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Experiencing the Joy of “Ethiopian Community” in Australia

Australia is home to many Ethiopians who have come from all parts of our mother country. During my recent visit there, I had the joy of experiencing what it might be like in Ethiopia to have real community where acceptance was not based on ethnicity, religion, politics, viewpoint, age, gender or any other differences because I saw it demonstrated over and over again in Australia during my recent trip there.

Some of the best times occurred during the informal question and answer periods following my talks in Melbourne and Perth as well as during informal times when I simply had the opportunity to meet and spend time with some of the great members of our greater Ethiopian family. *Some of these stories, lessons and personal examples of Ethiopians are encouraging as I can see them working to construct the bridge to a New Ethiopia of the future where we would not be devalued, judged or excluded from the full rights of personhood or citizenship simply because we were forced into some ethnic or other kind of limiting box.*

Arriving in Australia and meeting these Ethiopians—who I had never seen face to face, but with whom I had been in communication for over a year—was very rewarding. *The first night I arrive, my host brother Sisay had planned a backyard barbeque at his home as a welcome. Nearly a hundred people came; people I did not know, but who already knew about the SMNE; yet, we met together like family or long-time friends. We ate and celebrated with each other; I not even knowing their names, which part of Ethiopia they were from, their ethnicity, their religion, their political background or anything else about them. Instead, what connected us was that we were all from Ethiopia.*

Later on, after the guests had eaten and were sitting down talking, only then could you hear some of the people speaking different ethnic languages; like English, Amharic, Tigrayan, Oromo and Gurage. *Then it really struck me that this was like the New Ethiopia where the beauty of our diversity could be experienced as we all came together first as humans.*

Discussions went on between younger and older guests, between men and women and between people of different backgrounds. We talked about what was going on at home and how we were affected in different ways. *People respectfully listened and responded; with no one interrupting others. It became very obvious that even though we Ethiopians were physically living far from Ethiopia; our minds still were focused back home. We felt free to talk, laugh and simply enjoy the company of one another in an affirming atmosphere that was created by simply appreciating each other.*

We began to experience the joy of coming together like this and were inspired with what could happen in Ethiopia if this were transplanted there. One gentleman said that he and his family had fought with the TPLF at the beginning, but now they all realized how Meles had hijacked their efforts and this was why he did not support this regime any longer. We talked until midnight and all left feeling highly encouraged as we looked forward to the meeting the next day.

Please find the link for my talk to Ethiopians in Melbourne, Australia entitled: *“Making Ethiopia a Livable Home for All Its People” Empowering People to Build Institutions to Fairly Represent the Diverse People of Ethiopia Public*” <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/110726Mr%20ObangAddressInMelbourneAustralia.php>

Some of the most interesting parts came up during the question and answer period. Some of the Somali Ethiopians present at the meeting brought attention to the hunger and drought in the Ogaden and beyond.



It was a very good and important discussion where some agreement was reached that this crisis should not be ignored by other Ethiopians like has been done in the past. Other people also raised issues that were important to them; after which the meeting ended and a number of us went to an Ethiopian restaurant where the discussion continued into the evening.

The next day I was the guest of a brother Berhe from the Tigray region who had taken the entire day off from work to give me a highly interesting tour of the city of Melbourne. We talked about many issues; our personal lives, our country, the TPLF/EPRDF and what each of us thought about all of this. The topic of ethnicity was not part of it; mostly because it did not matter to us as we thoroughly enjoyed each other's company.

In the late afternoon he took me to a radio interview at the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) a radio station where Ethiopians have their own program in Amharic, among the many other languages diverse programs. I met with a very gracious Ethiopian brother Ato Kassahun who would be doing the interview, who then introduced me to colleagues from all over the world who did similar programs. Following the interview, we, along with my host, Sisay Tsegaw, joined with some Tigrayan friends for dinner. We had an excellent discussion while eating injera.

This time, the topic of ethnicity was discussed. *One Tigrayan brother talked how his appearance—which easily identified him as Tigrayan—had put him into a box he did not like. He talked about the need for reconciliation if we were to have an Ethiopia where all our people were viewed as equals. He talked about how ethnicity, a tool of the TPLF/EPRDF, was clearly moving Ethiopia backwards; dividing us, creating hostility and giving the TPLF opportunity to keep us hostage. He also explained his resentment towards the TPLF for intentionally alienating non-TPLF Tigrayans from the mainstream opposition; making them victims of this system on both sides as most non-Tigrayans assumed he, and others like him, supported the regime. This was another very good discussion.* After listening carefully, I learned that if the problem of Ethiopia is to be solved, it will come out of discussions like these between one person and another. I will never forget this day.

