

SOME REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT IN ETHIOPIA *

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1. Introduction

In this section, I shall present my readers with some general introduction about my reflections on the subject matter assigned to me for this presentation.

What I am doing in this presentation, I would like to emphasize, consists in my personal reflections. My talk does not represent a specifically researched paper on culture and development. My source for what I have to say tonight is by and large my own personal experience. I was born in Addis Ababa, in the vicinity of *Shuro Meda*--across the street from the American Embassy--inhabited by different ethnic groups. I lived in an area known as *Dorze Sefer* [a neighborhood largely inhabited by the Dorze community] until I was twenty-four years old. Since then, I have lived in different areas of Addis Ababa--the Bole area, in the vicinity of the Second Police Precinct on the road to the Piazza--and, presently, I live in the area of town popularly known as *serrategna sefer*, where I have been residing for the last 16 years. There are many things I have learned from this varied life of mine. And then there are those lessons I

accumulated over the years while crisscrossing the country on travels that took me from Addis Ababa to Gondar (for only 1 year in Debre Tabor), Dila, Asmara, Arba Minch, the whole length of Wollo (except Borana), Bonga, Nazereth, and Tigray on different occasions. I have lived in three European countries for a cumulative total of 7 years. There also are lessons that I learned while on short visits to some countries of Africa, Europe, Asia and America. My main concern has been to observe, as actively and consciously as possible, those different ways of life and make sense of my observations. It is all these lessons that I have drawn over the last 54 years of my life, now through seeing and observing, at other times through hearing and listening to what people were saying, that I have called my personal experience. There are also lessons that I have learned at different levels through formal education, my own readings, as well as from the mass media. I used to scribble some of my experiences and the lessons drawn from them in my notebooks. I have published some of them in different publications, though I do not think they have been read as I probably expected. Consequently, what I am

presenting here on this occasion are those issues hastily selected and put together from my publications and my personal notes that I deemed relevant to the subject matter under consideration.

It is very difficult to limit oneself to such a short speech as expected of me while dealing with such a broad subject matter as the one I am dealing with, for such an undertaking in the short time available to me could lead to misunderstandings of one form or another. So I am forced to limit myself to those issues that can be presented within the time limit allowed to me.

Although I am still in search of the secrets for their ability to have so much resisted and thwarted the repeated onslaughts perpetrated by foreign forces of occupation, I admire, respect and pay homage to the people of Ethiopia for their accomplishments in protecting and defending the country's freedom and independence and the respect they earned for it, which I, too, enjoy, thanks to their efforts. Consequently, it is only once I saw and heard those people who had a taste of what colonialism could do to people that I knew, considerably

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enough, who I was. And yet, the fact that I was not alive to see those people score victory after victory, in different forms and languages, in their struggles against the repeated violence and oppression perpetrated against them from within by their own rulers has always left me with a sense of contrition. And because, as with every citizen with a healthy attitude and mode of thought, I would like to see the people's livelihood improved, I earnestly and bitterly question some of the things I see around me, finding them most of the time reprehensible, from which, of course, I cannot be free myself. And with regard to this point, I shall be even harder on the alphabetists, of which we here are a part. If you therefore detect a trace of audacity on the part of one who is a teacher and a scribbler of poems, I ask you with all due respect to attribute this audacity not to any arrogance on my part but to a painful soul-searching attempt that leaves me in a state of remorse.

2. What Is Development and What Is Culture?

In this speech, I shall define the two concepts as simply as possible, so that they may be clearly understood by all of us. But my main focus is on the concept of 'culture'.

I use the term 'development' to refer to the type of engagement aimed at changing the life of human beings in a positive way as well as to the results of such engagement. Development, to my understanding, is a move from the current way of living towards a better one: ensuring better food and ways of eating, better health, better education and better transportation, etc. for the people. Whereas 'culture' constitutes such a broad assortment of issues that it is difficult to think of areas of thought and ways of living that it does not

touch upon or affect. It takes too much time and space to reflect upon the ways of life and manners of behavior that we see all around us. Consider the following examples picked up randomly: hunger, famine, street-life, displacement, etc.; modes and manners of mourning, feasting, drinking, eating, *chat/qat* ceremonies, corruption, drugs, sex and similar other phenomena, and the effects of the resulting lawlessness and anarchy that are undermining our values. It is not impossible to reflect upon, and all in a matter of a mere hour, the virtues and vices of what we hear on Ethiopian Radio, what we watch on Ethiopian Television and what read in the newspapers; the same holds true of what we observe in the literatures we read, the plays we see, what we get through sculpture, music, film, and video. On top of this there is the multifaceted and highly stocked material culture.

In this speech, what I call 'culture' refers to modes, manners, systems of people's life and the living itself. We can speak of 'culture' alternatively as being a phenomenon transmitted through generations orally and manifesting itself through work and material things, that has always been there and that is still here and being transmitted as in the past. 'Culture' is of a nature that a community living within a specific border defines itself by; its functioning can assume both individual and communal dimensions to the extent that it is both a way of life and a system of values. In general terms, I am using the concept of culture as it is defined by our day-to-day living and the constant changes it undergoes as a result. That is why I am alternating freely between using such concepts as 'mode of living', 'manner of living', 'ways of living',

culture, customs (as in 'folk customs'), tradition, etc.

To make my presentation as short as possible, I have chosen to use one idea, as it relates to the issue of 'culture and development', as a guiding principle for the speech I am delivering tonight. I am doing this because it is my belief that the main stumbling block to our country's development is the political process itself. It is also my conviction that this political process is infused with a kind of thinking that starts at home, within the family and, then, gathers momentum as we move through the formal educational system. In order, therefore, to be able to cover this idea, which I adopt as the driving principle of my speech, I shall not go into the details of the other issues I raise. Since I believe that most of us know the issues involved, I shall simply touch upon some of them in passing.

Let me begin by clarifying some culture-related concepts or hypotheses that I feel are necessary for getting my message across.

The first is that ***culture is a social construct***. Many of our outlooks, opinions, beliefs, philosophical stances, etc. are of our own making. In the idiom of the Genesis, they are our own creation. And we create them in different ways. We create them through religion. We have been fashioning them through science. We have been and still are creating them through the various forms of ideology. Humanity's physical and spiritual (or social) environment has been constructed and still is being constructed through these three mediums. And the process continues.

Culture is neither static nor permanent. It is in a constant flux. In this process of cultural change or

transformation both the positive and the negative aspects could emerge dominant, as the case may be. Mostly, however, the change could involve an amalgam of both according to the dictates of time. In any case, the important point is to properly recognize that both the physical and the spiritual worlds are in a constant process of change. This means that culture began changing since the moment that we heard of "life/culture as changing," or that it would begin changing today or tomorrow; rather, it has been changing since, at least, the dawn of humanity's history. It is through this long process of change that culture has assumed its present form. The culture we inherited is one that has been changing before our time and that is still subject to the same process of change. If we accept this process of cultural change, much the same way as that of life, then we need to revisit all those things that we have so far accepted and internalized over the years.

Regarding this point, I have this strange and difficult-to-grasp feeling. The situation strikes me as at once distressing, astounding and fearsome. The issue concerns a prevailing attitude about culture that pervades our society. The number of Ethiopians, both educated and lay, who believe that culture is a legacy that we inherited from our forebears and which we must keep intact for ages to come, is quite considerable. It would certainly be a good thing if it were possible to preserve intact the relics of Axum and Lalibela. It would indeed be wonderful if we could retain the paintings that we see in our places of worship as well as those in caves, on rocks and our parchment documents. However, it is never possible for us to retain intact our thinking, our feelings, our modes of eating and dining, our

manners of dressing, our rituals of marriage and mourning, our beliefs [as in religious faith], in short our day-to-day livelihood.¹ These and many more aspects of our culture cannot be retained intact while life itself keeps changing. Such things keep changing in tandem with life. It is my belief that there are quite a few among us with a desire, indeed a craving, consciously or unconsciously (I, for one, believe it is the latter), for retaining intact what we have inherited from the past. To keep our ways of life as they have been bequeathed to us by our forebears² would mean not to have taken any significant step forward. It would mean not making mistakes, 'undeveloping' and unchanging. Could this possibly be one of the problems in our thinking that we have as yet not been able to recognize? Could this same be one of the fundamental problems of our development?

Considered from a different angle, it appears to me that we have not been able to realize the existence of a conflict between the desire to keep intact the relics of Axum and Lalibela (which, incidentally, are subject to the laws of change under certain circumstances) on the one hand, and developing the country on the other. It appears to me that we wish to have a taste of the fruits of development without, however, recognizing that development means to change our ways of life, to improve them as much as humanly possible. Unbeknownst to us, it appears, we have blocked the path that would put us on the road to development by this outlook of

¹ When I say this, I am not unaware of the attempts being made in the areas of folklore and anthropology with regard to this issue.

² Could this kind of thinking have been motivated by a desire to earn our ancestors' blessing by handing over what they have bequeathed us exactly the way we received it in the event they ask for "the ways of life that we had handed down to you"?

ours. And yet, we constantly keep emitting the word 'development' as the years go by. To permit myself a computer's idiom, our default thinking stands in dread of change. It appears that this thinking has settled it once and for all that we should keep what we have inherited as they had always been. The journey that we make towards development has changed the Ethiopia I knew some forty years ago in many respects, not to speak of the Ethiopia of the remote past. What I have in particular observed is the changes that have taken place in Addis Ababa and at the Addis Ababa University. Thus it is that the *Shuro Meda* I knew forty-five years ago is no longer there. The Haile Selassie I University that I knew thirty-six years ago does not exist. Not only that, the 'T' that was there thirty-six years ago no longer exists. All three of us have changed. But the question repeatedly raised at this forum is: 'what kind of change is it that we are talking about'? This is a very broad question that requires an equally wide range of discussions. This is the crux of the matter. Such a questioning attitude might help us explore, study and analyze our country, our continent and the world at large by comparing it with our own particular situation.

So far, I have raised some issues, variously articulated in the foregoing, about culture, but more particularly about the notions of 'social construct' and 'change' that accompany the concept itself. I am fully aware of the fact that I have burdened the term 'culture' with many concepts and perhaps stretched its definition to the limit. I did so, however, sensing that everything we do--from our day-to-day routine activities to the impalpable spiritual workings of our lives--has a role to play in the efforts we make toward development. I also did this in order

to be able to articulate my observations in a more or less random and free fashion. Having said this, I shall now attempt to draw attention to some of the things that I have observed in our individual as well as collective lives and try to point out the relationship that I think they have with the idea of development and its practice.³

3. First Observation: Idioclature and Its Problems

In linguistics, with its various sub-disciplines, scholars speak of such categories as 'language', 'dialect', and 'idiolect'. For example, if Amharic constitutes the 'language', then the particular form of Amharic spoken, say, in Gayint would constitute one of its 'dialects', while the specific manner of speech the individual speaker of the language would constitute the 'idiolect'. Thus it is that I have now for long yearned to follow this model to speak of 'culture', 'local culture', and 'idioclature'.⁴ I have this deep conviction that, just as 'idiolect' is to language, so also should 'idioclature' be to 'culture'. In fact, it seems to me that 'idiolect' is the linguistic manifestation or realization of 'idioclature'. To be sure, I have nowhere come across

any instance where 'idioclature' has been used in English. I have gone thoroughly through two standard dictionaries only to find out there was no such entry. I have, therefore, taken the license to introduce the term in order better to organize my ideas. The reason for doing so lies in the fact that each of us understands and practices each culture and its variations with a sprinkle, now and then, of our personal seasonings or idiosyncrasies. Moreover each culture is practiced and contemplated both individually and collectively. There are moments in which the two modes co-exist or operate separately. There are moments when the individual may be forced to conform to the collective will. Conversely, there are also moments in which an individual deviates from the collective thinking and practice, either privately or publicly. Accordingly, then, it is my conviction that 'idiolect' should be given the attention it deserves. Throughout history, situations in which many important decisions have been influenced by the idioclature of the individuals who made them are not few. That is one of the reasons for me to dwell on the concept at length.

According to my way of thinking, I became what I am, at least, through the life process that I underwent since my birth. And this life consisted (and consists) in what I heard, did, spoke, touched, smelled, chewed, thought, etc., both consciously and unconsciously. And as I have pointed out at the beginning of my talk, I grew up in different places at different times. I have lived in places where different languages were being spoken and among people whose material and spiritual cultures were very much different from one another. I became what I am today by picking

up some ideas from different peoples both around the world and in my own country as well as my neighbors, learning other ideas from my parents, my colleagues and those with whom I grew up and sharing them with others. In all this process, time, culture and I--each of us--came to be where we are and what we are through constant change and transformation. Nothing, in other words, is static. And of those here tonight, many of you, I believe, happened to be where you are through more thorough processes and changes as well as situations particular to your individuality.

Taking into consideration such change, we are each bound, as our respective capacities allow, to think about improving our personal situation as well as those of the different communities and the country as a whole, at the same time keeping in mind and fully realizing the significance of the type of change we are talking about. At the other extreme lies a kind of thinking about improving our ways of life without actually recognizing and considering the significance of the kind of change we are talking about. Between the two extreme shades of thinking lie many other ways of thinking that are difficult to enumerate, even possibly identify. By way of illustration allow me to enumerate the details of the said modes of thinking, granted that my approach is rather unusual, and for which, therefore, I implore you to be patient with me just for a little while.

Let us posit that I, the person standing here and talking to you, am in the process of living. You, too, in your respective seats are also in the process of living. Other people not in this hall tonight also are in the process of living, whether they be in Addis Ababa, Gambela, Burundi,

³ I raised the foregoing issues not to tell you of something that you have not been thinking about privately, or something new that you are not familiar with. Neither is it because I am of the inclination to assume that you have not, at one time or another, raised and reflected upon these issues regarding our ways of life, though the extent, depth and frequency of the reflection might have been different for each one of you.

⁴ While preparing this presentation, I spoke to Ato Dereje Gebre, a former student of mine, and now my colleague, about this idea of 'idioclature' and asked him what he understood by it. He surprised me by saying: '*Gashe!* Stay assured that I have really understood. Are you not referring to what we call 'default' in computers? It then occurred to me that this has always been the case, except that the said default changes from time to time.

New York, Iraq, Gaza, China, London, Paris, etc. Each and everyone of us lives in accordance with our respective identities, the conditions of our families, our localities, our neighbors, our cities and our countries, etc. In order to elaborate on what I mean, allow me to take my own life as an example.

