

To Win Gold And Not Lose Silver

By Mitiku Adisu



Here are Tirunesh and Elvan (a.k.a. Abeylegesse). Tirunesh and Elvan are not chasing each other. They are chasing a dream. Tirunesh is trailing.

What goes through their minds at this point in the race is not difficult to guess. Both know one of them will shortly be declared the winner. Both are determined to beat the other to the finish line. (No one competes for the fun of losing.)

Both run fully aware of their humanity, national origin, youth and what is at stake. Both gracefully bear the pounding. Both realize the hurdles involved to make it this far; that it takes leaving behind fellow athletes vying for the same prize. The past is suspended temporarily in order to fully concentrate on the present. Running is, after all, a futuristic and deliberate motion—especially if you understand why you are running.

Tirunesh and Elvan also know that each step taken is a step closer to the finish. Both realize a sea of humanity is watching and that their effort is impregnated with a hanging hope. Soon exultation will replace the travail and vigor weariness. In less than 30 minutes what was an endless preparation for glory will come to an end.

Now suppose Tirunesh and Elvan (a.k.a. Abeylegesse) were running in opposite directions or the contest comprised only of one of them or there were no spectators in the stands to cheer them on. The race becomes a dizzying and meaningless activity, to say the least. The beauty is in that one can run against and *with* the other toward the same goal. In other words, the two can remain near and distant and rivals and allies all at the same time.



Tirunesh and Elvan are allies in the sense that they are essentially Ethiopian. The only distinction between the two is that one is running for Ethiopia, the other for Anatolia. This, I would argue, is our version of globalization where interdependence is affirmed and the periphery trounces and remakes the center in its own image.

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Elvan is the Turkish feminine name for ‘colors’. We gather this is in reference to her olive complexion. Elvan, who was born Hewan Abeye Legesse was a young woman of promise. As in so many instances opportunity in her country was limited and limiting. Anatolia (Turkey) came along to give her a helping hand. She accepted the offer and moved to Turkey, married a Turk (Can) and was granted citizenship. She later divorced Can, retained the brand name Elvan reclaiming once again her original Abeye Legesse identity. This could be the sign that the swallow was never far from home and is in fact heading that way.

And then there is Zenebech Tola, now Maryam Yusuf Jemal, representing herself and Bahrainis. Like her ‘sister’ Hewan opportunities in her country were closed to her. Bahrain came to her rescue. Of course, such transactions are not a one-way track as is often portrayed. Maryam, likewise, put Bahrain on the map out of its dreary existence in the backwaters of competitive sports. The only requirement was a name change to Maryam Yusuf without the need to abandon her Christian faith.

Interestingly, America did not require the Moroccan Khalid Khannouchi to change his given name or religion when he moved here.

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It is said that opportunity knocks only once. There are things you are able to do at 20 that you simply cannot do at 40. Alas, there hardly is an Ethiopian alive whose life was not spent behind bars, dodging or fighting a heartless government, unemployed, in a refugee camp, or idly waiting for twilight in some foreign capital. As we speak, talents of a potential mayor, a competent and compassionate prime minister, a youthful and charismatic president, a very able parliamentarian, a first-rate educator, a culturally sensitive engineer, a general who is also a patriot, a consummate diplomat, a savvy entrepreneur, a decent public servant, a fair and courageous Supreme Court justice are somewhere being wasted. Time runs. Time runs out. Those in their 50s and 60s were once upon a time teens and twentysomethings. Where have those youthful years gone? How were they spent? Sadly, some among us have chosen to relive the past and drag the rest of us there.

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The marvelous Belayneh Densamo’s career was cut short just when he could have reached for greater heights. Abebe Bikila avenged the 1930s Italian aggression with his bare feet by taking laidback Rome and the spineless World hostage at dusk.¹ He was later involved in a car accident that left him paralyzed and for a while forgotten. As a nation we have not learned to pay proper homage to those who make us proud. The great Ethiopian runner Miruts Yifter (the “shifter”) was not allowed to shine even farther as a result of the 1976 Summer Olympics boycott.²

That brings me to my other point: limited opportunities and a life laden with fear and mistrust have become, in recent years, the number one cause for Ethiopians leaving behind their homeland.

¹ The Olympics are the season for celebrating mutual understanding through sports “with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.” The talk of politics not mixing with sports, however, tends to be a matter of perspective. Here is a line-up of events that were very political: Berlin (1936); Mexico (1968); Munich (1972); African nations opposing apartheid rule in South Africa (1976); Moscow (1980); Beijing (2008?), etc.

