

# Walleign Mekonnen on the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia

## *Side Goodo*

The question of nationalities in Ethiopia has been the most contentious issue since Ethiopia took its current shape between the late 1880s and the early 1900s. The northern part of the present day Ethiopia, inhabited by the majority Abyssinians and the minority Kushitic Agews existed for over 2 Millennia in the name of the Abyssinian Kingdom with remarkable civilizations such as Axum, Lalibela and Gonder. However, Ethiopia as we know it today is the result of the internal expansion by King Minelik II of Shoa during the late 1880s until the early 1900s.

The majority (70%) of the current Ethiopian population, which lives in the southern, western and eastern regions of the country became part of the present day Ethiopia only during this period of internal expansion. The majority Kushitic peoples such as Sidama, Oromo, Afar, Ogaden, etc and the Omotic peoples such as Wolayita, Gamo, Gofa, Dawuro, Konta, etc and the Nilotic peoples living in the border between Ethiopia and the Sudan all became part of the present day Ethiopia between the 1880s and early 1900s. Historical evidences suggest that the rivalry between the two colonial powers, Britain and France in the horn of Africa, during the Scramble for Africa, facilitated the rapid Abyssinian expansion towards the south, the east and the west during this period. The two colonial powers provided King Minelik II ample rifles and other war materials that other ethnic groups living in the interior lacked. Therefore the King was able to easily subdue these hitherto independent African Kushitic, Omotic and Nilotic states with in a relatively short period of time.

Although these peoples were annexed over a century ago, due to lack of sustainable economic development and industrialization as well as limited urbanization, 85 % of them still live off subsistence agriculture in rural areas. The peoples of the South, the East and the West have therefore fully preserved their unique cultures, languages, histories and economic systems until today. Due to the failure of nation building arising primarily from failed economic development and successive dictatorial political systems, the country remained an amalgamation of nations and nationalities who constantly resented being part of a failed state.

It is based on this reality that Ethiopians from the South, the East and the West often voice concerns about the issues of nations and nationalities in the past and current Ethiopian politics. This is often misunderstood by their Abyssinian compatriots who unwittingly or intentionally refuse to accept the diversity of the country. This is in contrast to the spirit of the 1960s Ethiopian student movement which fully recognized the diversity of the peoples living in the country and their brutal and inhuman oppression and exploitation by the Abyssinian political elites. The most eloquent analysis of the issues of nations and nationalities in Ethiopia was provided by the late Walleign Mekonnen, who was the most progressive Abyssinian in the history of the country, and one of the leaders of the student movements in Haile Selassie I

University (the Current Addis Ababa University) in the late 1960s. Given the internal and international political developments during that time, his article was unsurpassed by its intellectual rigor and ability to portray the reality on the ground in the country. It was an epic essay.

However, I would like to warn readers that I do not endorse the ideology of the writer of the article. Walleign's analysis of the question of nationalities in Ethiopia was based on the socialist premises. His thoughts were influenced both by the contemporary global political trends and the domestic archaic political system of the feudal monarchy. Unfortunately, Walleign did not have an opportunity to live and witness the down fall of the brutal Ethiopian feudal monarchy in 1974 and the brutal global socialism in 1991. I believe that if he had a chance, he would have radically altered the premises of his analysis. Our basic objective in publishing Walleign's article is only to reemphasize the fact that the question of nations and nationalities in Ethiopia of the 1960s is equally relevant and burning in Ethiopia of today. This is not the negation of the current tendencies for African and global unity. Africa can not be free and united if it does not respect the rights of the 2000 nationalities and peoples living in the continent.

