

Ethiopian National Movement (ENM)
and
Some Sensitive Oromo Issues
by
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Stating that Ethiopia at this time is at a crossroad may sound like a cliché but it is literally true. I heartily believe that this time is a watershed moment for this generation of Ethiopians. TPLF's rule is weakening albeit it is still strong enough to kill; a new generation of Ethiopians hungry for freedom and true people power is rising; many veteran politicians from the Oromo freedom struggle and from the "Ethiopian Unity" camp are taking a leap of faith and charting a new and open-minded path; many prominent Oromo Ethiopians who grew up learning the good, the bad, and the ugly of our country's history who also, may I say, still speak Amharic are alive although becoming fewer and fewer. Now is the time, to use the timeless words of Martin Luther King, to think twice regarding our country's future.

This is the time to start thinking out of our old and failed boxes on all sides of the political paradigm. As many writers and commentators have said on different forums, the formation of the Ethiopian National Movement (ENM) is an encouraging beginning to save Ethiopia from being disintegrated as a result of the blind measures of TPLF's leaders. ENM's success as an umbrella organization that may facilitate conditions for a peaceful transitional system after the unquestionable downfall of TPLF depends on the active role all of the founders as well as future members of the Movement will play.

From what we have seen so far, it looks very clear that the mutual understanding and strong solidarity between the two larger peoples of our country (Oromos and Amharas) in the life and death struggle against TPLF gangs clearly showed the responsibilities these two pillars of our country have to shoulder not only to get rid of the TPLF rule but also to establish a true federal democratic system in post-TPLF Ethiopia. However, some issues that may look minor to non-Oromos but very basic issues for the Oromo camp may negatively affect the success of the Movement as well as the solidarity and brotherhood we have practically seen between Oromos and Amharas. These issues should be given proper attention by all parties that really want to see strong and united multi-national Federal Democratic Ethiopia.

These issues are: (1) the official use of Afaan Oromoo and (2) the display of the Oromo freedom flag at all Ethiopian events where the Oromo people and Oromo political organizations are taking part. It should be understood that the Oromo freedom flag is **no longer the logo of a single Oromo political Organization**. It became a symbol of the **beliefs, aspirations, interests and identifications of Oromos of all walks of life – irrespective of affiliations to any political groups**. That is why the use of the Oromo freedom flag as well as Afaan Oromoo alongside the tricolor Ethiopian national flag and the Amharic language have been successfully practiced in the public demonstrations held by all Ethiopians against the TPLF rule in different major cities of USA and Europe. These approaches were very smart and encouraging for bringing the Oromo people towards closely working with their Ethiopian brothers and sisters. Nothing negative has happened as a result of either the use of Afaan Oromoo or the display of the Oromo freedom flag at the anti-TPLF demonstrations held in Minnesota, Washington State (Seattle), Germany, Sweden, etc. These practices of solidarity rather sent shocking messages and signals to TPLF as they have practically demonstrated the true unity of the Ethiopian peoples.

It has been repeatedly explained that what the founders of ENM would like to achieve is to facilitate a transitional system that will lead to the establishment of a united, sovereign, developed, and very strong Federal Democratic Ethiopia in which all its peoples see themselves as equal citizens. It is based on the strong belief of establishing a new democratic country that the Oromo Democratic Front (ODF) managed to arrive at the stage of signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Patriotic Ginbot-7 for Unity and Democracy (PG-7) and also arrived at the historical stage of playing very significant role in the processes of the formation of the Ethiopian National Movement. However, the ODF agenda for the future united multi-national Federal Democratic Ethiopia doesn't look clear to many people, especially to the people at the side of the "Ethiopian Unity" camp. I am saying this based on the different comments that I have noticed on some Ethiopian websites, different media outlets including ESAT and also based on some emotional comments posted in social media regarding the official use of Afaan Oromoo and the display of the Oromo freedom flag at public meetings.

