

SCHOOLING AND HISTORICAL MEMORIES: THE CASE OF THE BATTLE OF ADWA

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INTRODUCTION

The past five years of Ethiopian history have brought identity-related questions into the surface. These questions range from the most mundane problems of everyday life of the Ethiopian people to the most abstract and, I might add, the most ludicrous periodization issues of Ethiopian history: Does *Ketfo* constitute part of the Ethiopian national dish or is it the exclusive food item of the Gurage? Does the Axsumite civilization belong to all Ethiopians or just the Tigreans alone? How old is Ethiopian history? As old as *Dinkenesh*? 3,000 years? 100 years? 40 years? Or 3 years? The list of questions goes on *ad infinitum*.

The common thread that appears to connect all the string of questions is that they are somehow related to the *identity* and *meaning* of Ethiopia. A coterie of intellectuals among the ranks of what might be referred to as the *rejectionist scholarship camp* is dotting the Ethiopian historiographical landscape with questions and answers that target the distraction of the Ethiopian polity. It may, therefore, be appropriate to pose and look at some of the works of these statist intellectuals at a time when Ethiopians are celebrating the Adwa Victory Centenary.

THE GENERAL LINK

An attempt to look at the link between schooling and shared memories of an historical nature through a historically significant event such as the Battle and Victory of Adwa is quite an ambitious undertaking. More so when such a huge task is attempted by an individual whose professional experience and academic training have been other than political science, sociology, history, and anthropology. The task becomes even more difficult when the goal is to provide a succinct summary of the complex web of relationships that exist between the processes of schooling and shared historical memories. In a few pages, the best that could be done is make an initial articulation of implicit questions and concerns that forge a broader link between the two processes.

The modern (European) school in Ethiopia, like anywhere else, is a central institution through which selective knowledge forms are produced and distributed. For understandable reasons, the centrality of the school in the *distribution of knowledge* rather than its production is much more pronounced and glaringly obvious in countries such as Ethiopia. The sensitization, codification, and eventually distribution of knowledge in the form of skills, attitudes and ideologies have been well documented by prominent education historians such as Joel Spring. In his work, Spring (1991) has argued that the school, through the curriculum, instruction, and textbooks, pursues and implements selected knowledge that is grounded in partisan political, social, and economic interests. Some ideas are legitimated while others are rendered illegitimate.

While these partisan human interests appear non-partisan in school subject discussions in the curriculum and textbooks, they oftentimes conceal hidden notions that serve partisan interests. Through distortions, omissions, commissions, etc., schools promote specific ideologies and interests. The role of the print media, i.e., textbooks, journals, and magazines in charting the direction schools should follow in teaching of the young is particularly self-evident. Such is particularly the case, for example, with the "new breed of Ethiopianist historians" whose major focus for the past several decades has been the deconstruction of Ethiopia both as a

sociocultural idea and a *geopolitical entity*. The primary institution via which such deconstructive ideas have been recycling in different forms has been the school and the target has always been the collective memories of Ethiopians.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The concept of "collective memory" was originally advanced by Maurice Halbachs (1995) to describe recollections of "a shared past that are retained by members of a group ... that experienced it". Also, Barry Schwartz (1995) views the term as a metaphor for a "society's retention and loss of information about its past". This paper uses the specific meaning of collective memory provided by Schwartz to synthesize a host of interrelated collective pasts of Ethiopians and alert unsuspecting readers of Ethiopian-related issues in the print media about the subtle missions and hidden ideologies advanced by some writers. To accomplish this, the paper draws heavily from the more recent works of some of the revisionist historians whose primary "scholarly interest and motive" might roughly be understood as part of an overall *undoing of the Ethiopian polity*.

I happen to believe that a shared historical legacy and a critical awareness of it are important constitutive factors of the formation and sustenance of a national identity. The survival and creative development of both an individual and a nation depend upon a creative understanding of one's past. An individual who has been either uprooted from his/her sociocultural context or one whose past has been somehow distorted would be not only disoriented about his/her past but also about the present and the future. This makes the individual unproductive, uncreative, and unhealthy.

