubi Gabriel; peoples of diverse backgrounds visited the shrine of Sheik Hussein.

Another pan-Ethiopian culture trait consists of a complex of beliefs, values, and observances related to the ideal of martial bravery, of *jegnet*. This, too, provides a basis on which Ethiopians of widely varying backgrounds can recognize and respect one another. For contemporary purposes, they may find it adaptive to transform that warrior ethic in ways parallel to the Japanese transformation of *bushido* into *budo*, from an ethic celebrating fierceness in martial combat to devotion to the welfare of all living creatures, even courage in the nonviolent assertion of civic ideals in the political arena.

One other pan-Ethiopian feature I'll mention is the love to travel. Settled or nomadic, Ethiopians of nearly all ethnic affiliations are great travelers. To find new land, go on hunting or raiding expeditions, seek political fortune, escape enemies, study at a religious center, go on pilgrimages, visit distant relatives, or carry on trade, they have long been accustomed to moving from one part of the country to another. Such travel has frequently led to settlement in new places, as historical records and local traditions abundantly attest. This is why any policy that hardens ethnic or regional boundaries must definitely be regarded as un-Ethiopian!

No matter what the extent of pan-Ethiopian similarities, there is no gainsaying the fact that Ethiopia today is experiencing an upsurge of ethnic particularism. To some extent this expresses ethnic tensions generated under the Derg and its aftermath, to some extent it reflects the modernizing dynamic classically analyzed by Clifford Geertz as part of the "integrative revolution." The dynamics of modernization entail an inexorable increase of conflicts among groups organized by sentiments such as race, language, ethnicity, religion, or region in societies where such groups have traditionally lived side by side, since the spread of education makes those groups more aware of their identities and interests; increased power, prestige and wealth at the center gives them new ambitions; improved communications gives them an arena to compete in; and the increase of outside interventions makes local groups more sensitive to the identities of agents of the center who are regulating their lives in new ways.
Given that dynamic, it was only a matter of time before Christianity was disestablished as a state religion, a change already accomplished under the Derg. It is also to be expected that ethnic and language as well as religious communities that had previously felt suppressed would welcome an opportunity to assert their traditions and claim a more equitable share of the nation’s resources. Whether this can be done without a destructively divisive mobilization of political energies along ethnic lines is one of the great questions which now confronts the Ethiopian polity. In any case, the facts of the matter do not justify the expressions of anti-Amhara antagonism that have become fashionable in some quarters.

For one thing, as Dr. Getatchew Haile has made clear previously in this journal, those called Amhara today do not constitute a single ethnic group, but rather a language community composed of diverse ethnic groups that have adopted the Amharic language over the centuries—much as the Oromo today, who speak a common *afan oromo* but consist of ethnic communities who previously knew themselves only by such names as Boran, Guji, Jimma, and the like. Indeed, the Amharic language, rather than being the tongue of a historically distinct ethnic group, appears to have emerged as a native lingua franca through a process of pidginization and creolization, such that it incorporated a good deal of Cushitic vocabulary and syntax as well as combined features distinctive of both the northern and southern branches of Ethiopian Semitic.

What is more, the representatives of “Amhara domination” who conquered and colonized the peoples of southern Ethiopia did not come from all parts of the Amharic-speaking territory, but primarily from Shoa province. Strictly speaking, one should really speak of a *Shoan dynasty* under Emperors Menilek and Haile Selassie rather than of Amhara hegemony, in the same way that other regional dynasties—in Tigray, Gondar, and Lasta—exerted imperial control at other times in the preceding millennium. Indeed, most Amhara areas received very little attention under the regime of the last Shoan emperor: the lion’s share of Haile Selassie’s beneficence went to urban centers—Addis Ababa, Asmara, Harar, Dire Dawa—while “Amhara” homelands like Gojjam, Begemidir, and Menz were notoriously neglected.

Although Shoan noblemen and soldiers inflicted considerable damage on the peoples conquered under Menilek, they also brought certain long-term benefits to those areas. They paved the way toward a degree of centralization that would make it possible for the Imperial Ethiopian Government to begin to abolish the slave trade in the 1920s; and in the postwar era, to introduce the rudiments of modern communications, education, and health care, and to bring an end to the widespread brigandage that had endangered travel in earlier periods.

Above all, the Shoans provided the leadership that protected all the peoples of greater Ethiopia from falling prey to European imperialism (except, of course, the portion of Ethiopian territory the Italians called Eritrea). Yet it would be a severely distorted reading of Ethiopian history to view that effort as
exclusively Shoan. The forces that protected Ethiopia against the Italians included Ethiopians from many ethnic groups: Oromos, Gurages, Wolamos (Woleitas), Konta, Kulo, Limu, and Kaffa as well as Amhara and Tigreans. They were led by officers from many regions: Ras Alula and Ras Mengesha of Tigray, Dejazmatch Bahta of Akale Guzae, Wagshum Guangul of Lasta, Ras Mikael of Wollo, Ras Gobena and Dejazmatch Balcha of the Mecha Oromo as well as Ras Gebeyehu (who died fighting at Adua) and Ras Abate of Shoa. The coalition of forces that defeated the Italians was a powerful testimony to the symbolism of an independent multiethnic Ethiopian polity. Such a successful multiethnic coalition was not to be seen again until the concert of forces that brought down the oppressive regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The historical part of Greater Ethiopia analyzes some of the distinctive contributions of Tigrean, Amhara, and Oromo cultures that made that coalition possible. Hopefully the current generation of Ethiopian leaders and intellectuals can find ways to transfigure that symbolism so as to make it appropriate for the contemporary world. In so doing they will help to satisfy the great yearning in Ethiopia today for salam...naga...peace.