At this historical time when the Ethiopian National Movement (ENM) is getting ready to work towards the achievement of its major goals, I wanted to write this piece to very sincerely and honestly underline that **Ethiopians of all walks of life and all ethnic backgrounds have to think twice before taking unnecessary actions that may negatively affect the unity of the country. It will be a historical mistake if we may not give attention to the critical importance of the Oromo language as a uniting factor and the Oromo people's meaningful symbol of struggle for freedom, justice, equality and democracy in all the events that are going to be organized to free Ethiopia from TPLF brutal rulers.**

When I say we have to draw people's attention to the critical importance of Afaan Oromoo and the Oromo Freedom Flag, I am not only trying to appeal to the better angles of our brothers and sisters in the "Ethiopian Unity" camp but also warning the danger that would follow from failing to seize this opportune moment.

I do hope that most of the readers of this piece know that Afaan Oromoo is a language spoken by more than half the total population of Ethiopia. So, the Oromo language also belongs to very large number of people that are not Oromos by blood. The Oromo freedom flag also represents the freedom struggle that has consumed millions of precious Oromo lives as it continues to do to date. The Oromo freedom flag contains a respected symbol of the Oromo culture and value - the **Odaa Tree**. For the Oromo people, therefore, any action against the official use of their language and the display of the freedom flag are not only unacceptable, but also potentially damaging factors that may negatively affect **the very existence of our country as a united Ethiopia.**

As a prominent Ethiopian intellectual who gave a brief speech at the public meeting that was held to announce the formation of ENM has clearly said, **Ethiopians shouldn't be scared of the display of an Oromo flag that contains Oda Tree on any Ethiopian events. It shouldn't be seen as something negative; instead it should be embraced.** That same prominent Ethiopian intellectual also said that **the image of a large tree at the center of the Oromo freedom flag displays a symbol that our peoples back in Ethiopia have been using as a place of gathering to discuss their social, political, economic, cultural, etc., issues.** He has specifically mentioned a huge tree that he was familiar with during his young age in the historical city of **Gonder**. I personally believe that the above mentioned genuine approach of a well-known Ethiopian intellectual is the reasonable approach that all Ethiopians should have for our freedom flag as well as for the use of our language - Afaan Oromo.

Language in the first place must be seen as a resource and a wealth of any nation, not as a liability. I am a proud Oromo to my bone. But I bless my parents and my teachers who taught me Amharic language. I am proud to speak Amharic as good as I speak my mother tongue – Afaan Oromoo. If we really want to see strong and united Ethiopia, we have to create a new generation of Ethiopians that will view language not as a line of division or a boundary but as a common heritage. So, let's not limit ourselves to Amharic and Afaan Oromoo and imagine a future generation of Ethiopians that can speak Amharic, Afaan Oromoo, Tigrigna, Guragigna and hopefully other Ethiopian languages fluently and interchangeably. At that time **the lines that currently divide us will be blurred and who knows, in time, these lines may disappear although that is not a necessary condition to have a strong and united Ethiopia.**

I am old enough to remember the Ethiopia of the Derg times, at least the later years of the Derg, very well. People sang, fought and died for a red flag, and three figurines of Marx, Engels and Lenin. These symbols had nothing to do with our country's history, culture or language. But we were emotional enough to shed our blood to fight for these symbols. But, the Odaa Tree that we see on the Oromo freedom flag is part of our heritage and our culture. I mean not only of the Oromo but also the other nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. By the way, **many Oromo Ethiopians are not also oblivious of the fact that Oromo patriots died defending the tricolored Ethiopian flag and fighting colonizers. Moreover, many Oromo Ethiopians also know that the green, yellow and red color of the Ethiopian flag has also through time came to be a Pan-African color.** However, the successive Ethiopian regimes have used this very flag to symbolize their dynasty and subjugation of other Ethiopians like the Oromos. Let me be a bit provocative here. To take the current regime as an example, TPLF has added a patch of color and a star with rays at the center of the Ethiopian flag. Which one is closer and meaningful to our tradition and culture: the Odaa Tree or a blue star that does not conjure any true meaning in the minds of Ethiopians?