At the social level, a community of people whose shared historical past has been obliterated through omissions, commissions, and distortions suffers from what I prefer to call *historical amnesia*. It loses a common bond and eventually a national identity. For both the individual and society, a critical consciousness of the past contributes to a healthy survival and development. The shared struggles, failures, and successes of people create a sense of community as the individual creates a sense of wholesome personality.

I also tend to believe that the survival of Ethiopia as a historical and sociopolitical entity cannot be left to the singular effort of the very few pan-Ethiopian and pan-Ethiopianist scholars. The immense contribution of such cultural workers to national survival notwithstanding, it is incumbent upon each and every schooled individual Ethiopian to sift through information produced about Ethiopia and Ethiopians.

A critical awareness of Ethiopia's past can develop only through a critical interrogation of *nouveau thinkers* in what Paulo Freire calls *cultural circles*. Schooled Ethiopians in Ethiopia and the Diaspora should assume the responsibility of protecting their shared historical legacies from the more aggressive onslaught of some of the virulent ideas on market targeted at their collective past. Cultural circles as sites for contesting and/or evaluating ideas of historical significance are institutional frameworks that should be put into place among the Ethiopian community without much delay.

It is through a creative immersion of oneself in the works of scholars whose works are primarily motivated by the production of a balanced scholarship rather than the pursuit of statist politics that one can stay abreast of developments in the sphere of Ethiopian and Ethiopianist studies. Such a systematized and deliberate study of Ethiopian-related issues at cultural circles and fora ensures the preservation of shared historical memories among Ethiopians. Nay more, it lays a critical foundation for subsequent generations of Ethiopians to safeguard their historical memories from the contaminants of ideologies that undermine their very existence.

The unmaking of Ethiopia, which in all probability started at the introduction of the modern school and whose fruits began to be reaped in the early 1990s, can only be challenged and fought back through a concerted effort of all Ethiopians, particularly, those who have been given the opportunity to become *critical consumers and producers of ideas* be it in schools or outside of it. I am one who happens to think that strengthening the non-historian's level of understanding of history is paramount for fighting back all sorts of national deconstructive ideas advanced vociferously by what I prefer to call *variants of voodoo scholars*.

Ethiopians in the 1990s, to me, have reached a critical point in their history in what looks like "the metaphorical second coming of the Zaman a Masafant" to borrow an apt description of the 1990s Ethiopia from the young, energetic, and critical Ethiopian Africanist historian, Teshale Tibebu (1995, p. xxvii). The critical question that follows Teshale's characterization of TPLF's Ethiopia is: Could this 'second coming of the Zemene Mesafint' be followed by a re-emergence of ideas, actions, and projects which accompanied the initial Zemene Mesafint? To me, it is not only possible but also desirable to actively pursue the notion of *renewed greater Ethiopia* and bring it to a higher ground through the pursuit of *higher ideals*. The defense and protection of the Ethiopian identity, I believe, demands the informed vigilance of the Ethiopian citizenry. This can be started only via a concerted effort of protecting shared memories. The undoing of Ethiopia began as an idea and its descent burial requires the dissemination of higher and inclusive pan-Ethiopian ideas and ideals. A critical awareness of our shared collective historical memories and their sustenance among the larger community serves the shield of Ethiopia and Ethiopianness.

THE ADWA LINK

It has been quite refreshing to listen to what scholars gathered here for the Adwa Victory Centenary celebration have to say about the meaning and significance of Adwa to Ethiopians in particular and black people both in the continent and the Diaspora in general. What happened at Adwa 100 years ago today needs to be told and retold through novel approaches and reinterpretations, for it is one of the historical public space that magnifies the shared collective contributions of all Ethiopians. It is one of the shining moments which illuminate what a collective human spirit can accomplish in the face of difficult circumstances. The resistance Ethiopians of every religious creed, region, and ethnicity put up and the victory they scored over the forces of evil is a testimony to what unity in diversity can accomplish when a parsimonious leadership avails itself.

Indeed, the Adwa victory is one that redefined and reaffirmed the Ethiopian persona to the world of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Ethiopia became synonym with black defiance towards white aggression; freedom and independence in the face of colonialism; and hope and civility in the face of despair and anarchy. Adwa brought Ethiopia and Ethiopians to public visibility both to friend and foe and to near and far.

