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Walleign Mekonnen on the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia

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The question of nationalities in Ethiopia has been the most contentious issue since Ethiopia took its current shape between the late 1880s and the early 1900s. The northern part of the present day Ethiopia, inhabited by the majority Abyssinians and the minority Kushitic Agews existed for over 2 Millennia in the name of the Abyssinian Kingdom with remarkable civilizations such as Axum, Lalibela and Gonder. However, Ethiopia as we know it today is the result of the internal expansion by King Minelik II of Shoa during the late 1880s until the early 1900s. The majority (70%) of the current Ethiopian population, which lives in the southern, western and eastern regions of the country became part of the present day Ethiopia only during this period of internal expansion. The majority Kushitic peoples such as Sidama, Oromo, Afar, Ogaden, etc and the Omotic peoples such as Wolayita, Gamo, Gofa, Dawuro, Konta, etc and the Nilotic peoples living in the border between Ethiopia and the Sudan all became part of the present day Ethiopia between the 1880s and early 1900s.

Historical evidences suggest that the rivalry between the two colonial powers, Britain and France in the horn of Africa, during the Scramble for Africa, facilitated the rapid Abyssinian expansion towards the south, the east and the west during this period. The two colonial powers provided King Minelik II ample rifles and other war materials that other ethnic groups living in the interior lacked. Therefore the King was able to easily subdue these hitherto independent African Kushitic, Omotic and Nilotic states with in a relatively short period of time.

Although these peoples were annexed over a century ago, due to lack of sustainable economic development and industrialization as well as limited urbanization, 85 % of them still live off subsistence agriculture in rural areas. The peoples of the South, the East and the West have therefore fully preserved their unique cultures, languages, histories and economic systems until today.

Due to the failure of nation building arising primarily from failed economic

development and successive dictatorial political systems, the country remained an amalgamation of nations and nationalities who constantly resented being part of a failed state. It is based on this reality that Ethiopians from the South, the East and the West often voice concerns about the issues of nations and nationalities in the past and current Ethiopian politics. This is often misunderstood by their Abyssinian compatriots who unwittingly or intentionally refuse to accept the diversity of the country.

This is in contrast to the spirit of the 1960s Ethiopian student movement which fully recognized the diversity of the peoples living in the country and their brutal and inhuman oppression and exploitation by the Abyssinian political elites.

The most eloquent analysis of the issues of nations and nationalities in Ethiopia was provided by the late Walleign Mekonnen, who was the most progressive Abyssinian in the history of the country, and one of the leaders of the student movements in Haile Selassie I University (the Current Addis Ababa University) in the late 1960s. Given the internal and international political developments during that time, his article was unsurpassed by its intellectual rigor and ability to portray the reality on the ground in the country. It was an epic essay.

However, I would like to warn readers that I do not endorse the ideology of the writer of the article. Walleign 's analysis of the question of nationalities in Ethiopia was based on the socialist premises. His thoughts were influenced both by the contemporary global political trends and the domestic archaic political system of the feudal monarchy. Unfortunately, Walleign did not have an opportunity to live and witness the down fall of the brutal Ethiopian feudal monarchy in 1974 and the brutal global socialism in 1991. I believe that if he had a chance, he would have radically altered the premises of his analysis.

Our basic objective in publishing Walleign 's article is only to reemphasize the fact that the question of nations and nationalities in Ethiopia of the 1960s is equally relevant and burning in Ethiopia of today. This is not the negation of the current tendencies for African and global unity. Africa can not be free and united if it does not respect the rights of the 2000 nationalities and peoples living in the continent.