

## **To Messay Kebede: the Center is One Step Closer**

By Tecola W. Hagos

### **I. The Center is One Step Closer**

I could not resist this play on words with the title of Professor Messay Kebede's recent invigorating article titled "To Seeye Abraha: the Center Is One Step Further," of January 10, 2009 posted in this Website. My understanding of the reference to the "center" in the title given by Messay to his article is that the "center" is a place of equilibrium, balance, and stability; thus, Seeye's effort/article is short of that goal. I prefer to say the glass is half full rather than half empty. But that judgment is a matter of where the trajectory lookout point is placed. Looked at from a different angle, what seems to Messay a "step further" from the center, may indeed be seen a step closer to the center. Thus, I came up with a more optimistic title to my article, using the aphorism used by Messay.

Messay admires and appreciates Seeye Abraha, which is fair and friendly, but he is also critical of Seeye's views on several distinct issues that I find either well taken or compelling, which in itself is appropriate. Messay pointed out that 1) Seeye did not extend the same recognition he accorded the "national question" and nationalities (dealt with by the EPRDF), to the ideological based class struggle propounded in the students' movement of the 1960s; 2) Seeye should have recognized that "ethnicization" is as divisive as a wrong ideology to follow; and 3) by emphasizing the election process, Seeye has dodged the issue of effective struggle to remove the TPLF out of power when the regime itself does not respect the election process. Messay contends that Seeye should have promoted other forms of struggle short of the use of force and other than the elections for political representations, and that is the shortfall of Seeye why he did not reach the "center." He alluded also some kind of "nature" in Seeye that would hinder him from adopting alternative peaceful struggles. I disagree completely with Messay's characterization of Seeye's inability for peaceful struggle outside of elections.

What interests me the most is the issue dealing with individual rights in both articles of Seeye and that of Messay, for the rest of the criticism and the issues thereof can be subsumed within the "rights" framework. I want to emphasize here the inherent contradiction when one advocates for individual rights if at the same time he or she maintains also the viability of a political structure that is based on group social circumstances. At the bottom of it all, it is the age old contradiction that surfaces when ever universal principles are challenged and often compromised by local conditions. We find these vexing challenges not only in political philosophy but more so in ethics and morality. The issue here in Seeye's article is the implied endorsement of the "Kilil" ethnic based political structure as identified by him as "group rights" even though he is advocating for individual rights. What is most important in this dichotomy between individual rights and "group rights" is not the fact that we have to contend with contradictory principles and interpretations of events, but rather how we deal with such contradictions. Do we go to war? Do we negotiate? Do we compromise? Do we postpone decisions and study the problem in depth? Et cetera.

Here is where I diverge in my approach to changes that need be undertaken within Ethiopia from both Messay and Seeye. My focus is totally on the process in dealing with such problems, for I am of the mind that contradictions are inherent in human cognitive enterprises especially dealing with social organizations and moral and ethical precepts. On this point I am closer than I want to be to Hegel's ontology of truth—the “being-nonbeing” relationship, for example. This effort to clear “life” of contradictions reminds me of my childhood effort to outrun or jump over my own shadow. I do not try to create well trimmed and neat solutions to problems. In fact, I do not seek solutions. Solutions are mundane consequences, what is of utmost interest to me is how close I am to triggering a process that ultimately benefits our survival in an ever growing complexity by minimizing conflicts due to contradictions. This is not the same as actively seeking a particular solution.

In other words, as long as we are not molesting and killing each other, everything else we do is bringing us ever closer to the center. I have pointed out in a number of articles the contradictory lives of Ethiopian politicians. My measurement of politics and politicians in general are Westerners and their history. I cannot, in all honesty, speak of Asiatic and far Eastern politics and politicians. They are not known to me except from books and few fleeting direct discussions or contacts with very few individuals from such regions. On the other hand, I have lived almost all of my adult life in the West. [Actually to identify any Ethiopian as a “politician” is a misnomer. I have to find some other terminology or create one myself.]

## **II. “Noncooperation” as a Tool for Political Change**

Probably Messay's important political prescription is the idea of “noncooperation” with the current EPRDF run Government of Ethiopia. But it is also the most difficult (even impractical) suggestion. Messay stated, “Noncooperation is a peaceful form of struggle in that it never confronts violently the government. Instead, it uses peaceful means, such as strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, etc, to force the government to make concessions or even to overthrow it. The purpose is to undermine the proper functioning of the established order through the withdrawal of cooperation and consent.” Several supporters of Kinijit had written several articles and comments about “noncooperation” as nonviolent means of struggle. Such method of struggle is dependent on the “humanity” of the leadership of the current Government of Ethiopia. Its weakness lies in allowing the Government to have the final say in how it would respond to such challenge.

