



“What Will Ethiopians of Tomorrow Inherit from Us?”

Mr. Obang Metho Keynote Speech at the 4th annual Ethiopian Heritage Society of North America (EHSNA)
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Thank you for inviting me to speak at the 4th annual Ethiopian Heritage Festival, a special celebration for Ethiopians in the Diaspora. I thank the Ethiopian Heritage Society of North America (EHSNA) for organizing this yearly event where all Ethiopians can come together; not only to celebrate our heritage, but also to encourage us as Ethiopians to contribute to building a better future for all of our people, both here in the Diaspora and in our motherland. The strategic mission of the EHSNA is a noble one. **It affirms the importance of preserving our history, heritage, and past experiences as diverse people of Ethiopia, which can give us better understanding of who we are as people today. It also emphasizes how important it is to connect the past with the present in order to build a better society for Ethiopians in generations to come. This includes recognizing our young people as important emissaries to a better future. Thank you for the very important contribution you are making.**

I am honored to be here with you to speak about our beloved country, Ethiopia, its beautiful and diverse people, our heritage, our heroes and heroines, and our future. As I speak today, I will be emphasizing legacy over heritage because although very interconnected, the two are very different. This brings up an important distinction between heritage and legacy. **Heritage is what we inherit from those who came before us and legacy is what we will pass on to those who come after us. We do not have control over our past, but we have far greater ability to choose what we pass on to future generations. Our emphasis should be on the future. In other words, what can we learn from our past—from both the successes and the mistakes—in order to pass on a better legacy to future generations?**

This is my main point today: when we make decisions based on God-given moral values and principles, we will pass on a legacy that will bless those who come after us. If we allow our consciences to be corrupted, what we pass on to the next generation will become a curse to them. We have not inherited a perfect heritage. We are not responsible for that, but we are responsible for what we do now. How can we make God-honoring moral decisions today to bring healing and a future to Ethiopia? People who rise above circumstances to make the moral decision, usually in a time of crisis or under great pressure, become our heroes and heroines of the future. One person can make a difference; and oftentimes, that person does not understand all that is at stake.

For example, let me start with someone who is very close to us today, **Captain Guta Dinka**, one of our real Ethiopian heroes. **Captain Guta is now a man known for his moral courage, integrity and values for a decision he made in 1962. That decision affected the lives of millions of people and has inspired many, but at the time, little did he know the impact of that decision.**

Captain Guta was appointed by King Haile Selassie as a bodyguard to Nelson Mandela when Mandela was seeking military training in Ethiopia. You have heard the story already. While in the camp, Captain Guta was offered a huge monetary bribe by two secret infiltrators from apartheid South Africa if he would use his proximity to Nelson Mandela to kill him. Although relatively unknown in these early years, Mandela was already seen as a threat to the South African government, but Captain Guta probably had little understanding of what part Mandela would play in the future. In some ways it makes it all the more heroic because he was protecting the Nelson Mandela, still unknown, rather than the one we know of today. **His decision was based on his moral convictions; refusing to yield to the lure of quick wealth. The world is a better place because this man refused to be bought out; but instead to live by higher, God-given values.**

Nelson Mandela is also a worldwide contemporary hero—why? **When many would have expected him to become more hateful, more embittered and more vengeful after years of unjust imprisonment, he demonstrated great moral courage in forgiving his oppressors and becoming a transformational leader largely responsible for the reconciliation and peaceful resolution of the wrongs of apartheid in his country. Captain Guta probably had no idea that the decision he made in the quiet parts of his heart and mind would produce such fruit, particularly as we face our own crisis of power in our own country. One person can make a difference.**

Heroes are not the same as celebrities, political leaders, wealthy persons or others whose names are in the news or who have held important positions. **Heroes and heroines are people who overcame obstacles, who rose to make moral decisions at difficult times of their lives or who stood up for what was right, good, just and honorable, especially when it was risky, unpopular or when it required great sacrifice and commitment. Who are other heroes of Ethiopian heritage?** Here are a few, included for differing reasons, fully acknowledging I may be leaving some of the more well known ones out.