² Twenty-eight African countries boycotted the games as a result of the IOC refusing to ban New Zealand from inclusion after the latter played apartheid South Africa in rugby. In hindsight, the boycott was a worthy cause.

Is there no way around this enduring dilemma? Why is it that we could not keep our lives from going in all directions? Indeed, the present government has taken a first step by issuing an Ethiopian Origin ID card to lure those living abroad to return. Innovative as the ID arrangement may look, the real question ought to be what needs to be done to stem the tide of out migration and who the real beneficiaries are of the particular public policy. What should happen to not slavishly adopt World Bank-induced programs that seem to foster corruption,³ undemocratic governance, and wealth disparity?

In essence then, all the ID card does is bypass entry/exit requirements and provide opportunities for investment and employment on par with domestic investors. Those living abroad are encouraged to invest their resources but discouraged from taking part in the political process.⁴ (Unless one is related to incumbents or remains subservient, the rest are instructed to mind their own business and leave the governance of the nation to the ruling minority.)

Moreover, the government could annul the card on grounds that the holder has behaved “contrary to the public and national interest.” Knowing what we know of this government one has to be a compulsive optimist to trust it will not go back on its promises. And that explains why Ethiopians eager to invest in their nation’s economy are taking up foreign citizenship in droves as a safety measure against misappropriation of their hard-won earnings.

Calming the fears of the citizenry will have to top policy priorities of any incoming administration. The ruling minority has squandered all hopes of recovering public trust because it continues to go against the national grain. Foreign lobbyists represent incumbent interests against the citizenry. The pain and suffering of southern Ethiopian population is brushed off as non-existent or fabrications and later conceded as minimal. In fact, the one consistent strategy of the present government has been an outright denial of facts pertaining to borders, epidemics, elections, the economy, civic institutions, *ad infinitum*, followed by a grudging admission that there have indeed been few ‘minor’ problems. There is always something going on hid from public view. As a result, suspicions fester. Each is pitted against the other—the Diaspora against itself and against those on the home front, the people of Tigray against the rest of the nation, Amharas against Oromos, the *nouveau rich*⁵ against the poor, rural population against city dwellers, etc.

³ Corruption since the 1990s has worsened across the world.

⁴ Compare if you will Irish-American, Jewish-American, Polish-American constructive engagement in the affairs of their respective countries of origin with the destructive nature of relations between Ethiopian-Americans and their government.

⁵ Addis Journal reports (May 28, 2008): “An Addis businessman reaped 100,000 Birr from a friend in a bet after Manchester United won Chelsea in the champions League ... But ... gave it all and ten thousands Birr more to fellow supporters.” I know the businessman can do what he likes with his own money. The point here is to highlight the widening socio-economic gap and the immorality of a culture of consumption in a city where more than 50 percent are unemployed and some 100,000 are homeless.

The Ethiopian condition can be likened to the guy who put his treasures in a bag full of holes. Forty professors from a flagship institution and many unionized teachers were summarily and unceremoniously expelled for voicing concern over what they perceived was a wrongheaded national policy. That was a hefty price to pay individually and as a nation. The options under such circumstances become simply to withhold one's participation or leave for greener pasture. The government's response was to say good riddance and invite Nigerians and hire teachers with low qualifications!

Consequently, persons of caliber are pushed out depriving the nation of a developed human capital. Bekele Geleta⁶ turns up in Geneva to run a global institution because his country refuses to utilize his enormous creativity and leadership by making life unbearable for him in every way imaginable. Getachew Haile undertakes the cataloguing of ancient Ethiopian manuscripts in a Minnesotan college instead of Ethiopian. The celebrated GebreKristos Desta passes away forlorn in a Mid-America apartment. Imagine a host of Ethiopian professionals who with a more conducive environment⁷ would gladly consider moving back to their homeland and how that could change the nation for the better.

Turning this debilitating tide cannot happen with leaders 'without chests'. It takes men and women of stature and foresight on the order of Kamal Ataturk or even Emperor Haile Selassie in the first few years of his reign. In the meantime, let us rejoice in the fact that wherever our vocation and lot in life may have placed us we shall remain firmly attached to our homeland and its people and in some mystical way consider it a privilege to be its permanent ambassadors.



We may once in a while find ourselves holding opposing views or representing opposite sides, as did Tirunesh and Elva. That ought not to be cause for concern but only for celebration. That is why I believe Ethiopian win in the women's 10,000 and 5,000 is not just double gold but also double silver.

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⁶ Canada.com, July 19, 2008

⁷ Is it conceivable to hold free and fair elections and expect the ruling ethnic minority to concede defeat?