Let me take this opportunity to honestly say something that most politicians may not want to publicly say, may be for the sake of political correctness. As we are today, if one of the readers of this piece of writing may get a chance to travel to any town in Oromia (for example to my hometown Ambo, a now historical town of Oromia where the popular Oromo revolution has started - Ginchi, Gedo, Nekemte, Gimbi, Bushoftu, Adama, Chiro, Badessa, Asella, Robe, Jimma, Gore, Mettu, etc.) and ask any young Oromo (an Oromo between the ages of 20 & 30), about the Ethiopian flag and the Amharic language he/she will get a very shocking answer. Whether we may believe it or not, no young Oromo generation gives priority to the Ethiopian flag and the Amharic language as compared to the Oromo freedom flag and Afaan Oromoo. That is why we have never seen a single Ethiopian flag in any of the demonstrations that took place in different towns of Oromia. In most cases the slogans chanted were also in Afaan Oromoo. This is not due to hatred either of the flag or of the Amharic language as some people in the "Unity Camp" may try to conclude.

The main reason, I do believe, is Oromos couldn't see themselves in the realities that this flag as well as the Amharic language represent, especially under the TPLF blind rule of the last twenty-five years. For that matter, almost all young Oromos in the above stated age range cannot speak, read Amharic texts and write in Amharic. I have learned by talking to many young Oromo College/University graduates of very recent time that young Oromo students enrolled at different colleges/universities that the TPLF government has opened in different parts of the country cannot communicate with other Ethiopian students in Amharic. This is due to people's use of their own languages as medium of instruction at schools and as official language in public offices after the downfall of the Derg regime. This was not a gift of TPLF to the Ethiopian people. It was the result of the sacrifices of very large number of Ethiopian

democrats/revolutionaries that also include the Oromo nationalists that were fighting the Derg regime under the leadership of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

I have very recently heard a comment made by a lady who was trying to criticize what happened at a meeting that was held in Washington, DC Metropolitan area to announce the formation of the Ethiopian National Movement. She said that “the Oromo language was spoken first at the meeting whereas the national language of Ethiopia is Amharic and the OLF flag was displayed next to the Ethiopian national flag - protocol wise it was wrong”. Having the above mentioned reality about the Oromo youth’s inability of understanding Amharic and how they see the issue of the tricolor Ethiopian flag in mind, I would like to ask the following questions:

whom do Ethiopians in the so called “Unity Camp” are trying to address or refer to when they are saying Amharic is first and Afaan Oromoo should come after what they consider a “National Language”? How did these people take for granted that the Ethiopian national flag in which successive Ethiopian regimes have placed their own preferred symbols represents the interests, aspirations and beliefs of the Oromo people as compared to the Oromo freedom struggle flag?

True, Amharic was and still is the official language of the successive Ethiopian regimes, including the current TPLF led minority regime. The fact of the matter is the time when Amharic alone was taken as a unifying language, especially for the new generation of Oromos, has passed twenty-five years ago. One may easily prove this by talking to any young Oromo that recently came to Europe or USA from the Oromia parts of Ethiopia. I personally have tried it repeatedly and couldn’t get that many young Oromos that came from Oromia and speak/understand Amharic. Whether we accept it or not, **for the large majority of the Oromo people in general and for the Oromo youth in particular, Afaan Oromoo is their national language.** So, if we may ask the question of protocol as to which language should be spoken first at any public events where Oromos may take part, Oromos will definitely say **Afaan Oromoo** should be spoken first. The same is true about the national flag that our forefathers have sacrificed for. It is undeniable fact that the new Oromo generation has lived and is still living in a country where all regions of the country have their own flags. **Don’t forget, the tricolor flag that we in the old generation take as the symbol of freedom, unity, development, hope, sacrifice, etc., was described as a “piece of rag” by the late leader of TPLF.** Whether the purpose was to make it unique or to relate it to TPLF’s oppressive rule, Melese’s government, just like its predecessors, did put its own unique symbol in the center of the tricolor Ethiopian national flag. Due to the oppressive and inhuman nature of the TPLF led regime, the Oromo people relate the current Ethiopian flag with the sufferings they have been through for the last twenty-five years. My point, therefore, is it will not be easy to expect Oromos to unanimously line only under the tricolor flag. Thus, if we may want to see a strong and united Federal Democratic Ethiopia, we should be able to accommodate the beliefs and interests of all the peoples of the country and work towards the formation of a common country in which all its peoples may see themselves as equal partners. Arriving at that destination will not be possible by forcing the large majority of the population of our country; the Oromos, not to use their language and not to display their freedom flag at different public events.