The noted Ethiopian historian, Bahru Zewde (1991), reflecting on the significance of the victory at the Battle of Adwa in shaping the social psychology of subsequent generations of Ethiopians, writes that Adwa through its "eloquent demonstration of national consensus and defiance", created, nurtured, and sustained "a deep sense of national pride and spirited national independence". This sense of self-pride and self-independence is misconstrued by writers like Devla Murphy (1968), I. M. Lewis (1983), H. Vivian (1968), etc. as arrogance, superiority complex, etc., etc. Even the respected pan-Ethiopianist, D. Levine (1965), falls into the now all familiar Eurocentric characterization of the Amargigna-speaking Ethiopian as deceptive and dominant. Babile Tola's (1989) characterization of the Ethiopian "national psyche and socio-cultural heritage" as murderous and violent (pA) is, yet, another distorted view of the defiant nature of the Ethiopian seen through an Eurocentric lens.

The social-psychological characteristics which Adwa created among generations of Ethiopians assumes various forms and individual expressions in multiple and varied settings. In non-Ethiopian cultural settings, the collective memory left on the Ethiopian psyche may be a liability to achieve self promotion and development especially when expressed via individual ideocyncracies. At any rate, what was achieved by way of a collective memory needs to be reconfirmed, reaffirmed, and reinforced despite contexts and individual aspirations.

PREDATORY DISCOURSES

The truth of Bahru's characterization of the Ethiopian national psychology cited above notwithstanding, competing deconstructive narratives of the Ethiopian identity that resemble the more fashionable postmodern characterizations abound. These discourses that I prefer to call *predatory* refute the presence and relevance of an Ethiopian identity and the stories they narrate make a forceful call for the burial of anything and everything Ethiopian. Ethiopia both as an idea and a geographic entity is replaced by myth and fiction as will be shown in a short summary of their surmises. The *meaning* of such pan-Ethiopian historical achievements as the Victory of Adwa are, thus, deliberately downplayed and distorted. The idea of considering the Battle of Adwa as one fought between two "colonial powers" is nothing but a distortion of the history of an anti-colonial battle. The general intent of the predatory discourses is the deconstruction of the Ethiopian polity and are the counter-stories of "pan-Ethiopianism".

These narratives that we now read through the various media outlets include the barrage of anti-Ethiopian propaganda which we read in the name and guise of scholarly works both in books, journals, and popular magazines. I would like to suggest that nihilistic ideas of all sorts are being vigorously constructed in varied forms and aggressively distributed by the day. Some, like Dereje Alemayehu's distorted view of history are subtle and some are crude forms of vulgar propaganda, like the more recent 'Ethiopia never existed in history' piece of the Ethiopian *Newt Gingrich*, Dawit Yohannes and John Sorenson's book, *Imagining Ethiopia* (1993). Other predatory works that are directed at the distraction of Ethiopia include Asafa Jalata's, *Oromia and Ethiopia* (1993); Holocomb and Sisai Ibsa's, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (1990); Triulizi's, *Competing Views of National Identity in Ethiopia* (1983); Okbagzi Yohannes's, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics* (1991); and Paul Baxter's, *The Problem of the Oromo or the problem for the Oromo?* (1983). What follows is a short discussion of some of the ideas espoused by a few of these works and some others.

Most of these works are primarily targeted at the deconstruction of the Ethiopian identity for the express purpose of undoing the Ethiopian polity. Let me also suggest that having been aware of the significance of the Battle of Adwa in defining the Ethiopian character and realizing the Victory of Adwa as the concentrated expression of the long and rich but complex history of Ethiopians, many anti-Ethiopian elements downplay and/or distort its historical significance. They make a conscious and concerted effort to bring about "a collective historical memory loss" about Adwa on the part of the new generation of Ethiopians. They fully recognize the importance of this collective memory loss to the deconstruction of the Ethiopian national identity.

