



December 15, 2014

SMNE FORUM SERIES II: MINNESOTA

STARTING THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN DIVERSE ETHIOPIANS IN MINNESOTA *CAN WE COLLECTIVELY OWN BOTH THE GOOD AND THE UGLY PARTS OF OUR PAST SO WE CAN BE FREE AT LAST FROM THE SHACKLES OF OPPRESSION?*

First of all, I would like to thank Ato Girma Biru, all members and supporters of the SMNE in Minnesota for taking your time to organize this wonderful forum. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on the topic of *Starting the Conversation between Diverse Ethiopians in Minnesota*. I have spoken to the Ethiopian community in Minnesota a number of times, not including times I have spoken to the Anuak—my own ethnic group. In the past, I have mostly addressed separate communities of Ethiopians in Minnesota, but this time it is different. My message for today is to encourage us to break down the barriers between communities by starting to *talk to each other rather than about each other*. This forum is second in a series of forums on this topic. No doubt, simply by living in Minnesota, you have seen ample evidence that certain environmental values, practices and supports make it easier to do.

Although mainstream Minnesotans appear to be very similar to each other, it was not always the case. Many can trace their heritage back a couple of generations to when their grandparents or great grandparents immigrated here from places like Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Germany or other mostly European countries. There was also a large population of African Americans. They all lived in their own neighborhoods, started churches or religious organizations based on language and ethnicity, ate food familiar to their own cultural backgrounds, and mainly *talked about each other rather than to each other*. Today, things are very different as you can easily see. Mainstream Minnesotans have assimilated, but at the same time, they have made it a hospitable place for many new immigrants and refugees from all over the world—from China, India, Burma, Mexico, Russia, South America and Africa. It is not only home to the largest population of Asian Hmong in the country; it is also home to more Somali, Oromo, Ogadeni, and Anuak than any other place outside of Africa.

How does it work? What can we learn from it? What will it take for us Ethiopians to create a well-functioning, multi-ethnic, and pluralistic Ethiopia where the rights of the powerful and the least powerful are equally upheld? How can Ethiopians in Minnesota start to build trust among each other so that the job of building a New Ethiopia becomes a joint project between its diverse people? What is holding us back? How can we deal with it so we can move on?

Clearly, much of what happens in Minnesota is the result of four factors: 1) the commonly held mindset of many average Minnesotans who believe in the value and rights of all human beings, regardless of differences. 2) an effective rule of law that limits personal wrongdoing, 3) a structured process for demanding and making orderly change, and 4) strong institutions that for the most part, do their jobs in the public and private sectors.

On the other hand, in Ethiopia today, we clearly see the failure of our justice system and the rule of law. There is no structured process for reform. Our institutions are used to control the people rather than as watchdogs to protect their rights. An authoritarian government uses power and division to advance themselves rather than the people. We have become a society divided by its grievances, language, cultural distinctions, and isolation from each other. However, a key ingredient to all of the rest is the first factor—a cultural mindset that largely values equal rights among people. It is what helps create harmony in Minnesota.

If people in a region or community [Put humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions](#), it opens up the possibility of the other three contributing factors. It also may be the easiest to change as it begins within each of us; however, we must first figure out how to deal with what divides us.

Today I will be emphasizing how we, the people of Ethiopia might approach and resolve past and current issues with each other so as to move on to the task of building a good government that will ensure justice, freedom, rights, and equitable opportunity for all. That is where we must start. This may be somewhat painful to work through for it requires looking at ourselves and certain closely held attitudes, beliefs and grievances that may no longer be relevant or helpful. In fact, they may not be true or fully true; or, they may be counter-productive to what we want to achieve. We also must resist becoming too comfortable in manipulative traps set by the TPLF/EPRDF to keep us divided. If we are to reach our common goals, we must revisit some of our assumptions.