It is obvious that, for the last twenty-five years, in most instances politically active Oromos were known for distancing themselves from any activities related to Ethiopia. Thanks to the farsighted approaches of prominent Oromo leaders, that frustrating and worrisome situation is in the process of being changed. All concerned Ethiopians from all ethnic, social, cultural and political backgrounds should be able to strengthen this promising beginning by trying to understand and also accommodate the feeling of their Oromo

brothers and sisters. **I would like to underline that what may make the Oromo people active part of the efforts to establish a new Federal Democratic Ethiopia will be the unreserved respect and recognition of their identity, language, culture, social values and self-governance without any kind of unnecessary interferences. In this process, the Oromo camp should be able to publicly see the official use of their language and be able to display the very popular symbol of their life and death struggle for freedom. That simple measure is among the factors that may make Oromos to play their fair share in the struggle for the formation of a new democratic country that its entire peoples will commonly call "our Ethiopia".** Any measure that might be contrary to this will definitely lead to the destruction of Ethiopia that most of us would not like to see.

In my opinion, the Oromo language and freedom flag issues are very important issues that did not get the proper understanding they deserve from the so called "Ethiopian Unity" camp. As a proud Oromo-Ethiopian my suggestion to fellow Ethiopians, therefore, is to follow **what was done in Washington, DC Metropolitan Area on October 30, 2016** to announce the formation of ENM at all future public events where Oromos may take part. Irrespective of all kinds of emotional comments against what was done at the public meeting of October 30, 2016, the organizers had valid reasons when they were insisting the inclusion of Afaan Oromoo as one of the medium of communication of the meeting and also when they decided to put Alaabaa Oromoo on the stage next to the Ethiopian flag. That approach had significant political value/advantage for both sides. For the simple reason that Afaan Oromoo was used as part of the medium of communication and Alaabaa Oromoo was on the stage, people in the Oromo side considered the event as their own event in which they have clearly seen themselves. On the other hand, the rational elements of the Ethiopian Unity camp also concluded that their Oromo brothers and sisters are part of the Ethiopian activities and there will not be any worry about future separation of Oromia from Ethiopia.

This approach will negatively affect only the TPLF brutal rulers. Because, they do not like this action as it leads to the unshakable unity of the Oromo people with other Ethiopians in general and with the Amhara people in particular. On the contrary, when we are denying the use of Afaan Oromoo and the display of their freedom flag, we are knowingly or unknowingly, helping TPLF's divide and rule policy.

Still the proponents of "Ethiopian Unity" are questioning why Afaan Oromoo was used and why the Alaabaa Oromoo was placed next to the "Ethiopian Flag". For the Oromo, myself included, Alaabaa Oromoo and Afaan Oromoo are among the reflectors of Oromo identity that the Oromo people would like to see at official status in tomorrow's Federal Democratic Ethiopia. Today's measures are to facilitate conditions for tomorrow's results. Any action against this approach will directly mean pushing aside the very rational, reasonable and farsighted Oromos that would like to call themselves Oromo-Ethiopians. I don't think none of us would like to see the consequence of this action.

Any approach that is against what I have tried to explain above, will lead to the scenario that caused Eritrea to become an independent country and resulted in making Ethiopia a landlocked country of more than hundred million people. If I am not mistaken, it was the blind move and lack of patience of the Ethiopian politicians of that time that pushed Eritrean nationalists to start a freedom struggle after the federation system was scrapped. According to what have been written in some historical documents, the UN had tried to mediate between the Haile-Selassie regime and the Eritrean forces in order to make Eritrea remain part of Ethiopia under genuine arrangement of a federal system. These documents show that the lowlanders that were known to be followers of Islamic religion preferred to join the Sudan and the highlanders that were followers of Orthodox Christianity preferred the federal arrangement with Ethiopia.