Let me pick a few examples to illustrate the forgoing thoughts. Quite a number of historians attribute Ethiopia's maintenance of an age-old independence to geographic factors including its strategic location "at a place where the rival empires of Britain, France, and Italy met" and "the natural protection of mountains" (Krieger et al, 1992, p. 574). Such geographic explanations deny Ethiopians of their resolve, courage, pride, and the immense sacrifice they paid to preserve their independence. The price paid by generations of Ethiopians to uphold their sovereignty as a people is tacitly thrown out the historical window and the age-old demonstrated efforts of Ethiopians to keep themselves free of foreign domination are carefully downplayed. The deeply

nationalistic feelings that Ethiopians hold so dearly are relegated to the back burner due to such extrinsic explanations. Even "[w]hen Ethiopians defeated Italians at Adwa in 1896, it [the Ethiopian victory] was attributed to the hostile Ethiopian terrain", writes Teshale Tibebe (1995, p. xix). That this be replaced with an intrinsic interpretation as a caution to preserving the entity born of a considerable human sacrifice goes without saying.

Likewise, Holcomb and Sisai (1990) explain the Italian defeat in 1896 by attributing it to Menelik's possession of "French weaponry" (p. 126) and that Ethiopia's victory is due to primarily French assistance (p. 131). In fact, according to this account, "... the 1896 Battle of Adwa ... was an indirect battle between the British and French over control of the region" (p. 7). Also, Shirreff (1995) explains the shattering defeat of Italians by the Ethiopians in 1896 by suggesting a reassuring remark, "...The defeat [for the Italians] was no disgrace since the Italians were greatly outnumbered and fought bravely ..." (p. 2).

The argument against the above explanations is not that the rivalry between and among the British and the French was not a relevant factor in the Ethiopian victory; nor is it that the French weaponry did not contribute to it. Rather, it is the lack of acknowledgment of the genius of the leaders of the Ethiopian people to play and exploit the anachronistic, individualistic, and selfish motives and interests of the European frame of mind from the explanation; the neglect of the fighting spirit and skill of the Ethiopian people as part of the explanation of the Ethiopian triumph over evil and its mere substitution with an advantage of sheer quantity and inhospitable terrain are scholarly unacceptable, politically inconsequential, and historically tangential. In general, the explanations that the forgoing writers provided deliberately omit the most important factor: the resolve and determination of the Ethiopian people to stand together firmly in the face of a formidable colonial army. This, despite the abundance of a pile of historical evidences.

In addition to the forgoing ideological deconstruction of a specific aspect of Ethiopian history, *predatory scholars* attack what is rightfully Ethiopian by articulating their more recent struggle over history. The following statements of Okbazghi (1991) depict the desperate nature of the Eritrean myth creators and recyclers:

There are no material records that show that Axum extended southward to what is today the habitat of the Amharas in northern Ethiopia. Contrary to the Ethiopian claim, the limited available evidence shows that the history of Axum, more than anything else, is the history of *southern Eritrea and northern Tigrai*. Furthermore, there is no historical indication of any kind that the Amharas were part of the Axumite empire [Emphasis added] (p. 27).

By what stretch of imagination and by which historical evidence, Okbazghi thinks of southern Eritrea and northern Tigrai as distinct entities from historic Ethiopia; only he knows. And, his contention of the Amharas as 'having been outside of the Axsumite empire' points more to Okbazghi's shaky knowledge of the historical evolution of the Axsumite empire *vis-a-vis* the southern expansion of Ethiopia and the ethno-cultural developments of the people that constituted the empire.

Consonant with Okbazghi's deconstructive views and writing in the more stylish discursive narration of a 1990s postmodern scholar, John Sorenson (1993) contributes his share to the undoing of Ethiopia. After arguing against the "image" of Ethiopia as an ancient African identity and crudely suggesting that "... this Greater Ethiopia identity is in reality an expression of Amhara chauvinism" (p. 5), Sorenson proceeds with making the following lamentable statements:

... At the local level, the ruling Amhara elites of Ethiopia invented and perpetuated a mythical history that legitimated their own power. Eritrean and

Oromo nationalists, in the horn itself and in sizable refugee communities abroad, challenged this image and argued for different readings of history (p. 10).