## **ON THE QUESTION OF NATIONALITIES IN ETHIOPIA**

**By Walleigne Mekonnen**

**Arts IV, Haile Sellassie I University**

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The main purpose of this article is to provoke discussions on the "sacred", yet very important issue of this country-the Question of Nationalities. The article as it was prepared for a special occasion (where detailed analysis was due time and other inconveniences impossible) suffers from generalizations and inadequate analysis. But I still feel it is not mediocre for a beginning. I expect my readers to avoid the temptation of snatching phrases out of their context and capitalizing on them. Instead every point raised here should be examined in the light of the whole analysis. We have reached a new stage in the development of the student movement, a level where Socialism as a student ideology has been taken for granted, and reaction with all its window dressing is on the defensive. The contradictory forces are no more revolution versus reform, but correct scientific Socialism versus perversion and fadism. The Socialist forces in the student movement till now have found it very risky and inconvenient to bring into the open certain fundamental questions because of their fear of being misunderstood. One of the delicate issues which has not yet been resolved up to now is the Question of Nationalities-some people call it ridiculously tribalism-but I prefer to call it nationalism. Panel discussions, articles in STRUGGLE and occasional speakers, clandestine leaflets and even tete-a-tete groups have not really delved into it seriously. Of course there was indeed the fear that it may alienate certain segments of the student population and as well the fear that the government may take advantage of an honest discussion to discredit the revolutionary student movement. Starting from last year, a small minority began to discuss this delicate issue for the most part in secluded places. Discussions, even private, leak out and because they were not brought into the open they normally led to backbiting, misunderstanding and grossly exaggerated rumours. I think students

are mature enough to face reality even if they are very sensitive. And the only solution to this degeneration, as witnessed from some perverted leaflets running amok [amok] these two weeks, is open discussion.

What are the Ethiopian people composed of? I stress on the word peoples because sociologically speaking at this stage Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? It is not made of a people with a particular tongue, particular ways of dressing, particular history, particular social and economic organization? Then may I conclude that in Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigray Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation, the Sidama Nation, the Wellamo [Wolayta] Nation, the Adere [Harari] Nation, and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation. This is the true picture of Ethiopia. There is of course the fake Ethiopian Nationalism advanced by the ruling class and unwillingly accepted and even propagated by innocent fellow travellers. What is this fake Nationalism? Is it not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask anybody what the “national dress” is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!! To be a “genuine Ethiopian” one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity and to wear the Amhara-Tigre Shamma in international conferences. In some cases to be an “Ethiopian”, you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon’s expression). Start asserting your national identity and you are automatically a tribalist, that is if you are not blessed to be born an Amhara. According to the constitution you will need Amharic to go to school, to get a job, to read books (however few) and even to listen to the news on Radio “Ethiopia” unless you are a Somali or an Eritrean in Asmara for obvious reasons. To anybody who has got a nodding acquaintance with Marxism, culture is nothing more than the super-structure of an economic basis. So cultural domination always presupposes economic subjugation. A clear example of economic subjugation would be the Amhara and to a certain extent Tigray Neftegna system in the South and the Amhara-Tigre Coalition in the urban areas. The usual pseudo-refutation of this analysis is the reference to the large Amhara and Tigray masses wallowing in poverty in the countryside. For that matter during the heydays of British imperialism a large mass of British Workers had to live under inhuman conditions.

Another popular counter argument is that there are two or three ministers of non-amhara-Tigre Nationality in the Cabinet, one or two generals in the army, one or two governors and a dozen balabats in the countryside. But out and out imperialists like the British used to rule their colonies mainly by enlisting the support of tribal chiefs, who were much more rich than the average citizen of the British Metropolis. The fact that (Houphet) Boigne and Senghor were members of the French National Assembly and the fact that they were even ministers did not reduce an iota of Senegalese and Ivory Coast [Ivoirians] loss of political independence. Of course the economic and cultural subjugation by the Amharas and their junior partners the Tigres is a historical accident. Amharas are not dominant because of inherent imperialist tendencies. The Oromos could have done it, the Wellamos [Wolaytas] could have done it and history proves they tried to do so. But that is not an excuse for the perpetuation of this situation. The immediate question is we must declare a stop to it. And we must build a genuine national- state. And what is this genuine national-state? It is a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state

