“On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia” - A Historical Review of Wallelign Mekonnen's Article Half a Century Later

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Introduction

Wallelign Mekonnen's article "On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia" was published 50 years ago today on Nov 17, 1969. From the outset Wallelign admits that "the article suffers from generalizations and inadequate analysis". It is no exaggeration if I say this five-page article influenced the fate of Ethiopia for the next five decades. It is also important to underline that there has not been a significant discussion and national debate on this article, except for the excerpts that ideologues on both sides used to advance their agendas based on the perceived beliefs.

Even though in 1972 the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) split on this very same question between the old guards like Andreas Eshete and the young activists like Mesfin Habtu, owing to the tumultuous and hasty sequence of events that ensued, subsequent studies and debates were lacking. But true to Ethiopian tradition, positions were hardened and splits occurred before adequate, meaningful, and substantive discussions could be held. This weakness, the inability to debate issues thoroughly before hardening one's position, has remained to be a weakness of the political culture witnessed in our country for the past 50 years. Looking back, what still amazes me is the lack of will and effort exhibited by Ethiopian intellectuals and political leaders to engage in a constructive political discourse since the publication of the article.

Wallelign’s Basic Arguments

Wallelign expresses the sentiment of the period in that certain fundamental issues were kept in the dark for fear of being misunderstood, and he found the question of nationalities to be one of these fundamental issues that needed to be addressed. Then he goes on to affirm that some people call it tribalism but that he calls it nationalism, and proceeds to explain why he called it nationalism instead of tribalism.

Wallelign tells us that there were serious discussions amongst a small minority on this "delicate" issue beginning in 1968, but that the discussions although private, were leaked to the student population, thus creating misunderstandings, exaggerated rumors and backbiting. He proceeded to say that "the only solution to this degeneration, as witnessed from some perverted leaflets running amok [amok] these two weeks, is open discussion." Hence, we learn that it was under a very divisive and dangerous situation that the article was released to the student body. Wallelign paid heavily for his courage, being sentenced to five years in prison but ended up serving only a few months before being released on pardon.

Wallelign asks the question "what are the Ethiopian people composed of?" and proceeds to answer by stating that Ethiopia is not a single nation, and defines what a nation is as follows:

“I stress on the word peoples because sociologically speaking at this stage Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages,
ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? Is it not made of a people with a particular tongue, particular ways of dressing, particular history, particular social and economic organization? Then may I conclude that in Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigrai Nation, the Amhara Nation,... and however much you may not like it the Somali Nation."

Wallelign wrote this before Professor Levine published *Greater Ethiopia*. I say this because Levine compellingly argued why there was a nation called Ethiopia. On receiving an award from SEED in May 2014, Professor Donald Levine (ፋታውራሪ ነበን ጥብር ጥንወ ግብረ በጥንሱ ወይም እትዮጵያ, as he preferred to call himself within his Ethiopian circle), reiterated what he wrote in his two books on Ethiopia, saying:

"Indeed, Adwa has long stood in my mind as a potent symbol of Ethiopia’s distinctiveness. Those who would deny Ethiopia’s long existence as a multiethnic society must be embarrassed by the Adwa experience. If the empire consisted of nothing but a congeries of separate tribal and regional groups, how then account for the courageous collaboration of 100,000 troops from dozens of ethnic groups from all parts of the country? How then explain the spirited national patriotism of such diverse leaders as Rases Alula, Mengesha, and Sibhat of Tigray, Dejazmatch Bahta of Akale Guzay, Wag Shum Guangul of Lasta, Ras Mikael of Wallo, Negus Takla- Haymanot of Gojjam, Ras Gobena and Dejazmatch Balcha of the Mecha Oromo, Ras Wele of the Yejju Oromo, Fitawrari Tekle of Wollega, Ras Makonnen of Harar, as well as Ras Gebeeyehu (who died fighting at Adwa) and Ras Abate of Shoa—sustained, please note, by massive material support to the war effort by the entire population, from north to south?"