I think of myself as a single unit (bulb) of onion, the peeling of whose concentric skin layers cannot be exhausted. I do not think all of you here tonight can escape this fate, if that indeed is what it is. When I peel one layer I find another me; I peel again and still find another me; I pause and peel once more, yet another me emerges, on and on until. . . . Upon constant introspection this is what I have learned about myself. Maybe it is because of the quantity of my findings, I have now reached a stage where I may have to own that I have lived more than my share of years. Consider, then, the following: If I find myself such a mystery as that the peeling of whose layers of skin cannot be exhausted, if, that is, every time I reflect, I dig into my 'self', I find different 'I'-s within me, it would not be difficult to imagine how complex my life (the life of 'I') and those of the many 'I'-s within me would be.

At this precise moment, those of us in this hall, given our respective backgrounds, our individual histories, our personal experiences, in short, given our respective identities, at least live with our public 'I' and the many 'I'-s within each of us.⁵The composition of the

⁵ There is my 'I' and there is the 'I' of each of you. The 'I' of each of you is not singular or just one. There are as different 'I'-s as you are many in number. The type of 'I' I speak of is as varied as the number of people looking at me, listening to me and reading me. [Translator's note: this would be easier understood if we interchange the 'I'-s the author speaks of with the Freudian 'Ego' in its strictly psycho-technical sense.]

'I'-s in each of us varies from person to person. All this amounts to nothing more than the life we just went through within the past few minutes.

Let us now think of, or reflect upon, in a similar manner the life that we lived since our birth. Let us also try to imagine the life that we would live in the future. Let us also consider, or try to imagine, the past, the present, and the future of the species we call humankind in exactly the same manner. And let us take one big step further and think, in exactly the same manner, of the kind of life that we here tonight passed through and that of our country, our continent and our globe. I ask you to keep in mind that we all do this in accordance with our individual outlook or mode of perception.

So far, I have been urging for us to think, reflect and imagine individually. Let us expand our scope and try to think collectively, that is, in terms of our collectivity. Let us think, reflect, imagine and hypothesize about the activities that we plan and undertake as a collective. Let us imagine what the scenario would look like from this angle. Because, there is such an important matter, which manifests or realizes itself in different forms and fashions, and to which we have given the name 'living together' or 'co-existing'.

If, as I have pointed out above, each of us is an impregnable mystery to our 'selves', what type of mystery is each of us going to represent to others? Let us imagine the problems and challenges we would face when we speak--given such a mysterious state of things--of collectively discussing, conversing, consulting and, beyond that, of collectively working, creating and acting in an organized manner. As I have

already pointed out, because views and opinions, as well as feelings, are as different and varied as we are many, it is self-evident that engaging in the act of collective thinking and discussion and 'co-existing' would be a complex undertaking. Let us for the moment agree on this score.

I have already said that each of us is a mystery 'its-self'. It is at this stage that each of us becomes a mystery to the other. And it is on this basis that we wish and desire to lead a collective life, as communities or societies. But communal or societal life does not offer itself as a bed of roses as we might think. The reason, at least one of the reasons, why humankind in all places and at all times can never get a break from the task of devising, developing and structuring ways of life is to withstand the challenges posed by the idea of living together. It devises and develops different modes of life taking into consideration the ups-and-downs that come with living and carefully weighing its experiences.

The informing principle, or the aim of each mode or system of living, I believe, is meeting the needs and demands of people through collective effort and co-existing in a stable and peaceful environment. Culture, thus, is a system and, at the same time, a mode of living in which each individual takes a slice from its inexhaustible, multi-layered 'self' and contributes its share to the structuring or building of the collectivity, of which it partakes in an environment of co-existence. Such a system and mode of living varies from place to place and in accordance with the physical and spiritual landscape of each environment. However, this system, with all its shortcomings, is one that has managed, and still manages, to accommodate the people living in

its folds. In my opinion, and generally speaking, culture constitutes such mode of life within the system that it also is. Its constitution is filled with complex relationships.

Life, whether individual or communal, at least has material and spiritual aspects or components. And as a result of situations ensuing from the interaction between these two aspects or components of culture, life can flourish or be devastated. There is a saying in our country to the effect that "people reflect the way they live." To me this refers, on the one hand, to what they eat, drink, dress, where they live, etc., and the material and spiritual realities of their homes, their neighbors, their country, and--if they are affluent enough--of the world and the manner in which they entertain those realities and, on the other hand, to that in which they are accommodated by those realities. These realities determine the ways of the people's life. The incessant interaction between the two, that is the realities and the people, and the balance or the imbalance thereof, as the case may be, determines the quality of their lives. When we speak of the quality of life in our country, we find that its social aspects are many and varied and it extends to subsume the family, the extended family, neighbors, villages, localities, and so on. It is broad in its dimensions. It manifests itself at the individual, national and global levels and may even extend so far as to embrace the spiritual or the Otherworldly aspects.

Individuals have their own personal, physical and spiritual needs. These needs urge and goad the individuals. And our country's individuals are repository to the needs of families, extended families, neighbors, workplaces, friends, ethnic groups, culture, etc. There are many needs

that are of concern to individuals by the mere fact that they are human beings. All these nudge the individual all the time. Each of the categories enumerated above have something that they need and each of them asks for the fulfillment of its respective needs. Their demands must be met somehow. And what makes matters even more discomfoting for the individual is the fact that the needs and demands are not similar or of the same order and rank. Most of them are as contradictory as they are varied. The complexity of the personality of the individual arises from the fact that it is and has been fashioned and structured on the basis of these incongruous and often contradictory needs. So, then, the individual, qua individual, has problems to deal with. Although individuals may not always contemplate and reflect upon their problems, their everyday travail is in one sense an attempt to provide answers for their existential questions. All these forms of outlook and needs, related, in one form or another, to the individual's idiolect and other social urges manifested in different forms, cannot be said without their own influence on the need to co-exist as a community and the efforts exerted toward development.

4. Second Observation: Management and Governance, from the Family to the State

As I have pointed out in my discussion of this issue in another article,⁶ when children try their

⁶ "The Role of the Family, the Individual, Communities, Schools and the Mass Media in the Development of Citizens Who Know their Rights and Who Have Been Ethically/Morally Disciplined" [Amharic Text]. A Paper first presented at a conference held on January 10, 2002 and, then, published in August 2003 and reprinted in my book titled *Unheard Voices* in 2004 [Text in Amharic].

hands at finding out about things by directly experiencing them, say, through their sense of touch, the first thing they come to know is such injunctions as "Stop it! Don't touch anything!" And there usually is a reason for this kind of talk from grown-ups. When young children try to talk, as is their wont, while adults converse, what they usually meet with is a reprimand in the form of "Don't interrupt!" And when they try to learn through observation of whatever they see around them, many are the moments when they are scared stiff with such words as "What are you looking at!" instead of a calm explanation of what it is all about, to at least satisfy their curiosities. Again, if children who are alert enough to listen with attention to what adults say among themselves, all they reap is the usual rebuke. At this point, I think it is only too appropriate to ask: "What is to become of these kids? What are they expected to do?" I reckon there are those of you who might wonder if this "allegation of yours is not a wee bit exaggerated!" On the other hand, however, I do not think there is anyone among you to deny the prevalence in the past, as well as at present, of such a custom of treating children in the society we live in. One cannot, in all honesty, deny the existence in many a family of such tendency to curb, even altogether block, children's free mobility, free speech and free thinking, whether in the past or at present.

When we plan and lay out the structure for family management and power distribution, what we usually find, we are told, is the father being "leader, endowed with absolute authority, always the source as well as owner of the family's financial needs." This is for the most part true. By contrast, the mother and the children are passive consumers and beneficiaries of the

resource so obtained by the father. The mother and the children also serve a testing-ground for his authority. In other words, they are his 'subjects'. He manages them according to his whims and wishes. The father does this, for the most part, out of habit, out of conditioning. It is possible to surmise that he never solicits their advice. The mother and children, for their part, passively succumb to this arrangement. They would not dare to open up a conversation, much less question such an arrangement. All they are left with is the grumblings with which they carry on, often in his absence.

The father feels a sense of superiority, perhaps bordering on the despotic, that makes him regard the mother and the children as helpless people "with nowhere to go, with no recourse," except to accept things as they are, since, indeed, they are without alternatives. But the father himself knows that, as a child, things were like that in his family; he knows the mother and children suffer, precisely because he has had a taste of it all. When, in turn, sons grow up and become fathers, they usually act as their fathers did. They know their families would suffer under their rule as heads of households. But they follow suit in spite of their awareness of the situation. And the women continue to suffer the seemingly endless burden of oppression. This, too, constitutes an aspect of the ways of life I have been talking about.

There are situations where this same father would either continue to play the same role as a father, or where he may be forced to play the role of his children. Outside of the homestead he may be a minister, a director, a manager or an administrator. He could also be a farmer, a teacher or an employee of

different organizations and departments. If he is in a position of authority, and at the same time educated, he will treat the employees under his management, not according to the 'theories' he was taught at school, but much the same way as that he has been used to doing at home. He becomes both the source and owner of authority and power, and manages the employees under him as he likes. We are told that there are proclamations in accordance with which offices are established, as well as rules and regulations on the basis of which the offices are managed and workers administered. Such rules and regulations do indeed exist. But the Father-Manager keeps on managing the workplace as his whims and wishes dictate. Just as he does with his family, out there in the workplace, too, he deals with his employees using different styles and tactics: now he uses the stick, then the carrot; he penalizes them; he plays his employees against one another; he places stool pigeons in their midst; he plays his own game of musical chairs. In this fashion he breaks and violates rules and regulations as well, often paying homage to his superiors to show his loyalty, while at the same time trampling all over his employees. He is quite aware that the work he oversees suffers, but he continues with all the slyness he can muster as long as his position of authority is not threatened. He attends to his own private needs, with the Amharic saying, "As long as I don't own a goat, I have no discord with the leopard" for a motto. Things were like that before him, and he will tread the same path. In short, this official assumes the status of the Father both at his workplace and at home. As for the employees under such an official, although they know quite well that the work is suffering, they nevertheless

submit to his authority in silence, since, if they are terminated, they fear that they would end up with no food on their tables, or they would have nowhere else to go, or, even worse, they wouldn't know what their children's fate would be, and for different other reasons. These employees become the officials "workplace subjects." They see laws and regulations being broken at will right under their very eyes, but they do not question the ways of the official by citing the relevant laws and regulations. And if they ever do so, it is with the shilly-shallying that comes with, or is dictated by, their station. The bravery or valor they exhibit elsewhere suddenly evaporates when it comes to their workplace. As long as their work and their earnings are left alone in peace, they will keep on working at the mercy of the boss, satisfied only with the usual recourse to backbiting, disaffection and sniveling. In short, they more or less follow the ways they were brought up as children and now assume the status of 'office children'. The fortunate official, who probably has no one to order him around from above, will at least continue playing his role as the **FATHER** of his household, his workplace and of his country. Too many are the details for me to go into now.

Consequently, the system that the country's leader manages and administers, rather than being governed by laws and regulations, will be subjected to that leader's whims and wishes, so that whatever good comes out of such leadership will owe its existence to the personal virtues of the leader and, conversely, whatever damage is done will very much be a result of the leader's personal flaws. As is the case with many fathers, whatever respect and fame attaches to good

achievement, the leader will appropriate as duly deserved, while whatever wrong or damage has been done, then the leader is just as comfortable playing the usual game of passing the buck. If the 'common' people are ever credited with anything good, it is their war time exploits and heroism. But, when anything goes bad, they are within easy reach to be loaded with all sorts of blame, which to this day is the name of the game. When such leaders find it difficult to manage and administer the affairs of state through knowledge and in accordance with a system of rules and regulations, they sound their 'clarion call' of pronouncing the people "void of work ethic!" In other words, passing the buck once again, the difference this time being that this one is done on a national level. They do not even realize that they were able to even say this much in the first place, thanks to the food 'this people' toiled so much to produce, whence the energy that enabled them to speak. It is 'this people' that has always been in the forefront when it comes to defend the country's sovereignty, which comes with its package of sacrifices to be paid over and above fulfilling a national duty. As if the said people don't have their hands full with tilling the land, the elite go about from town to town enjoying themselves the comforts of power never, even for once, wondering why the people should, without any respite, have fallen down at every war front, and, to add insult to injury, these elite have the audacity to utter such unseemly criticisms about the people. Not only that, they never ever seem to stop and think what their own "work ethic" is all about and, compared to the productivity of the people's labor, what the level of their own productivity measures up to.

Let me dare to summarize what I have said so far in the following words. The kind of family management and administration system in our country, it appears, has transferred itself over to the management and administration system of our workplaces. And the relationship between our governments and the citizens appears to be guided by this kind of administrative culture. Consider the following. If the child, who is nurtured in the family and 'fashioned' in school, grows up to adulthood only to face the kind of authoritarianism or despotism in the world of the workplace, how is he expected to cultivate a work ethic subject to the principles of the law, regulations and honesty when he in turn becomes an official of some department or office? The problem does not lie in the individual official or government leader. Rather, the problem is fundamentally that of culture. We as well as our leaders during the different regimes are all children of this culture. It is therefore important to probe into this general observation of mine as one fundamental problem of the development endeavors of the country. And precisely because such culture as we are talking about cannot be transformed overnight by a single stroke of one proclamation or by conducting seminars, the solutions we seek also need a thorough research. Now, if the situation is as has been described above, then we ought to ask: "who is going to change whom?" "On the basis of what criteria is one person going to assume the position of teacher and another that of student?" The problem is complex. Be that as it may, however, "What should be done now and in the future to alleviate the problem?" "What tasks do the short-term solutions require?" "And what should be done in the long-term prospect?" These questions require

of us public response based on knowledge, action plans and strategy, and measures that are honest and transparent.

But all this is not to say that the toddler, the young child and the grown up youth have nothing positive to learn from their families. They learn such values as: 'thou shalt not steal'; 'thou shalt not kill'; 'thou shalt not bear false witness'; 'love thine friend as thou wouldst thy self', etc., values that transcend national borders, ethnicity, and religion. Children learn to be respectful to their elders; they learn the role of 'social police' of the fathers and the mothers, which manifest themselves in such voluntary practices, even on the streets, of counseling and reconciling people when they quarrel or fight. There are things they learn when they observe how neighbors do well by each other; how another woman neighbor takes the place of a mother, who happens to have gone to the market, and takes care of and feeds what little food she has to the kids of that mother when they are hungry. They also have a lot to learn from the coffee ceremonies of villagers.

There are numerous anthropological folkloristic studies about the strategies which societies such as ours had used and still use to ensure their peaceful co-existence. So let me quickly enumerate some that you, too, are familiar with.