Sorenson's reading of Ethiopian history, which in earnest is more of a misreading, at best, expresses his romanticism with what appears exotic and fashionable rather than academic and critical. ~ appears to be more of a narration of a 'cafe politics' masqueraded in postmodern language, for, otherwise the work is full of omissions and distortions of facts inconsistent with his preconceived and vengeful views of Ethiopia. Sorenson's concurrence with Holcomb's and Sisai's (1990) notion of considering Ethiopia as a mere creation of a 'colonial process' is therefore not surprising, for, they all share the same dream and aspiration: The undoing of Ethiopia. This, contrary to what sober scholarship requires. Sorenson continues his postmodern demagoguery by making his true nature of a Western ideologue rather than a scholar public:

The old idea of Ethiopia, which once signified stability and continuity rooted in antiquity, has exploded. In its place lie the ruins of that image; in the popular culture of the West, the former dream kingdom became one of nightmares, and Ethiopia now serves as a synonym for disaster (p. 183).

Sorenson's words above, besides carrying a tone of satisfaction at what happened to Ethiopians as a result of warfare and famine and condoning the racist characterization of Ethiopia by the popular culture in the West, concur with Holcomb and Sisai's notion of a "colonial mythology" (p.192) to the extent that Ethiopia is construed as a myth and a mirage.

Let me finally suggest that what I call "Ethiopia unbecoming" in earnest began in post-Adwa Ethiopia when the victory itself attracted the *ferenjjs* to come to Ethiopia *en mass* as "apostles of modernity and civilization". Suddenly, *Ethiopia began to matter for the one time ardent foe*. How true of the nature of Europe to change instantly? I may point out that the modernizing and civilizing mission of the European got its institutional expression via the modern school which has since been successfully utilized to "reinvent" the Ethiopian in the image of the European. No wonder that Emperor Menelik's entourage expressed its apprehension at the sight of their emperor's first ride on it!

The so-called Ethiopian modern school, through making very little effort in introducing Ethiopian history to children and youth and educating them on shared historical legacies, has made them an easy prey to predatory discourses full of deceit and utter lie. Ethiopian children and youth were miseducated through systematic distribution of disinformation via the use of such cultural artifacts as *Green Primer*, *March of Time*, and *The Old World, Past and Present*. All these cultural works omit Ethiopian history and teach children about the glories of Western civilization. Ethiopian children were made aware and appreciative of the power of Hamorabi and Peter the Great rather than Ezana and Emiye Menelik, Kemal Ataturk and Eisenhour rather than Gobena Aba Dache and Alula Aba Nega. The loss of "collective historical memories", whether through omission or distortion, in the final analysis, leads to loss of identity and self-distracted. While this is a very serious danger hovering over Ethiopia today, it is not irreversible provided, of course, we alter our mode of operation in Ethiopian and Ethiopianist political and historical projects. Let me now turn back to a critical discussion of one more example of the predatory discourses I talked about earlier. It might be instructive to begin the discussion by evaluating a *historical view* which has been recently articulated by a learned individual on a popular magazine. After criticizing Ethiopian nationalism very harshly, this writer describes himself in the following words:

I have an emotional attachment to Ethiopia, but not because of Nigist Saba, but due to Nigist Adane; not because of Axsum Tsion, but because of Gedame Sefer; not due to Fasil's Castle, but because of Arat Kilo; not because of Yared,

but because of Tilahun Gessese, not because of but *in spite of Mene/ik*, for the sake of Amha, Solomon, Tesfaye, etc. (Dereje, 1993, p. 35).

The foregoing represents a view that dismisses the path that Ethiopians traveled through for millennia. Ethiopians are emphatically reminded to forget and forfeit their collective memories and only be concerned and be appreciative of the here-and-now. The writer's "tour d'horizon", to borrow his own phrase, is exclusively limited to his own perceptual world. Anything and everything outside that is at once thrown out. What a loss of sensibility and an incredible memory loss!

What is insensible and what is lost involve the fact that *the present gets meaning only in the context of the past*. That Nigist Adane, *rather than* Barbara Hopkins, Gedam Sefer *rather than* Dupont Circle, Arat Kilo *rather than* B. J. Franklin, Tilahun Gessese *rather than* Elvis Priestly created an 'emotional attachment' precisely because of their *socio-historical* proximity, relationship, and relevance to such historical and cultural icons as Nigist Saba, Axsum Tsion, Fasil's Castle, and Yared. That Menelik would remain at the center of all with his celebrated march to Adwa and his sagely leadership that led to the decisive victory over what was evil goes without saying.