Compared to Wallelign’s narrow definition of the term nation and declaring that Ethiopia is a prison of nationalities and concluding that these nations have a right to secede, Levine’s deeper search for Ethiopia’s distinctiveness is much more appealing to the student of Ethiopian history and politics today.

Wallelign never accepted the existence of Ethiopian nationalism. He argued that "there is of course the fake Ethiopian Nationalism advanced by the ruling class and unwillingly accepted and even propagated by innocent fellow travellers". He thought Ethiopian nationalism was the language and culture of the ruling class, that of the "Amhara-Tigrean supremacy". Of course, this fails to answer the question as to how Ethiopia survived as an independent state if it had no nationalism that binds its multi-ethnic forces in a common front against invading enemies. Wallelign seems to have ignored this fact and ended up declaring Ethiopian nationalism as fake. Wallelign further declares:

"Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask anybody what the "national dress" is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!!"

My recollection about the national culture of the time is different than what Wallelign tried to paint. It was common to watch various ethnic songs and dances during the weekly Hibre T’r’iit (ገብረ ከርገት) shows, and what was occasionally depicted at the National Theatre, and in the annual festivities of T’mqet, Mesqel and other national religious festivities. I distinctly remember attending a show at the National Theatre, most probably the same year Wallelign wrote the article, that was hosted in alliance with UNESCO, where all ethnic cultures were presented on
stage, and I remember being distinctly infatuated by the folk dance from Sidamo where Aselefech Ashne and other female dancers looked as if they were kissing with their male counterparts on stage. Hence Wallelign's assumption that the cultural heritage of other ethnic groups of Ethiopia were not recognized as being Ethiopian is wrong.

But of course, there was subtle discrimination in the cities based on facial features, tone of skin, and one's linguistic skills in speaking the Amharic language well, etc. However, it is important to note that the Amharic skill issue was more of an urban rural divide, where even provincial folks from Shoa, Wollo, Gojjam and Gondar were being ridiculed for being “country”, not being modern or as commonly called (ፋራ) and were made targets of light-hearted jokes based on their regional accents. But these subtle discriminations never materialized as state policy in denying citizenship rights to members of other ethnicities in jobs, training, scholarships for higher education etc. To my understanding and long observation of the Ethiopian political scene for the last half century, the question of nationalities in Ethiopia was more of recognition, equal treatment and RESPECT. Of course, the question of land ownership was the central issue since as an agrarian society land ownership was the measure of one's honor and even one's humanity. Hence the peasants who were dispossessed from owning land were also treated with disrespect, thereby adding insult to injury. The primary issue was the implementation of a just and fair land tenure system that primarily ensures a decent livelihood to the farmers who are the core drivers of the agrarian economy of Ethiopia.

On Ethiopian Nationalism

In his own way, Wallelign attempted to deconstruct Ethiopian nationalism as Amhara-Tigre chauvinism by arguing:

"to be a 'genuine Ethiopian' one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity and to wear the Amhara-Tigre Shamma in international conferences. In some cases to be an "Ethiopian", you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon's expression). Start asserting your national identity and you are automatically a tribalist ...".

I wonder if this presentation of the facts is acceptable to the follower of Ethiopian politics and history. What we are dealing here is more a problem of perception than reality, more of an urban life with a conformist norm built on multi-ethnic presence than a targeted strategic identity modification. What is not questionable is that the Ethiopian state never issued any verbal or written policy accepting a given dress code as acceptable as formal wear, or excluding certain cultural outfits as unacceptable or rejecting non-Amhara names. It never had such a policy. Individuals were changing their names willingly to fit the mood of the period. Currently with the ascendancy of Oromo power, we are witnessing individuals accenting their Oromo heritage or preferences to fit the mood of the period. It used to be common, and still is, among Chinese immigrants to change their first names when they become naturalized Americans and get their citizenship. Now with China becoming a world power, the Chinese may not even emigrate let alone change their names. It is important to remember that Ethiopians like Dejazmatch Balcha Safo, Dejazmatch Geressu Duki, Ato Bulcha Demekssa, Dr. Duri Mohammed, Dr. Abdul Mejid Hussein, General Jagama Kello, the Deressa brothers...many, many more rose to prominence and served with distinction without changing their names or cultural identities. The choices individuals made due to opportunism to shape their career, or fit in a society that has evolved in
a way that promotes urban identity cannot and should not be mistaken for a state endorsed policy. I think Wallelign failed on that front, in his inability to differentiate between state policy and individual preferences. Those who changed their names should take responsibility for their individual decisions instead of blaming the Ethiopian state.