Our History:

As Ethiopians, we have an ancient past, but it is not all glorious. Yes, we have some positive things like 3,000 years of rich history in the world even though for most of those years, Ethiopians have been oppressed. Ethiopia's legacy is mixed with accomplishments and failures, highs and lows, things to be proud of and things to not be proud about—good parts and bad parts. The interpretation of events and one's perspective on them also varies among different people. One person's hero is the villain of another. We have made leaders into artificial, cardboard figures where someone is either **all good or all bad instead of a mix where some may have achieved certain admirable things over the span of years in power while still committing evil acts in other areas of their governance.**

Neither can we trust our history completely because those recording it may have not gotten it all right; or, it may not be known or recorded at all; it may have been revised along the way to support a certain agenda or perspective; or, it may have only been passed on orally to certain groups of people and is not included in our annals of history—a common occurrence in our culture.

Can we agree that this country of ours has problems? We have a long history of injustice, oppression and violence resulting in unresolved grievances. Almost everyone and every group have suffered in Ethiopia at some time in the past and/or present. All have pain and or resentments of some kind. How do we resolve these grievances?

One group might claim to be more oppressed than anyone else and want it corrected, but in this country, most everyone has suffered in some way or at some time. Some of that suffering and injustice is serious. Who is supposed to correct it or pay for it? When we speak of the past we must ask, which past? Is it the past of the Oromo, the past of the people of Afar, the Ogadenis, the people of Benishangul, the Amhara, the Tigray, the people of the South or Gambellans, or one of the little tribes experiencing discrimination and marginalization? I could keep going. Is it the Orthodox or the Muslims.

The Muslims feel they came to a Christian country. Even though they intermarried and intermingled, some feel they were never treated equally. In Gambella, the Majangir and other small groups who have lost their culture under the more dominant culture. The same has happened to many among the 86 tribes in Ethiopia.

How do you determine the degree of grievances held by individuals or collectively by groups? How do you distinguish between who has the most serious grievances and those with less serious grievances? How do you measure such a thing and will it help to do so? How do you single out whose past is worse than others and who is supposed to pay for grievances of the past? How far back should we go?

There are at least two problems related to this:

- 1) In Ethiopia over the past hundreds of years, the decision as to who is human and deserving of respect, rights and opportunity, changes according to who is in power. Leaders have been given the power to *make* someone either worthy or unworthy of personhood. No wonder why people feel they have to almost worship leaders because there is no other way to gain a place in society other than to cater to the needs and whims of whoever holds the power. Because shifts of power can quickly change one's status, no one is assured of being valued on a lasting basis. A person's worth, dignity, rights and respect is not based on being created in the image of God, but upon what is useful to whomever is in power. On the other hand, some are never valued no matter who is in power. Thus, power struggles are continual and resulting grievances become deeper and more serious between the *haves and the have-nots*. Some examples are:
 - i. Nobility versus the *commoner* no matter what ethnicity—the feudal system of the past elevated a few and subjugated everyone else.
 - ii. Ethnic or ruling party affiliation and loyalty
 - iii. Entitlement—locally, regionally or more nationally—is not earned, but given based on prestige and power of association through family, clan, village or ethnicity. This results in a hierarchy of the elevation of a few and the abuse or devaluation of others.
 - iv. Skin color: because some of us have not embraced our own God-given, God-affirmed dark African identity, some of us have rejected the beauty of who we are and have made second class citizens of those around us who are *more dark African* than others. The marginalized have suffered under all groups.
- 2) We seem to **blame ethnic-based perpetrators and their collective ethnic group rather than the individual leaders or people who committed atrocities against the people**. This country is made up of so many ethnically-mixed branches within our family tree that it is often difficult to know who is who. Certainly, there is confusion between who is what ethnicity as our blood is so mixed together. I do not claim to be a historian, but our history is not well known, based on fact, or reliably told. This has led to much confusion.
 - a. For example, Menelik II is thought of as an Amhara; however, some historians claim he was the son of an Amhara and a lady in the house of his grandmother, possibly from the South. His closest friend was Oromo, until they later had a falling out. In 2014, who is responsible for the wrongs Menelik committed—is he and those associated with him or his ethnic group? If it is his ethnic group, which one?
 - b. King Yohannes, a Tigrayan, conquered and oppressed the people; yet Meles went to the bush because he felt he and his own ethnic group were not treated fairly by Mengistu Hailemariam, a reputed Amhara. However, Mengistu also is alleged to be a mix of ethnicities, so who should be blamed?
 - c. There has never been a time when the rule of law or justice was effective whether under King Yohannes, Menelik II, during Haile Selassie, the Derg and now under the TPLF/EPRDF. The people of Ethiopia have never been treated fairly. Each may have accomplished some very good things along with perpetrating evil and cruelty. **Blaming collective ethnic groups for the evil acts of individuals and their cohorts may be convenient, but when done, it will always lead to the persecution of the innocent.**
 - d. We must beware of being used by various ambitious leaders or groups like the TPLF/EPRDF who may attempt to gain power and a ready-made constituency by feeding ethnic-based, religious-based or politically-based factions a steady diet of *victim mentality*. As long as these leaders *nurse the grievances* of some group for their own personal benefit rather than for the peoples', or as long as they can convince them that it is *always someone else's fault* and *someone else's responsibility to fix things*, people do not take personal responsibility to change things. They give away their power and remain trapped in the status quo.