The individual acquires a lot of knowledge and experience from such social systems and practices as *sera (seyra?)*, *gada*, *idir*, *tsiwwa*, *mahiber*, *debo/wenfel/jige* (working collectively), *iqqub*, and credit (economic activity), all of which communities organize by way of making social co-existence as comfortable as possible. In due process, the individual thus grows

up learning both about the virtues and weaknesses of such systems and their practice. The individual also learns about folk wisdom with regard to justice and adjudication from such things as *shimgelinna*⁷ [mediation, conflict resolution], *iset'-ageba*, *agurah t'ennagn* [both traditional forms of litigation], *yigbagn* [appeal, entreaty, supplication], *abetuta* [petition], *irq* [reconciliation, mediation], *yiqr le'igzer* [forgiveness], *behigg amlak*⁸ [in the name of the law!], *amalaj* [mediator, intercessor], going into a churchyard and ringing a bell [seeking protection, immunity for a crime committed], *be hayle sellase* [invoking Emperor Haile Selassie's name, the supreme authority--more or less invoking the Law itself], *beneggesew nigus* [invoking the name of the regnant], *awch'ach'ign* [public ritual to identify a thief/criminal], and similar other practices pertaining to the law, justice and social life management. The present system of education and justice will inevitably find out, perhaps sooner than later, the crisis it finds itself as a result of its failure to learn from all these and other such deep-rooted practices that I think are relatively effective ways of conducting social life.

The fact that we have not been (and are not) undertaking serious research on the above issues, whose value has extended from the single family unit all the way through to the palaces, is a problem both of survival and development, to which

⁷ I think the conflicts at *Beddeno*, *Water*, and *Arsi* were settled through one or another form of traditional conflict resolution systems. Similarly, the recent conflict in *Gambella* involved such a system of conflict resolution. So this traditional method of conflict resolutions is still a recourse that we may yet have to resort to.

⁸ It is worth noting that the two consecutive concepts have been repeatedly invoked by Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam in his discourses on Ethiopian politics over the past thirteen or fourteen years.

we should give prompt and due attention.

5. Third Observation: Monadic [or Unitary] Outlook*

We all need some kind of outlook or worldview in order for us to understand the many issues that life presents us with. I think it constitutes a good tool for a comprehensive study of disparate ideas and sensations embodied in the different phenomena that constitute our lives. We can use this tool to study and understand contemporary life, increase our awareness of the changes that our outlook undergoes as a result of the physical and spiritual changes that take place. If we discuss these issues and proceed together, I think we will be able to know ourselves even better than we do now. Such a tool will, in my opinion, help us map out the direction into the future and move on, not instinctively and at random, but based on the knowledge and experience thus acquired.

Allow me to briefly talk about one of the outlooks that I think I have observed in our shared lives--yours and mine. After that I will, time allowing, present you with more instances. Once again, I urge you to keep in mind that I am still reflecting.

In many of the things and instances that I observe, I see tendencies of **ONE-SIDED** way of looking at things writ large. Lest the sense in which I use this term may prove confusing, let me try to explain how it is used here with some examples. It appears to me that, most of the

* Given the context of the discussion, this refers to ways of thinking or outlook opposed to what the author calls (in another section) 'common' outlook or worldview [translator].

time, the discussions we hold have as their goal **either** to agree **or** disagree. Something is **either** white **or** black. A person is **either** generous **or** greedy [read also 'good' or 'bad']. A given government is **either** good **or** bad. The alternative awaiting us in the Other World is either Heaven or Hell. Maybe such thinking has its origin in religion. Of those religions in Ethiopia with a long history, let us look into the Orthodox Christian faith and Islam. Both have their own dogmas (laws, procedures, and regulations), holy books, places of worship, symbols, and clearly identified holidays. The adherents of these religions, however, are observed leading their day-to-day lives, not according to the respective dogmas that their respective religions dictate but in their own folkways. Let me cite some examples I have been observing since my childhood days.

Let me start with my own personal experience. You may then resort to your own repertoires of experiences and develop what I have to say by filling the gaps that I leave behind in the process. My mother was a very faithful and sincere adherent of the Ethiopian Orthodox Faith. She always used to go to Church, observe the liturgy, pray, fast, and even occasionally attempt to participate in the liturgy. As I heard her repeatedly tell it when I was a young child and, later, a grown up, "Holy Mother Mary! Mother of God!" had come to her in a dream and talked to her when my mother was only a little child. I still remember the glow on her face every time she related this dream of hers to me. But, then, every year, on the first day of *Ginbot* [the Amharic equivalent of May], which is a holiday dedicated to the commemoration of the birth of St. Mary, my mother and her neighbors used to gather under a tree [usually an oak] and kill a sheep, the meat of

which they roast, they prepare boiled grains [usually wheat and chickpeas] and popped millet, brew coffee, serve *tella* (local beer) and *araq* (distilled alcohol made of grains) and celebrate Mary's birthday. This ritual still continues in different forms. There is hardly any time for me to go into the details of why the celebration takes place under a tree, what they smear the tree with, what they do with the roasted meat, the boiled grains, the popped millet and the *tella* and the *araq*. I will not attempt to explain who blesses the ritual and why. The main issue at the core of all this is the fact that such rituals have not gained the official blessings of the Christian Faith.

Let me add just one more example of the activities attending the daily coffee-ceremony. After the coffee is brewed and the dregs have settled to the bottom of the coffee pot, a small amount, measuring to two or three drops, of coffee is poured into one of the coffee cups. Then the same coffee is emptied from the first cup into the other cups in turns. Finally the coffee is sprinkled on the floor at a little distance from the tray. [The practice in Bole is to leave the coffee in the last cup for fear, I think, of not dirtying the carpet.] Let us not even think about digging into the significance of these rituals. Let us limit ourselves to the observation that the ritual appears to be ages old, perhaps even pre-Christian. And I do not think the ritual is a monopoly of Orthodox Christendom. What is of interest here is that the participants of the ceremony and the ritual in our locality at the time earnestly believed they were Christians and that most of them were churchgoers. Beyond this, think also of the *borenticha*, *denqara*, *ch'elle*, *atete*, *asmat*, *digmt*, *t'inqola*, *addo kabre*, *qalicha*, etc. [all of which are forms or various manifestations of magic,

sorcery, charms, astrology, etc.] What of the disparity between what these people are saying (believing) and what they are practicing in their every-day lives?⁹

What urges, indeed forces us, to think about all these is the fact that they are beliefs and practices that are not forgotten after one or two occasions. These are all beliefs and rituals, which we practice in different forms and manners, serious issues that have a big space cut out in the psyche of each of us. And I think what is actually and concretely practiced, what goes on in the minds of the practitioners of these rituals, what they tell us about their own practices are more important than what other say about them, whether publicly or off-the-record. To neglect this clearly visible way of life, not to collect, study, and analyze related data that may help us understand its nature, should strike one as surprising, to say the least. As if this was not enough, where lies the point in talking about education, health and

⁹ Let me mention two issues that invite quite considerable reflection. First, while, on the one hand, "Christianity" came to Ethiopia through the upper class, specifically the kings--the same is true of "Marxism" and "Democracy"--on the other hand, we see that indigenous religions and beliefs had been there since time immemorial, so to speak, and still co-exist with the official religions, and proudly one may add. Wouldn't you say this scenario challenges our faculty of reflection? Would any one doubt that this situation has lots and lots of things to tell us about our country? Second, is it possible that people do what they do the way they do it to get everyday solutions to their everyday problems, since the indigenous religions, whether truly effective or not, provide immediate answers to the people's immediate quests, as opposed to the official religions, which usually take a very long time to provide answers to the people's questions and problems? How then can such people, who were born into and lived all their lives in such culture, be expected to trust and follow the lead of governments whose words are at variance with their actions? How are such people expected to believe that governments would give them the peace, love, prosperity and happiness that their gods and the indigenous religions have not given them?

development in general, which says nothing about such issues? Wouldn't this strike you as shame? And how did the tendency of looking at things one-sidedly only manage to reign supreme in a country where this kind of life, which is a composite of at least two levels or layers of meaning--what I would call here *seminna worq* (wax-and-gold)--a way of life full of ambiguities and even contradictions?

Let me explain what I mean. Beginning with my childhood, I grew up to be what I am today always hearing that Ethiopia is a country surrounded by enemies, a country with only one God, one religion and one king.¹⁰ In later years, but for the fact that it was not included in the power structure, I would have included the chairperson of the basic cell, the "One father",¹¹ and rendered my reading of the situation with the appropriate elaboration of the fundamental philosophical principle behind the structure. But this **unitary outlook** has not stopped here. I think it has continued through the regimes both of the *Derg* and EPRDF.

With the advent of the *Derg* the Emperor had already been deposed, something we all know about. I, for one, think that the Emperor is still alive and well, except for assuming different names and acting out different roles. Here is how I see it. In the era of the *Derg* many political parties were in the making. Most of these parties were organized under **one** umbrella unit known as the Union of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations

¹⁰ One can add to this the legend of the King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and further elaborate on the issue.

¹¹ Unless it is a matter of who grubs the power, in most places in our country even today, what is more reliable or ascertainable is "one mother" rather than "one father."

[UEMLO]. After that it was declared that these organizations were united in the form of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia [WPE]. At this point, I think there are two *seminna worq* layers. In the one, although the 'wax' [the external layer or structure] is represented by WPE, at the level of the 'gold' [the underlying or deep structure] it constitutes the different parties, each of which secretly minded their respective organizational agenda, and gathered in the same whole in the guise of **one** party. Seen from the perspective of the second layer, while the 'wax' was represented by WPE, the 'gold' was represented by the *Derg*, and within the framework of the *Derg*, by Colonel Mengistu. (As we all know, when he was forced to leave the country, didn't all the speechifying he used to indulge in for seventeen full years cease being broadcast in the official media?) It was in this manner that they managed to rule on the basis of **one** ideology, which they labeled Marxism-Leninism (for them it was like **one** "religion"), **one** party and with **one** president. But after the cessation of the so-called Red Terror, with the successive establishment of the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association and the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association, it appears that the "one father" lost his dignity, pride and power that he previously enjoyed.

The EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) is a coalition of many organizations. And I think this is the 'wax' [the surface reading]. I say this because, for those who have been there since 1991, for at least eight to ten years, the 'gold' has been the TPLF. Let us hold on to this for the moment. My reading of the situation provides **one** organization, **one** type of democracy (or 'revolutionary democracy'), **one** president or **one**

prime minister. Because this phase is still in process, the issue of ideology may remain controversial. Moreover, this period might require the inclusion of those opposition organizations both at home and abroad. As complex as the situation may appear, the 'monadic' or 'unitarian' view is very much apparent in many of the ongoing political activities. The door, however, is open to those who may wish to base their reading of the situation on the basis of the 'wax' alone.

Among the poor, while power belongs to God, the political authority here on earth is considered as the counterpart of that in Heaven, whether this authority has acceptance among the people or not. I consider this as the unitary view manifesting itself, particularly when the poor are bothered about land, tax and elections.

6. Fourth Observation: Collective Outlook

There is what I would like to call collective outlook or view, which is not characterized by any form of 'wax and gold', and which we still have not grasped, a type of view that I have tried to explain in relative detail in one of my articles. Since I have nothing new to add here, I shall summarize some of the main points that I raised in the official version of the said article¹² and present them here. Allow me to quote at some length from the article.

Ethiopia, as we all know, is a country that is home to many ethnic groups (nationalities) speaking different languages. It is also home to at least three major types of religion, which we can categorize as

indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam, all of which have co-existed for centuries. I think there is one important point that we never mention when we talk about Ethiopia, whether as 'ordinary' individuals, 'intellectuals' or political leaders. This point concerns a way of life, which has its origin in these religions and which the people draw upon in their daily lives, whether in times of peace or war, conflict or harmony. On the one hand, we here engage in historical research and voice such concerns about 'who expanded Ethiopia's borders, who subjugated whom, who took whose land by force, which people annihilated which people, who unified the various princely dominions, who established law and order in Ethiopia's administration, etc.' On the other hand, the people, who interacted with each other for centuries, whether through war or commerce, went about their business quietly. In times of peace, on the one hand, merchants led their caravans cross-country, stayed overnight where they conducted their businesses, where they ate and drank with the local community. They cohabited with the local women where they did their business. They sired children, whether by accident or otherwise; they adopted children or had their own adopted by others; they set up concubinages and gradually developed relationships of love that ended up in marriages. One cannot deny that in all of this there couldn't have developed intermarriage between different values, different languages, and

¹² See footnote 7.

different cultures. On the other hand, we have the case of a large number of men mobilized from one woreda to another in times of war.¹³ Because these men usually stayed away from their families for long periods of time, they would have inevitably had sexual interaction with the women of the communities where they went, not because they were soldiers but simply because they were human beings with biological urges. Keep in mind that, even amidst wars, these soldiers continue to answer to such biological calls to perpetuate the species, whether they did so studiedly or merely by coincidence. Whenever such soldiers settled in any given locality, as much as they exhibit the kind of cruelty that fighting demands in time of war, so also do they exhibit the kind of humanity that may be hard to believe once peace has reigned. In such situations, the soldiers and the communities among whom they have settled are more than likely to strike conversations in which each side tells the other about itself, about its respective region, and its culture. While people educated in traditional religious institutions and those that went through the modern system of education, as well as expatriate scholars, keep on writing the history of governments and wars, and while we, for our part, keep reading what they write and engage ourselves in all sorts of discussions, and while those who have grasped the magnitude of the damage caused to one people or

¹³ The same holds true of peaceful workers who go from place to place on their own campaign to earn their living.

another by the wars attempt to "rectify this unbalanced relationship," in the process making sacrifices at different levels, the people's life has continued in its own way for centuries now--unwitnessed, unrecognized. I do not for once believe that there is anyone who has written down the different values that have emerged (and still emerge) from the kind of relationships the people have developed through the various forms of interaction among themselves. It is my strong conviction that there is a reality of life in this history of ours riddled with war, but particularly in the life of the people's social, economic, cultural and sexual interactions, some of which began forcefully and were consummated forcefully, others that began forcefully and ended peacefully, still others that started in peaceful negotiation and ended in love and cooperation.

Let me now try to explain what I have said above by means of examples taken from the people's day-to-day life in terms of 'ideology', with which we, the literate, are more familiar. A better term for all of us would have been the German *Weltanschauung*. Because the term 'ideology' has been overloaded with all sorts of meaning, particularly as of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The term's political overtone in particular has overshadowed its other meanings. I therefore use the term to refer to the way we perceive and understand the world and life in general.

