‘I am a citizen of humanity first and by necessity, and a citizen of France second, and only by accident.’ – Montesquieu

First, let me state clearly that I am an expert neither on identity nor on nationalism; I am only a student who is interested in issues related to Ethiopia; this article is just a reflection of what I feel as a young Ethiopian.

Because Ethiopia is our birthplace, whatever happens there, it affects us deeply. When we hear or see good news, we feel happiness and pride. Similarly, when bad news hits, we feel anger, sadness, and shame. Among these various feelings that we experience, ‘pride’ stands out.

PRIDE AND IDENTITY

One of the definitions of ‘pride’ found in the Oxford dictionary:

‘A feeling or deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired.’

Being proud is always challenging as much as it’s important; it’s challenging because wherever there is pride, there is prejudice; it’s important because pride (i.e. self-respect) boosts self-confidence, and vice versa. However, excessive pride results in exaggerated self-importance and is a recipe for a disaster. Comparably, excessive humility destroys creative and productive potential. There is a saying in Amharic: ‘Yekerere Yibetesal’ (i.e. extremism of any kind self-destroys).

Consider the question: What makes one (a proud) Ethiopian? This question was raised before I was even born, and still remains debatable despite the dozens of books and articles that have been written about it. Today, the duality of ethnic heritage and national identity is very common in Ethiopia; this dual identity is more or less similar to an American identifying herself as Latino-American, Korean-American, Polish-American, Black-American, Caucasian-American, and so forth – the ethnic or racial heritage does not diminish her ‘Americanness’, but embellishes it.

Individual and collective identities can coexist as long as one does not destroy the other – this was the exact reason why individuals like Wallelign Mekonnen addressed the national question aggressively and sacrificed their precious lives in the 1960s, clearing the path for others to follow in their footsteps; though some people argue that those young people were ‘just in love’ with the ‘Marxist-Leninist’ ideals, it is difficult to completely discredit the genuineness of the youth movement and the crucial questions raised during that critical period in the history of Ethiopia.
If the coexistence of ethnic and national identity appears impossible, consider your body as Ethiopia and the various organs that exist in it as the different ethnic groups; each organ has its own unique identity, but they also act as one. The individual identity and the collective identity can be a source of pride in a positive way when one tolerates the other and when fairness exists. But then the collective identity could become a source of discontent, forcing one to cling to one’s individual identity, while allowing opportunist minds to turn things around for their advantage, which could in turn lead everyone involved to identity crisis, to exaggerated self-awareness, or to unnecessary and bloody conflicts. Discontent happens when one oppresses and considers itself more important than the other, instead of celebrating diversity, tolerating differences, and sharing political and economic power fairly.

My friend wrote me the following after reading the draft copy of this article:

‘The ethnic and national identity thing has also been an issue for me since I was a child. I was born in a Muslim Oromo dominated Bale. We had Muslim Oromo neighbours on all four directions. But I always sensed the underlying uneasy feeling my parents had about living in that province. My mother is Amhara through and through, my father believes he is Oromo – I say that because he claims his ethnic background from an Oromo grandfather who adopted his Amhara father, but his mother is Amhara through and through. So what does that make me? That was a question that always bugged me. Things got real when official circumstances needed that data. When I went to get my ID from kebele, my mother asked me which ethnicity I want indicated there, then when the census people showed up at our house and asked for ethnic backgrounds, there I was contemplating the issue again. My father’s slight disappointment that I identified myself as Amhara didn’t help the situation. But I got to that conclusion using the same way that he chose. He chose to be Oromo, despite knowing that he has no Oromo blood. So I just made a decision, I chose to be Amhara. I could have also said, my dad is Oromo so I am Oromo. But the thing is, I don’t think he is, he chose to be.’

Another friend added:

‘I grew up in a family that sympathises with the old idea of Ethiopia and which feels threatened by issues that arise based on ethnicity. Both my parents are fluent in Oromic and Amharic and have Oromo blood and they still hold their ground steadfast when it comes to their national pride. I always consider myself Ethiopian first and do not even want to think about my ethnicity; I have no tolerance towards people who are more proud about their ethnic background. May be it is through an extensive discourse we can get to the point where we feel comfortable about the existence of other groups with different ideologies.’

I admire my friends’ honesty and crisp writing. They not only capture the identity dilemma that Ethiopians face today, they also delicately suggest, as shown in the second comment, one of the remedies for our nagging national problem: Extensive discourse. I am sure that many agree with their stand just as many others would disagree. However, their openness is a great example of the extra mile this generation is willing to take in order to resolve conflicting ideas through debate and dialogue instead of the tried and tested methods of the past that have kept us in an unstable political environment.