affairs, it is a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history. It is a state where Amharas, Tigres, Oromos, Aderes [Harari], Somalis, Wollamos [Wolaytas], Gurages, etc. are treated equally. It is a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally. And how do we achieve this genuine democratic and egalitarian state? Can we do it through military? No!! A military coup is nothing more but a change of personalities. It may be a bit more liberal than the existing regime but it can never resolve the contradiction between either classes or nationalities. The Neway brothers and Tadesse Birus could not have done it. Talking about Mengistu and Tadesse, one cannot fail to remember the reaction that the Mengistus coup though a family one and at that by a sector of Shoa Amharas (with few exceptions, of course among the Workeneh) was very popular just because it was staged by “Ethiopians”-Amharas. With Tadesse, it was automatically a tribalist uprising. Why? Tadesse an Oromo cannot stage a nationalist coup but Oromo Supremacist. I am not equivocal in condemning coups, but the Tadesse coup had at least one significant quality and a very important one too. It gave our Oromo Brothers and Sisters self-respect. And self-respect is an important pre-requisite for any mass-based revolution. Even the so-called revolutionaries who scoffed at the coup just like the mass of the student body, could not comprehend this quality. You can clearly see in this instance the power of the Amhara-Tigre supremacist [supremacist] feelings. They clearly proved that they were nothing more than the products of government propaganda on this question.

Can the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Bale armed struggle achieve our goal? Not with their present aims and set-up. Both these movements are exclusive in character, led by the local Bourgeoisie in the first instance and the local feudal lords in the second. They do not have international outlook, which is essential for our goal. They are perfectly right in declaring that there is national oppression. We do not quarrel with them on this score. But their intention is to stop there. They do not try to expand their struggles to the other nationalities. They do not attempt to make a broad-based assault on the foundations of the existing regime. They deliberately try to forget the connection of their local ruling classes with the national oppression. In short these movements are not led by peasants and workers. Therefore, they are not Socialists; it would only be a change of masters for the masses. But for the Socialists the welfare of the masses comes first. The same can be said for the Gojjam uprising. But I would like to take this opportunity once again to show how much Amhara supremacism [supremacism] is taken for granted in this Campus. To applaud the ELF is a sin. If anything favorable is written out, it is automatically refuted by both USUAA and NUEUS. But the Gojjam affair was different. Support for it was practically a show of identity to the so-called revolutionaries. Mind you, I am just saying that these movements are not lasting solutions for our goal-the set-up of a genuine Nationalist Socialist State. I am all for them, the ELF, the Bale movements, the Gojjam uprising, to the extent that they have challenged and weakened the existing regime, and have created areas of discontent to be harnessed later on by a genuine Socialist revolution. One thing again is certain. I do not oppose these movements just because they are secessionists. There is nothing wrong with secessionism as such. For that matter secession is much better than nationally oppressive government. I quote Lenin, “...People resort to secession only when national oppression and national antagonisms make joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse. In that case the interests of the freedom of the class struggle will be best served by Secession. I would also like to quote the resolution on the question of nationalities from the London International Socialist Congress of 1896 attended, supported and adopted by

the Bolsheviks who brought about the October revolution, “This Congress declares that it stands for the full right of all nations to self-determination and expresses its sympathy for the workers and peasants of every country now suffering under the yoke of military, national or other absolutism.”

As long as secession is led by the peasants and workers and believes in its internationalist obligation, it is not only to be supported but also militarily assisted. It is pure backwardness and selfishness to ask a people to be partners in being exploited till you can catch up. We should never dwell on the subject of secession, but whether it is progressive or reactionary. A Socialist Eritrea and Bale would give a great impetus to the revolution in the country and could form an egalitarian and democratic basis for re-unification. To come back to our central question: How can we form a genuine egalitarian national-state? It is clear that we can achieve this goal only through violence, through revolutionary armed struggle. But we must always guard ourselves against the pseudo-nationalist propaganda of the regime. The revolution can start anywhere. It can even be secessionist to begin with, as long as led by the progressive forces—the peasants and the workers, and has the final aim the liberation of the Ethiopian Mass with due consideration to the economic and cultural independence of all the nationalities. It is the duty of every revolutionary to question whether a movement is Socialist or reactionary not whether a movement is secessionist or not. In the long run Socialism is internationalism and a Socialist movement will never remain secessionist for good. To quote Lenin again, “From their daily experience the masses know perfectly well the value of geographical and economic ties and the advantages of a big market and a big state.” From this point of view of the struggle as well, a regime like ours harassed from corners is bound to collapse in a relatively short period of time. But when the degree of consciousness of the various nationalities is at different levels, it is not only the right but the duty of the most conscious nationality to first liberate itself and then assist others in the struggle for total liberation. Is that not true of Korea? We do support this movement, don't we? Then, what is this talk of tribalism, secessionism, etc.....?

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