



Diverse Ethiopians in Minnesota find new and promising relationship as they step out of ethnic, religious, gender, and political boxes to embrace each other as valued human beings first.

What does it mean—in real life—to appreciate the common bond of humanity above ethnicity or any other distinctions? If you had attended the recent SMNE Forum in Minnesota on December 6, 2014 that brought diverse Ethiopians together **to talk to each other rather than about each other** you would have seen it in action. We give thanks to the people in the Twin Cities who have captured this vision and organized this meeting only two weeks after a similar event was held in Washington D.C. on November 15, 2014.

What made it so gratifying was to hear from such diverse Ethiopians—from different ethnicities, religions, regions, genders, backgrounds, and perspectives—as they presented their stories, ideas, and solutions to the problems facing Ethiopians. Speakers were from Oromia, Gambella, the Ogaden, and the Amhara region and included both men and women. Some were of different faiths—either Muslim or Christian. It was encouraging to witness the enthusiastic response of the audience and participants as each presenter spoke about the past, including grievances, as well as of the present and its challenges, and about our shared future. They all soon discovered the many similar commonalities between them.

Following the forum, one of the organizers Ato Girma Biru, made this comment about how surprised he was with the outcome of the meeting, *“When we first decided to call this meeting, we did not think there would be so much interest; neither did we expect to find such dynamic speakers. The concept of talking to each other was enlightening in itself, but what was communicated through the speakers has lifted our spirits, reminding us that we have much more in common than a collection of tribes.”* He was thrilled that the people of the Twin Cities [Minnesota] were taking this initiative and was hoping that people in other cities would do the same thing.

The speakers freely and respectfully expressed their feelings without fearing they would offend someone. The audience appeared to be deeply engaged; intent on hearing the personal perspectives of these diverse Ethiopians. Each speaker began by talking about the grievances, the pain, the disconnection and the division among us Ethiopians and how it was setting Ethiopians up for a grim future. Interestingly, each of the speakers came to a similar conclusion—that the only way to avoid the such a self-destructive future was to start talking to each other. Only then could we develop real-life relationships with real people; only then could we work together to build a better Ethiopia for all of us.

The meeting was opened with prayer from a Christian sister Destaye, who thanked God for bringing all these Ethiopian brothers and sisters together to find a solution to the troubled future facing our country. She called for God to open the hearts and the minds of the people to embrace each other, finding a way to cooperate and to work together.

Mr. Obang Metho asked the primary questions to be addressed at the forum: *“Can we collectively own the good and the ugly parts of our past so we can be free at last from the shackles of oppression? We cannot avoid dealing with the past, or it will hinder our future freedom, harmony, and wellbeing. To do so we must start talking to each other. This is the second in a series that we hope will continue to bring together Ethiopians representing different perspectives, but who can relate to each other as human beings first.”*

Here are some short summaries of these perspectives from the presenters:

Speaker #1: Degaga Kumera



“Having a forum of people talking to each other is long overdue and is greatly needed if we are to move on as a nation. When Obang first asked me to speak, I endorsed the idea, but I was skeptical as to whether or not this idea of working together would actually work because of what we have experienced in the past.

For example, when one group—like the Oromo—would be targeted, only Oromo would speak out, not other Ethiopians, but he told me we have no choice but to reach out to other people, including within our own groups, to make them part of it. This view is different from the past and has given me hope. This is the reason I am here today.

I still have more questions than answers as to how to unify our people so we can work together, but I will do whatever I can for the betterment of all our people to find a lasting solution so as to bring peace, justice, and a free society to all”

Speaker #2: Nagesso Wakeyo



This kind of forum, meant to educate, enlighten, and empower the people, is very important for any society. It is exactly what our people need, especially back home; but, unfortunately, the government would never allow it. Here in the Diaspora we could do it, but most of the time our meetings are not about empowering the people, but instead are political, mainly focusing on how bad the TPLF/EPRDF regime is back home. The existing divisions among the people are often deepened by the politicians and the elite, not the people. But, because the people are highly influenced by some of these leaders, their attitudes and beliefs are often shifted, sometimes in ways that are contrary to what is best for the people and the country.

For example, most groups criticize the policies of the TPLF/EPRDF; but yet, they still set up political organizations by ethnicity, just like the TPLF/EPRDF. This happens even in the Diaspora. This is a big part of the problem. For example, there are some groups who do not want to speak the language of another ethnic group; but still set up their own political parties in the name of their own ethnic group. This alone gives a strong signal that you are not wanting other people to be part of it. It is also the reason why such alternatives are not really alternatives, but are simply the same model as the TPLF/EPRDF. In other words, some of these leaders tell others to get in their own cars and to follow them, but they do not know where they are going.

People need to go back to the drawing board because this model has not worked in the past or the present; nor will it work in the future. The ethnic model of the TPLF has only worked as a tool to divide and conquer, but it will not work to advance the people of Ethiopia as a whole.

For Ethiopians to get out of this it requires new thinking and that new thinking starts with talking to each other with honesty and genuineness. It also includes learning to agree to disagree while still finding some common goals. This is why, for me, this forum is a very good beginning. We need to have more forums like this for our people wherever the people are living.

Speaker #3: Destaye Crawford



“All of us share a beautiful country, rich with natural resources. If there was a good system of government, which was good for all of us, there would be no reason why we could not get out of this extreme poverty our people now live in. However, to change that, we have to value each other. We have to see the humanity of each other. I am married to an American man that I married because I loved him and because he was a human, not because of his ethnicity. God has told us to love, respect, and protect each other.