There is one hypothesis that I often raise when talking to my students. There is, I tell them,

one general and basic *weltanschauung* that we who live in this country share in common. And this is the kind of thinking and way of life borne of the interaction among indigenous religions, Christianity and Islam, which in turn emerged out of the different relationships among the people of Ethiopia that have been going for centuries, and which 'prods us'¹⁴ and which we follow in unison. That is what I called collective [world] view. What those of us that consider ourselves educated, and those leaders of ours upon whom "history bestows the responsibility" of leading the country, theorize about the salvation of a country from the height of our pulpits, completely oblivious to our country's realities, and what actually takes place on the ground mostly do not find themselves in accord, such that even we ourselves get confused. And very often, we speechify again and again (sometimes naively, otherwise adamantly) about our aim to lead the country and, then, years later (when things wouldn't fall in place) we suddenly become adherents of the country's realities. Because we have failed to recognize the existence of the common worldview of which I have spoken above and have not been able to study and understand its nature, we also have failed to grasp the fundamental reason for the disparity between our theory and our practice. Consequently, we have been manufacturing temporary

¹⁴ I say 'prods' us to indicate (1) that it exists; (2) if it does exist, that, instead of knowing its name and its nature and, therefore, formulating it to suit different situations, I have always felt that the idea shapes and reshapes itself as situations change and that we live in accordance with its dictates.

solutions to our problems, solutions not carefully considered and studied but in ways that render us a laughing stock to keen observers who have no problem labeling the way we go about it all 'herd instinct'. If we had carefully studied the nature of this worldview, we would have been able to understand most of our ways of life and to identify and change those ways of doing things that would not serve our interests. It does not, of course, mean that there would be no change unless we study and fully grasp the significance of the worldview I am talking about. Change, there will be, meaning the same kind of change as that we already are familiar with. And whither and to what this change has taken us we know, too. Unless we divorce ourselves from this manner of functioning, I do not think the change awaiting us in the future would be one that would not flatter, or force us to compromise, the "the habasha pride" and freedom that we have always been repeating to ourselves and which tickles us every time we hear it.

Another thing that I find amazing is that there could come a time when this worldview, invisible as it is, could serve as the bulwark with which to protect the country. Because, any invading force, even if it is a superpower, that has not understood the nature of this worldview would not be able to assault us at will. And the history of this country, even up to now, partially testifies to this claim of mine. It is impossible to either benefit or harm something [someone] that one does not know much about. It is impossible to change

(civilize) or attack (subjugate) that which one does not know. Consequently the worldview poses a problem to us, but even more to our historical enemies. Therefore, in order to pass on to future generations a sense of good behavior and positive values, to develop ourselves, and the country as a whole, and even to combat AIDS, we need to understand this worldview. For it would be impossible to change a people whose ways of thinking are not well understood; neither would it be possible to develop with such people. If what I have said so far is well taken as one major issue and earns me a hint that all of us would give it due consideration, I would be the happiest person ever.

In the article from which this lengthy quotation has been taken, I had in the main talked about the 'monadic' or 'unitarian' view in connection with the shaping of what has been referred to as good citizens. In the above quotation, however, I believe I have given my audience sufficient glimpse into what I have called **common national worldview**. When we have been able to study, analyze, expound and understand this worldview, then we will have been able to take one step beyond talking and writing "wonderfully" about the country and the peoples in habiting it as well as the different social and political activities going on within its borders. And it will be possible to start and organize the kind of study I have in mind through the collaboration of the existing veteran scholarly authorities and the young scholarly authorities who are going to bequeath this authority from their forebears in the various fields. I shall say something about these 'authorities' later.

7. Fifth Observation: The 'Wax-and-Gold' Mode of Life

'Wax and gold' is a form of traditional Ge'ez poetry that has one surface meaning, known as 'wax', and multiple meanings, known as 'gold'. The 'gold' is the hidden meaning, which yields itself clear only after a thorough interpretation involving different approaches. This hidden meaning is not always clear to everybody. This form of poetry can be used to express the mysteries of the divine; as an outlet in times of distress; or as a form of entertainment in palaces and other important places. But it is also used as a form of survival strategy in the every-day life of the people, such as coming to terms with one's oppressive conditions of life. On the other hand, it has been quite sometime now since this poetic form started to be used for a despicable game of social and political 'hide-and-seek'. Let me explain briefly.

"I swear upon my father's name that I didn't do it!" "I swear upon your name, mother, it is not me but her who did it!" I think such forms of swearing are not strange to most of us. I certainly am not a stranger to it. Because that stage of childhood when children, who are threatened with punishment [real or perceived], answer, without even knowing what the question is all about, "It is not me!" is not something easily forgettable. Such responses from children still abound. I do not think the question has been properly heeded before such a response is given. The reason for this kind of immediate, almost mechanical, denial, it appears to me, has to do with the loudness or angry tone with which the question is asked. And sometimes, the denial is preceded by a shedding of tears. Perhaps, we

have actually committed the said mistake or 'crime'. I think we immediately lie fully aware that telling the truth brings something unpleasant in its footsteps. All this appears like a race to save oneself from whatever follows or is perceived to follow. It appears, therefore, that it is a childhood survival strategy that employs lying accompanied by tears, all to save oneself from punishment. It cannot be denied that this and similar other words and actions certainly have impacts on our personalities.

And when we get older, we play all sorts of unnecessary games of 'hide-and-peek' in our every-day lives. We lead a kind of 'clandestine' lives in our daily routine. A mode of thinking to watch the way things go and switch "to where opportunity knocks" pervades our daily talks. What I am going to deal with below are some examples of people praising others openly but deprecate secretly behind their backs; glorify publicly and curse secretly; bowing and saying 'Sir', 'Madame', 'Sister', 'Brother', only to end up backbiting the same in their absence. Have you ever come across the following kind of conversation, which goes on between two people?

X: If you want to hear the real truth, what I, your brother, really like is raw meat.

Y: Why, then, did you say you liked salad when asked earlier?

X: Are you crazy! Did you expect me to make a fool of myself and say that I actually like meat, while all around me, the so-called nouveau riche flaunt themselves as 'civilized' and munch on cabbages, lettuce and eat and carrots?

Y: You mean you worry that much? What would happen to you if you had told him that you actually like *qurt'* [raw meat], plain and simple

X: Listen buddy! Haven't you ever heard of the saying '*gommen bet'ena*' [giving a person the white lie/being diplomatic]. You do not know in what guise these people approach you! It helps to take precaution! 'Silence is golden'! Mum is the word, my dear!

Haven't you ever come across some such conversations? Let me take another example, this time imaginary, fashioned after conversations carried after one of those meetings in the current era of EPRDF. Here is the scenario. One of the participants raises his hand and is given a chance to speak. Here goes:

A: Well, actually, I don't have anything to say! But I thank His Excellency, the Chairperson for giving me the opportunity to speak! . . . Truth be told, there are many good things that this government has done. Of course, one cannot say that there have not been some mistakes. As the saying goes 'as iron is not rust-free, so are people bound to make mistakes! . . . [In this manner, the speaker completely jumbles and makes a mess of what the chairperson has said and stops.]

B: Well, what I mean to do is venture a view! Ethiopia has seen such an era of equality, peace, democracy and justice. But (with a forceful gesturing of his hands) massively, in leaps and bounds, building capacity, people-focused, free from dependency, with concerted effort, AIDS, harvesting water in pools, using our rivers for irrigation, we need nations', nationalities, and peoples' vision, and African Unity. . . [Mumbles some such things and stops.]

During break, a participant who has been listening quietly approaches the two speakers and joins them for tea. He addresses the first speaker first and asks: "So, you, too, spoke of 'some mistakes'?" He then turns to the second speaker and says, "What is all this mumbling about leap . . . concerted effort . . . this and that?"

A: Listen, brother! One has to approach life with tact! What you wanted me to repeat is what I said to you in private about this government being the second Gragn, is that it? [Before, the first speaker has finished what he had to say, the other 'advocate' of democracy looked left and right to make sure that there wasn't another person around who might be eavesdropping and ...]

B: Listen! You keep quiet and you are in trouble! You tell the truth, you're in trouble! What you should do, therefore, is echo the major slogans uttered at different times and stop. If you do that, the present government will leave you to yourself as someone inconsequential; and any future government as may come will not even understand what you said! Life needs tact!

You see, this is fear taken to the limits of absurdity! But, could it be that, as far as these characters are concerned, what they said is a form of clandestine warfare?

Another tactic that emerges out of such big meetings is silence. While it is possible to use such forums to express one's view that is based on knowledge and experience and supported by evidence, in a 'civilized' manner, it is often considered preferable and wise to keep quiet. Once people are out of

the conference hall either for tea or for lunch, then the hallway is filled with the inevitable hubble-bubble. Gossiping and serious talk are mixed in a curious fashion only to be swallowed by the deafening uproar. Come evening time, the same hubble-bubble and uproar is magnified a hundredfold and continued in the 'closed sessions' of barrooms and pubs. That is what I think happens.

But Ethiopia does not have a monopoly on such gossipings and whisperings around political issues. It is commonplace in both the developed and undeveloped countries. 'Let's Gossip!' is the catchword. And I have come across such words used to trigger conversations while I was abroad. If that is the case, why, then, did I single out our situation as a point of focus? I did so because I think this kind of gossiping is so pervasive in our country, as one major way of life *sui generis*, that we appear to be carrying it around on our shoulders, while it presses down on us comfortably positioned.¹⁵

¹⁵ This idea struck and shocked me when I went to some place in 1964 (E.C.). The incident took place a week, or less than a week, after I went to the place. Right in the center of the town (let us call the place town, just for convenience) is a huge square. Beginning around sunset, if it is a weekday, and beginning about four or five o'clock in the afternoon, if it is a weekend, people clad in their *gabis* take their seats around the square. These people kill the time backbiting one or another person. What shocked me was when I was told that the name of the particular location was '*saw megach'a*' [literally, a place where people gather and bite off peoples flesh clean off the bones]. Gradually, I got used to it and began listening to what was being said. To be frank, the extent of the people's openness was interesting, indeed delighting. I say this because they didn't name the place '*saw mekabiya*' [a place where you speak honorably of people] and then transformed it into '*saw megach'a*' in practice. I think it is beginning that moment that I learned that such culture of gossiping and backbiting has taken root in our society, particularly once I started looking inward at myself and outward at the society and reflecting upon my past life.

But the tragedy lies in the fact that the major actors of this drama are the very same people who consider ourselves educated and that think our education has equipped us with the ability to discuss things openly, knowledgeable, with tolerance and in an orderly fashion. Allow me to indulge myself in some hyperbole and say that there may be some of us who, as teachers or office staff, may be susceptible to an inclination to give our lectures (if we are teachers) or report on the realities of our offices (if we are office staff) to each student or fellow worker, as the case may be, behind closed doors, in the absence of witnesses.

So, if we do not dare to speak out openly and without obfuscation about the realities we see in our respective professional fields, if we leave such task to the very limited number of known personages, first of all, how can we think and talk about development and professional ethics? Secondly, why do we think others should carry the burden of such task, which we ourselves were not willing to carry in the first place? Thirdly, what if these 'others' were not willing to take the responsibility? Unfortunately, because the one who determines or decides what is risky and what is not is the individual alone, it is also the same individual who decides what to tell and what not to tell. Consequently, such individuals are heard confounding their lack of respect for professional ethics with the right to speak or not to speak, and with all the audacity they can muster. Moreover the culture's '*gommen batena*' [minding ones own business] is thrown around as a supporting slogan, depending on the level of the individual's point of view. But then, there are different types of *gommen*. There is Sheikh Alamudi's *gommen*; there is the *gommen* of the nouveau riche; and there is the *gommen* of the

'alphabetists' themselves; there is the ordinary people's *gommen*. There many types of national *gommen*: the pauper's 'I will beg'; 'why bother for this world, since everything has been predetermined!'; 'whatever God has decided will happen anyway!' and 'Why bother at all!' These are examples of the national *gommen* of opting for silence or doing nothing about anything at all. The types of 'health', whether mental or physical, differ in a similar manner. Is it then possible to do anything of significance amidst a life that is guided by these types of thinking and expression?

The 'wax-and 'gold' mode of this social and political game of hide-and-peek is not limited to what has been said so far. There is another mode pertaining to the elite of the three regimes of the Emperor, the *Derg* and EPRDF. The very life of those elite groups is 'wax-and-gold' *sui generis*. What such groups looked like during the imperial era is well known. With the advent of the *Derg* regime, instead of asking their willingness and attaching itself to those people, who had a better record of advocating for change, knowledgeable, experience, moral courage and personality, whether on the pretext of "using them" or for some other reason, the regime opted for those it later surrounded itself with. The latter, in their turn, embraced the regime, whether to "use it" for promoting their agenda or for some other reason. They began tightening their embrace from time to time. When the regime realized that the embrace tightened to the point of turning into a bear hug, it, too, forgot what it was up to in the first place and reciprocated with the same intensity of embrace. As experience has shown, things are not for ever; so, when the ground started to become shaky and the regime was no longer as steady as

before, those who surrounded it gradually began to loosen their embrace. When the regime's downfall was imminent, those same people began to be critical of the regime and even dared it, while at the same time going about inquiring about the nature of the next regime. They all armed themselves with the right words of flattery and the appropriate smiles. When the downfall of the one they were with became certain they rejected it absolutely and slowly switched to the new camp and began to flirt and woo the would-be regime.

The incoming regime knew what these people were from the beginning. But the new regime, instead of opting for those genuine people who resolutely struggled both against itself and the *Derg*, took in those who were with the *Derg*. Those foreign powers, which look at the list of their names, would have a good impression about the meetings. Here, then, is the second round of 'hide-and-seek' starting in a new and sophisticated fashion. It appears to me that such a 'culture of duplicity' has pervaded the ranks of the elite.