The “noncooperation” method of struggle is a method that could be easily adopted by Ethiopians taking into account the respectful often fearful nature of most Ethiopians for authority. This type of movement was the least confrontational political protest against an oppressive system. In case of colonial India, it was first utilized from 1920 through 1922 by Mahatma Gandhi as non-violent means to force the British out of India. However it failed due to violent reaction of the British Government military against peacefully assembled Punjabis, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of civilians. And Gandhi was arrested for sedition in 1922, due to the Chauri Chaura Incident, and was sentenced to six years imprisonment and was released after serving two years. By then that form of movement

had run out of steam. A new movement was organized called “Civil Disobedience Movement” starting 1930 with the protest march to the Ocean against the new Salt Tax. It is this more active movement that lasted until it was interrupted by the Second World War that brought about new relationship with India. In 1942 Gandhi once again launched the “Quit India Movement” that became the most powerful movement with sporadic tremendous violence and pressure on the British who relented and granted India its Independence 15 August 1947. The often cited idea that India achieved its independence through the non-violent program of Gandhi is simply wrong, for Gandhi had abandoned the pacifist struggle.

One could use the same form of criticism that Messay leveled against Seeye’s idea of peaceful struggle to remove EPRDF from power through elections as being impractical since the EPRDF is using violent means to stay in power when considering the strategy of “noncooperation” as a method to dislodge the same current Government which will not change its characteristics just because the method to be used to remove it from office is changed.

### **III. The Ethiopian elite**

There is this one particular paragraph that I agree with Messay over one hundred percent, for it encapsulate the essence of the elite opposition political and social perceptions for the last forty five years. Messay wrote:

“Why did these rising elites prefer a divisive ideology to the path of consensus to promote their cause? We find the answer if we notice that, like the idea of class struggle, the national question enables the educated elite to emerge as liberators of oppressed groups and to speak in their name. Not only this messianic positioning crafts them as exclusive representatives of these groups, thereby excluding other competing elites, but it also grants them absolute control over their own constituents. In another word, the national question is none other than an expression of elite conflicts: it is not about oppressed people; it is about elites assembled around ethnic criteria fighting to create reserved and docile constituencies.”

This is the type of statement that should be carved in stone on our version of Mount Rushmore for display to all Ethiopians. The Ethiopian elites are the worst group of individuals on two legs.

The quotation from Messay is tailor made to fit every Ethiopian elite starting from the aged professors to the younger generation aspirants. It amazes me listening to their video addresses or reading their articles and comments how arrogant and presumptuous these people are. I remember some of the aged elites defying the Emperor with arrogance and with their anachronistic tyrannical behavior toward students where they taught courses at HSIU in the 1960s. Even now, it is infuriating to me to hear from students from Addis Ababa University and other Universities around the country how their professors treat and relate to them. Ethiopian professors in Ethiopian colleges and universities (and

schools in general) are total terrors; they would not last a day in any American College with their form of abuse and arrogance toward their Ethiopian students. The arrogance of Western educated Ethiopians started long before the establishment of Haile Selassie's Colleges (University), but with those who were educated in European schools during Menilik II reign. Gebrehiwet Baykedagn and even worse Afework Gebreyesus, and later Takele Woldahawariat were such early examples of elitist arrogance.

Ethiopian elites seem to claim power and privilege by the mere fact of their education. Ethiopian leaders from Menilik II to the present leader Meles Zenawi seem to have been at a loss how to deal with Ethiopian elites. There seems to be such distorted expectations and of super human attributes of miracle workers to Ethiopia's elites. Haile Selassie indulged foreign university and college educated Ethiopians on their return home with gifts and choice appointments, in the 1950s and earlier, which treatment totally distorted the expectations and social life of such returnees. Rather than education being accepted as a tool to be utilized in the service of the people and communities, it was seen as a badge of entitlement for privileges. Messay discussed this distortion in his monumental book Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974, but he did not go far enough in discussing the caustic nature of Ethiopian elites, for I want Ethiopia's elites to be completely subordinated to community elders, religious leaders, and simple folks who do the daily grinding work to maintain a civilization—a life process.