Let me add another argument.

At the time of Wallelign's paper (1969), the level of urbanization in Ethiopia was only 5%. Most of these urban dwellers were Amharas, Gurages, Dorzes (Gamo) or Amharic speaking Oromos. The rural life was largely unaffected by government interference. The state's encroachment into the life of the peasant stood between negligible to non-existent. As long as the peasant pays his taxes through the local tax collectors, he didn't have to deal with the state. As a result, the peasant was free to speak his language, adhere to his tradition, demonstrate his culture, wear his cultural outfit, and celebrate life with songs in his own language. In addition to this when one considers the non-missionary policy of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, one will be at a loss to understand the significance of national oppression in Ethiopia. It is therefore appropriate to conclude that Amhara-Tigre supremacy was a highly exaggerated, ideologically induced concept. The ethnic contradictions were limited to the urban areas where elite competition in schools, trades and businesses could have been prevalent. And even that was undermined by the camaraderie in the student movement, a camaraderie where students from other ethnic groups were playing leadership roles. Haile Fida, Berhane Meskel Redda, Aid Ahmed, Mulugeta Mosisa, Aboma Mitiku, Yohannes Letta, Yohannes Benti, Gebru Mersha, Gebre Gebrewold, Yirga Tessema, Tilahun Gizaw, Mesfin Habtu, Tesfu Tesfaye etc. were all non Amharas. The student movement both at home and globally accepted these individuals as its leaders throughout the life of the movement. And as a result, there was little doubt that elevating the ethnic issue for equality would endanger the existence and continuance of Ethiopia as a multi ethnic society. It was believed even recognizing the agenda of the right to self-determination including secession will solidify the brotherhood and rank of the progressive forces thereby denying the possibility of the disintegration of the state due to ethnic tensions (what was coined as national oppression). That is why we find Wallelign's indulgence in accentuating the right to secession at a time when a truly ethnic disenfranchisement was practically non-existent. Calling Ethiopia's ethnicities as nations was like administering an adult dose of antibiotics to an infant with cold symptoms. Ethiopia was misdiagnosed and given the wrong medication and the wrong dosage.

Wallelign's Solution

Wallelign diagnosed Ethiopia's malady as being, practicing national oppression and moved to the question of how this can be resolved. He wrote his perception of a "genuine national" state as one that operates on the basis of equality for all as a solution. He declared in his article:

"what is this genuine national-state? It is a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, it is a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history. It is a state where Amharas, Tigres, Oromos, Aderes [Harari], Somalis, Wollamos [Wolaytas], Gurages, etc. are treated equally. It is a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally."
That was the promised land and vision of Wallelign, but Zemecha Wallelign, the final campaign that facilitated the ascension of the EPRDF forces to the seat of power at the palace of Emperor Menelik, delivered what he did not anticipate. After the decimation of the progressive forces both by the Dergue, the TPLF and their own mistakes the vanguard that was to keep Ethiopia’s unity was missing from the political landscape.

As a result, two ethnic parties for all regions except Tigray were formed, the constitution was framed with Wallelign in mind, ethnic homelands were formed as Kilils for the larger ethnic groups. Every ethnicity was free to use its language in schools, courts, and local governments, and in some cases a new language was created (WeGaGoDa “ወጋጎዳ” concocted from Welayta, Gamo, Gofa, Dawro) and forced upon people as a medium of instruction in schools. This was done out of sheer spite, and it was an ill-conceived notion of clearing the minds of the people from the perceived influence of the Amhara through the use of Amargna.

