

By Dr. Teshome Abebe (June 01, 2014)



In a very recent article (the Economist 5-27-2014 By M.S.) titled “Cutting through the nonsense”, the author presented arguments and counter arguments regarding the continuing (but losing steam) debate regarding reparations to Black Americans whose ancestors were slaves.

Economists debate such ideas not only from the point of view of costs and benefits, but also from the view of ethical considerations including the notion that incentives do matter, but also because there are unintended consequences to all chosen actions.

I write this short essay not as a political theorist or historian, but as an economist whose primary interest is the development of Ethiopia socially, economically, technologically and scientifically. Along the way, however, I, like others, have developed a keen sense of observation that such development is intertwined, and most of the time, hindered by both political and historical accidents. My motive in writing this piece is to provoke and possibly hear from the many Ethiopians of similar interests, and in the process help contribute to a potentially healthy debate on the issue in an effort to find a useful path to a more assured and stronger union.

We all took notice of what transpired recently at the towns of Haromaya (Alemmaya), Dire Dawa, Adama (Nazret), Medawlabu, and Ambo in Oromia Zone (Killil) when ‘university students’ went out on a rampage complaining that the Addis Ababa master planning process encroached on Oromo territory, and thereby, by definition, altered the limits of the Constitution’s definition of territorial integrity. These are my words, but the purported arguments are essentially those. Prior to the outburst of the ‘university students’, there were a handful of articles articulating the point of view that the current seeming discomfort between Ethiopia’s Nations and Nationalities could be assuaged if only the Amara were to acknowledge and ask for forgiveness for what their ancestors may have done during past regimes—presumably going back to many centuries.

Leaving aside the unresolved issues pertaining to the self-administration of Addis, its federal city status, and because of its location within Oromia, enjoying the cultural and political benefits of same, Addis is an international city. As such it is influenced more by international patterns of development and progress rather than by just local and provincial attitudes. And that is as it should be. But there is more here that needs to be pointed out, and it has to do with the universities. In Ethiopia today, as in many countries, there are universities that are funded and

operated at the federal level, and there are universities funded and operated by the Killils. The Killils have been given a mandate to start their own universities and institutions of higher learning. Of course, this raises the attendant issues of Killil faculties, killil students, Killil curriculum, and Killil administrators. It has been stated that even the federal government itself has been assigning students and faculty on the basis of their Killil origins. With this setup, however, the relationship with or connectedness to the federal institutional structure diminishes over time.

On the face of it, there is absolutely nothing wrong in what I just described above. Ordinary people live and learn under the circumstances that are comfortable for them as the whole attempt should be about the learning. It is all about the learning—what students learn. And learning requires engagement and motivation, and through this learning the acknowledged goals of every individual, namely, of socialization, self-esteem, employability and inclusion are met. Killils should have the flexibility and authority to engage and motivate students in ways they feel would accomplish the goal.

But what happens when the learning itself is incoherent, untenable and not true in its conception? What happens, for example, when the learning is based on myth, and that myth includes the purported sacrifices a class of people had endured—sacrifices that can not be checked and cross-checked to ascertain and record as facts? What if, for instance, the learning is all about the perceived and actual injustices of the past? Let me ask the question more directly: do current generations have responsibilities for injustices committed by their forefathers centuries ago? Granted we all bear and have ethical stake on any event that happened before we were born. But do people in Amara Killil or Tigrai Killil or Somali Killil today have responsibility for something that happened two hundred years ago to the Oromo people? Do the Oromo children of today have any responsibility to the Amara, Tigre or other peoples of Ethiopia for what happened in the 15th and 16th centuries, or even 100 years ago? How far do we go to allocating or assuming guilt, and at what point do we stop talking about the injustices of the past?

I think that what is important is to consider what the problem to be solved by allocating or assuming guilt would be. What, for instance, is to be solved if the Amara were to accept guilt for what Menilik is claimed to have done to Oromos or Tigres as a people? If we can determine with certainty what is to be solved, the next consideration ought to be what are the costs that that assumption of guilt would impose; how likely is that to cure things and make the offended whole; and what are the undesirable effects of such assumption of guilt vis-à-vis the benefits they promise to deliver? (Eritrea would be a good consideration here.)

We have many examples in history that help provide some of the answers to these questions. In the first place and in general, we can stipulate that our actions should not be influenced by myth (as informing as myth could be). Myths—as important as they are in shaping cultures, are images and ethics that are now too distant and fuzzy as both fact and fiction and can never be separated from one another. Furthermore, the limitation of man's actions by fixity of myth shows disinterest for every quantitative form of progress. The result of this condition is feelings of guilt more governed by taboos rather than by facts.

Secondly, in our modern world, victors with sufficient resources generally atomize their enemies—in effect erasing them from history as well. In this way, history is rewritten into entirely the story of the victorious. Nothing you see is what it actually is. Pre-historic victors, for example, are said to spare the enemy's women and take them home, often to bear the victor's children—the partial continuity of the vanquished by way of reproduction! Today, history of the

vanquished is wiped out and replaced by new and made-up history. Ironically, the new writers of history join the dark gallery of history writers who have gone before them—each of them less important than the previous ones, since their actions become so tragically familiar.

Third, the traditional division of land (s) into opposing camps was based in part on attitudes of aggression and paranoia. Today, we aspire to a constant recourse of optimism where aggression and paranoia are subordinated to give us the power to revise our attitudes, values and possibly, actions. In this way, we aspire to endeavor in the light of unifying ideas.

Fourth, our educational system should be geared not at confining knowledge to isolated places, isolated themes, and isolated curriculum even within the life of the individual. Rather, it should be guided by a concept(s) than by an impulse(s).

So what is the way forward?

For starters, dismissing the disaffection of a group or groups of people by previous or the current state of affairs is ludicrous. I think that disaffection and discomfort (injustice) should be acknowledged openly and fully. Second, we can postulate that it is very important for people to understand that there may have been injustices committed against a group or groups of people as a class. Because of that, we can further argue that it is true that one class of people owes another class of people something. Here, what is owed is not certain. But because I can not finish this article without a) suggesting solutions to the limits of guilt; and b) provoking the multitude of colleagues and readers to state their take on them, here are one or two ideas: first, let us stipulate that if one is older than 100 years or deceased, they owe nothing whatsoever to the current generation. We shall, therefore, agree that events that have taken place over a century ago should not form a basis for guilt. Let these people move on to the Promised Land on their tiptoes or rest in peace! Second, if one is between 50 and 100 years old, they are probably beneficiaries of some actions of their forefathers, and owe the current generation something taking into account both the good as well as the bad. Third, if one is between 25 and 50 years young, they are probably perpetuating and/or committing an injustice of some sort yet to be defined by a future generation, so watch out. And finally, fourth, if one is less than 25 years old, they need to make sure that both their education as well as actions is honorable and unifying to future generations! Along the way, they need to banish from their souls all forms of prejudice, and cleanse themselves of any hatred and jealousy. They should aim to make justice the compelling guide to their lives with the clarity and grace that it is bound to bring to their endeavor!

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