The country needs change and that change starts in our hearts, minds and souls. We don't have to be politicians or intellectuals to contribute to the betterment of our people. This kind of peoples' forum is what is needed to discuss what is wrong, what would be better, what has worked, what has not worked, and to brainstorm in order to come up with a vision that would be good for all of us. As a Christian believer, I have big hope in God and in my people and that we will be better off in the future if we continue to talk to each other and to reconcile our differences.

Speaker #4: Ahmeddean Abdulwahab:



“For me, as an Oromo and a Muslim believer, I grew up in Ethiopia before this ethnic, nation and nationality viewpoint came into being by the EPRDF. Before that time, your tribe or your religion was not a negative thing or used as a divisive tool; but, in the last 24 years, I have seen how our ethnicity, religion, language, political affiliation, and class have all been used to not only divide us, but to destroy all of us.

We, the people, have to get involved and cannot wait to avert this or it could destroy us. There is something of beauty to be gained from every one of us—from every ethnic group, religious group, region and so forth. Let us focus on these things and build on this. The principles of the SMNE, where we value the humanity of every one of us and where we guard and protect all our people, for no one is free until all are free, are principles that include all of us. We can use these principles to reconcile our differences and to move on together as one people.”

Speaker #5: Binyam Bekele Balti



“As a Majangir from Gambella, yes, all of us have been oppressed so we should not spend so much time dwelling on the past oppression; but instead, let us focus on working to end the oppression. We should accept the past, talk together to manage the present and work together to have a better future for all of us.

Was there and is there oppression, grievances, discrimination, and marginalization in Ethiopia? Yes! Speaking as a member of a tiny, marginalized ethnic group, numbering no more than 10,000 people worldwide and found only in Ethiopia, I know all these things firsthand. If someone says they are more oppressed than my people, I cannot deny that; but instead, what I should do is to tell that person that we should work together so our descendents will not compete with each other for who is more oppressed or who is more or less Ethiopian than another.

For example, you can look at someone like me and see I am very dark compared to the highlander Ethiopians and start questioning whether or not I am Ethiopian. This has happened to me. When I say I’m Ethiopian, some Ethiopians will say, ‘No, you are not because you don’t look Ethiopian.’ I then have to explain that I am from Gambella before I am finally accepted as being Ethiopian. Yet, my ethnic group, the Majangir, is found nowhere else in the world except in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. What can define who is Ethiopian more than this?²

You can find the Nuer and the Anuak on either side of the border—in either Ethiopia or South Sudan—but this is not true of the Majangir. Ethiopia is our only home. We are the indigenous of the indigenous people of Ethiopia. Not many of us live outside of Ethiopia. In fact, I am the only Majangir in the United States. Few of us are educated because the previous and current government failed to give us that opportunity. This makes the recent massacre of Majangir leaders in Godere all the more tragic since those killed were among the very few who were educated.

We were targeted by the TPLF/EPRDF regime because some among them, or foreign investors, wanted our land. Despite this, I am ready to work with everybody to bring lasting change to this country. I think reconciliation is the only way to solve our problems.

For me, I strongly believe in this idea of the SMNE of putting humanity before ethnicity and that no one is free until all are free, because this is the only way to bridge the gap between the people and to work together for something better. These principles taught me that I am not the only Majangir in North America, but that all of you in this room, and all freedom loving Ethiopians throughout the world, are my people. Every Ethiopian that cares about justice is Majangir and every Majangir who cares about justice is Ethiopian. I am ready to work for a new Ethiopia where there is justice for all, not only for the majority ethnic groups, the few elite who are educated, or for highlanders, but an Ethiopia for all its citizens—a country where everyone is valued and given equal opportunity.”

Speaker #6: Sadiq Abdirahman



I thank the SMNE for holding this much-needed forum and am humbled and honored to be part of it. I have been in support of the SMNE ideas and principles from the very beginning of its establishment. The people of the Ogaden region have suffered so greatly, but most Ethiopians may not even know the extent of it because this region has been cut off from the world—some even calling it a ‘silent Darfur.’ The Ogaden is the only region in Ethiopia where humanitarian organizations like Doctors without Borders and the International Red Cross are not allowed. Even though this region is part of Ethiopia, the mainstream Ethiopian media and even scholars in the Diaspora do not cover it, but the SMNE and Obang have always raised up this issue.

This is what the country should be about—caring for everyone, not only about your own or the few. That is why this kind of forum is a very important way to hear from the voices of people from whom you otherwise would not have opportunity to hear. The freedom needed by the people of the Ogaden is the same as that needed by everyone else in all the other regions of Ethiopia.

Where freedom is shared, there is peace for everyone. Ethiopians have to work together to share the pain and then work together to create peace for all. Yes, what our people need is to talk to each other rather than about each other. It is a very noble cause. The regime has made us talk about each other for too long. Let us start sharing each other’s pain and grievances so we can work together, reconcile and create a more just society for all. For me, I will always be available to contribute my share, whatever I can, for the betterment of our people. I believe that no one is free until all are free and this basically sums it all up. This is a call for involvement and becoming part of the change.

Obang's conclusion:

“It is the disconnection among the people and the lack of a common vision that stands in our way, weakening the opposition and prolonging the struggle for freedom and justice; but, hearing from these speakers and those in Washington D.C. reassures me that we can be different. Once the people realize the part they can play in building a different future, the crisis will be averted and shortly after that, can come the victory to liberate our humanity from those parts of our ethnicity or other distinctions that prevent us from becoming who God created us to be.

May God empower, enlighten, and embolden us to embrace these God-given values and principles, and to pass them on to others. As we honor God and do what is right, good and loving towards all of our people, may we see the promising rays of the sun rise to its fullness, overcoming the darkness that has been keeping Ethiopia from shining.”

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