

WHAT SYMBOLS FOR NATIONAL COHESION

by

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In the first part of this short exposé, I will try to show that we have no symbols of cohesion inherited from the past. In the second part, I will make some proposals which can be the basis for future cohesion.

1. We do not have a long common historical heritage which could serve as a symbol of national cohesion and as a basis for political stability.

There is no 3000 years of Ethiopian history as is contended by the official historiography, but as the Ethiopian Student Movement used say correctly, "3000 years of Abyssinian and 100 years of Ethiopian history".

Even if we take the relation between the Amharas and the Tigres, the two important constituents of Abyssinia, it was characterized by violent rivalry rather than by unity based on this common heritage, even in face of foreign enemies. The role of the Tigrean nobility during the Napiers expedition against Theodros' and Menelik's perfidy during the Yohannes war against the Dervish are cases in point.

As for the other nationalities who today make up the majority of the population, their incorporation into the Ethiopian empire state by Menelik was not an act of reunification as some claim, but an annexation of foreign peoples and territories by force. And the 100 years or so after Menelik are characterized by an administrative, political and cultural domination of these oppressed peoples by the Amhara-dominated center and not by a process in which the different nationalities inhabiting present day Ethiopia welded a common destiny to live together in a common country. I cannot dwell on this point much longer. Suffice it to mention that it is not an accident if the victors against the Mengistu regime are not multinational organizations but nationalist movements.

It is not only in Ethiopia that we observe that in times of crises centrifugal forces are more active and potent than the discredited center. Look at the Soviet Union. Look at Yugoslavia. And yet I would claim that it is not the aspiration of oppressed nationalities for self-determination that jeopardizes national cohesion but the rivalry of the

two nationalities at the center to maintain the present forced unity under their hegemony.

2. The monarchy as an institution which could serve as a symbol of cohesion has discredited itself.

In the first place much of what I said about the lack of common historical heritage also holds true for the monarchy. Secondly, even if we take the Monarchs after the so-called restoration of Ethiopian unity, I would say only Haile Selassie was close to being an absolute monarch over all Ethiopians, specially after his come-back to the throne with the help of the British at the end of the Italo-Ethiopian War. But this was, seen in historical terms, an ephemeral success and does not justify the legend about the secular Solomonic Dynasty which is allegedly deep-rooted in Ethiopian culture.

I say it was ephemeral because at least after the coup attempt of 1960, the legitimacy of the monarchy was weaning. The royal family was no longer by and large an institution of reverence but a laughing stock for its hedonistic pursuits. The ridiculous and unsuccessful attempt of the senile emperor to settle the problem of succession on the eve of the 1974 popular revolt showed that the monarchy was no longer omnipotent. And finally, not only did the successful coup d'état of the Dergue abolish the monarchy but the callous indifference of the Ethiopian aristocracy during the Wollo famine 1973/74 gave a death blow to the legitimacy of the monarchy. (Our version of "Why don't they eat cake?" was the story of an Ethiopian aristocrat who ordered a wedding cake from London for the marriage of his daughter at the height of the Wollo famine.)

3. Although Ethiopia is a country in which the population belongs almost equally to two religions: Islam and Christianity), the Ethiopian Orthodox church is claimed by many to be the symbol of cohesion endowed with a moral authority that can command obedience. Supporters of the ancien regime tried to use it as a rallying point in their struggle against the Dergue and the revolution but without success. Even Mengistu tried to use the church as a mobilizing instance in his struggle against nationalist movements and he was not more successful.

Religion remains an important factor in the daily and private life of the Ethiopian peoples. But it has not served the political ambitions of any group as a weapon up to now; it has been neither a uniting nor a dividing factor in political terms. When we consider the resurgence of religious fanaticism and strife in many parts of the (third) world, this is a good thing for Ethiopia.

4. There is no charismatic political or patriotic personality who could symbolize the aspiration of the Ethiopian peoples for peace, bread and democracy.

The resistance movements against Mengistu's dictatorship have not given rise to any Achinos, Bhutos or Perons. I don't know if our culture or history does not allow the emergence of such charismatic personalities, but this appears to be the case when I consider the two leaders of the two wings in the Ethiopian Student Movement, Haile Fida and Berhane Maskel. They both had elements of which charismatic personalities are made. But the charismatic leader of one wing was a devil incarnate to the other.

It is not possible to create a charismatic leader by means of conscious propaganda. Every since Mengistu climbed the imperial throne with his cowboy boots, sycophants and opportunists have tried to make this half-literate blood-thirsty dictator into a genius, a leader called by history to pull Ethiopia out of backwardness, etc. Their efforts may have supplied raw material for the jokes of cynic intellectuals but hardly served any political purpose. Not the loyalty that his personality inspired but brute terror which sows fear among his subordinates and the people alike enabled Mengistu to rule.

To summarize, none of the traditional symbols which allegedly enable peoples to weld their unity and live together peacefully exists in Ethiopia.

If the past has not endowed us with symbols capable of uniting us, what is to be done in the future?

Gramsci defines a crisis as a state of affairs in which the old is already dead and the new is not yet born. Ethiopia is in such a situation today and this entails both a danger and a chance for the creation and consolidation of national cohesion and peaceful political development of the country.

The imminent danger can be averted and the chance seized only if the Ethiopian political elite arrives at a minimum consensus on which a political situation allowing the peaceful solution of Ethiopia's problems can be based.

Three cardinal issues on which this consensus can be based are in my opinion the following:

a) The overthrow of Mengistu's bloody regime is an important turning point in Ethiopian history. But, unfortunately for us, the new political power came once again from the barrel of a gun. We now have a political group in power whose military might in no way corresponds to its political and administrative capacity to manage the problems of the country. The loyalty of the present army and security is not to a constitution binding for all Ethiopians but to the political group in power; it is not a national but a nationalist army. This being the case, the precondition for peace and national cohesion depends on the possibility to democratize the political life in the country such that the zero-sum game in which the winner gets everything and the loser gets nothing prevails no more. In other words, not the temporary silence of the gun, but its complete withdrawal from the political scene is the condition *sine qua non* for the democratization of political life in Ethiopia.

b) With the overthrow of Mengistu's regime by the Tigre-led military revolt, the century-old Amhara domination is at least weakened. This is a good thing but also entails danger if an attempt follows on the part of the Tigres to replace the Amhara domination by their own, or if the rivalry between these two nationalities is going to characterize the future political evolution in the country. Only if it is possible to democratize the relation between all nationalities, in which a free and voluntary unity is possible can we create a viable national cohesion and hope for a peaceful development. Tactical alliances between whichever nationalities may serve the political calculation of different political

groups in power equations but cannot solve the question of nationalities.

c) Last but not least, not past glory but present misery of our people can and should be a uniting factor for all Ethiopians regardless of their nationality, religion or political persuasion.

In sum, in the absence of traditional symbols which can contribute to national cohesion, only the consensus about the necessity of democratizing political life, democratizing the relation between the different nationalities and the common task in the fight against misery can be the basis for national cohesion and peaceful development in Ethiopia.