It has become apparent that what our ethno-nationalists aspire was contrary to the great strides we have taken to address the ethnic issue in the past 50 years since Wallelign wrote his article on the question of nationalities. Unfortunately, despite the several efforts to reform the political system, the demand for a separate homeland is still harbored by the ethno-nationalistic groups without considering the socio-economic fabrics that have woven the current Ethiopia; perhaps without learning from the lessons of other countries that chose to secede and have failed to fulfill the promise of utopia in a new homeland.

In the past half century, the advent of capitalism even in its limited statist form, has only consolidated the demand for more individual rights as the propertied class in each ethnicity learns its separate nationalism from its market, in its bid to control it alone. This will only get intensified as the economy expands widening the appetite of the ethnic entrepreneur not only to control his own market but also to dominate other markets within its reach. How to curb this insatiable appetite for more markets and control and end the competition and rivalry among the different ethnic business and political elites, remains an agenda for the present generation to address. Changing the constitutional framework from a unitary state to that of ethnic federalism and granting more rights to the federal entities has only empowered the ethnic entrepreneurs only to demand for more rights and drive the issue to its fringes.

Thirty years ago when TPLF and OLF ascended to power non-Oromos, but mainly Amharas became the targets and hundreds were slaughtered in Arbagugu, Bedeno, Weter etc. A year ago, when OPDO came to power hundreds were killed in Burayu, Legetafo, and other places in what is known as the Oromo kilil. The Burayu killings seemed to be politically motivated as the targets were a minority group called the Gamo. Two weeks ago, Amaras were targeted for looting and killing in Dodola, Bale zone. As I write these lines Orthodox Christian churches and monasteries are being burnt in Eastern Hararghe, the laity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian faith and its priests are continually targeted for persecution. There are reports that over 15,000 died just in the last three years alone. Most of these killings are concentrated in areas where Oromo moslems reside. It is not difficult to understand that this is a calculated move to destabilize the country and continue to benefit from the chaos and misfortune of innocent victims.
Is Wallelign’s Solution Working?

Foreign Policy magazine in its January 15, 2019 edition warned Ethiopia is moving in the direction of Yugoslavia articulating:

"Empowering ethnic groups through territorial autonomy has been a double-edged sword: While allowing self-government has reduced tensions stemming from the dominance of a particular group, it places ethnic belonging at the center of politics, links it to territory, and therefore risks an eventual increase in ethnic tensions."

Showing a way out of this quagmire FP pointed "Without careful management of the delicate transition, Ethiopia risks a dangerous fragmentation along ethnic lines."

Comparing Ethiopia's situation with that of Yugoslavia FP noted:

"Some differences work in Ethiopia’s favor. First, the units of the Ethiopian federation did not previously exist as separate states. Second, loyalty to the Ethiopian state irrespective of ethnic or national allegiance and identification is strong. (Even the few extreme nationalists, such as the Oromo Liberation Front, are generally reacting to rampant injustice in the past rather than challenging the existence of the state.) Third, the bond among nationalities appears stronger. After all, all groups remember the common struggle against the Italian invasion…"

Now, with the federal arrangement assured into the foreseeable future, some ethno nationalists are still nervous about its guarantee. In their bid to squeeze more advantages for their ethnic group they are demanding self-rule and total control of their resources. Even though theoretically no one opposes self-rule and controlling of one’s resources, the interpretation of these concepts has become destabilizing. To the young Oromo nationalist Jawar Mohammed and his Qeerroo young hooligans, self-rule and controlling one’s resources is interpreted as dislocating non-Oromos from "Oromo land" and confiscating the businesses of non-Oromo Ethiopian entrepreneurs, evicting Ethiopians from their hard earned wealth and built houses. Hundreds of businesses are closed, and those which are open work under duress, paying heavy illegal penalties to the Qeerroo for every business engagement they make. And the ruling party in the region watches on the side lines or collaborates with the hooligans who are just a fortnight away from becoming the Interahamwe of Oromia.