MIXED ETHNIC (OR NATIONAL) IDENTITY AND PRIDE

As many individuals have argued, a mixed background, though during the time of peace considered a source of cultural pride, during the time of political chaos could become a source of anguish and identity crisis; it could also force the individual to either pick sides or to remain neutral, both difficult options depending on the situation. Desmond Tutu, the South African cleric and activist, once said: ‘If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.’

Consider the Ethio-Eritrea case: Now almost all Eritreans happily celebrate their independence from Ethiopia. The ‘liberation,’ regardless of Eritrea’s domestic problems, has been a source of national pride, especially for those who fought during the war and for the young who were born after the war. The separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia, on the other hand, remains a thorny issue for Ethiopians who
still desire to reunite the two countries for political, cultural, and economic reasons. The situation makes life more complicated for a child born from both Ethiopian and Eritrean parents, especially when the parents file for divorce because of the politics. It is even worse when you look at it from the perspective of Meles Zenawi, for example, who is half Ethiopian and half Eritrean - no wonder why some see him as ‘a cold Machiavellian rationalist,’ an expression borrowed from a third friend of mine.

A mixed background, apart from serving as a source of cultural pride, can force individuals like Meles to develop a calculating mindset because people are more likely to distrust them even when they are genuine, a case that Jawar Mohammed cleverly articulated in his recent article: ‘Tigrean Nationalism: From Revolutionary Force to Weapon of Repression’.

WHY SHOULD I BE PROUD? LEMIN? LIMINTAY? MAALIF?

Should I be proud of being Ethiopian? No doubt, I should, but it has to be in a realistic manner; I have to carefully discern my source of pride. What is that makes me proud? In the Western media, Ethiopia has been synonymous with civil war, hunger, drought, population explosion, environmental degradation, diseases, and all the bad things that one could imagine, which for sure are not a source of pride, but humiliation. And there is the positive part: The cultural and linguistic diversity; the presence of Abrahamic and indigenous religions; the endurance and hospitality of our people; the capital city, which has always been a melting pot of contemporary art and politics, African or otherwise; the brave and patriotic freedom fighters who defeated colonial and oppressive forces; our food and traditional dresses; the unique flora and fauna; fascinating anthropological, archaeological, and historical sites; beautiful landscapes, lakes and mountains; untapped human talent and natural resources; and all the other exotic things we have, which absolutely are sources of national pride.

Should I also be proud of my ethnic ancestry? No question, I should, because that is part of who I am; repressing or destroying my ethnic identity is impossible; I did not choose it, either – like Montesquieu, I could say it was by accident. However, I have to be careful with it, too, so to avoid ethnocentrism.

My parents speak three languages fluently: Amharic, Afaan Oromo and Tigrigna; my mother has also been exposed to Anuak language and culture. They never found it a problem to speak this or that language and to cross between theirs and their neighbours’ culture. They do sympathise with the old idea of Ethiopia like my friend’s parents; they also take pride in their ethnic heritage.

When I was little, my parents taught me their language so I can communicate with them; my father also made me recite the names of his ancestors until the 8th generation, which I barely remember now - he wanted continuity in tradition.

My parents’ experience shows that there is an apparent difference between genuine ethnic pride and ethnocentrism; the former is concerned about self-awareness and cultural heritage, the latter is similar to religious fundamentalism, which undermines the common bond one has with others.

My parents have seen bad times during the monarchy, derg, and now under ethnic federalism. They constantly warn me to stay away from politics because of the pain they endure (here I am breaking their rule).

ETHNIC FEDERALISM AND PRIDE

Apart from my parents’ influence, I grew up hearing ‘ethnic federalism’ like a mosquito buzz - just as children of the 60s, 70s, and early 80s were raised with ‘marxist and leninist’ slogans. I am aware of the potential danger ethnic federalism poses to the nation-state. That it can destabilise the country through fragmentation of society unless the system is reformed. I say this not because I have the desire to sound like a prophet of doom, but I have witnessed how things could easily go from good to bad to worse where I grew up.

However, I am also aware why the effects of ethnic politics will last for a long time to come even if the leaders are replaced. Seen from the perspective of the ‘oppressed’ ethnic groups, ethnic
consciousness is a gain, not a loss, because it has helped them re-embrace their cultural pride, and more than that, it can be used as an instrument to mobilise people and to achieve full-blown economic and political influence in the nation-state that proponents of ethnic federalism once labelled as ‘prison-house of nations and nationalities’.

Ethnic federalism has remained the mantra of this generation. The average elementary school student knows something about ethnic federalism, and the one in high school is as ethnic conscious as the one in college. I was one of those students; some of our teachers used to call us ‘guinea pigs’ – it was a fitting title.