Abebe Bekele: Abebe Bekele is a hero in my opinion, not because he was a great athlete and runner who was a two-time winner of the Olympics, but because he was someone who rose above the limitations, obstacles and difficulties of his life. We know he was poor and learned to run during a time when he could not afford to buy a pair of shoes, later choosing to run his first major race barefoot. He won that race. **What are the lessons we can learn from him? We, Ethiopian are all running the race of life, many of us facing obstacles and challenges;** however, Abebe is someone **to emulate in his willingness to not give up or to use excuses, but instead to persevere, focusing on the goal ahead.**

Ebed-Melech, the Cushite/Ethiopian: Ebed was a Cushite (Ethiopian) and an official in the court of King Zedekiah of Judah, living over 2,500 hundred years ago. **This man's moral decision to save the life of Jeremiah the prophet is recorded in the Biblical book of Jeremiah. As is the case today, many of those with power become the enemies of truth and punish those who speak out. Such was the case with Jeremiah.**

Some who resented his warnings and opposed his message sought the approval of the king to throw Jeremiah into a cistern to silence him, knowing he would die there. But Ebed, one of a number of Ethiopians or references to the country of Ethiopia recorded in the Bible, immediately went to the King on his behalf to ask permission to save him. As a result, the king agreed and even aided him. **What are the lessons we can learn from him?** Ebed showed the moral courage to call this action wrong.

He could have faced severe consequences, even death or his own imprisonment; but instead, as a result of taking this risk, he saved Jeremiah's life and became a hero who God later rewarded for his actions. We have modern day Ethiopian heroes and heroines facing the same plight; numbers of them languishing in prisons. (For a full account, see Jeremiah 38: 1-13; Jeremiah 39: 15-18)

The King of Ethiopia who welcomed followers of Mohammed who were seeking refuge in Ethiopia in 615 AD: The Prophet Mohamed sent numbers of his followers who were being persecuted in Mecca across the Red Sea to Ethiopia, assured that they would find safe haven there from a Christian king who had a reputation for being a good leader. Muslims did find a hospitable refuge in Ethiopia.

What are the lessons we can learn? Unlike in many places in the world where religious conflict ensues; Christians, Muslims, Jews, members of traditional African religions and others have lived in relative harmony for many centuries. This is a valuable heritage of relative respect for people of other faith backgrounds and is one to cherish. Efforts to divide Ethiopians on religious grounds have undermined some of this harmony, but recently, Ethiopians of different faith backgrounds have spoken out against government interference in any religious practice, including in that of others.

These are but a few of our heroes, people who rose to the challenge of their times, but there are also many whose names we will never know, the quiet and forgotten Ethiopians; yet, they have left lasting legacies on their families, communities and people unknown. **In other words, do not minimize the role that individuals like each of us can make on the future of Ethiopia, one by one, decision by decision.**

Along with Ethiopian heroes, are some people who were destructive and when in positions of power, were destructive forces that brought pain, suffering and grief that is still affecting us. **What can we do today about parts of our heritage that have been destructive?**

When we speak of heritage, it is usually in positive terms, but it could be positive or negative, good or bad; something that builds us up or tears us down. Our heritage can give us strength, pride, instruction and a good foundation or it can leave us with unfinished business, grievances, alienation and obstacles to overcome. We often pick the best from our past to remember, but it is often the failures of the past that sabotage our tomorrows.

The challenge for us today is not only to appreciate a rich history, military victories, wonderful cultural traditions or great accomplishments of Ethiopians, but it is critically important to learn from the mistakes of the past, especially where those mistakes continue to wrongly define us, limit us or stand in the way of becoming better people and a better society. Those experiences may differ for different people.

When some people think about our Ethiopian heritage, they might delight in saying how much they love this country and everything Ethiopian, from the music to the food to the history to feeling great pride in being the only African country never to be colonized. However, others might refuse everything “Ethiopian,” rejecting the name Ethiopia and its flag—saying, “It is not mine!”—and hold resentment against grievances present, past and even ancient. It depends to whom you talk.

The hero for one of us may not be the same as for another. Yet, no country is free of those people or experiences that have injured some or even many. How can we take the best from our past and build a better future. How can we help some recover from the leftover pain, resentment and bitterness of past mistakes so we can move on together? How can we plant something good for the future so the crop it produces will create a better, healthier, more productive and more harmonious society; not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the way to not just survive, but to thrive?

I believe that it is all about values. When those values are based on God-given truth and principles, we are bound to make better decisions for ourselves and as we make decisions that affect others. When we respect the worth and dignity God gives to every human being; we will not violate the rights of our fellow Ethiopian whether or not they are from our “village” or “tribe.” When we recognize that every one of us is created in the image of God, how dare we dehumanize them? The heroes and heroines of today will see the value of every human being.