The other type of 'wax-and-gold' mode of operation pertains to the political power structure. Especially since 1933 (E.C.), the way the exiles, the *bandas* and the patriots were put up against one another was one situation that fettered the country during the late Emperor's regime. Imagine a ministry or department in which there were three high positions, for which three persons were appointed by the Emperor, one each from the three groups, and think what could have happened. Given a culture that accorded three different levels of regard or esteem, the three persons so appointed exhibit differences commensurate with the kind of

esteem each is held in. It would not, then, be difficult to imagine each of them giving each other the wink amidst their inferiors (including the employees) and plotting and playing the stool pigeon and eyeing each other to ensure the security of their respective positions (particularly the one from the second group). Add to this the host of family members, relatives, friends and relations by marriage, and you have the poison proliferating the system with its own network of nepotistic relations. I think that such form of power alignment has been adopted, together with different forms of its articulation, first during the struggle for 'land to the tiller', and then by the *Derg* and currently by EPRDF, the degree of sophistication varying for each scenario. After liberation, the then regime was publicly announcing its intention to ensure the hard-earned freedom and to rehabilitate the country from the damage incurred during the war. In this process, the kind of arrangement in which it put up the administrators and other officials supposedly responsible for implementing the project could be labeled the number one 'organizational mode of operation', that is, group mentality. Examining the nature of the different structures that the *Derg* regime had laid following its nation-wide program of Development Through Co-operation, with its slogans of 'land to the tiller', 'national unity', 'class struggle', 'ensuring the rights of the broad masses', I think, would yield results indicating the similarity of the game with that of the previous regime. A lot can be said about its tactics of putting up against each other those with actual power to practice their prerogatives and those with power which was anything but sham, and, when it felt like it, putting up against each other military and civilian, or civilians, generals/colonels, military cadres,

each of these eyeing the others. If only historians and political scientists could analyze for us the ways of the 'wax-and-gold' games of 'hide-and-seek' that we had all along been going through, I am sure most of us here and elsewhere would delight in their endeavors.

All the instances I cited above show how the 'wax-and-gold' mode of deception and duplicity was used by those with vested interests, for their own personal gains. And now let me cite one example that I heard of with regard to how the 'wax-and-gold' game was used by the 'ordinary' people as a form of survival strategy.

We all know that three different contending forces had deployed themselves in Eritrea at one time. Of the three, one was the government. The other two organizations had not as yet constituted a consolidated force, so that they moved about from village to village asking the folk for food and water and trying to recruit young people to bolster their ranks. Once one of the two had gotten what it needed and left, the other one would follow in its footsteps with the same agenda. Depending on particular area the people inhabited, there was a situation in which two of the three forces, sometimes all three, made their presence felt from time to time. The time was one in which each of the three lay claims on the people's loyalty. When, however, the people could no longer bear the burden, they somehow secured the banners of all three forces. Then they placed some young people in different strategic spots as scouts to inform the people of the approach of the forces, whichever one they may be. When the young people see a force approaching from a distance they send signals to the community. The people, upon seeing or hearing the

signal, all gather outside of their homes. Three people, each holding the banner of one of the forces, are placed at the center of the crowd. When the said force approaches, they identify it by the banner it carries. After they are assured themselves which one of the three the approaching force is, the person holding the banner similar to the one that they have seen moves out of the crowd waving the banner and approaches the troops, while the crowd follows with ululation. In this manner, by gaining the confidence of each of the forces, they managed to alleviate the burden they had been forced to carry.

This story may or may not have happened exactly as it was related. The point is that the whole thing is indicative of the fact that people would go to any length in search of some form of survival strategy. When, in Ethiopia, things fail to function or be carried out openly and in an orderly manner, people come up with their own respective solutions as the areas they live in permit or dictate. It appears that it is in this fashion that the realities of the country managed to assume the complexity characterizing them over the years, with such intricacy as we, the so-called educated, cannot simply understand.

One can cite many similar examples about the folk's ways of life and survival, but time calls. If things are as I said, whether at the level of people's private life or at that of public life all the way up to the high levels of the power structure, and if this indeed is as pervasive as I have depicted it, how, then, can the Ethiopian elite talk about changing and developing the country, rather than about changing themselves? Yes, we could talk about developing ourselves spiritually, through knowledge, but what moral capacity or authority do we have to talk

about developing others and make them prosper in the process? And how is it possible to undertake a development project, based on knowledge backed up by concrete facts and open discussion, while finding oneself subscribing to the ways of life I just described?

My other point, which I consider constitutes a main concern for all of us, is the following. We need to open a forum for dialogue about how such a 'wax-and-gold' way of life, which has been developed and shaped just like some literary style or style of life, has gradually shaped the political structure and the life style of each individual, how it managed to become a philosophy of social life and affected the relationship between the people and governments, so that we would be able to thoroughly study the situation and find solutions to this huge and complex phenomenon of a problem. The situation is more complex than this. Although most of us, including previous and current officials, have not written or spoken about the situation in this manner, I do not think what I have described so far is strange to many of us. I estimate that there are many such narratives probably more shocking than that I have presented here as an example.

8. Sixth Observation: "The Culture of Silence"

In the section in which we talked about life in the family, we have seen how the participation of children in discussions was extremely limited. What the child experiences in the family in this regard manifests itself in the form of the Ten Commandments. So the child grows up without saying anything about his home. Where there are elderly people, the child

would not dare say anything unless otherwise asked. The reason for this, in one respect, could be the respect the culture accords to old age and experience. Young boys could start talking in the house with full freedom perhaps when they get married. Mind you, I am still on my reflection trip. At this point in his life, now as a fully-grown man, he would start to play his father's role with respect to his relation with his wife. His wife, for her part, would start to play the role of subject, just as it was with her mother, on which her husband experiments his patriarchal authority and power. The scenario smacks of vengeance. The tragedy of such a situation lies in the fact that, in our country as elsewhere in the rest of the world, the whip of vengeance lashes out on the one who has no crime to speak of. The husband does the talking and rarely talks to her, much less with her. He carries out his vengeance against his father first on his wife, and, then, on his children. At this point, his wife and his children keep quiet, just as his mother and as his former self, respectively. Let us say, with a little bit of exaggeration, that the cycle of family 'dialogue' assumes this mode of silence.

However, strangely enough, this way of living has proceeded all along, with all its package of poverty, without much disruption in this kind of silence. And I believe there are many of us who are not surprised that this kind of life has proceeded until our own time with all the poverty characterizing it. We constantly hear about and witness all the meaningful and excessive rioting and violence that takes place both in the 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' countries. Did we somehow manage to survive as we have done under such circumstances because the state of our poverty is any less than those countries

considered as uncivilized as ourselves? Or is it because, as one is wont to believe, God and Allah are always attending to the country with special care, or because it is "a miraculous country"? Or, alternatively, is it because Ethiopia, as some people who have found it tempting to embrace ignorance rather knowledge, have often dared to say, is a country of "ignoramuses"? Or is it fear that forces the people into silence? What do we have to say of the same people when we see them fighting for their freedom and the integrity of their country's territory? When they immerse themselves into blazing flames and throw themselves at enemy tanks and manage to ensure their freedom and dignity? Have they been doing all this out of fear?

Or, should we look for the secret in the way of their lives? Could the problem of this way of life lie in the people's preference to bear hardships, to remain tolerant and, therefore, silent when the problems they face are internal, national issues? Could the style be manifesting itself in such instances as tolerating the father in the family, tolerating the *mislene* [administrative deputy], the *ch'iqa shum* [village headman/tax assessor], and the government outside of the home? Could this be the reason why the country has managed to stay relatively stable? Could this be one aspect of that common outlook or worldview (the worldview of the Head), the nature of which we have not been able to grasp? And when internal problems get rougher and rougher, could it be that such solutions as mediation, complaints or appeals, exile, and many more are manifestations of this way of life? And how much have the constitutions promulgated particularly since 1948 [1955 G.C.] to replace these ways of life

succeeded in their attempts? What is the state of these constitutions today? Are there conflicts between the traditional ways and the ways of the constitutions? If so, what kind? Whether we like it or not, the way of life that has been prodding us so far, the worldview that I have termed 'common' or 'collective', exists. What of the modern constitutions? Have they been able to replace this collective outlook? Did we have the appropriate people and structures able to implement the so-called modern constitutions? Or, are we still stuck with talking about them being committed to paper instead of implementing them as they have been written over the last 50 years? Have the 'ordinary' citizen been able to know these different laws and regulations as much as the cultural ones? Have they gained the confidence and acceptance of the citizens just because they have been written down? Could the silence that we witness today perhaps be an expression of all the confusion surrounding us? All this is just like a snapshot of the general situation. Let us now explore in brief the situation of those of us who have gone through school.

I have tried to mention in passing at the beginning of my speech what is in store for the young children going to school. There isn't much by way of an encouraging situation in the schools, too. We have said that, in many instances, the teacher is "a school-father" and the student "a **child of the school.**" There does not seem to have been any situation whatever in which the child grew, beginning with the traditional school, freely asking questions and responding to questions and engaging in discussions without fear and anxiety. Of course, one can speak of the existence of good fathers, mothers and teachers, and indeed there are quite a few. The question, however, is which one--

the good or the bad--is predominantly visible. What I have so far depicted in my reflections are those aspects that I think are predominant and salient.

The question now is, how could a child that has been nurtured without the benefit of discussions concerning the life both at home and at school freely participate in the wider issues and concerns of society? If the child was brought up engaging in discussion on issues of concern, how could he/she discuss issues now? Who has ever taught the young how to go about discussing issues? During the days of the imperial regime, thanks to the efforts of some teachers at some schools, students were exposed during class and through debating clubs to the culture of discussion. Whether that budding culture has continued and been able to blossom, I have not been able to determine with what I have observed about my students today. What I have been able to learn, particularly since the last years of the 1970s [E.C.], is a totally different thing. And truth be told, how possibly could our youth engage in academic discussions and other kinds of debate without having been exposed to the art of conducting discussion and debate to begin with?

Is it probably because of this that, whenever there is even a small, casual conversation, especially among the elite and the urbanites, disagreeing is considered as something in bad taste, even wrong for that matter? Is that why, during such conversations, the response to disagreement turns, at best, into ill mood, otherwise into quarrel and dislike for one another? Could that be why in our conversations there is a tendency to be emotional rather than using concrete evidences that would result in gaining additional knowledge; to be rash rather than

considering issues maturely; to disorderliness rather than restraint? Could this be why we tend to listen to ourselves rather than listen to others as well; hearing only one self speak rather the conversing with others; trying to reach one's goal in one quick leap rather than taking measured and considered steps; why this culture pervades our ways? Could this be what has prevented us from moving together with our respective differences? Was it on this kind of social and intellectual terrain that we were exerting our efforts, first to sow 'socialism', then 'democracy', and expect to reap good harvest? Is it because we have not cultivated the art and knowledge of conducting discussions and, therefore, lack the necessary experience that we, the alphabetists, keep silent?

Let me skip the details and try to say a few things about discussions conducted on bigger forums. Ethiopians who returned after being educated abroad used to give speeches and hold discussions at the National Library and Museum, Theological College, the University College, the YMCA, and, later at Haile Selassie I University. Teachers of the Haile Selassie University also used to conduct discussions, especially at forums, including those organized in the Sidist Kilo campus, at the Alumni Association, and the E.C.A. Students as well conducted discussions in their respective campuses and colleges. Different student papers and magazines used to be published covering wide areas of issues from different perspectives. When we look at some of the issues of these student papers and magazines now housed in the library of the Institute of Ethiopia Studies, we realize that there were quite a few voices advocating for the ways of democracy.

However, it appears that, beginning the moment when the "Land-to-the-Tiller" wing of the student movement consolidated its ranks and held the upper hand, the form of the culture of discussion began to change. When the style of clandestine operation gradually began to prevail, what I call 'organizational way of doing things' (group mentality) and 'organizational mode' of directing meetings and discussions' assumed structural dimension. This mode of operation, which took momentum beginning with the 1974 revolution, has since then made its way into the country's palace and the political structures of the clandestine and 'official' organizations, becoming, in a sense their *modus operandi*, and it still persists. The kind of 'organizational way of doing things' I am talking about does not seem to limit itself to politics; rather, it appears to have transformed itself as a way of life within the larger spheres of society. Both the Markato community and the bureaucracy seem to have equally mastered the style. Neither are newspapers and magazines left out of this game, in which they seem to have attained some degree of sophistication. Other than those newspapers officially acknowledged as government, only the owners know which newspapers and magazines are government, which party organs, which private and which belong to organizations. We, the 'congregation', listen to what they tell us, caring little or none about what 'popular internet' cites carry, and proceed without discriminating between truth and falsehood. Especially in this 'Age of Democracy', to say that the things published, particularly in the first ten years, mostly carried pennames would not be much of an exaggeration. But the game continues.

Consequently, for all the appearance of the nation's retreat into silence, the game is continuing clandestinely. We, the gullible, who cry the slogan of "transparency!" every time we get the chance, may not see what is going on, but the players of the game have known all along what has been going on from the outset and what is still going on currently. And they all seem to know each other on this score. The game also seems both agreeable and comfortable to indulge in. And it is my belief that all those who honestly and genuinely desire transparency may be numbered among their enemies.

It has now been quite a while since I began feeling that the procrastination and crippling of work in different offices may not, after all, be part of this 'silent struggle'. But what we mostly hear said is: 'there is too much bureaucracy! It is incapacitated! It lacks competence! There is some truth in that. In my opinion, however, bureaucracy is one of the strategies both of struggle and survival, which has been there now for a long time. Those who work within the existing bureaucratic structure do not go out public for salary increment when prices of commodities and the cost of living skyrocket. Living indeed has become too expensive to bear. The salary level of the workers is indeed low. For all this, however, you hear it said that 'living is somehow manageable', especially beginning with the *Derg* era. But how could living be managed, given the scenario just described? There could be different hypotheses to explain this 'anomaly'. One such hypothesis could be 'public subsidy', the reason being that, when the cost of living rises, bureaucracy itself goes clandestine. You go to different offices and find people apparently working, but you don't see your

needs being attended to. When the salary hike or the subsidy the workers expect does not materialize, they work with ill will. They cripple the work; in fact, they kill it. And what happens to those who come to get services? They begin to extend their arms, as if in supplication [that is, to bribe]. In this manner, every time the cost of living rises bribery itself becomes an expensive affair, which has been the case for quite sometime now. Special 'tariff' levels attach to the services rendered. So continues the game.

But I think this way of doing things is dangerous. It is an ugly tendency that confounds governments with the country and rolls them into one lump. Governments come and go. Different officials in different governments may not be to our liking. We may not get what we want in the political arena. But cultivating the culture of keeping things to ourselves, keeping silent, and killing work as a form of struggle is tantamount to be inconsiderate of ourselves, the country as a whole and, most above all, the coming generations. Embracing killing one country as a lasting solution to get rid of governments that are transitory in nature and whose tenure is limited to a finite number of years is certainly not the workings of a healthy, thinking mind. As it appears to me, if the culture of silence I am talking about came about as a result of adopting it as a mode of such a "struggle," I am afraid it is going to prove dangerous to all of us--the perpetrators as well as the victims.

