



WOLLO: Microcosm Ethiopia and Exemplar of Ethiopian Unity

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Literally and figuratively speaking, Wollo is the central locus and the heart of Ethiopia. By virtue of its geographical location, Wollo, both in the distant past and the annals of contemporary Ethiopia, served as the rendezvous point for major Ethiopian nationalities, and by way of reflecting on this reality, on November 2, 2005, in a brief Amharic article entitled ‘The Question of Nationalities and Ethiopian Unity’ or in Amharic **የብሔር ጥያቄና የኢትዮጵያ አንድነት** I wrote the following:

የወሎ መልክዓ-ምድራዊ አቀማመጥ በርካታ የኢትዮጵያ ብሔሮችና ብሔረሰቦችን ያሰተናገደ ነበር፤ አማራ፡ አፋር፡ ኦሮሞ፡ ትግራይ ለበዙ ሺ ዘመን አብረው ኖሯል። ጎን ለጎን የሚኖሩ ብሔሮችና ብሔረሰቦች ደግሞ ጦርነትና ደም መፋሰስን ለማሰወገድ በጋብቻ ይተሳሰሩ ነበር።

Six years after I wrote the synoptic bird’s eye view on Wollo, to my gratification and great delight, I stumbled into an Ethiopian Television special program on Wollo that once again uplifted my spirit. The TV program, aired on September 16, 2011, covered the newly built St. Gabriel’s Church in Dessie and the annual pilgrimage of the devout Ethiopian Christians to Gishen Mariam.

The new St. Gabriel Church is a breathtaking, magnificent, and spectacular cathedral. However, it is not so much the material façade of the church that had an imprint on my mental image. It is rather the initiative of the nucleus committee and the people who tirelessly sacrificed their time and energy to construct the cathedral that impressed me most. And yet, beyond this impression, it is the indomitable spirit and penchant of the Committee for the construction of St. Gabriel Church that touched my soul and propelled my spirit, and it is for the following reason:

The 13-member Committee who took the initiative, or who were bestowed to act as a task force, and worked in unison till the completion of the construction of the Church were not, as some may assume, entirely Christian. In fact, six of the Committee members were Muslims. Among the Christians too, it was not Orthodox Christians only who were engaged in the making of the St. Gabriel Church. Followers of the Evangelical Lutheran church were equally devoted as well. And it is for this reason that I like to call Wollo microcosm Ethiopia and exemplar of Ethiopian unity.

To my great satisfaction, during the TV program, the interviewees, mainly an engineer, a church administrator, representative of the Evangelical church, and other individuals, constantly emphasized the unity of the Ethiopian people, and one of them emphatically

stated, “other Ethiopians should come here [to Dessie] and learn from the Wollo experiment.” The engineer and the church administrator repeatedly reminded the audience that constructing magnificent buildings is not novice to Ethiopians. They have also underscored and critically observed the Eurocentric state of denial in regards to the ancient edifices of Askum and Lalibela.

The unified people of Wollo, rallied around the St. Gabriel Church, were hosting the thousands of Ethiopian pilgrims who were passing by and whose destination was Gishen Mariam, some 483 kilometers from Addis Ababa and located north of Dessie in Wollo. They have provided food and shelter (tents) for the pilgrims and in the Ethiopian Christian tradition, they washed their feet before they set off for their destination.

Gishen Mariam is associated with the True Cross, the original cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. Legend has it that the Empress Helena, guided by the direction of the smoke from the incense that she burned, managed to recover the True Cross and then she distributed the pieces of the Cross to the major Christian churches, one of which being the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Ethiopians believe they got the right hand piece of the Cross; a fragment of the Cross popularly known among Ethiopians as ‘Gimade Mesqel’ or ግማድ መስቀል in Geez, ancient Ethiopian language now serving as liturgy in the Church.

With respect to the Cross fragment, the Ethiopian oral tradition attests to the fact that the contemporary Ethiopian king who reigned in the first quarter to the first half of the 15th century (most likely Emperor Dawit or Libne Dingel) had a revelation by which, in turn, he was instructed to “place the cross on the cross” and this divine order was interpreted by the king and/or his counsel to mean “put the cross in a place that looks like a cross” (አንብርወ መስቀልየ በዲበ መስቀል), and the mountain that happen to look like a cross was Gishen, an appropriate match for the revelation and a legitimate house for the fragment of the Cross.

Once the True Cross fragment was placed on Gishen, Ethiopian pilgrims have been flocking to that sacred site for the last six centuries, a reaffirmation to the creed of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church and a constant reminder of the continuity of tradition from generation to generation.

The St. Gabriel Church in Dessie, the pilgrims, the people of Wollo in particular and the Ethiopian people in general exhibited holistic and humanistic ethos in preserving Ethiopian unity. Ethiopians as a whole seem to constantly reassure the past by fusing it with the present; they literally resurrect the ghosts of the past, as if by deliberate action, to direct the future. But this could take place only in a conducive environment like Wollo that has a great diversity of interaction and provides enormous effervescence of ideas and cultural coalescence.

The microcosm Ethiopia that we have seen above, of course, must be replicated in all Ethiopia, and the precondition for the realization of the Wollo experiment in all over Ethiopia, it seems to me, is a package that includes peace, stability, democracy, tolerance, visionary and patriotic leadership, and above all unity of the Ethiopian people. If the precondition is met, Ethiopians could perform miracles.

The Ethiopian people and a significant number of non-Ethiopians who, in one form or another, are sentimentally affiliated with Ethiopia have great concern when it comes to the unity of the Ethiopian people. In the last two decades, I have been corresponding with or getting feedback from many prominent scholars and students/readers alike. They all demonstrate a fervent good wish for Ethiopians and state, ‘peace be unto Ethiopia’.

One of these scholars who love Ethiopia dearly is the eminent professor Donald N. Levine, who, among many others, sent me a happy Ethiopian new year wish back in September. Professor Levine's electronic message, written in Amharic, reads as follows: **እንኳን ከዘመነ ጦርነት ወደ ዘመነ ሰላም እሸጋገራችሁ** and I replied by saying that I appreciate the professor's inspirational message. Peace indeed is what we must all cherish, appreciate, and treasure. However, I truly believe that peace alone could not bring about profound change and development unless the ingredients in the package suggested above couples it. If peace is accompanied by the criteria in the package, Ethiopia could encounter a genuine transformation for the better. Lets embrace Wollo, microcosm Ethiopia, and the rest is history.

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