

Can Ethiopia lead the Horn of Africa to Peace and Prosperity?

By Prof Said Sh. Samatar

Editor's Note: *Following is a presentation that Said Samatar, professor of African History, made at the Ethiopian Studies Association, which took place in Addis Ababa at the end of last year.*

My remarks center around a simple question, which goes as follows: CAN ETHIOPIA LEAD THE COUNTRIES OF THE HORN TO PEACE AND PROSPERITY? I must answer the question in the affirmative. If I don't, I fear I'd perish of despair. I believe that Ethiopia holds the key to the future of this desperate region. Or to put it differently, Ethiopia, in my view, represents the last best hope to lift the countries of the Horn out of abject poverty, social stagnation and cultural death. Making this claim raises a further question: what set of qualities combine to uniquely qualify Ethiopia to play a leadership in the march towards a better future for the poverty stricken masses of the Horn? First, Ethiopia, with its teeming millions, enjoys an unrivalled demographic weight. Then, there are the ancient glories. At the risk of repeating the obvious, this is a country steeped in an epic history, whose origins go back to that legendary union between the Great King Solomon, and even the Greater Queen of Sheba. Everyone knows the legend. Our unsuspecting queen journeyed to the royal court of the Wise Solomon, with a caravan laden with gifts of gold and silver, in order to "drink wisdom at Solomon's feet."

The wise—but also lecherous--Solomon, who had an eye for the attractive female, is alleged to have serviced some 700 wives and 300 concubines, a total of a thousand beauties--a circumstance that offers a striking proof of his prodigious powers of virility. Still, once she arrived, he set his sights on the stately Sheba. The virtuous Sheba was determined to leave with her virtue intact, but Solomon was equally determined to have his way with her. According to some versions of the legend, he placed her under house arrest and subjected her to a variety of petty persecutions, until the hapless Queen reluctantly submitted to his embrace. Solomon took advantage, but the outcome was not unhappy. Sheba returned pregnant with the First Minilik, whose name is an Abyssinian mispronunciation of the Arabic "Ibn al-Malik," or the "Son of the King," the founder of the Ethiopian line of princes that antedates the Caesars of Rome by a millennium.

Now, that is nothing short of an epic tale, which constitutes the heritage of all Ethiopians--even an imitation Ethiopian like me, from the periphery of the state, not from the center where the action is. Then there is Ethiopia, the tolerant, home to all three great Abrahamic faiths that coexisted happily except in the aberrant episode involving a man known to Ethiopians as Gragne, or the left-handed, and to Muslims as the holy Ghazi, or warrior Imam Ahmed Gurey, who waged a massive jihad on Ethiopia that resulted in the near disappearance of Ethiopia from the map, but for the timely intervention of the four-hundred-strong Portuguese expedition led by Cristovao da Gama, none other than the son of the great explorer, Vasco da Gama. In waging a religious war against Ethiopia, Gragne broke a cardinal rule of Islam, a prophetic injunction that forbade Muslims from carrying out a jihad against Abyssinia. By entrenching this injunction, the grateful Muhammad was responding to the incredible show of humanity on the part of the Aksumite Neguz, or king, known to Muslims as Ahmed Nagaash, and to Ethiopians as Armah.

In the early days of Islam when the beleaguered nascent Muslim community was subjected to fearful persecution, a party of more than seventy Muslims (which by some accounts included two of Muhammad's wives) fled to the Aksumite court of Neguz Armah who, in an act of unbelievable kindness, gave sanctuary to the terrified Muslims. The

pagan chiefs of Mecca gave chase and demanded the immediate surrender of the refugees. Astonishingly, the king adamantly refused to hand them over. In doing so, he risked doing irreparable damage to the amicable relations in trade and goodwill between the two Red Sea neighbors. When the Muslims eventually emerged victorious over their persecutors, most of the refugees returned, but the record does not make it absolutely clear that they in fact all returned. Might some have remained behind to plant the seed of the new religion in the soil of the Horn before it took root in Arabia. Historians puzzle over the astonishing show of humanity to the Muslims by the Aksumite sovereign. The king's generosity, in any case, was not lost on Muhammad who laid down in a hadith (the Hadith contains the sayings and deeds of the Prophet during his lifetime. As such, it constitutes Islam's most sacred scripture after the Qur'an). "Abyssinia is a land of justice," the thankful prophet is alleged to have cried out "in which no man is oppressed." The point was unmistakable: no Jihad against Abyssinia. It is a fact in any case that in the early energetic days of Islam when the empires of the Byzantines and Persians were tumbling down like a house of cards before the steady onslaught of victorious Muslim armies, Abyssinia was left unmolested.