What seems to be totally forgotten is also the notion of using history as a guide to political social actions. Perhaps, part of the failure of the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974-76 was the utter neglect of the significance of history and socio-cultural reality on the part of its leaders including the writer of the above piece! How the Dialectician-turned-Metaphysician misses the link between the past and present escapes me. We expect more from individuals who claim a deeper and wider immersion in European thought, for it is too straight forward a common sense that who one is both as an individual and a society can only be sought, reconstructed, and reconstituted in relation to one's personal and collective past. Alas, what a paradox!

Although history is not a destiny, everywhere and everytime, the past will have a significant authority over the present both at the molecular and molar level. Urging Ethiopians to lose their collective memories is to subtly work toward bringing their own identity crises. This becomes part of the undoing of Ethiopia when it is reinforced with a wholesale condemnation of some of the major icons of past Ethiopian leaders as the following paragraph demonstrates:

They [Tewodros, Yohannes, Menelik, Haile Selassie, and Mengistu Haile Mariam] were all power monger tyrants, who were ready to commit any crime to safeguard and enlarge their personal power. Even measured by the yardstick of nationalism, they were all self-centered potentates, who were ready to betray their country or anybody, when they found it opportune to avert a threat to their own power, or to weaken a foe (Dereje, 1993, p. 36).

Like any other people, Ethiopians do not always have the LUXUry of choosing their past. That they have had leaders who were despotic and tyrannical cannot be disputed. But, lumping all leaders together without acknowledging differences in leadership and ideal is not only unfair and unjustifiable but also a subtle call for a gradual national deconstruction. Just like the history of other people, Ethiopian history did not happen on a silver tray; it is filled with ambiguities, frustrations, failures, tensions, successes, achievements, etc., etc. Good and bad, right and wrong constitute our long and complex collective past, but, nevertheless, we own them all. That we cannot be selective in our collective memories goes without saying. However, suggesting to Ethiopians to forget their shared past on the basis of the forgoing argument is trying to subvert their collective memories so that they may disown what are legitimately their own. I can only say that Ethiopians, as a people, are informed by their collective past, good and bad, I may add.

CONCLUSION

The challenges to the *meaning* and the very existence of Ethiopia have been many and varied. They range from the most direct physical confrontations to the most subtle ideological deconstructions, but nonetheless, contained within them expressions of *meaning* and *survival*.

The strenuous Ethiopian encounters with foreign powers, including the ambitious colonial project of Italy was frustrated in 1896 at the exultant Battle of Adwa when Ethiopian nationalistic forces swept away the colonial army. Italy tried its lot once again in 1936 and temporarily succeeded, only to receive shame and doubt for the second time.

What modern Europe repeatedly failed to accomplish in Ethiopia was later tried using more sophisticated institutions and ideas. In the guise of what I call *voodoo scholarship*, the West began to implant seeds of deconstructive notions among the Ethiopian youth via the school.

Since its first introduction in 1908, the so-called modern school has served as a potent cultural site where ideas that questioned and undermined the very existence of the Ethiopian polity have been produced and circulated: a prime example of the consequence of a naive embrace of endogenous institutions.

The range and complexity of deconstructive ideas which have been and which still are recycling in Ethiopian schools for the past several decades and even today are tremendous and amazingly wide. Through deliberate omissions, deletions, distortions, commissions, and revisions of the long and complex historical processes that defined Ethiopians as a community of people, our foes have been able to attack us from within, utilizing institutions and ideas that appear friendly and useful. *The external-foe-turned-internal has now attained the upper hand!* What is to be done?

Now that the Ethiopian schools have come under the hegemonic control of deconstructive forces, new challenges will continue to evolve in the sphere of retaining our collective memories. The extent to which these challenges will be transformed into opportunities to actively work toward the preservation of our shared memories will be largely dependent upon the vision, knowledge, and commitment of the schooled Ethiopians. If the desire is to see Ethiopia re-emerge out of the danger of a collective memory loss and, hence, of itself, it becomes incumbent upon each one of us to organize "cultural circles" wherever we live. These fora could be utilized not only for the pursuit of pan-Ethiopian ideas and ideals, but, also, sites for cultural actions to counter ideas and ideals. This is the surest way to keep the Adwa spirit waxing and wattleing into posterity.

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