What Oromo nationalists of the Jawar ilk do not understand is that the so-called Oromo land belonged to other Ethiopians before the Oromo Migration since 1520. Ethiopians who live there should have equal rights to the resources and politics of the region and any attempt to continue to disenfranchise and ultimately dislocate non Oromos will be resisted. It is only by redefining and negotiating the terms of self-rule and control of resources that a stable political system can be a reality. The present status where hooligans became the police and the court, and where the ruling party ODP collaborates by standing on the side or openly assisting the Qeerroo cannot continue for long. It must come to an end.

At present the other contentious issue is that of Addis Ababa. The Oromo nationalists want to have a special privilege and interest over the city. In principle self-rule cannot be granted to the Oromo Killil and at the same time be denied to the residents of Addis Ababa. It is in the nature of the principle of law that it is either all-encompassing or void (non-existent). Ethiopia’s resources have been invested on the capital for over a hundred years. Majority of the loans
borrowed by Ethiopia are invested in Addis Ababa. The residents have lived in the city for over 130 years. They are its natural owners. The fact that Meles drew an administrative line for the Oromo around the capital should not grant special privileges to the Oromo Kilil. Ethiopia did not start with Meles or Menelik. There were Oromo Migration, Ahmed Gragn, Gelawdewos, Zerayakob, Amde Tsion etc. before them, and a king called Dawit and his city called Berara in what is now called Addis Ababa. Hence playing with the self rule of Addis Ababa by Oromo nationalists will undermine all the efforts done so far to create a lasting peace in a shared view of the future.

What is to be Done?

What we have witnessed in Ethiopia over the past few years is an alarming outcome of the ethno-nationalist agenda propagated by the various actors with varying vested interest and mandate in the current political environment and enabled primarily by the powers to be. This sets a dangerous precedent, lest we learn from the mistakes of countries like Rwanda, we are heading towards a dangerous path. Unless appropriate actions are taken swiftly to bring to justice the perpetrators and ensure peace and stability, the silent majority might rise up to defend its existence, and that would be a day of reckoning we all should pray not to see.

As I write these lines TPLF is being pushed out of the coalition it created 30 years ago because of an abrupt ideological shift within EPRDF and forced to think of alternatives such as creating an independent state of Tigray. It has already committed to run its own election on time and creating a de facto state. This move may make Eritrea nervous and can lead to a preemptive strike by Isayas, and the Ethiopian government may push the Amhara region to push for territorial demand from Tigray, engulfing the whole region into endless chaos and destruction. The Prime Minister should show leadership to avert such a catastrophe. If slowing the EPRDF merger process could keep the TPLF within the coalition, the PM should reconsider his position of ‘party merger at any cost’. Party merger can wait, election can wait, transitional justice can wait while we Ethiopians as a nation embark on National Reconciliation.

It is time for Ethiopia to finally debate the issue initiated by Wallelign 50 years ago. All stakeholders including the TPLF should come to the table and discuss and negotiate in good faith. All issues must be placed on the table. Those who seek session should not be shy to utter their interest. Those who believe in sanitized homeland where no other language speaker should inhabit their “God given” land should feel free to share their passion. Those who believe why a unitary state is a panacea for the country’s problems should reason out their positions. Those who think ethnic federalism empowers them better while keeping Ethiopia’s unity intact should feel free to share their thoughts. And finally, those who think federalism is a better option, but its present ethnic arrangement is destabilizing should present their option. It is only through a transparent and full debate followed by negotiations that we can resolve our current predicament and allow ourselves to concentrate on other economic and job creation issues. But to embark on this protracted and long voyage, all of us should start with the intent of preserving Ethiopia’s unity and make every effort to make it a reality.

Ethiopian unity must be preserved because as the Israeli nationalist Yoram Hazony said:

“the national state offers a great improvement in the possibilities for the collective self-determination of the tribes [ethnicities]. This is because the great obstacle to the self determination of clans and tribes [ethnicities] when they are armed and politically
independent is the incessant harm they do to one another through their relentless warfare.”

A unified Ethiopia will save its ethnicities, that Wallelign wrongly called nations, from relentless warfare and create mutual loyalty based on the shared history of resisting colonialism and Fascism. I believe a multi ethnic federation is possible as long as we dedicate ourselves to a common nation state called Ethiopia where every citizen lives anywhere in the country with full economic and political rights.