Who should make admissions, apologies, and reparations and to whom? What is the cure to our many justifiable grievances?

When it comes to our more distant past, we may realize that most everyone in Ethiopia has suffered. We have to acknowledge the bad and the ugly parts of our past, but we cannot remain stuck there. Until we secure a just government it will make such decisions difficult. This is why I talk about the new Ethiopia. **Let us all take responsibility for the ugly things of the past even though it may or may not have been done by my tribe or my religious group or darker people like me. In other words, we have to collectively own the ugly past of all of us along with the good parts. It is a part of our history, but we do not have to repeat it, but instead, relegate it to the museum. Then we should start a new chapter. This is the only way to free ourselves from the shackles of the past.**

If we continue to point fingers at others, saying “your grandfather has done this to us, or your tribe, your race, your religious group, or whatever group, we will remain stuck. Instead of this, let us own the past. Let us be honest about what happened, but let the past mistakes become our teacher for the future. Let us not pass on our curse to the future descendents like the way we inherited it from our families, our communities and ethnic groups. We have to be a new people with new thinking, a new approach, an open heart and mind, humility, forgiveness and repentance. In countries where people fail to deal with this amicably, more blood has been shed, more lives traumatized, and more destruction inflicted on the country and on the people.

Ethiopia is now at the tipping point—close to exploding—at the edge of the cliff. **What Ethiopians need to do is to talk with each other about both the ugly and good parts of our past. Let us be genuine and understand we cannot change the past, but we can change the future.** People say we must change the past, but to what should we change? Can the pain inflicted on my group be repaid or taken back? For example, my own group was oppressed and not even treated as people. Even now people have told me that “...it was the TPLF who made you human.” Really? How can we fix this sickness in our minds that has led to unbelievable evil and brutality against other human beings? How can this virus be cured? December 13, 2014, will mark the 11- year anniversary of the massacre of 424 Anuak in Gambella. Are all the Tigray responsible for that massacre? If I or others say we must be paid back for our losses, who will do that? Will the members of the TPLF or all Tigrayans? Will it fix it?