In the era of the *Derg*, it is difficult to say that all clandestine organizations were at ease or comfortable with the establishment of WPE. There were possible those among the organizations working

with the *Derg* who may have sulked when the reality struck home. I, therefore, found it difficult to determine whether all of the organizations had either challenged the *Derg* openly or simply opted for keeping silent. That is why I started thinking that the bureaucracy was embraced as one answer to the problems at the time. I still think the problem continues, albeit in different forms and manners. That is why I dared to say that, what we call "the culture of silence" at every opportunity we get might not, after all, really be silence. If there is any truth in what I have said so far about silence, how, then, could such situation help our development endeavors? And how could we solve the many invisible and inarticulate political, economic, and social problems? And what would be the benefit, in terms of development, of the mutual strife, whether open or clandestine, especially that among the elite, and the slings and arrows of vengeance, resentment and intransigence coming from all directions against oneself as much as against others?

The other reason for the silence we witness, and one that needs to be looked into, is the crisis--which young adults and the elderly very well know--caused by the 'era of terror' during the *Derg* regime. The cruelty the people suffered during that period is not new to the country's history. A book titled *Däqiqä Ist'ifanos: Bähigg Amlak*¹⁶

¹⁶ Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, in the short foreword he wrote to the book, has the following to say: "The story of the torment of the disciples of Ist'ifanos, which Professor Getachew Haile translated from Ge'ez into Amharic, is shocking and infuriating; it lays bare our ignorance about ourselves. It forces us to own to the fact that, even six hundred years later, we have not made an iota of progress and, therefore, urges us to look deep into ourselves. While I was reading this book, it struck me that it probably was us who invented the system of tormenting people, which the West calls 'torture' in English, and which in Ge'ez is referred to as

[the disciples of Stephen: in the name of the Law], first written in the 15th century, and translated from Ge'ez into Amharic by Professor Getachew Haile, and published this year in America attests to this fact.

Many young people were killed en masse during that period of terror. Parents were confused and fear made its abode with them. On the one hand, they felt like their innermost secrets were exposed; they became awestruck, seized with dread. On the other hand, they appeared as if to wash their hands like Pontius Pilate--as if to say, 'hear nothing, speak nothing, see nothing'. The spirit of rebellion of 1974 disappeared without a trace on the eve of 1976 and 1977. The courage and valor of each and everyone was tested, challenged. The attitudes of family members changed; the role of fathers as protectors of their wives and children was questioned. Fathers were gradually stripped of their reliability. The religious fathers, supposedly in the service of the Other World, who despised everything that was of the flesh, were not hearted uttering a single word in the face of that gruesome terror. And individuals who were known for their vocalness at other times suddenly lost their moral courage. Consequently, the respect accorded to priests, sheikhs, bishops, elders, and notable personages was put to the test.

We all looked for opportunities to talk, contemplate, and consult with each other to seek ways to extricate ourselves from that period of torment. We still are searching for some kind of reprieve. The wars simply took our breath away. The parade of proclamations and the

kunene [Damnation] . . ." (Getachew Haile, Avon, Minnesota, 2004, p.13). When I, too, read the book, I felt really taken aback. The matter is simply shocking and frightening.

constant change of names and structures of different cities, the country and workplaces left us without any break. What has once been there was demolished--for our benefit. Something new was instituted, proclaimed--all in our name. The new one was destroyed before we even got to know it--once again, for our benefit. There were killings, imprisonments, rapes, harassments, all carried out in our name--but we were never consulted. Confusion became our fate. All these seem to have been carried out deliberately to deny us the leisure to think.¹⁷ On top of all this, there was the obligation to serve on committees and attend meetings. The terror put everyone up against everybody else. The result was mutual suspicion, fear, loss of trust and confidence in others.

And in the past thirteen years, the shadow of that era of terror has been being replayed, this time in a new form and with a different magnitude. We are now being exposed to new scenes on different forums, including on television. All of us who passed through the era of terror and the past thirteen years deserve something more than being told: "why, you have become silent!" The reference should read: "why, you are anesthetized!" How, then is it possible to think and act development with confidence without being relieved from this state of 'Silence' or 'Numbness' (take your pick!)?

9. Seventh Observation: History and Politics

Another instance of our life style has to do with giving too much

¹⁷ Things don't seem any different today either, what with all the banners that we see hang everyday around the city and all those meetings organized by all sorts of offices, agencies, institutes, meetings whose rationale and aims are never monitored or evaluated.

space to history, and superficial history at that, or compressing much too much of it, in our day-to-day lives, but especially in political matters, or in our psyche. And the fact that this is being done under circumstances whereby what we call history has become increasingly controversial adds to the confusion already existing now.

A person who does not know for certain his date of birth and one, moreover, who doesn't care to know either, talks a lot, and with all the self-assurance there is, about the thousand-year history of his ethnic origin. Few are not the individuals who do this, and yet who shun any attempt to know for certain the ages of their parents, possibly also their own and those of their children, which is the easier thing to do and, yet, who tirelessly masticate and regurgitate the history of their ethnic groups, possibly even of their country, on the basis only of what they have heard just once, and second hand at that.

Another angle to this problem is that, while many Ethiopians may not know the dates of their birth, there could be ways in which they can identify those dates by rough estimate or by connecting them to some event. And this may create a misunderstanding between any two members of the same family. The reason could be lack of memory or they could be any number of other reasons. If I take my own case, I grew up being told by my mother that I was born on *Seen 21*, 1942 [June 28, 1950]. After I grew up I was told that the date recorded in my father's book of Psalms was *Seen 21*, 1941 [June 28, 1949]. I grew up and lived with my mother. My father was not in the vicinity on the day of my birth. Should I believe what was recorded in the

book simply because what has been written down is more reliable? Or, should I trust in what my mother told me, since she was the one with whom I lived until the day of her death? But the problem, you see, is not just a matter of getting the facts correct. It involves feelings. The point is not that a year added or subtracted actually makes that much difference. The important thing is what I feel about such discrepancies. I focus on this issue to pave the way for a consideration of a more important and broader issue that pertains to our society along the same line. So I ask myself what I feel and think about myself, my family and my country in general. When I think of how much controversial the matter of my age has been in the family (even to this day), then, I think of how controversial could our social life be. Our society is filled up with all sorts of stories, tales and customs, on the telling and retelling of which we waste a lot of time. What we know for certain about our own identity and related issues that we can agree upon are far too few, save for our sexual identity. When I think of all these, I stop and wonder how very low indeed is our consciousness about ourselves and our styles of life, as well as our culture of keeping written records about all these.

Look, I do not know much about myself, for there was no one who did, or was able to, record the history of my growing up into adulthood. Neither did I record anything pertaining to that after I grew up. So, all that I know is restricted to what good old memory has in store. And what I can remember varies from place to place and from time to time. I remember certain things when I am with those with whom I grew up in

my area of birth, which differs from what I remember when I am with my schoolmates. Similarly, what I remember when I meet, after a long period of time, my expatriate friends differs, as also does what I remember when I meet my colleagues at work. I have not developed any procedure or skills as to how to record things since my youthful days. This is not a problem limited to myself and other Addis Abebans. It embraces all of us. Consequently, what we know for certain about ourselves, those things that we talk about, and with great uncertainty, at that, are very much limited. This very much depends on who happens to be at what place at a given time, and on the extent of our ability to remember things. Let me now direct the discussion to the problem pertaining to the family.

If what I know about myself today is as limited as I have tried to show, it follows that what I know about my family is even more so. They themselves did not develop a system of recording data or information, whether about themselves or their families, about events as they exactly occurred at the time they did. Consequently, there has not developed a system of recording data about things pertaining to our respective villages, *kebeles*, districts, *awrajas*, administrative regions, the life history of the country, the history of our ways of life every time something happens or occurs, the same way people in the developed countries do. This means that most of the things we know are those committed to memory. To gather and commit to paper that which is orally disseminated, whether that concerns the history of villages, at the lowest level, or that of the country at the highest level, has problems with complexities all their

own. This poses a challenge even to those said to be versed in history. And in countries such as ours, what is being challenged, what is being put to the test, is not just their historical knowledge and research ability, but also their very being, their very identity. Because what we have been hearing and reading so far has not been about the people versed in the art of farming, education, health, construction, artisanship, and in the military profession and developing the country. Rather what we have been reading is about those military personages with clout, the narration of which has completely excluded the history of the groups we have just mentioned. In this regard legend has indeed played a major role. So everybody has been simply echoing what each has heard or read. Needless to say, members of the country's elite have used such narratives to their best advantage, as they are still doing. And I think the majority of the people are confused, just as I am, with this state of affairs. Because I find it difficult to believe that the country's history has been recorded on the basis of reliable data and evidence. And, mind you, I am not talking about the history of great events, wars and power struggles with all their gory details.

What I have in mind rather is social history. What I am after is the kind of history that tells us about the eating and drinking customs of a people; their costumes, their domiciles and how they produced all this. What did people think? What did they dream? What were their successes and what their failures? How did they administer themselves? The history I am after is the kind that could answer these and myriad other questions similar to these. The reason I say this is

that, because such kind of history would tell us what we have and what we lack by way of material and spiritual life, we can use the data and the evidences it provides and determine in what direction we should move in the course of our development. In the absence of such history and a consciousness based on it, I think it would be difficult to think of the country's fate. I have spent half of my life thinking of the country in its current state as a ship without a compass to direct it, dropped onto the ocean out of the blue, with its citizens as passengers who have no idea of where they are headed. Though I can't exactly say why, I believe the people sharing this feeling of mine are not few. Therefore, to cite as one of the problems facing the country's development the political culture of the elite that bases itself on a mightily superficial knowledge of history would not be as unviable as one may think.

10. Eighth Observation: Problems of Language

Since the issue of language is at the same time the issue of culture, I shall try to tackle it from various angles. But what I am going to deal with is not the problems that are repeatedly addressed by the mass media. There simply is no time to do that.

Any given country must decide or determine the language that it deems appropriate to carry out its common development and to generate, disseminate and enrich the knowledge necessary for such development, and institute it as its major language. Such a task requires resolve on the part of the powers that be. And when doing so, primary consideration should

always be given to development, not to age-old political grudges or immediate political gains. Neither is it enough to simply provide in some law for a given language to mediate in development endeavors and activities. If such a resolve stops at that, its advantage lies in nothing more than either slackening political tensions or adding to what already exist, or simply leaving situations in limbo. The end result of such measures benefits none of the Ethiopian peoples. Consequently, if one is seriously convinced that such a measure is needed, one should embark on the task of squarely facing the problem and deciding on the country's working language, or as it is called today, 'Federal language', and develop it systematically as the country's resources allow. I don't see this happening as yet.

The language issue, as I have said, seems to be in some kind of limbo. If matters continue as they are now, therefore, I do not think it would be possible to speak a common language in the country's Federal institutions and offices. I would like to remind you that I am still in my reflective gear. Although the language is still taught at the different levels in schools, I do not think there is a hospitable environment to encourage students to pursue studying it willingly and with enthusiasm. On the contrary, there may even be a kind of encouragement in the opposite direction cached in silence, i.e. doing nothing about it in any positive manner. Earlier on in the past, students were forced to study the current 'working language', as it was one of the required subjects in the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination that students must pass to enroll at the University. And one of the reasons

that kept us together was this, I believe. The reason why all of you here, though belonging to different nationalities, are listening to me, is because I am addressing you in a language that is common to all of us, that is, as a means of communication. The idea of requiring students to sit for an exam in the language was, indeed, less that encouraging and convincing, even cruel at moments in some situations. But one might also argue that even that was better than nothing or leaving things dangling in a void. As things stand now, young people, who have recognized the current situation as one in which the language may have to determine its own fate will probably realize the implications of the situation later than sooner, are now deprecating the language. They may even consider this stance of theirs as synonymous with 'modernity', 'Americanism', or 'Europeanism' (i.e. being civilized), thanks to the importation of all sorts of cheap and superficial cultural values, to the temptations of which they appear to have succumbed. It is, consequently, my opinion that the language lessons, that is the languages of the nationalities, the Federal 'working language', and English taught at the primary, secondary, preparatory and tertiary levels should be revisited by a neutral body capable of studying the 'state of the language situation' in Ethiopia. Because doing so could tell us a lot that is good as well as a lot that may be shocking about the state we are in, and many more. At any rate, we should make efforts to study our situation in a reliable way and at least try to close the doors on the gossiping and rumor mongering about the situation. I was forced to address this issue, however tangentially, because, as I have already pointed out, it is one of the

fundamental issues pertaining to development. Without exchange of accurate information and without effective communication, development, whether agricultural, industrial, economic, social or political, is unthinkable. Since, in our country, the interest in language development is a matter of lip service, rather than one of genuine concern, the issue has been entertained more as a matter of political interest, not genuine concern for genuine, material and spiritual development. One cannot at all claim that the governments that came and went have made efforts to develop the working language, as much as the luster attached to its name, and to use it to develop the country.¹⁸ It is true that some enlightened intellectuals had in the past expressed their view in a 'national' language that had progressively gained more and more speakers and readers. Many veterans, whom I would like to refer to as the generations of *Berhanenna Selam, Addis Zemen, and Yezareyitu Etyop'ya*¹⁹ used to express their

¹⁸ I would like to kindly remind my audience that it is not my intention here to unfairly deprecate the attempts made during the imperial era and that of the *Derg*. My focus rather is on what I consider fundamental and glaring issues.

¹⁹ Those I refer to as the 'generation of *Berhanenna Selam*' are the individuals who, before 1928 [E.C.] were writing about education and the country's development in general and who were schooled in the traditional or in the modern educational system, or both. Those I call the generation of *Addis Zemen* are the individuals who, after the invading forces of Italy were defeated, were engaged in the stabilization, rehabilitation and building of the country, but more specifically those who were vocal and influential particularly from 1933 to the 1950s [E.C.]. And those I refer to as the generation of *Yezareyitu Etyop'ya* the group that, particularly beginning with the 1950s, was struggling in a different form and manner to voice its concerns about education and development. The reason for naming each group after a different newspaper is that I felt that the opinions and the ideas of those I consider veterans in each group were similar both in content and orientation.

views and opinions and communicate them to their audiences in the then 'official' (now 'working') language. They also used the same language at meetings in different venues to deliver talks on their works and their professional area of expertise. They also undertook research about rural development and presented their findings at meetings. Even theological matters, which were captives of Ge'ez as the arcane monopoly of the clergy, were spoken and written about in the same language. There were also many works dealing with public administration, political economy, agriculture, health and languages written in the same language. However, I don't believe that there was a consciousness and zeal on the part of the respective governments or administrations corresponding to the efforts of those individuals to develop both the language and the country. In fact, what the three consecutive governments, whose activities I have been witness to, had on their agenda regarding the language and primarily did was to have books that would help promote their respective ideologies with which to rule the country translated and, where possible, written and produced locally. They have not developed the language systematically and in a planned way and expanded its appropriate use in schools and the society at large, such that it could also serve as the language of philosophy, law, the social sciences, the natural sciences and technology. Following this period, when the "firebrand generation of 'Land to the Tiller'" raised the issue of the age-old oppression of the Ethiopian people, it made a habit of using English, leaving aside the country's major language of communication. Truth be told, however, I do not think the

students did what they did with the intention of keeping what they said and wrote from those sectors that might have been interested in what the students had to say. A more credible reason might be, the rather naive, zealous and ardent belief that the use of English would probably serve as a unifying medium for the student population, which represented an amalgam of different nationalities. The leading members of that generation started first to write, and then, to organize and lead discussions, in English. Why this shift? It appears that the practice (or the culture, if you wish) has to do with many issues, among which mental or intellectual/political consciousness, the ability to articulate issues, action, and momentary advantages and fame could be taken as figuring prominent, for which one can suggest different hypotheses, but can also provide concrete evidence. Because the details are too many to tackle here, the issue should be postponed for other occasions.

