Commendable headways in terms of Ethiopia's heritages

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It is common among opposition politicians and activists to the government of Ethiopia for neglect of cultural, historical and other heritages. Criticism and concerns are good and it is a civic duty to be vigilant of heritages and bring misdeeds into attention.

Unfortunately, our oppositions take the issue in a misguided, unconstructive manner and motivated by bias and zero-sum politics.

Their concern is often clouded by misinformed misguided notion that the government does not care as much as they do and a lack of understanding of the broad developmental value of fostering heritages.

As these forces consider themselves the sole guardians of the cultural, historical and other heritages of the Ethiopian peoples, it doesn't occur to them EPRDF officials and experts in charge of the project care as much as they do about the statutes. They don't attempt to review the works being done by the relevant organs.

To the contrary, the heritages of the peoples of Ethiopia are the primary beneficiary of the changes since 1991.

Firstly, it should be understood that the scope of heritages is broad. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), defined as:

*Culture is "a concept which incorporates all intellectual, ethical, physical, technical and other activities that characterize humankind as a rational being. It also involves the ability of man to learn and train himself in moral, technical and other spheres of knowledge. Culture is a wide concept which include the modes of life, beliefs, traditions and the whole set of the material and spiritual wealth which characterize a certain society as distinct from others"."

Therefore, cultural heritages consist: Tangible cultural heritage - movable cultural heritage (paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts), immovable cultural heritage (monuments, archaeological sites, and so on), underwater cultural heritage (shipwrecks, underwater ruins and cities), Intangible cultural
heritage: oral traditions, performing arts, rituals; as well as Natural heritage: natural sites with cultural aspects such as cultural landscapes, physical, biological or geological formations

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage (sometimes called living cultural heritage) as: "The practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills (including instruments, objects, artefacts, cultural spaces), that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. (It is manifested inter alia in the following domains:) Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; Performing arts; Social practices, rituals and festive events; Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship."

In the decades prior to 1991, all forms of Ethiopian heritages suffered from the adverse effects of a prolonged civil war, recurrent drought and famine, governmental neglect. During this period, apart from periodic upgrades of the infrastructure (such as airports and roads), there has been little investment and successive governments have largely overlooked the sector.

Ehen the EPRDF took over governmental power, the sector was in urgent need of re-investment, in particular, the cultural and natural sites, and the skilled man power needed for the sector as well as enhancing linkages to international networks, both for marketing and research purposes, have also been neglected and the lack coordination between stakeholders.

Generally, there was lack of marketing and promotional strategy as well as low awareness among local communities. In addition, the limited share of tourism earnings reaching the local community is affecting the sustainability of the sector and is having a negative impact on the contribution of tourism towards poverty alleviation.

These changes were directed by a detailed cultural policy for the last two decades.

The Cultural Policy stated that in the context of Ethiopia, culture encompasses:

"In the context of the cultures of the peoples of the various nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia, this definition could be used to incorporate their varied social, economic, political, administrative, moral, religious and psychological conditions. The languages, history, oral tradition, housing, instruments of production, food preparation eating habits, costumes, ornamentation, aesthetic values and
appreciation, beliefs and religious practices are also components of their cultures."

The need to focus on the sector was clearly stipulated as:

- The recognition of the positive or negative role that culture could play in the relationship of peoples; with the realization of the fact that culture is itself the mark of the identity of humankind and the foundation of all human rights; and believing that it is appropriate to ensure that the cultures of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia receive equal recognition, respect, and chance to develop and;

- The recognition of the fact that culture is closely related to the daily life and psychological states of people, and that it has a decisive role in facilitating development programs to meet their goal.

Following the policy direction, several works have been accomplished.

For example, the achievements of the year between 2005-10 during the PASDEP period was summarized as:

the average annual number of tourists visiting Ethiopia was 324,666 and they generated annual average revenues of ETB 1.61 bin. This achievement represents an increase in the annual average number of tourists and revenue generated of 21% and 16.3%, respectively. Specific initiatives undertaken during the five year period included strengthening of wild life conservation areas, expanding infrastructure and tourist facilities, improving national parks management and control, and giving particular attention to community tourism. These initiatives resulted in the establishment of facilities for national parks at Alateshi, Borena Sainte, Maze, Chebera Churchura, Kafeta Sheraro and Gerale. Border demarcation of wildlife control areas was completed for Simien Mountains National Park, Bale Mountains National Park, Senkele rhino shelter, Shigesha and Tulu lodge. At the Simien Mountains National Park 147 households were voluntarily resettled to a pre-arranged settlement site. Two investors have built lodges at Awash and Simien mountains national parks that contribute to expansion of the available facilities and create an encouraging environment for more tourism. At Senkele rhino shelter recreation centre has been built and, in schools which are close to wildlife conservation areas, nine natural resources conservation clubs have been strengthened and given awareness creation training related for wildlife development and protection.

The development of cultural heritages was given bigger attention and ambitious goals in the subsequent Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). The GTP stipulated that:
During the plan period, the strategic directions for the culture and tourism development program are to enhance the role tourism and culture play in socio-economic and political development initiatives. Women and youth will benefit from the sector’s development. Cultural and tourist attractions will be used to build an attractive image of the country.

The cultural, natural and historical heritages and values of the country would be developed so that they play a significant role in social and economic development as well as in the democratization process of the country. Cultural goods and services will be promoted to play a greater and positive role in the country.

The main objectives for culture and tourism, during the plan period, are to ensure the sustainable development and conservation of tourism, Ethiopia's diverse and unique culture and cultural heritage sites, and encourage the community’s participation so that, overall, cultural activities and tourism contribute to socio-economic development and democratization process in Ethiopia.