I want to bring to your attention another a major flawed reasoning pervasive within the Ethiopian communities where we find good studentship being equated with leadership qualities. One may be a great scholar, very good in reading books, following instructions, spending inordinate amount of time studying alone with occasional group participation. But the quality of a leader demands behavior and characteristics that is a far cry from such bookish and solitary life. Ethiopian elites have simply misunderstood their roles as educated individuals. It is amusing to watch Ethiopian elites with higher academic achievements monopolizing discussions, and the type of air they assume vis-à-vis their less educated counterparts, which I find to be quite hilarious. Leaders have quite different qualities than most bookish elites and scholars whose social skills are usually underdeveloped. It does not take much to verify the wisdom of my statement. Just visit a school yard of boys and girls and see how leaders distinguish themselves from the rest of the crowd; it is hardly the smartest or most intelligent boy or girl that other kids follow, but it is usually someone gifted in organizational skills, tolerant of subordinates, and inspiring that other kids follow as their leader. Adults are not much different; our ways are set at such early stages of our lives.

#### **IV. Questioning the use of the term “Woyane” as an identity for the Ethiopian Government**

I disagree with Messay's repeated use of the word “Woyane” to identify the current Government of Ethiopia. The word “Woyane” may have been taken from the TPLF nomenclature in its Tigregna language designation. However, the current Ethiopian Government is a made up of four political organizations as indicated below, and to identify the current Ethiopian Government by a single word taken from the name of the

smallest member of the constitutive organizations of the EPRDF that is in power, is highly misleading and inaccurate.

1. Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization	183	Ato AbaDulla Gameda
2. Amhara national Democratic Movement	146	Ato Addisu Legesse
3. Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Front	112	Ato H/Mariam Desalegn
4. Tigray People Liberation Front	40	Ato Melese Zenawi
Total chairs occupied by EPRDF	481	or 87.9%

More importantly, because of the repeated negative use of the word “Woyane” to denigrate Tigrean people as a whole by ultra racist and narrow nationalist groups and individuals, its original meaning as used by the TPLF to honor the first Woyane rebellion of 1943 has been severely compromised. Almost all Tigreans I asked their views about the use of the word “Woyane” to identify the current Government are not happy with that designation. The other members of the EPRDF are even more incensed by the use of such a term, for it totally discredits them as active players in the present Government of Ethiopia.

The continued use of the term “Woyane” to identify the Government of Meles Zenawi will simply polarize the issues up for discussions. It marks a whole class of people with negative identity. It creates unnecessary resentment and animosity between people further alienating groups from participating in the political life of Ethiopia.

## V. The Spoiled People of Ethiopia

It seems to me Ethiopians are the most indulged people in history by their leaders to the point of being spoiled brats. It is fashionable to claim that the “backwardness” of Ethiopia is due to oppressive leaders and governments. And we bought that stupid assertion as the basis for dissent and legitimate cause for the student rebellion starting in the 1960s that is still going on. The so called oppression in Ethiopia is a child’s play compared to the degree of brutality and violence people had to endure in the rest of the world from their leaders and social structures. I was amazed in my detention in 1974-75 in *Alem Bekagn* prison in Addis Ababa how prisoners were kept idle, doing nothing not even cultivating their own food. The human interaction is almost like a family affair. I was told that the same is true throughout Ethiopia—no real hard labor except occasional pretenses.

In my book review and commentary of Messay’s recent book, I wrote about Ethiopian societies’ misplaced compassion. “The socio-political relationship that caused to such steady deterioration of Ethiopians becoming poorer and poorer generation after generation is caused by far subtle but devastating process. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a hand in that process too. And Messay has articulated my argument, although he meant the statement for some other purpose when he stated that ‘Ethiopians had a deep compassion for the poor and a great admiration for the abnegation of the monk.’ [Messay, 115] This is one main reason that I refer to Ethiopian society as self-indulgent wallowing in self-pity. It is such misplaced compassion that destroyed

individual effort and excellence, and made us embrace mediocrity, live in squalid circumstances, and tolerate unacceptable level of unhygienic conditions.”

I disagree with Messay for his harried dismissal of the possibility of reinstating the old Monarchy as a form of Ethiopia’s government. Messay categorically rejected the reestablishment of the Monarchy without giving any reason.