In short the country's 'working-language' was not developed such that it could serve the interests of systematized education, work, research and public debate. Be that as it may, today we use the language to conduct the different forms of transaction cited above, whether forced by the demands of our every-day life or of our own free volition. Let us at this point set aside the broad issue of education and research and direct our attention to our culture of routine talk and conversation. But even this is inevitably linked to the development of education and research; that much is clear.

Most of us who consider ourselves educated use such words and phrases as '*the people*', 'the

problems *the people* face', 'the needs of *the people*', etc. sprinkled here and there in our conversations. But who is *this* 'people'? Where is *this* 'people'? How much does *it* number? How many languages does *it* speak? What kind of life does *it* lead? What is *its* culture? And what/how does *it* think? Has anybody approached *this* people genuinely and asked *it* as genuinely what *its* needs and anxieties are?*

What does a self-appointed, high official mean when that official speaks of "the people's needs"? Is the official referring to his party, to his ethnic group? Is the official talking about the people inhabiting the region he administers? Whose needs exactly is he talking about?

On the other hand, when a certain farmer talks about "the needs of the people", does he mean the needs of the farmers living in abject poverty? Does he mean the needs of the farmers leading a relatively better life than the rest of the farmers in the community? Does he mean the needs of the farmer in the middle-class bracket, relative to the status of the rest living in the same community? Or, is he talking about all the farmers near and around him as compared to the life style of the official and that of the urban dwellers?

What does a cadre of the *Derg* mean by "the people's needs"? What exactly goes on in his mind when he utters these words? What does TPLF's cadre mean when he speaks about "the needs of the people"? How about a cadre of EPRDF? What of the businessman in the Markato? How often does the so-

* The words in italic are the translators to indicate that the people are spoken of in a tone, as the context shows, that depicts them as 'objects' to be studied, rather than as human beings in their own right.

called 'dangerous truant' talk about "the needs of the people"? And if such a truant ever utters the phrase, who or what constitutes "the people" for him?

Let us now turn our attention to those who gather from the different parts of the country and congregate in what is referred to in current parlance 'workshops'. Each rises in turn and talks about "the people's needs," "the efforts of the people," "the people's contribution," and "the people's problems," and so on. And, then, let us imagine what goes on in the mind of each speaker as he/she utters these phrases. We cannot go into the details of this. I, for one, believe that their thoughts vary with the level of their capacity, that is, with their experience, educational level, their interests, their dreams and their visions. On such occasions, I think those gathered applaud after every speaker stops what he/she has been saying. And the people gathered in the workshops applaud for the "people" each pictures in his/her mind and for the idea each associates with that image. And I think it is precisely for this reason that the different groups that appear to have arrived at a consensus, given the applause, of course, find themselves faced with glaring differences, come the time for implementing what appears to have been agreed upon by all. And it may also be for this reason that each group gradually begins to play its own version of the 'wax-and-gold' game of hide-and-seek and try, each in its own way, to quietly pull the strings of development, the strings of "the people's needs" in its direction. It might, therefore, be for this reason that development fails to be real development and "needs" fail to be real "needs."

Consequently, because the appropriate and accurate use of language is an instrument of social life and development, we need to give it due consideration and find ways to gradually alleviate the confusion through education. Let alone that which we speak without thinking, even that which we have carefully weighed, considered and articulated and written often lacks clarity, resulting in superficial controversy, bickering and, not seldom taking us on a course of collision and wrangling. This, too, results from the underdevelopment of language, to which we must pay attention and try to develop a language capable of communicating serious issues in a mature way. The language of gossip, sarcasm, backbiting, slight and derision is not suited to scientific learning, public health, industry, agriculture, etc., all seen in the light of development. Deliberately twisting meaning to draw laughter from the company we keep and affecting erudition helps nothing by way of sustaining the production of manufactories; and neither could it help to lead the factory workers in a manner to ensure their productivity. In short, there seems to be no domain of life in which language does not play a part. Think of philosophy, law, science, technology, development, the internet, and politics--all very much depend on language for their sustenance. We should not forget that language could be as much a means of miscommunication as it is of communication. If we manage, some 20 to 30 years down the line, to communicate with and understand each other through a common 'national' language, the greater would be our chances of developing and marching into the future together. If we decide, so to speak, to move on 'un-understanding' each other, then the

chances for us to 'undevelop' together will grow as wide as the void. At this point I have no inclination whatsoever to imagine where we would be in the said years if we decide to engage in Federal activities in a foreign language. As many are the language problems we face, I will have to stop here.

11. Ninth Observation: Anticipants--What Is It That We Are Awaiting?

I have more than once felt that we all are in a state of somnambulism. Did I say 'sommambulism'?! Seriously, I sometimes think and ask myself if "we are not really asleep--dead asleep, that is." We look like people waiting for something!!! It has been twenty years, or thereabouts, since I started thinking that way. But what it is that we are really waiting for, anticipating, I really don't know. Could we have been waiting for "God to descend from the Heavens" and rebuke or, otherwise, kill--if we are capable of such cruelty--a recalcitrant neighbor who has been bothering us; throw down governments at our feet, which take, or give us, the plots we till at the dictates of their will, governments that heap us with all sorts of taxes; governments that imprison-set free--kill us as they wish; governments that mobilize us to wars at whim, etc.; and establish Heaven here in Ethiopia; waiting for such a God at least for years amounting in the hundreds? This much I have thought and said to myself. I have felt that there were, and still are, many of us who expected the university community or other groups to do the fighting, while we sit with hands folded and lying in wait for any benefits that might accrue from such a struggle. I have

also felt that there are many among us who have said and still say, "oh, the people quietly accept hardship and injustice," individuals who have not been able to realize that we ourselves are part of that people but who lack the courage to say "I quietly accept hardship and injustice," and, therefore, expect that one day, the people would by some miracle achieve something and get us out of our misery. This, too, is an issue that invites much debate. It is only systematic study and research that could tell us the truth, or at least gives some hint that would indicate the right direction to the truth.

12. Tenth Observation: Lack of A Meaningful Education Grounded in Philosophy

Education is fundamental to, and plays a major role in, material and spiritual development. It could be said to constitute the **KEY** to all the key issues of development. All the problems that I addressed in this presentation are mostly solved through education. I shall refrain to go into the details of my observations about the system. My general view, which I tried to point out some seven months ago, is quoted below:

The education often accompanied by such qualifiers as 'modern' has, since its introduction in Ethiopia, has both attracted people's interests and invited debate at different forums until the present. It has also attracted the imaginations of the leaders and the educated sector of the different periods in connection with Ethiopia's civilization. Proclamations,

policies and communiqués have been issued in its name; short newspaper and magazine articles have been written both in favor of and against it. Opinions have been ventured about it in chapters of different books and in articles and books written in local and foreign languages and that treated of the subject in its own right. I believe the need for serious research that would tackle these and other writings on the country's educational systems, usually accompanied by the qualification 'traditional', has long been overdue, research, moreover, that would yield well grounded and worthwhile information and data on the state of Ethiopia's educational system and development. I am one of those who anticipate that such an undertaking will materialize in the future.²⁰

Keeping this in mind, allow me to raise a couple of important points quickly.

I do not think there has been a philosophy of education designed and prepared taking into consideration the ways of Ethiopian development, and based on knowledge and an intellectual consciousness, and with carefully thought out plan and procedures, and the quantity and quality of the manpower necessary for that development, such that it accords with any such development philosophy as may be appropriate

²⁰ Fekade Azeze, "Ya'inqulalu Iler" [The Day of /the stealing/ of the Egg]: "Haddis Alemayehu on Ethiopian Education and Development." Written on *Hidar* 6, 1996 (E.C.) [November 15, 2003] and published in *Addis Zena* in two installments on *Yekatit* 24 and *Meggabit* 1, 1996 [March 3 and March 10, 2004].

for the country's needs. What quickly comes to my mind in this regard is the serious attempt Ato Haddis Alemayehu made in his book titled *Timihirtinna Yetemari Bet Tirgum* [Education and the Meaning of School/ing/], first published in 1948 (E.C.) and printed at the Artistic Printing Press, and in which he tried to describe and explain what the country's educational system should look like. His ideas have not been tested in practice. But he has written a lot about his idea of education under such topics as "family education, school education, and societal education," in the process of which he drew a close link between social life and education. In his discussion of the traditional educational system and schools he says, "Because they were based on religious teachings, they had excluded politics, economics, commerce, agriculture, military science and other skills necessary for a community's life from their curricula" (pp. 9-10), to which, however, he adds their importance in constituting the basis for the country's social life. And the things he says about the modern schools that were being built after 1933 [1941 G.C.], as part of the process of rehabilitating the budding modern school system that the invading forces had destroyed, bear witness to the following wonderful ideas of the author [as thinker]:

There may be those who support the argument that [the schools] should be called Ethiopian schools because they were administered by Ethiopian resources, led by Ethiopian officials, and because the students they produced were there to serve Ethiopia. But in my opinion, these schools that are modern [deserve to be called Ethiopian] only when they manage

to build a correspondence between the education they provide and Ethiopia's social history, its administrative system, its governance, its customs, and its ways of life as well as the other things that constitute the identity of Ethiopian society (pp. 110-111; emphasis mine).

If these ideas of Haddis Alemayehu's had at the time been accorded the attention that I think they deserve, if they had been discussed thoroughly and conditions for their implementation had been created and they had been implemented, I do not think the Ethiopian educational system would have found itself in the state that it is in today. That is why I raised this important point now and will probably do so in the future.²¹

I do not think that there is any idea or intention of presenting education in our schools as something vibrating with life. The various subjects taught in schools that teach that education is teaching about life, including philosophy, law, biology, chemistry, history, physics, medicine, etc. are aimed at knowing the nature of "Nature" and humanity in their different dimensions and at different levels and simultaneously improving the lives of human beings. Education is a continuing undertaking aimed at to tame the beast in human beings, to render life efficient, and to develop the material and spiritual world of humanity. Education is one aspect or component of our day-to-day living and life in a general. I do not think our educational system untiringly teaches this fact to our

students in school. It does not appear that such awareness about education exists among the country's leaders, educational officials, all teachers and other people, but especially among those who have gone through higher education; neither do I think that this life-education link is mentioned or raised in the classrooms.

The current trend of thinking among people, it seems, is that education is just for earning a living, being appointed to some official position, fame and prestige. To get these through education requires passing exams and securing, as the case may be, certificate, diploma, or degree, in which case, then, the whole venture becomes one of pursuing "education-for-passing exams." There are many reasons that prevent us from claiming that we are teaching our students to enable them know themselves, their specific environment or the world at large. The kind of exam (objective, as it is called) in which students are required to blacken circles has rendered learning exam-focused. This in turn has opened the way for students to copy answers from each other, that is, cheating. Students have developed their own technical jargon, or argot, if you like, for such things. This is not something that we can afford to ignore as mere child's play.

Moreover, there are those problems that are repeatedly raised about the state of the educational system in general. What students learn in class is invariably transmitted through blackboards. Teachers are not available in sufficient numbers, to which we should add the low level capacity of most of them. If there are both government and private schools with sufficient numbers of classrooms, textbooks, libraries,

study halls, laboratories, they must indeed be very few. Truly, in a scenario like this how many students will stand to benefit themselves, not to speak of the country's development? And how many will become a burden and a liability to the country? Believe me, I dread to ask such questions.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

So far I have reflected upon a number of issues. I have pointed out some aspects of our lives that I consider as good or bad. I have also called attention to those cultural constraints that we face in our struggle for survival. If it is our genuine desire to see a much better society than we have now in the coming twenty-five years, then we must, starting immediately and without further procrastination, begin inculcating the knowledge, outlook and values that would guide us in that direction beginning with those children going to kindergarten. The immediacy I am talking about cannot, of course, be measured here and now, but it indicates the urgency of the problem. We must convince ourselves that the problems would be solved through theoretical and practical lessons provided at different levels in different places. Before we make our move, however, we need to gather information and data in the different disciplines and professions that would help us know the concrete situation of our country and organize databases. The effort to strengthen the good aspects that I mentioned regarding our ways of life and to alleviate the problems regarding our outlook or worldview and, accordingly plan and implement the necessary activities

²¹ To get an overall view of the book in question, see Fekade Azeze's article mentioned in the preceding footnote. But nothing is a substitute for reading the book itself.

requires more than mere individual reflection of the kind I am doing; it requires undertaking thorough field research in different areas of our life. We need the research and the data so obtained to carry out such activities as conducting mass education, determine those professional disciplines to be given at a higher level, training and producing capable teachers, producing morally equipped citizens, and to plan our educational system based on local or indigenous knowledge and practice augmented by the relevant knowledge and practice that we acquire from other parts of the world. To successfully undertake such a task we need to look beyond the government and involve, as situations and conditions allow, individuals, the family, communities and non-governmental organizations, all of which must participate as their respective capacities allow. We need the said research and data to determine the extent and type of their participation. We also need to conduct discussions at the level of the family, community, schools, and the mass media simultaneously, for these are precisely the activities that would contribute to the bringing about of the changes we envision and to attain the kind of life that we aim to realize. Finally, the kinds of reflections such as I have done, which are based on nothing more than personal experiences and knowledge based on those experiences alone should not be credited with anything more than serving as hints or pointers to the need for undertaking serious research activities embracing all areas of life as we know it here in Ethiopia. So, what is to be done?