I remember when my pen friends in Addis took their 8th grade national exam in English, I took mine in Amharic, others in Afaan Oromo, in Tigrigna, etc. I would have proudly considered learning in one’s language a breakthrough had the government not rushed, poorly implemented, and politicised the program – we did not even have text books when we started; as we passed from one grade to the other, books were still scarce and arriving late. I remember how our teachers struggled, but their dedication and determination helped us overcome the challenge. It is obvious that for a radical change to take effect someone has to pay the price, but when that someone is ‘you’, it is not fun, of course; no wonder today's scientists test drugs first on guinea pigs or other animals.

The Ethiopia that my 8th grader pen pal from Addis knew perhaps was not the same as the one I knew; for sure he or she did not see the bloody ethnic clashes that I saw in my own eyes in a remote village, in Oromia, in the mid-1990s (for which both the ruling party and its regional opponents of the time were responsible; only few people outside that zonal area knew what happened there) – I am not talking about Arsi (a place which has been referenced several times either fairly or unfairly), but about events that transpired in Jimma zone. I am not also here to blame this or that ethnic group for the damage caused because the poor people who got involved (Gurague, Oromo, Tigray, Amhara, etc) were all victims – one group was sacrificed as a scapegoat, while the other was used as a weapon of revenge, and vice versa; I would only blame the political actors of our historical past and present.

Politicians (particularly from the ruling party) still treat people, especially in regional towns and villages, like pawns on a chessboard. The people constantly live in fear that anything bad could happen at any time – perhaps, instilling fear is one of the chosen techniques of the ruling party (just like the old regime) to stay in power; or, maybe crippling fear and sporadic ethnic disharmony are the unavoidable by-products of ethnic federalism in its current form.

**CONCLUSION**

Cesar Chavez, the Mexican-American civil rights activist, argued, ‘once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. We have seen the future, and the future is ours.’ This is true in Ethiopia’s case. Today, ethnic consciousness is pervasive and entrenched in the regions; even the capital city, where supposedly an enormous national pride overshadows ethnic identity, has remained the centre of debates concerning ethnic federalism.

My friend from Bale, quoted above, also included the following observation:

‘Everyday I get the feeling that we have made a U-turn somewhere, and whoever wants to go back on the previous lane is going to face a major opposition now. Because, now, people know. They know they can proudly say who they are and no one can tell them someone else is better than them based on their ethnic identity. We are all parts that make up the whole. I just wish we had the same vision for this ‘whole’ that contains us all and also makes up the major part of who we are.’

I could not have said it better than her.

When Ethiopian regimes change, what has been a gain for one has been a loss for others (or it has been perceived that way); a ‘change everyone believes in’ still has to happen. When that happens, we may amend what has been damaged, keep what has worked, and discard what has failed; this
will eventually strengthen our common bond. As the saying goes, no one can easily break the sticks when there are two or more in a bundle.

We must aspire a ‘more perfect union’ where the past remains history and the future looks promising. We already know extreme suspicion, division, mistrust and egoism will never let us move forward. For a lasting peace and sustainable democracy, we must encourage and support anyone who fights fire with water.

I recently read an article[1] that Dereje Alemayehu wrote in 1993; the writer gave the following piece of advice to individuals who live outside Ethiopia:

‘The Ethiopians in the diaspora have many special responsibilities and can help the cause of peace in our country in different ways. First of all, as we are living away from the scene of action, we should try to help de-emotionalise and de- personalise the political debates. Whichever of the contending parties we may support, an appeal for de-escalation and reconciliation has to be our primary concern. Consequently, instead of jumping on the bandwagon of nationalist movements, we should try to be ‘bridges’. Those of us who are not involved in organisations should try to facilitate discussions instead of being partisans...

‘...our most important contribution towards peace and democracy should be directed to democratising the decision-making process and cultivating the culture of solving all political problems by peaceful means. In economic theory, they say that it is not wealth as such, but the capacity to produce wealth that is fundamental. A solution can be outdated quickly. If the methods of seeking other solutions to every new challenge is not democratised, the country can go back to square once again. Finding workable solutions to the burning problems of Ethiopia depends on the success of democratising and pacifying the decision-making process.’

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NOTES

[1] ‘A Diktat or a perspective for a democratic discourse? (A reply of a ‘national-nihilist’ to a mature neopatriot)’, Dereje.

Categories: Comment & analysis [5]
Issue Number: 480 [6]
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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src = "//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js" + "?xfbml=1&version=v2.0"; fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));

Article-Summary:
Why should one take pride in one's identity or country, asks Elyas Mulu Kiros, in an exploration of the tension between national and ethnic identities in Ethiopia.

Category: Governance [7]

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