The broad scope of the plan can be observed from the targets set in the GTP which includes:

1/ Protecting, recording promoting and developing cultural values, heritages and natural ecotourism so as they can be used in benefiting for cultural, social and political diversity of nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia.

- Identified and registered languages, indigenous knowledge, natural and cultural heritages and protected wild animal parks
- Identified and implemented natural and cultural heritage protection.

2/ Ensure one economic and political community through developing assets of cultural diversity and folklores

- Identified and studied cultural values that strengthen one economic and political community among nations, nationalities and people.
- Recognized and developed nations, nationalities and people folklore

3/ Develop cultural and natural ecotourism centers so as to increase its contribution for economic growth

4/ Undertake researches on scanty cultural heritages and natural attractions so as to increase its contribution for economic growth.

While the complete performance report of the GTP period is not available, several progresses have been made so far.
The report for the first fiscal year of the GTP shows that:

"During this budget year, three non-moveable and 5 intangible heritages have registered nationally and 20 heritages have been prevented from illegal trade. Moreover during this fiscal year it was planned to register nationally 201 moveable heritages, but only 200 heritages registered. Besides, it was planned to reduce illegal hunting and trade of wild animals by 30% percent and during the budget year it is decreased by only 25%.

Furthermore, during this budget year renovation was made for 7 heritages; protection was made for 8304 information heritage; and 500 heritages are used for appropriate service. Birr 72.4 million of income was generated from the sector, which is extremely higher than the budgeted 20.9 million Birr. Besides, the foreign currency earned from the sector was 299.2 million USD.

With regard to promoting cultural and natural heritages at international level, bilateral agreements, participating in international fairs, expos and festival were implemented during this budget year.

Furthermore, better performance is reported during this fiscal year with regard to establishing tourism system, facilitate its accessibility and increase customers' satisfaction. It was planned to collect and document 215,000 heritages and during the fiscal year, about 246,872 heritages were collected and documented."

The efforts to enhance the state of Ethiopia's heritages and the strengthening of institutional frameworks were given emphasis in the subsequent years with broad participation of stakeholders.

Among those the joint program conducted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development in partnership with UNDP and UNESCO are notable. The program's main achievements were:

- The legal framework of the cultural sector and the national capacity to protect and manage cultural heritage were reinforced by the elaboration of key legal documents submitted to the Government (e.g. “Cultural Industry investment Code,” “Cultural Industry Development Strategy”).

- Four proclamations, and their respective implementation regulations, were drafted to protect the four World Heritage Sites (Tiya, Lalibela, Aksum and Gondar Fasiladas).
• National and regional government authorities were assisted to develop capacity in identifying, managing and protecting heritage and indigenous knowledge. Policy and regulatory frameworks as well as guidelines on the management and protection of heritage were revised and developed. Local communities and grass-roots organizations actively participated in the management, protection and utilization of heritages, including indigenous knowledge.

• A comprehensive database of handicraft industries was developed. Four Living Cultural Resource Centres were established for training, market promotion and production of cultural products. Women and youth artisans were supported through skill building and entrepreneurship training, provision of work spaces, market linkages and revolving seed money. Trade fairs and bazaars were organized to integrate artisans into the market system, helping them to maximize their advantage and establish linkages with potential clients.

• The programme promoted better networks between producers and the market, as well as better knowledge of existing resources, demand and potential product branding. The poorest and most marginalized artisans -- primarily women and youth -- significantly increased their production of cultural goods, improved their links to markets and generated much higher income.

• Significant progress was made in identifying prevailing and common cultural and religious values; the programme encouraged a participatory approach by bringing together the government, civil society and academia.

It should be noted that Ethiopia's cultural heritages benefited from the overall socio-economic and developmental policies of the last two decades. The massive infrastructural development that made previously inaccessible sites easier to reach for researchers and visitors.

Specifically, the recognition of the various nation, nationalities and peoples, their cultures and right to self-administration was the key factor that transformed the nature of the sector.

As it is understandable for any person, preserving, developing and promoting one's heritages can be best done by the concerned people itself. Since EPRDF took power, it recognized the peoples' right of self-administration including cultural rights.

Today parents freely raise their children according to their culture and send them to schools which teach in their mother tongues. Television and MW, FM & community radios in total transmit in more than half of Ethiopia's
languages. Elementary school text books do not focus on ideological or foreign country issue rather on local and regional heritages and characteristics. Children today are not align to their heritage and that of adjacent peoples.

Generally, the expansion of education, local self-administration, freedom of expression and high increase of publications in diverse languages improved the lot of Ethiopian heritages in the past two decades. Dying cultures and languages have revived, the relatively developed languages have furthered flourished entering the world wide web and digital technologies.

The same can be said with regard to well-known historical, cultural and religious heritages. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church achieved organizational freedom and become able to launch theology colleges, relations with sister cities abroad in the last two decades. Stolen sacred artifacts were returned as far from Scotland and Belgium. Muslims were able to claim and promote their heritages, such as, the Al-Nejasi site, document the history of their Ulemas and conducted advanced studies, researches and experience sharing with fellow adherents from foreign countries.

One of the Axum obelisks, which was stolen by facist Italy, was returned after 60 years due to the persistent lobby and political and diplomatic efforts spearheaded by this government. The Lalibela rock-hewn churches received long-due maintenances by this government with the assistance of international experts. The number of Ethiopian heritages recognized as World Heritages reached more than eight during EPRDF rule. About half-a-dozen languages are being researched and taught in the departments and institutes of several Ethiopian Universities.

There is indeed much more that needs to be done. However, on the balance, the track record unequivocally demonstrates, within the limits of the country's financial resources and institutional capacity, the government had been prudent in the management of the heritages of the peoples of Ethiopia.