The next day I was invited to lunch at the home of the head of the Ethiopian community, Ato Taye. He had also invited another friend brother Omar, of Oromo-Muslim background, as well as Ato Bichok, a brother from the Gambella region. We met Taye's wife and had a delicious lunch while discussing issues related to Ethiopia as well as local issues related to the extreme hardship faced by some in the Ethiopian community there in Melbourne.

Later in the day, it was decided that Omar would take the day off from work to give me the chance to see some of the most beautiful parts of Australia on the Great Ocean Road. The Great Ocean Road is a 243-kilometre (151 mi) stretch of road along the south-eastern coast of Australia between the Victorian cities of Torquay and Warrnambool.

As the sun rose the next morning, Ato Taye, Omar, Sisay and myself took off for an eight-hour drive to Great Ocean Road, one of the most scenic highways in Australia. The road traverses rainforests, as well as beaches and cliffs composed of limestone and sandstone, which is susceptible to erosion. *As we drove, we talked in depth as we viewed the beautiful landscape. It was amazing what we learned. Brother Omar talked about his childhood, growing up a Muslim, where he had had the opportunity of having very positive relationships with Christian family members and friends; expressing disappointment that such relationships have been needlessly poisoned by the ethnic and religious divisive politics of the TPLF. What Omar was saying was not new to me as I have heard this lament from many other Ethiopians all over the world.*

Ato Taye said that the religious and ethnic differences did not matter much in the past. *He explained that before 2003, he did not even know the ethnicity of many of his best friends because at that time, these tribal divisions were not present to the same degree. As an example, he said that he did not know the ethnic background of one of his best friends of forty years until more recently when he learned his friend was Gurage.*

We discussed another example based on religious differences. Muslims usual do not eat meat killed by a Christian, but *Sisay told of how his father had said this was not always the case. He told of how Muslims and Christians had prayed together to God for rain during a drought. During this time of hunger, they had killed a cow and shared the meat together.*

The conclusion was that who led the country made a big difference as leaders can move a country backwards or forwards—towards harmony or towards division as is the situation in Ethiopia now. As we enjoyed seeing the beautiful landscape, it reminded us of the highlands of Ethiopia. When we saw the thick forests of eucalyptus trees; it reminded us of how Menelik took this native tree of Australia, from Australia many years ago and planted it in Ethiopia. The tree is now abundant all over Ethiopia.

My mind was racing as to how Ethiopians; wherever they are in the Diaspora, could take their knowledge—like a tree—and take it back to Ethiopia to plant it. What a blessing it could become in Ethiopia. One man, Menelik, who was a leader, had the vision of planting such trees to make Ethiopia more beautiful. Even though he is now gone, Ethiopians still enjoy the beauty of this Australian tree.

Leaders who care for the people; not only in the present, but to come, can leave a wonderful legacy of harmony, equality, prosperity, unity and justice rather than a legacy of deceit, hatred, violence, corruption and poverty. The latter is the poisonous fruit of the TPLF and its ethnic politics that holds Ethiopia back; who will plant what will move us forward?

In the evening we finally returned after many hours of very rich, stimulating and deep conversation that none of us will ever forget. We all agreed that if Ethiopians had the opportunity to spend time together like we had been doing, we could re-discover the joy of being together as people.

The next day, I had the privilege of meeting with six great Ethiopian women who uplifted me with their vision to build institution for supporting the healthy development of young Ethiopians that they were carrying out in practical action. *These extraordinary women, who came from different regions and ethnic groups, came together around a common concern—helping each other and young Ethiopians reach their potential rather than becoming involved in drugs or crime as they struggled to adjust to a new culture; different from their parents. The efforts of these mothers were inspiring as they had become mentors of these school-age boys through getting them involved in organized soccer. This was not only for their own children, but for others as well. It was making a real difference in their lives.*

After speaking to the women and hearing about their efforts, their leader sister Tenenet arranged for me to meet with these young Ethiopians in the football field, young people from the age of 14 to 20, who were practicing soccer in the field. *I encouraged them to work very hard to be productive citizens and positive role models; telling them how they must make this a priority for themselves. I used my own example of immigrating to Canada without any family members when I was only 17; requiring me to take my own education very seriously and to be careful to stay out of trouble. I reminded them how easy it is to make a mistake if one is not self-motivated and disciplined. I also encouraged them to not let the tribal thinking, which is so prevalent within our society, to affect them.*

That evening, the joy of community again brought diverse people together. I was invited for dinner to the home of Bichok, a Nuer man from Gambella who was married to an Anuak woman. Other Ethiopians including brother Jamma, a wonderful man from the Somali region of Ethiopia were also invited as well. As we ate together, what a great discussion we had about who we are as people.