Twenty-five years from now, if some were hosting this same event, what kind of heritage from us will we want them to speak about? What kind of Ethiopia do we want to pass on to the next generation? How do we get there? How can we rightly deal with our past mistakes so they enhance rather than darken our future? Can we forgive those in the past for a heritage that at times has hurt us?

Can we correct the injustices of the past to the best of our ability? Will we deal wisely with the challenges given to us today so that we pass on a better tomorrow to our descendants? We are at a crossroads of history where our decision is a moral one. How can we, individually and collectively, influence and inspire each other to rise to the challenge of choosing the moral high road? How can we empower, equip and encourage our people, ourselves included, and especially our young people, to become a transformational generation? How can we leave behind the worst parts of tribalism, feudalism and Marxism to become a God-fearing nation based on moral values and principles, where we put humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions and where we care about the lives of other people because no one will be free until all are free?

Will we create a legacy that speaks to how we value all our people, not only our tribe? This means caring about the weak, the marginalized, the disabled, the elderly and the displaced or the homeless. This means creating a legacy where the treatment and rights of all people, especially the more vulnerable women and children are respected, where discrimination of others based on ethnicity, skin color or religion is unacceptable; where competency, hard work and integrity will give you the job rather than your ethnicity; where people can hold different religious views but can still live together in harmony because we believe in religious freedom and share a land and blood;

where Ethiopia will no longer be known for hunger, starvation and for some of our people dying on the road to some foreign land to flee persecution, where the rule of law applies to everyone and no one is above the law; where what we say is not opposite of who we are; and finally, where we connect our values to our actions.

We can learn from other people, like the early forefathers of America who envisioned a heritage where people can come from anywhere and if they worked hard enough, they could make their own way—where the law and key institutions supported the rights of people.

We may not be happy with what we inherited, but we can still create a better legacy for our descendents to inherit. **That starts with each of us. It starts with new thinking, valuing others, loving others, caring for other people and seeing everyone as being created in the image of God. Let us teach our kids to love, to respect, to forgive, to be civil, to act with justice and humility and to work hard to overcome obstacles. It can start at home, but be reinforced throughout our culture by our religious leaders, schools, communities and by the example of our leaders, near to us and far. Then we can leave a legacy of which we can be proud. We need not do it alone, for God is ready to help those who call on Him and whose hearts are genuine.**

Let us not pretend. Ethiopia has been called a country of mystery. That may mean an ancient past, unexplored places and undiscovered wonders; however it also might mean that we are one thing on the outside and are something quite different underneath. We can attract some with a showy exterior, while hiding a darker side in our hearts. We speak of double-digit inflation, development and millennium goals while we still do not have clean water, acceptable hospitals in most places, consistent electricity or education for many of our people. Corruption is rampant, exploitation is an everyday event and the majority of people are left out. Let's be truthful so we can deal with reality.

How can we come out into the light and expose what is hurting us and holding us back from integrating God-given values and principles into our lives? Ethiopians are deeply religious people in comparison with many places in the world, especially nowadays. Even decades of Marxist-Leninist communism did not extinguish the importance of God and faith to Ethiopians. However, how can we integrate our faith and values into our everyday actions and even into our interior motives, dreams and hopes?

Do we seek power, even ethnic-based power? Power is corrupting and always has victims. Do we seek to serve others, even those outside our ethnic, political or religious groups? Such a humble spirit always bears fruit. Who are we as Ethiopians? Are we willing to admit our shortcomings and to be transformed into the people God intends us to be, leaving behind the misconceptions, lies, prejudices and mistakes of what has held us back in the past? As stated in the Biblical book of James 3:16—with slight embellishment for our current struggle with ethnic-based favoritism—here is what he says, *“For where you have [ethnic-based] envy and selfish [ethnic-based] ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”*

We are one generation away from a better Ethiopia, but without investment in the next generation for a better Ethiopia, we are one generation from the extinction of our efforts. Can we invest in our young people so they can wholeheartedly adopt a vision for such a future? Both they and we can be links to the next generation—a transformational bridge to a different kind of Ethiopia—where we can bring blessings to our nation, our people and those beyond. May God help us to become such a legacy to those who come after us!

May God bless Ethiopia and beyond!

Thank you! =====

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