⇨ **Spiritual Cleansing**

The undertaking of the kind of research I mentioned above requires the collaboration of citizens both at home and abroad who are qualified and capable in their respective disciplines and professions. In order for such individuals to gather the relevant data and conduct the required analysis in the shortest possible time, they need, most above all, initiative and the resolve to accept such challenge. Half-heartedness and non-commitment are inimical to such an undertaking. In this regard, then, we must first of all take ourselves on a campaign of **SPIRITUAL CLEANSING**, or what amounts to the same thing, cleansing of our conscience. We can consider this cleansing of the conscience as a penance we do for our families and our society at larger.

The whole populations should participate in this **SPIRITUAL CLEANSING**. More specifically, however, those of us who had one way or another participated in the political activities of the different periods must do penance and speak out. "Penance" in this context means looking back from where we now stand and examining all the things we did from our youthful days to adulthood, whether consciously or unconsciously, and transmit those aspects of our experiences that we consider beneficial, along with our strong and weak points, to today's generation and those to come in the future. Experience sharing is the crux of the matter. It would be beneficial if those who, both before and after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, participated in the power struggles that took place among the different political groups could tell us about all the goings-on to serve the self-interests of individuals rather than in the interests of the

country as a whole. It would also be useful if those who took part in the activities of the patriots, the *bandas* and the exiles during the invasion could tell us everything they know without holding back anything of relevance. And those of us who conceived, delivered, nurtured and brought to maturity the game of 'partisan or group politics' should participate in a special and thorough manner in this process of spiritual cleansing. The penance we do in this respect, rather than being to priests, father confessors, angels, saints, prophets or God, must first of all be to our own conscience, then to our children and, then, to our relatives and friends. In this manner, we should learn to 'narrate' our experiences without hiding anything of relevance, practicing self-criticism, laying our minds bare. Once we manage that, we should then go public of our own volition and tell what we know to the people. We should, therefore, organize forums whereby we 'confess' the injustices we committed and ask for the forgiveness of the public and forgive those that have done injustice to us. With such experience behind us, we could then get together and give our opinions about the country's political activities and make suggestions about the changes that need to be made. Without undertaking such campaign of spiritual cleansing, we couldn't possibly start to think about planning the next task based on the kind of research I talked about..

⇨ **Independent Council of Cultures**

In our country, it appears that the people heard or seen speaking over the different media mostly are those

with "legal (political) power." Usually, however, they seem to have more of the "power of the gun" than "legal power." Among such people one occasionally finds those who are accorded special regard, respected, and sometimes liked by the people as opposed to being feared by them. And among those officials of the previous regime, there are also some who are regarded with special respect in spite of the mistakes made by the regime. It is necessary, then, to organize forums whereby such likeable individuals, particularly those officials of past regimes, could share their experiences with the people.

The same should be done for those individuals whom I see in a different light and consider as possessed of the "power of knowledge," the "power of conscience" and "spiritual power."

Those I consider as possessed of the "power of knowledge" are those professionals in the disciplines of history, physics, agriculture, medicine, chemistry, language, engineering, computer science, etc. But that mere expertise in these and other such disciplines does not make them "authorities of knowledge." This power or authority is the kind that colleagues who work in the various fields willingly bestow upon those exceptional people who are prominent as a result of the level of their education, the knowledge they have accumulated, their professional contributions, the quality of their publications, and the general knowledge they have acquired outside of their respective disciplines.

What I call the "power of conscience," otherwise "moral

authority" is that which stems from the self-respect, the sense of freedom and of justice, sense of kindness, of concern, of openness or transparency, of honesty, courage, of resolve and self respect that each of has cultivated within ourselves. Based on these qualities, we in turn willingly and freely bestow this power or authority on those individuals in whose words and actions we observe these and similar other qualities, motivated by our own sense of freedom and justice, respect for others and concern for the welfare of our country and, depending on the capacities we have, the actions we take to this end. Conversely, where such qualities as I have mentioned are found missing in other individuals, we have the moral right to deny such "power" or authority. There are people traversing different age ranges, both in the urban and rural area, whose words and actions are not at variance with each other, who are models of self-as well as mutual respect, considerateness, sense of propriety, who do not change their words for self-gain every time situations change, who have the courage to act publicly in accordance with the dictates of their conscience. Such are the people I consider as possessed of "the power of conscience," or "moral authority."

"Spiritual authority" attaches to religious leaders of the different religions. This people are possessed of authority by virtue of being religious leaders. But this authority that I speak of, while related to the religious leadership such individuals provide, is at the same time very different from it. What make these religious leaders worthy of the kind of authority I am talking about are the efforts they make toward ensuring peace, respect,

freedom, etc. for humanity as a whole, over and above their religious duties and responsibilities. This authority is willingly and freely bestowed upon such individuals by the people for their belief in the equality of all religions and the efforts they make to ensure the existence of peace between the adherents of the different religions as well as the leaders of these different religions.

It would be of the greatest benefit if and **INDEPENDENT COUNCIL OF CULTURE**, consisting of individuals with political authority (both past and current), who were loved and are loved by the people and who have used their political power for the common good of the country rather than self-gain; those who are considered by their colleagues as possessed of "the power of knowledge" or professional authority; those who considered as having "spiritual authority"; and others who are accorded respect on the basis of criteria set down by the different nationalities and/or ethnic groups, were to be established.

We cannot go into the details the task such a council is to undertake once established. But its main and central task would be to freely discuss and debate cultural issues, make its opinions and suggestions publicly known, and present its findings through the proper procedures and mechanism to the government. Council members who are mature both in the knowledge they have and the experiences they have accumulated would follow-up and listen to the different questions and issues raised in the society with regard to development, governance and culture, and they would make the relevant suggestions and recommendations in their capacity

as members of a neutral body. As such they will then play the role of narrowing the gaps between generations and, also, to calm a political ferment that leads to, or encourages, unnecessary differences and conflicts. When, for different reasons, the people get confused or come across hurdles, they would gradually begin to ask questions stemming from knowledge and experience, such as: "What did the Council say on such and such issues?" They could also suggest ideas. But it does not necessarily mean that the council will accept the questions or ideas. Neither is it obliged to do so. The important thing is the presentation of differing ideas and opinions on the forum, from among which the council selects and entertains for further discussions those ideas and opinions that have relevance to the issue at hand. The fact that this could be done is central to the whole venture. I am greatly convinced that such a council would make important contributions to the efforts we make to study the many problems pertaining to culture. Furthermore, since such a council would consist of intellectuals with modern education as well as those members of the different communities that are highly regarded by the people, I believe that the opinions and recommendations made by the council would be such that they strike a balance between internal and external knowledge resources. This is only a beginning. Once such a council is established, more ideas and suggestions can follow.

→ **Establishing and Independent Institute of Cultural Studies**

The main task of this institute would be to collect, classify, document and analyze the country's material and spiritual legacies.

Systematically collecting and studying these cultural resources is a pre-requisite for the education provided in the family, in the different localities and communities and in the formal education sector. However, since it would not be possible to plan for development on the basis alone of what such an institute studies, it is important that other data banks and research institutes should also be established. Let me mention some of these. I think it is necessary to establish independent educational, economic,²² health, agriculture, business, industrial, administrative, and natural resources research institutes. It is on the basis of the findings of the researches carried out by these and similar other institutes that we can design an educational, economic and development programmes that have recognized the interactive nature of development.

The establishment of such institutes has other benefits as well, one of which is creating and developing the culture of using data in our work. It is, of course, true that it takes some time to get used to this culture of using data. Once we are used to this culture, we will be able to rid ourselves organizing and restructuring anew such programmes as education and similar projects every time regimes change. But this does not mean that the procedures we set down will not change in accordance with changes taking place both within the country and globally. The important point is that we should develop the culture of using efficiently documented and

²² The economist Dr. Alemayehu Seyoum has suggested the establishment of "an independent and neutral economic consultative council" in the interview he gave to *Reporter*, which was published in the *Yekatit* 6, 1996 [February 14, 2004] issue of the newspaper.

easy to use data in our work, such that what we so develop would not be subject to arbitrary change every time governments change.

It is also important to have in place data bank on "Ethiopian intellectuals and professionals." Such data source, prepared in a way that will make it easy for us to identify and locate such intellectuals and professionals, will come in handy and very useful. In other words, there is need for a data bank that has a detailed record of the names, professions, experiences, their previous workplaces, their current addresses Ethiopians educated and trained in the various disciplines professions. Such data bank would prove very useful if it included those Ethiopians that have gone into retirement both at home and abroad.

Granted that such independent institute of cultural studies would inevitably need the help and assistance of all those other institutions. Essentially, however, those who carry out research in the institute are going to be professionals and graduate students in the fields of law, folklore, history, literature, painting, dance, music, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, tourism, theology, etc., etc.

→ **What Is It That We Are Going To Build [and Restructure]?**

We have said that culture is a social construct or structure. We are going to establish these independent institutes and data banks in order to move on into action. And they will be established on the basis of an agreed upon consensus emanating from an open public debate on the findings arrived at by scientific

research undertaken by researchers in the various disciplines and professions as well as pointers as to how better reorganize the activities the country undertakes. What are we going to reorganize? Let me cite some of them:

- We shall improve upon and restructure those values that we consider beneficial to the development of our educational, economic, political, administrative and social systems. We shall also restructure and put to use those values that we considered do not work or that we even have pronounced hurdles on our way to development, such that they would fit into the scheme of things as we envision them.
- The individual, the family, the community, the school system, mass media, civic associations, *kebeles*, government and non-governmental organizations shall be restructured with our collective values with the imprints of humanity, so as to enable us attain the standard of life and collective sense of humanity that we envision for they year 2020. We will move on armed with our enriched positive values such that they would be in accord with the changing global situation. As for those local values and the values that have proliferated among us as a result of our global interaction with others, particularly those values that smack of hypocrisy and those ways of life likely to prove harmful to our development, we shall replace them with better ones and move on, thanks to dialectics.

- If we have doubts about the working language of the country, we can make it open to public debate. But the limbo in which it is now is rather worrisome. It is not clear who exactly is going to benefit with this state of affairs, and I don't think it should continue this way. The issue of the working language of the country should be settled once and for all. If, then, the current working language would continue to be used ways should be sought for developing it further and enabling it to serve the cause of the country's development, and the quicker the better. Otherwise, I fear we may reach a stage where we may not be able to do anything worthwhile with our working language, a stage where we may not even be able to communicate as we are doing now. Consequently, there is a need for establishing an "independent council of languages" consisting of members from the different disciplines and professions. And this institute should be encouraged to seek ways of developing the language. This, I believe, is as urgent a task as any other development issue. I have reached that point now where I am beginning to feel apprehensive. But since I have so far been reflecting upon the package of themes or ideas that this vision 2020 forum has provided me with I am obliged to meet the requirement. In which case then, I shall proceed to give some pointers as to what we should expect (hope for) in the year 2020, using my license as one who has come here to reflect, a wee bit prophetic license, should I say? The assumption, of course, is that the

things said above are more or less achieved.

1.0. On living and working together peacefully through dialogue:

- Father, mother and children will conduct their family life through open and free discussion and dialogue;
- The manpower that the country has will be cleansed of its sense of vengeance, will rid itself of its game of 'hide-and-seek' and secrecy and will collectively open assault on its arch-enemy hunger and famine, which has been besetting it for years and years. It will work together united by the same gall in the different areas of development;
- The culture of instinctive politics based on using existing differences for purposes of fomenting discord among different groups will become a mere museum pieces and will be visited by both local and international tourists. Publicly discussions on the existing, complex and intricate differences will become a healthy culture;
- Sharing of ideas, conducting free discussion and debate publicly through newspapers, radio, television and conference halls will be considered going to the movies;
- Because the culture of talking and listening to one another on the basis of concrete evidence will develop so much among friends, in schools, in families, at *kebeles*, in bars, in *tella* pubs, in civic societies, and because the culture of debate will also develop so much, differing in opinions and yet co-existing in peace will become as common place as greeting each other;

- Tackling a given work in herds (without clear vision) will be replaced with working with professionalism and become a thing of the past;
- The economic and political system that gave birth to the culture of greed and money-grubbing, whatever the source, will wither away gradually and go to its grave all consumed; the culture of enriching oneself through embezzlement will become a thing of the past and earning one's living will be a mode of life.

2.0. On freedom and equality

- Citizens will stand up for their own rights, interests and social security with no need for external agency;
- Our political officials will relax with their families in public parks and promenades with no need for the protection of security guards, visible or otherwise. Come those time, they will frolic and gambol with their children on the well kempt lawns and among the *Masqel* flowers of public gardens;
- Men and women, women and men will pave the road on which they take leisurely walks mutual understanding and respect as two equal human beings;
- In the year 2020, mothers will suckle babies, while fathers are busy cooking in kitchens. We will reach a stage where no one will be surprised by the fact that, when Ethiopian mother go to work, Ethiopian fathers will stay home and play roles of house-husbands and conversely, when Ethiopian husbands go to work, Ethiopian wives will stay home and play roles of housewives;
- Children, women and the elderly will walk upright and with a

sense of security; they will discuss whatever they feel either in pairs or in groups freely and in public; they will be all smiles and laughs, possessed of relative spiritual freedom.

3.0. On politics

- The political system will be restructured systematically from the bottom all the way up to the highest level. The culture of silence will give place to civilized dialogue; compared to what exists now, the culture of "group politics" will give place to the culture of transparency so structured as to give due respect to economic and social values as well as the values of good governance and transparency;
- The tendency to look at politics as lies, deception, clandestinely organizing to overthrow governments, etc. will gradually be removed from our country;
- The country's elite will throw away the political culture of group differences and conflicts and replace it with a political culture promoting common worldview (common outlook); they will develop those ways through which differences will contribute to the development of common outlook; they will be able to consider differences as one resource of material and spiritual development. Because they will realize that, every time a given culture is oppressed and faces endangerment, humanity will have been deprived of one more perspective through which to look at the world, they will protect it and save it from extinction as if it were their own personal wealth.

4.0. On education

- Because people will begin to realize that learning means living, enlightenment, awareness, happiness, in short, life, people will long for it rather than dread it.

5.0. On entertainment

- Many bars, drug joints and *qat* (*ch'at*) joints, libraries, museums will be transformed into cultural music centers; their current clientele, mostly the young, will visit them together with their children in their adulthood;
- Forms of 'physical' and biological entertainment that hunger and famine have created will gradually change; people will cease to overindulge themselves in raw meat, alcohol, sex, cheap video, cheap plays and movies and, instead, develop the habit of reading, going to see good plays and movies, and listening to good music.

I have said enough.

Thank you for your patience!