The last day of my visit in Melbourne, these leaders and friends decided we should call a casual meeting at an Ethiopian restaurant in order to explore the next steps to take in Melbourne. We were expecting only a few people, but nearly 60 people showed up. We talked about the change we wanted to bring to Ethiopia; but that it had to start by coming together as people first. One man said, "Life is too short to hold on to these negative attitudes. We must start with caring for each other."

Many people opened up; seeming unafraid to share their real feelings. Some publically apologized; saying they were sorry if they had hurt others in the community or if they had not cooperated or supported others when it had been needed. People spoke emotionally from the heart; telling about how this ethnic problem was even affecting their marriages, but also how they believed that they, as individuals and as a community, could really change. The consensus was that the healthy Ethiopia they so desired could begin by creating a healthy community among Ethiopians in Melbourne. This discussion went on for several hours. When it finally finished, I went directly to the airport; leaving Melbourne and arriving in Perth at midnight.

When I got off the plane in Perth, just like many times in the past, I was met by two Ethiopians I had never met; Ato Berhanu and brother Abera yet, as we talked and laughed, it felt like we already knew each other. They took me to a hotel and the next morning, they came to take me to lunch prior to the meeting. The meeting was one of the most diverse meetings I have ever seen. Nearly every region of Ethiopia was represented—Gambella, the Ogaden, Tigray, Benishangul, Southern Nations, the Amhara region, Afar, Oromia and even Southern Sudan. The discussion was very uplifting and encouraging.

People were free to challenge me or each other; openly saying what was on their minds. Some were very emotional. One of those there was Ato Gebremedhin Araya, a former Head of Finance for the TPLF and came out saying he used to work with the TPLF, but was not doing so anymore. He believed that the TPLF was holding everyone hostage by terrorizing the people.



Ato Gebremedhin Araya speaking!

The final comments were made by an Ogadeni sister who inspired us all! This brilliant and articulate woman told the people that this was the first meeting of Ethiopians she had ever attended where she felt safe; even with the Ethiopian flag behind the podium. People laughed as she said this. She explained how her grandfather had been killed during Haile Selassie's rule; that her father was killed during the Derg and that her brother was killed by the TPLF/EPRDF; but, despite it all, she said she was willing to work to cooperate even to the point that she would run for prime minister of a new Ethiopia! She received an overwhelming applause from the people. She

went on to say that the problem of Ethiopia must be solved in a human way and stated the SMNE motto: “No one will be free until all are free.”



Pictures of the Ogadeni sister who inspired us all!

People were happy and joyful; believing that if we addressed the problem of Ethiopians by reaching out to talk to each other, by carefully listening to what they said—even when in disagreement, by respecting the innate humanity and dignity of others and by showing genuine care towards others; it would bring reconciliation between people in Ethiopia and within the Horn of Africa. ***Reconciliation is the foundation of the New Ethiopia we seek and I saw it emerge at the community level—from the BBQ on the first night I arrived in Australia to this final meeting with Ethiopians in Perth and everything in-between; it was a joy to see!***

Let us now build bridges to each other like what happened at these meetings! The bridges we construct are not only for the present, but to be used and enjoyed by people of the future just like Ethiopians still love the eucalyptus trees; not only for its beauty, but also because it can be used for practical reasons—to build homes, to provide medication, for shelter and for many other uses! Menelik had the vision for the future that left us this tree; what will we leave to our descendents?

May God help us plant the seeds of reconciliation that will bring a legacy of love, justice, peace, harmony and prosperity to a New Ethiopia. Let us sow the seeds by reaching out to others, by admitting our own flaws, by forgiving each other for the wounds of the past and by appreciating the value that God has given to all human kind! What a joy it would be for us Ethiopians to leave such a legacy for those still to come!

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Please do not hesitate to email me, Obang Metho if you have comments: Obang@solidaritymovement.org