Then there is Ethiopia the literate--with a written language going back to the fourth century, during Neguz Ezana's reign, with inscriptions of Ge'ez on one side and Greek on the other, appearing on the king's mint. Ezana was, reportedly, the first Ethiopian monarch to convert to Christianity. What African country, or for that matter, what Western European nation can claim a written national language and a national script stretching back to the fourth century A.D? Furthermore, was there a European nation in which Christianity was established a state religion in the middle of the fourth century A.D.? Furthermore, Aksumite Ethiopia had been a colossus world power between the fourth century B.C. and seventh A.D. Among other things, it was Aksumite Ethiopia that humbled and put an end to the mighty power of the empire of the Meroites just north of today's Khartoum, in about 350 A.D. As well in the sixth century, Aksum extended its tentacles to the Arabian peninsula where Aksum's governor Abraha ruled Yemen in pomp and splendor. The Aksumites, indeed, went one better and were on the verge of taking Mecca itself when, regrettably, a smallpox epidemic broke out among their ranks and decimated the hordes of Aksumites encamping on the outskirts of the Arabian capital. The Aksumites arrived with a fleet of elephants (the elephant being the tank of warfare in ancient times. Remember Hannibal marching over the Italian Alps with a cavalry of elephants, thereby striking terror in the hearts of the astonished Romans), a military feat that so impressed the Arabs that Muhammad was to dedicate a chapter of the Qur'an called "Ashab al-Fil," or the "People of the Elephant," to underscore the event.

Finally--and most remarkably--there is Ethiopia, the victorious at Adwa that inflicted a crushing defeat on the European power, namely Italy, that threatened the independence of this proud African nation, making Ethiopia the only African nation to decisively preserve her independence against European encroachment. Further, the Ethiopian victory served to put the fear of God into arrogant, racist Europe. Therefore, Adwa was not just an Ethiopian victory, it was an African victory, too, giving black people the world over the inspiring example of Ethiopia's triumphantly successful resistance to European colonialism. Additionally, Adwa inspired people of African descent inspired in more profound ways. The symbols of that inspiration can be seen not only in the rise of the new religion of Rastafarianism that places the late Emperor Haile Selassie at the center of global Gods. Ethiopia's inspiration to Africa goes deeper than Rastafarianism. For example, nearly all the flags of black Africa as well as the Caribbean are variations modeled on the colors of the Ethiopian flag. If a flag represents the collective soul of a nation, then Ethiopia stands proudly as the soul of people of African descent throughout the world. This is a heady stuff that explains why an aura of dignity, a mystical mystique, if

you will, surrounds the name of Ethiopia.

Let me now turn to the reason I went into rehearsing this well-known story. Ethiopia, a country with such a glorious past and a present mystique, the country that constructed the marvelous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela and the wondrous obelisks of Aksum, above all the country that claims to shelter the Ark of the Covenant, is now bleeding. Isn't it a shameful scandal and a wrenching disgrace, then, that such a country should be inhabited in the twenty-first century by a people who are perennially haunted by the specter of disease and starvation? I've never seen a gathering of Ethiopian scholars who ask themselves: What went wrong? Why is our glory gone, and how do we recover it? Maybe we, so-called intelligentsia, have let Ethiopia down, by failing to play our historic role to articulate a socio-economic vision to lift our downtrodden masses out of the dark ages. If one takes this line of argument, then, Ethiopia has been betrayed by visionless Ethiopians. And, of course, according to the Good Book, "without a vision, the people perish."

Speaking of a vision, what is my take on how to get Ethiopia on the move--economically, politically, and socially? Briefly, what I propose may be described by the metaphor of the "Flying Geese Effect," and it points to the experience of East Asia. To simplify that experience in the interest of time: when the mother goose of Japan took off economically in the post-war era, the goslings of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, and maybe even Malaysia, woke up to fly to the honking of Mother Goose Japan, streaming in her wake, following her lead.

Naturally, Ethiopia is the great Mother Goose of the Horn for the reasons sketched above. Therefore this proposition considers Ethiopia as the primary country in the Horn, around which hangs the destiny of the rest. And so, if Ethiopia can be nudged into an economic liftoff, perhaps the goslings of Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia can be stimulated into following Ethiopia's lead. This view therefore calls on the international community to make Ethiopia's economic transformation the priority global agenda. The bulk of the world's resources in economic aid and technical expertise should be marshaled and concentrated on Ethiopia's economic takeoff. A passing caveat, though: trying to lead Somalis is like trying to herd goats—every goat is addicted to straying on its merry way!

In the meantime, those fortunate few of us who have had access to education, and hence, economic wellbeing, bear the primary responsibility of coming up with an agenda of Ethiopian development, in short a program of vision and imagination towards a brighter future for our people that would be worthy of the Children of Queen of Sheba.

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