According to historical evidences, the highlanders (Christian Eritreans) convinced the lowlanders to be united with Ethiopia through federal arrangement. The lowlanders accepted the idea of federation provided that their language will be Arabic and Tigrigna and also they will be allowed to display their own flag as Eritreans. The then Ethiopian politicians that surrounded Haile-Selassie's throne became so emotional and said that no language other than Amharic and no flag other than the tricolor (green, yellow and red) Ethiopian flag. So, the Haile-Selassie regime annexed Eritrea as the 14th region (Teqlay Gizat) of Ethiopia without the will and full agreement of the large majority of Eritreans. In fact, there were Eritreans that were members of the then "Hager Fikir Mahiber". They were somehow in agreement with Haile-Selassie's regime. As we learned from history, those in the Hager Fikir Mahiber were few in number and couldn't dominate the side that supported Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. The important point I would like to underline here is that the impatient Ethiopian nationalists refused the requests of Eritreans and pushed them towards the struggle for independence. As all of us have witnessed, in 1991 Eritrea declared its independence and Ethiopia became a landlocked country thanks to the blind love of Ethiopians for the empty slogan – ANDIT ETHIOPIA, ANID HIZIB, ANID KUWANKUWA, ANID SANDAK ALAMA, etc. I hope our generation of Ethiopians will not repeat that historical mistake in the technology dominated 21st century and push the Oromo camp towards the formation of "Independent Republic of Oromia".

Two important points should be clear regarding the display of the Oromo freedom flag alongside with the Ethiopian tricolor national flag: (1) In tomorrow's Federal Democratic Ethiopia, the two flags either hang together or they will be forced to hang separately. It is no more possible to erase the Oromo flag from the hearts of a generation of Oromos that have died and suffered in its defense. (2) We have the choice of accepting these two flags are representing struggles at two levels – on the one hand, the tricolor Ethiopian national flag represents the life and death struggle to defend Ethiopia in which Oromos have also played significant role. On the other hand, the Oromo flag represents the Oromo resistance against internal injustice. If we fail to deploy both flags in this complementary fashion they will definitely end up standing on their own.

The unbelievable sacrifices of the Oromo people for the last more than one year clearly showed that nothing beyond freedom from TPLF's rule will stop the life and death struggle that still continued by courageous and determined Oromos in general and the Oromo youth in particular. The fundamental solutions we should find for the diversified problems of our country, therefore, should be the kind of solutions that have very carefully taken the Oromo questions into proper consideration. Recognizing the Oromo language and Oromo's symbol of freedom struggle is among the very minimum measures that rationally thinking leaders of the Ethiopian political organizations as well as Ethiopian individuals should agree upon. **Whether we like it or not, fundamental solutions for the multi-faceted problems of Ethiopia are unthinkable without active participation and strong leadership of the Oromo people.**

The Oromo and Amhara people's struggle for freedom have forced the minority regime in power to arrive at the final stage of depending on a military rule in the name of the state of emergency. The peoples' struggle is still going on in different forms and shapes. The freedom struggle will not stop until it gets rid of TPLF rule. That day will definitely come how long it may take. Until the arrival of that day, let us not squander the ray of hope that is radiating in the horizons of Ethiopia today. The new language of solidarity between the Oromo and Amhara youth and the new engagement between the Oromo and pro-unity politicians is very promising and unprecedented compared to what prevailed over the last 25 years.

For the continuation of Ethiopian Unity the blind move of all or nothing strategy does not help anyone. My call is – let us be meek enough to listen to and understand the heart-beat of Oromos vis-à-vis their language and symbols of their struggle for freedom: let's be smart, open-minded and creative enough to preserve the unity of our country. The time to challenge our long-held beliefs and question our own views on all sides is now, not tomorrow.

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