“This does not mean that I reject ethnicity and sponsor the return to the structure and culture of imperial Ethiopia. The latter is gone for good and we have no reason to wish its resurrection. To try to revive it is to ignore the present reality and force on people an idea of national existence that they are not willing to accept, thereby driving the country into even greater conflicts. It is also to overlook that, like any other human concerns relating to identity, ethnicity craves to be recognized so that the lack of recognition turns into a fanatical attachment.”

There are very many good reasons to reinstate the Monarchy albeit with limited power under a constitutional arrangement. One main reason is the undeniable appeal of the Monarchy to several groups around the country, groups with ideation of separatist political goals. Thus, I believe it is far better suited to maintain the territorial integrity of Ethiopia than any other form of governmental structure. For that reason alone, I would support the establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy for Ethiopia. This is a legitimate idea worth discussing

When it comes to human institutions and evolution, I trust more the slow process of natural selection through competition of real talent to any opportunistic change that brings up “*afe chole*” elites as new leaders. Such leaders will not last for long and the effect of their leadership is disastrous. We are living proof of such awful change for the last thirty five years. How are the sons and daughters of the aristocracy any worse than the new aspiring elite leaders of competing political organizations? If we go by scholastic achievements and careers, they seem to have done as well, with the added attribute of *Chewanet*. Unlike the Ethiopian elites, I do not see the children of former officials and those of the aristocracy engaged in venomous diatribe all over the Cyber World.

Generally speaking, our Ethiopian society is the least hurtful society, but also the most inapt society I know of compared to other societies around the world (excepting the indigenous people who lived in Greenland and the Tundra) by looking at the social relationships of masters and subordinates, the proximity of the different social structures to each other, the absence of instruments of torture and punishment et cetera. Of course, there were incidents in Ethiopian history where certain ethnic groups were brutalized at some point in our history, but that was never systemic or pervasive. There is no comparison with the degree of atrocities other peoples suffered elsewhere in the world with the suffering of Ethiopians at any period in history in the hands of their rulers or dominant groups. It would be interesting to read Ethiopian scholars’ views on such issues.

I ask you all, if Ethiopia's past aristocratic leaders were that oppressive, then where are the underground mines, the dungeons, the slave plantations, the torture tools in Ethiopia? For example, if we visit Western Europe, at any time in its history we find some of the most horrendous violent treatment of human beings on earth, where human beings were thrown into deep dark mines to labor all day long and scourged mercilessly, we find human beings chained in galley ships rowing until they drop dead, we find human beings thrown into arenas to fight to the death each other or wild animals, we find human beings burnet at the stake for their beliefs or being accused of black magic et cetera. And closer to our time whole people were subjugated under colonial rules, millions sold into slavery and treated as animals, and whole races were annihilated for no reason but for being different. The scale of the atrocities on millions and millions of human beings is astounding. This form of brutality and violence you may find in Asia, in the Americas, and in the Far East as well, but not in Ethiopia. All this means that I am not sympathetic with Ethiopians claiming oppression for their lack of achievements and economic development.

## **VI. Conclusion**

I do hope this brief critique will generate further discussion on several important issues discussed by Seeye Abraha and also the critical appraisal of that by Messay Kebede. By no means, it should be considered as definitive, but as a starting point. Ethiopia is moving into unfamiliar territories. I greatly admire Messay Kebede—his ideas are always thoughtful and impregnated with possibilities. Seeye Abraha is expanding his horizon on several fronts be it in history, political science, sociology, et cetera. This is a time of wise and clear ideas for sharing and for discussion. Sometimes in our enthusiasm for the welfare of our communities, we might overlook the potholes of reality right under our feet. Here is why every Ethiopian should look after every other Ethiopian.

I am not attempting to simplify complex socio-political situations nor am I trying to lighten our heavy burdens of possible disintegration as a nation by painting pretty pictures about our history and legacy. With the illegal and detestable imprisonment of Birtukan Mideksa by the Ethiopian Government, Ethiopia is entering a new era of political relentless oppression. This may be a good time to reflect inward to draw strength from our respective communities. We have a population explosion that is out of control. We have lost most of our moral guidelines. We have an ongoing famine and/or starvation, and unemployment rate is one of the highest in the world next to Zimbabwe. Our children lack positive role models except distance runners. No matter how fast we run and how well we endure on the athletic fields around the world, it is our home stretch that determines whether we are great winners or abominable losers in the great race of life. **Ω**

Tecola W. Hagos

January 13, 2009

Washington DC