How about our own ugly past in regards to the unequal treatment of our citizens? For example, the people of Omo Valley number close to two million people; yet, how many have gotten an education? The truth is that they have never had the opportunity. I know of only two people from the Omo Valley who have gotten an education in the West. During the time of Haile Selassie, many from the mainstream groups—the Amhara, Tigrayan, Oromo, Gurage, and others—were able to obtain an education outside of the country. But in the Omo Valley, Gambella, Benishangul, the Ogaden, in Afar and many places in the South, many still have not had the opportunity. **We Ethiopians must own the ugly part of our legacy even if we did not contribute to it. By being people of this land, we are all part of what we have inherited.**

The whole country is sick, but the medication is not to dwell on the past but to resolve it so we can move on. We, the living, are sick because of the past that was passed on to us. As Americans, you live in America and own the past. This even includes slavery. We share in this ugly part because we are alive today. We must deal with it; but we cannot cure it. We must admit it, but we cannot make it go away any more than we can bring the fallen tree back to life. However, the future must be different. We can create a country where we are valued by our humanity, where we care about the well being of others like we care about ourselves, for no one is free until all are free. After we acknowledge this, all of us can work together to change the country, including forming a peoples’ government.

For the last three thousand years, Ethiopians have never been given a choice of who they want to lead them, what language they should speak, or what laws are good for the people. Our governments, whether kings, queens, emperors, prime ministers or powers behind the rulers, have never primarily focused on what can be done for the people, but instead what can be done to maintain and control the power even when it meant trampling on the people.

Oromo say they are 40% of the population. This is not debatable. Because of the numbers, their language should be made to be a national language along with Amharic. As a majority, this is something that could be worked on right now. We could also include English as another language if the people decide to do so based on how many now speak it in the world. Once we create a government for the people, we can deal with issues really affecting people in their daily lives such as health, education, land ownership, and business development. This is the way to build a harmonious society and a country of which most everyone could be proud.

For example, there are Ethiopians from many ethnic groups, every region, and many different religions that live in America and they are proud to be Americans. Why—because, like in Minnesota, there is a rule of law that equally applies to everyone. There is opportunity for people. This could be done in Ethiopia if we start talking to each other rather than have ethnicity automatically trigger resentment for grievances against someone's ancestors. Let them rest in peace, God will judge them and those who aggrieved them.

Our past is holding us hostage. As painful as it is, let us prove we can be better than our ancestors. This idea that because of our past, we have to separate into tribal countries is not going to bring the solution. Look at Eritrea and how despicably they treat their people. Look at South Sudan, as a country, they are fighting. It is not the land, it is the people. We are the people and we can change.

This idea that because of past grievances we cannot find a way to live with each other is absurd. Do we believe we are better off if we build a fence around our land and let no one in but those who are from our tribe? This is crazy-making when we consider that many of us, like our ancestors, are mixes of different things. We have succeeded here in America where we live in the land of someone else's ancestors, but yet we have found peace and opportunity.

If we fail to see the humanity of each other, we will pass on the curse to others. If we fail to do this in the right way now, we may be choosing to follow the path of other countries like Rwanda. Do we want to end up being the people that others, especially our descendents, condemn tomorrow? Or, can we do it correctly this time and become an example for the world? The first step to climb to the mountain top of greater harmony is to talk to each other. Because of our fallen natures as people, this is not easy to do. Some will say it cannot be done; however, we know it can improve and that gross violations could be minimized by an effective and fairly enforced rule of law.

For anyone who hopes for a better Ethiopia for their children, they must start talking to each other rather than talking to each other. Once we have a stronger, people-based government, such a system would be better able to deal with the past by making sure it never happened again. If an apology for the past was required, the elected leader, who might be from Afar, the Ogaden, the South or from any part of the country, even from among the most marginalized, could apologize on behalf of a responsible government, evaluate the need for reparations and decide how to restore justice rather than one ethnic group.

Let the Ethiopian people establish a court justice system trusted by the people. Let the court of law make these decisions so the next generation can start afresh in a New Ethiopia.

May God help us to overcome our past grievances to become reconcilers to a new future in a New Ethiopia.

=====
For more information, contact Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE. Email: Obang@solidaritymovement.org